#Lightsout: Audiencing and Ad Hoc Community Formation In The Super Bowl Discussion Network

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Abstract

When the lights went out at the Superdome during the 2013 NFL Super Bowl, Twitter exploded. This paper presents a discourse analysis of tweets that used the #Lightsout hashtag. Drawing from the concepts of audiencing and ad hoc community formation, we argue that in addition to serving a role for football fans to audience the event, #Lightsout became a site of cultural negotiation for communities otherwise marginalized by the cultural force of the Super Bowl. The results of this research serve as a theoretical launch point for the study of Twitter and television audience practices.

Twitter, Audiencing,

Introduction

In the U.S., the National Football League's championship game, the Super Bowl, is a major cultural event. Super Bowl XLVIII captured 108.4 million television viewers (Nielsen, 2013) and generated a total of 24.1 million related tweets (Ashtari, 2013). Interestingly, it was an event peripheral to the game that created the most chatter: the unexpected power outage that caused the lights in the Superdome Stadium to go out resulting in a thirty-four minute stoppage of play. Almost instantly, the #lightsout hashtag became a trending topic on Twitter.

We conducted a qualitative discourse analysis of #lightsout tweets to explore how the blackout affected the discourse practices of a dominant cultural event. We found evidence of ad hoc community formation (Bruns & Burgess, 2011) in that the unexpected blackout allowed for marginalized communities to appropriate the narrative of the Super Bowl to fit their own storytelling devices. We also found evidence of traditional audiencing (Fiske, 1992) as displaced viewers took to Twitter to comment on the game and ponder the cause of the delay.

Twitter Television Studies

The micro-blogging tool Twitter has provided researchers with the ability to track and analyze real-time discussions of topical events. Twitter television studies have investigated how fans interact with episodic (McPherson et al., 2012) and live events (Highfield, Harrington, & Bruns, 2012). Rather than detracting users from television viewing, Twitter creates a shared space for fans to come together to discuss and critique television shows and events (Highfield, et al., 2012) and engage in audiencing--a behavior that allows an audience to connect itself with the content. Live-tweeting television shows enhances the viewing experience for users and serves to reinforce the tweeting behavior (McPherson et al., 2012).

Ad Hoc Publics and Audiencing

Bruns and Burgess (2013) identified ad hoc publics created around political user-generated hashtags, explaining they emerge "the moment they are needed" (p. 7). We argue that similarly, ad hoc communities may form around socio-cultural events. Bruns and Burgess distinguish the behavior of ad hoc communities from audiencing--the flow of activity between a text and the consumer of it that makes him/her both a recipient and an actor (Fiske, 1992)--by citing the difference in discursive practices and engagement (RTs, @replies) afforded by Twitter.

Drawing from the previous literature we ask: What were the discursive practices used by those who tweeted #lightsout? What communities, if any, emerged through the #lightsout conversation? What audiencing behaviors emerged?

Method

Guided by the frameworks of audiencing and ad hoc communities, this analysis seeks to understand the "systematic links between texts, discourse practices, and sociocultural practices" (Fairclough, 1995, p. 17). We define discourse as a text (Fairclough, 1995; Wood and Kroger, 2000) that may encompass "spoken or written language use" in which language use is a social practice (Fairclough, 2000, p. 309). Our unit of analysis is the individual tweet.

Data

Tweets were collected with the open source YourTwapperKeeper. We collected a total of 16,443 tweets containing the #LightsOut hashtag between 10:00 PM Sunday, February 3rd and 11:59 PM Monday, February 4th. Due to limitations in the Twitter API not all tweets were collected (see Bruns, 2011). There were 11,942 tweets marked as retweets (RT). Of those, 88 individual tweets accounted for a total of 9,770 RTs. Given their prominence, these 88 Top Tweets were isolated for analysis.

Analysis

Twitter Mechanics

Analysis of the Top Tweets revealed a keen understanding of the mechanics of hashtag use on Twitter with advertisers and individual users making use of its popularity for self-promotion (Page, 2012). Bruns and Burgess (2011) found that hashtags are often negotiated. There was evidence of this, for example, as one Top Tweet commented "@nicoleblogsbuzz: #lightsout by @WeAreTheInCrowd is the best song ever...wait...what do you mean I'm not using the hashtag right?!" Such self-awareness of the hashtag's intended purpose and the reappropriation to fit a personal narrative reflects skilled use of the affordances of Twitter (Magee et al. 2013) while reinforcing the emergent proper use of the hashtag (Bruns & Burgess 2011, Page, 2012).

Audiencing

Not unexpectedly, multiple Top Tweets related to the game itself and the effect the blackout would have on the outcome, for example, "RT @dfreese23: Just like rain delays. How quickly games can change. #lightsout". Thus the event-within-the-event not only prolonged the outcome of the game, but also created a space to extend fan engagement at its peak—providing evidence of audiencing. Humorous, sarcastic, and speculative tweets about what could have caused the delay gained the most traction in RTs about the game: "RT @Sean_Spurney: The 49'ers said we aren't losing like this... *pulls the power plug* .. #lightsout"

Ad Hoc Communities

Many of the Top Tweets contained references to pop culture titles such as The Hunger Games, Batman, and Harry Potter. In keeping with Magee et al., (2013), these tweets displayed knowledge of the narrative by including characters and specific terminology in a manner that indicates ingroup affiliation. Interestingly, these tweets renegotiate the Super Bowl narrative as a form of storytelling—specific to their referenced pop culture text—under the shared theme of a hashtag. For example "@ArryPottah: The power went out at the Super Bowl. Too bad you Muggles don't have Lumos. #lightsout #poweroutage" uses the Harry Potter pejorative term "Muggles" along with "Lumos," the name of a spell, to appropriate the Super Bowl narrative into a Potter storyline. Similar tactics were displayed across the tweets that made references to pop culture titles. Thus #lightsout allowed existing, potentially marginalized communities to come together—via a larger ad hoc community centered on the hashtag—to appropriate the dominant Super Bowl narrative.

Discussion

The audience for the Super Bowl represents one of the widest variations of demographics on television. Our analysis revealed #lightsout was used in both audiencing practices and in the formation of ad hoc communities. Given the large number of RTs in the dataset, there is evidence that "users were not merely tweeting into the hashtag stream, but also following what others are posting" (Bruns & Burgess, 2011, p. 6). Additionally, the use of ingroup terminology and the appropriation of the narrative in the RTs suggest that many users in the dataset were participating in the formation of an ad hoc community, one that connected their own with the larger cultural event of the Super Bowl. Tweets with references to pop culture were evidence of this in their shared nerdiness with one's followers and the larger hashtag community.

Although this study is limited in the scope of its dataset, it suggests the potential for future research that works to interrogate audience practices that are dynamically attached to the opportunity to instantly respond to live events on Twitter. More research needs to be conducted in this realm by examining the potential communal engagement that unfolds via a trending hashtag where elements of social capital (Putnam, 2000) are present even for a brief moment. Twitter offers the opportunity to examine both without actually going into the individual homes of members of the audience. Unlike ethnographies of television from past audience studies, researchers are in the position to quickly gauge audience response and examine the flow (Williams, 1975) of the audience. Thus, this study serves as launch point for research on the relationship between Twitter and audience practices.

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Previously On…Participatory Culture and the Recap

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Abstract

This paper presents a comparative framing analysis of "recaps" of an episode of "The Vampire Diaries" (TVD), from www.ew.com (EW) and www.TelevisionWithoutPity.com (TWoP). EW and the CW Network, which airs TVD, are both owned by Time Warner and TWoP has been owned by NBC Universal since 2007. Recaps were initially almost always a fan endeavor, written with sarcasm, with enjoyment or both. Recently a tension has emerged between the writers of recaps (recappers), the fans of the recaps, and the corporations who own the sites that host them. This analysis attempts to discuss the ways in which the recap can serve as an example of the tension inherent to convergence culture, where emphasis on the production and circulation of media content depends heavily on the participation of the consumer. This paper is presented as part of ongoing research into the participatory culture of recaps and online fan communities.

Keywords

recap; fan culture; participatory culture; convergence culture; community; play

Introduction

A recap is in essence a summary of events. Television creators have been using them for decades as television began to showcase increasingly narratively complex shows (Thompson, 2003) that required a short "previously on" segment at the beginning of each new program to "catch up" the viewers. This was because the number of characters and plots had increased to the point that a summary of events was often necessary. In recent years the idea of a recap has grown into something even more playful, with more recappers offering thoughtful recaps of popular shows that are often works of art all their own. The shows recapped range in genre and include dramas, situational comedies, and reality tv. As the recap has grown more popular, it has also grown more profitable, and the pressure has also grown to produce them as quickly as possible after a show airs. This may leave a recapper in an uncomfortable space, pulled in two directions by their enjoyment of a show and the need to produce quickly to earn the most participation and profit. This is not to oversimplify the issue and suggest that profit margins must always somehow "mar" art, but is instead intended to articulate a potential issue for particular online communities in the recapping world, that may be explored through qualitative analysis. Baym writes that qualitative research is a "dynamic" process, where researchers must continually, "find balance between opposing pulls" (Markham & Baym, 2009, p. 174). Similarly, I attempt to situate this research in the convergence culture literature (Jenkins, 2006) by acknowledging the often opposing pulls of fandom, and the consumer side of the transmedia phenomenon (Phillips, 2012) of the recap.

This "pressure of production" can prove too much for some recappers. Some may quit recapping particular shows or may stop recapping altogether. The deadlines can be "brutal" in a competition to remain "relevant"(Juzwiak, 2012). The pressure to produce is similar to journalism and other time sensitive businesses, except that recapping is inherently a creative endeavor, not one based in fact. So for those who write the most popular recaps, simply offering the fastest and most "correct" recap is not competitive. A good recap elevates the material and makes a contribution to the story in a silly, thoughtful, or sarcastic way. The work necessary to craft a competitive piece in a very short amount of time, could eventually seem futile. Recappers can feel overwhelmed by the very ephemeral nature of the whole endeavor.

Yet at the same time this ephemeral state may allow a certain freedom and chance at play that isn't present in the creation of other media, particularly if profit is not of primary concern to the recapper. If the recapper doesn't write for a major site, they may often feel free to experiment with content and structure. The very fact that it could be forgotten immediately may be what appeals to them about it. Those types of recaps can be as silly or a serious as the recapper chooses, and this freedom may end up being what eventually earns them the most fan participation of their own. (Stryker, 2012).

Related Research

Participatory culture is a growing field of research with contributions from scholars such as Jenkins who writes that convergence culture, "is shaped by the desires of media conglomerates to expand their empires across multiple platforms and by the desires of consumers," (Jenkins, 2006 p. 3). He, and researchers like Andrea Phillips further acknowledge that consumers are "courted" across multiple platforms, in transmedia efforts (Jenkins, 2006, Phillips, 2012).

Participatory culture is part of this media system Jenkins describes, where the traditional idea of producer and consumer relationship no longer applies, and the lines between each have become blurred, in the deluge of information now available. Jenkins reasons that because of the amount of information available, it creates a stronger incentive to talk about the media we consume with others. This incentive he discusses is helpful in understanding the online context where most recapping occurs, where recappers are able to use new media to encourage playful participation from other fans.

Similarly Paul Booth's (2010) "philosophy of playfulness", is the notion that much of contemporary media has been made pleasurable to use. Recaps can certainly fall into that category as they are often meant to be a playful expression of fandom using the affordances of contemporary new media to create content. They can be a pleasurable way to read, write, or otherwise participate in an online fan community.

Method & Findings

This paper presents a comparative framing analysis of two different recaps of the same episode of "The Vampire Diaries". Goffman's framing theory (1974) supposed that "mediation" could provide social cues for those trying to interpret events. The recaps from each respective website, EW and TWoP, provide different social cues for their readers, and each frame the same story in a different way, using different technological affordances. This analysis also took the purpose of each site into account. TWoP is a site created for recapping and EW is a site that features recaps, but that is not its sole purpose. Each post was analyzed according to features such as time of posting, length of post, and number of "visible" participants, such as comments or episode "grades", although less visible participation is still important.

EW offered the shorter recap at 4 pages, while TWoP's recap was 17 pages of text. Both of these page numbers are fairly standard for a recap of TVD, for each site. The EW recap was posted on October 12, 2012, a day after the episode aired. TWoP's recap was posted almost a week later on October 16, 2012. However, both sites acknowledge the emphasis on time as each site employs an immediate reaction after the episode airs. EW has a short "instant react" and TWoP calls theirs a "recaplet", or a very short version of what will be a longer recap for each.

Each site uses different affordances, as EW relies on comments for participation and TWoP relies on their forum and episode "grading". EW's recap garnered 178 comments, while TWoP had 0, because their community generally relies on the forums. The forums are typically not about one episode, but serve as a continuing discussion of the story as a whole, and the number of posters there is continually changing, but currently registers at over 30,000 for this show. In addition TWoP community members are asked to "grade" each episode on the recap page, where 651 Users of the site graded it with a "B".

Conclusion

The "pressure of production" in the context of what was previously a mostly playful endeavor manifests itself in different ways in these online communities and in recaps themselves. The overall tone of the EW recap is less critical, it is significantly shorter, and there is less participation than can be found on the lengthier TWoP recap. Although TWoP recaps of NBC owned television shows might reveal more on the story of convergence culture that warrants further research. This paper is part of ongoing research into fandom, and participatory culture, and in the future I hope to conduct interviews with recappers.

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Prompting Fan Anticipation and Participation Via Show Accounts on Twitter

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Abstract

Research is increasingly acknowledging the importance of fan practices on Twitter, but less work examines the ways production companies use the service to represent their shows and interact with fans. Our work studies the tweets from five accounts from hour long shows (The Americans, Breaking Bad, FaceOff, Grimm, and House of Cards) to characterize the way they interact with their fans and promote their shows. We find that these shows use a variety of practices to encourage fan anticipation of new episodes and seasons, as well as participation in the story or fan group. Anticipation is supported through content sharing, countdowns, and discussions of watching styles, while participation focused practices include interaction with fans and performers/producers, use of insider knowledge and humor, and explicit calls for participation.

Keywords

fans; anticipation; participation.

Introduction

Internet research recognizes the importance of fan communities online, and work examining fan practices on Twitter is increasing as people flock to the service to express their fanhood, extend their engagement with the stories that are important to them, and connect with performers, producers, and other fans. Studies of fans and Twitter include works that follow conversations about large events, such as awards shows like EuroVision (Highfield, Harrington & Bruns, 2012). Other research focuses on more long term practices of storytelling, including as roleplayers focusing on characters from The West Wing (Bore & Hickman, 2011) and The Hunger Games (Magee, Sebastian, Novak, Mascaro, Black, & Goggins, 2013). Research in the design community recognizes the importance of avoiding spoilers, with work developing Twitter filters (Goldbeck, 2012), and other work emphasizes how fans on Twitter use shows to "interpret their life own experiences" (Marwick, Gray & Annany, 2013, p.1).

While research is engaging with fan practices on Twitter, less research has focused on how content producers or affiliated companies work to interact with fans. However, as Jenkins and Deuze argue,

> "media companies can no longer be meaningfully studied in the absence of understanding of how they relate to consumers. By the same token, consumers, audiences, fan communities…can no longer be meaningfully understood without a better understanding of the economic and technological contexts within which they operate" (2008).

Our research endeavors to work at this intersection, and focuses on the ways production companies are representing their narrative properties and engaging with fans via Twitter.

Methods

In order to develop a better understanding of how media companies and fans are interacting through Twitter, we conducted a thematic analysis of tweets from the production company accounts dedicated to five different serialized shows, which we refer to as show accounts. Selected shows include NBC's Grimm, SyFy's FaceOff, FX's The Americans, AMC's Breaking Bad and Netflix's House of Cards.

These hour-long shows were selected to represent a range of fan group sizes. As newer properties, The Americans and House of Cards are working to develop fanbases with less than 25,000 Twitter followers, while Grimm and FaceOff have been on air for multiple seasons and have more than 25,000 followers on Twitter. Breaking Bad has been in production the longest, and has more than 240,000 Twitter followers. While fan bases played an important role, we also worked to include network, cable, and streaming distribution processes. Data was collected beginning in winter 2013 using TAGS v 5, developed by Martin Hawksey (2013). This work reports on analysis of 285 tweets, though data collection is ongoing.

Findings

Our analysis revealed two main themes that arose in the tweets from each show: anticipation and participation. Each theme is supported by several practices that we observed across the dataset. Importantly, the majority of tweets included practices that supported both anticipation and participation. Anticipation practices included content sharing, countdowns, and discussions of watching styles, while participation practices included interaction with fans and performers/producers, insider knowledge and humor, and explicit calls for participation.

Content sharing involved linking to coverage of the show from other media outlets, as well as to fan created media. Content sharing also included linking to new content from the production itself, such as behind-the-scenes media offerings or information from production staff about how the show is created. This content sharing reminds fans of the show and encourages engagement when waiting for the next viewing opportunity.

Countdown language discussed anticipation over many different time periods. During the beginning of our collection period, Grimm's show account generated a countdown hashtag, *#March8isGrimm*, which was added to the great majority of tweets, and started weeks before the actual airdate. Other accounts tweeted about new episodes within days and even minutes of airtime. This explicit countdown language stimulates audience anticipation, and often, the show accounts go further and retweet or share fan tweets that discuss looking forward to the next episode or season. Multiple show accounts also highlight their upcoming new seasons, adding another element to look forward to.

Coupled with these conversations about anticipating new content, show accounts also discussed methods of watching available shows, including on-air marathons, encores on affiliated channels, and online streaming services. House of Cards stands out with regard to watching style, as all episodes in the season were released together, resulting in "marathon watching" of many episodes in one sitting, as well as much conversation about this watching style. The show account not only discussed marathon watching, but also retweeted fans' tweets about their watching experiences.

As demonstrated by the importance of retweeting fans in anticipation practices, interaction with fans is a key part of how these show accounts operate. Show accounts retweet and converse with fans on a regular basis, including the previously mentioned conversations about watching style, generating and using a special name for fans, such as "Hey, Grimmsters" for Grimm fans, and directly responding to questions or comments in a reply-to tweet. Additionally, these show accounts also work to interact with performers and production staff. This includes using castmembers' usernames in tweets and retweeting performers or staff's tweets about the show, but also includes incorporating live question and answer sessions with performers or staff, sometimes having them take over the actual show account.

Knowledge of performers and production staff also connects with the larger practice of sharing tweets that require insider knowledge to understand context or to get the joke. This is one of the most common practices, and often overlaps with content sharing. Humor is one way that this insider knowledge is highlighted, but other examples include sharing fan pictures of important show elements, such as the Peachoid, a giant peach shaped water-tower featured in an episode of House of Cards, as

well as references to facts or background story elements that surface knowledge of the show isn't sufficient to understand. This kind of tweet engages fans and rewards their participation as viewers.

Show accounts also engage fans by explicitly calling for fan participation in the form of retweeting show account tweets, taking quizzes to demonstrate knowledge of the show and "prepare" for upcoming episodes, and playing games to engage with the narrative and demonstrate their fandom.

Discussion

In this dataset, the great majority of tweets worked to combine multiple practices discussed above, demonstrating a variety of techniques to encourage audience anticipation and participation. Show accounts on Twitter are working to extend existing fan practices, but are also working to encourage new practices of engagement. Though many of the tweets we examined reveal shows interacting with fans to encourage anticipation and participation, and in some cases, even acting as fan-like themselves, it is important to consider that these accounts function as marketing and public relations, and as such function within an economic relationship with their followers.

Acknowledgments

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Microblogging as Non-violent Resistance

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Abstract

With the growing popularity of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), new media are penetrating people's everyday life and transforming the way they express themselves, interact with each other, articulate daily experience, and perceive the world. A large amount of research is devoted exclusively to the alternative or antagonistic use of new media in particular moments (e.g., the Arab Spring), failing to associate these specific uses with a larger living context, the everyday experience and social memory of new media users in particular. To fill that gap, this study explores how—and to what extent—everyday use of new media articulates people's experiences and shapes social memory, makes them relevant to the changing socio-political context of China, facilitates a new type of public sphere, and generates a form of non-violent resistance by taking Weibo in China as a case.

Keywords

Weibo; non-violent; microblogging; social memory; China

Introduction

Ongoing researches try to explore the relationship between the use of new media and certain social changes. The heavy emphasis on the role of new media in specific contentious issues overlooks cumulative impacts from the everyday uses of new media on social memory, failing to capture, reflect, and assess the political potential embedded in the routine use of new media—beyond a simple realization of overt contentious possibility.

China has the world's most active social media users (Chiu, Lin, & Silverman, 2012). Among over 550 million Internet users (Xinhua, 2012), the world's largest online population, 95 percent of them from major cities are regular users of social media (Chiu et al., 2012: 1). In particular, Chinese citizens' reliance on the social media as platforms for airing opinions, exposing discontent, criticize government policies, or vent anger over specific incidents is specifically intensifying (Liu, 2011) as the tightening of state control over the mass media persists, leaving people with only limited or no access to mass media and mass-mediated public sphere (Esarey, 2006; Zhao, 1998, 2009).

Method

Current study investigates how social media provide a platform for Chinese citizens to articulate their experience and shape social memory through analyzing tweets on the country's most popular social media site, Sina Weibo. The authors perform a discourse analysis on tweets generated by the verified Chinese official city accounts on Weibo. Three cities have been chosen—Xiamen, Shifang and Ningbo, where collective action took place in the past. For each city, a randomly selected sample of 5,000 tweets has been collected for analysis.

The analysis is based on the tradition of discourse analysis framework, which helps to understand the constitutive relationship between language and its social norms and provide empirical basis for this research (Fairclough, 1995, 2000; van Dijk, 1997). By exploring the meaning of the texts on Weibo, current study hopes to extend the research scope to explore the magnitude of people's engagement in discussing sensitive topics and potentially formulating new discourse online in the recalling of collective actions to forge a new understating of people's social memory. The authors also systematically identify the major themes of the tweets and clarify the elements in each theme.

Conclusion

Drawing on Negt and Kluge's (1993) conceptual framework of public sphere and experience, current study demonstrates that social media in China contribute to a broader sense of the public sphere as an organizational form articulating a societal, collective horizon of experience and shaping social memory. Importantly, Chinese social media provide people an alternative communicative sphere for sharing and accumulating "unofficial" social memory as a kind of covert resistance (Scott, 1990).

The article contributes to (a) a better theoretical understanding of the role of social media in everyday experience and social memory, with special reference to "the transformations of publicness and experience in the digitally based media environment" (Hansen, 2011: xiv); (b) a comprehensive understanding of the progressive changes by mundane use of social media beyond those revolutionary moments; and (c) a deeper understanding of the place and potential of social media in Chinese users' daily life, in particular how social media have been incorporated into the fabric of experience, nurturing everyday resistance and facilitating an alternative public sphere.

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