

TWEETING @THEWRITERSROOM: MAPPING THE TELEVISION INDUSTRY'S IDEAL FAN THROUGH WRITERS' ROOM TWITTER ACCOUNTS

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Introduction

In contemporary television culture, the industry has embraced and engaged with fan practices and cultures. This engagement, however, is often deployed to demarcate boundaries around appropriate participation and fandom (Johnson, 2007). Online social interaction between fans and creators, for example, can be used to reify the distinction between them, making clear which fan questions and behaviors are appropriate and which should be ignored (Chin & Hills, 2008).

In the current television environment, it has become particularly important for the industry to become involved in audience social media practices. Evans (2014) argues that audience conversations on social media become part of the program and network's brand. Given the number of voices involved in these conversations, it is essentially impossible for the network to manage its brand(s) as effectively as desired. Engaging in social media with fans provides a way to steer audience social media behaviors in favorable directions, and reward "good" fans by highlighting their comments. This study investigates a recent television social media trend: the increasingly popular practice of a show's writing staff engaging with fans collectively via a writers' room Twitter account.

Stepping away from the figure of the showrunner-as-author and instead foregrounding the collective creativity that actually goes into television writing and production, this practice invites in those dedicated fans who have a deeper understanding of how television writing works. The content of these accounts varies significantly, with some focusing on giving fans a peek behind the scenes into the day-to-day operation of the writers' room, while others focus on official promotional content or live-tweeting sessions. Though all are intended to foster some type of fan relationships, the level of actual interactivity varies considerably.

Celebrity interaction with fans on Twitter can serve as a powerful force for shaping behaviors and identity on the social media platform. Television writers are not "celebrities" in the traditional sense, but can be conceptualized as "subcultural celebrity," meaning that they possess all the cache of a traditional celebrity, but only for a limited number of fans (Chin & Hills, 2008; Ellcessor, 2012). Celebrity practitioners use Twitter as a venue for sharing apparent disclosures, creating a feeling of intimacy

Suggested Citation (APA): Navar-Gill, A. (2015, October 21-24). *Tweeting @TheWritersRoom: Mapping the Television Industry's Ideal Fan Through Writers' Room Twitter Accounts*. Paper presented at Internet Research 16: The 16th Annual Meeting of the Association of Internet Researchers. Phoenix, AZ, USA: AoIR. Retrieved from <http://spir.aoir.org>.

for their fans while reinforcing the asymmetrical status between celebrity and fan (Marwick & boyd, 2011; Muntean & Petersen, 2009).

On Twitter, identity is constituted through interaction (Marwick & boyd, 2010). This co-construction can be particularly powerful when the power imbalances of Twitter's hierarchical structure are taken into account (Van Dijck, 2013). The representations of celebrities that saturate our culture serve as a model of how people engage with culture and construct their identities, and celebrity performance of the self on social media serves as a model for how everyday users present themselves (Marshall, 2010). While celebrity practices of self-presentation serve as a model, the status marker of being acknowledged by the celebrity serves further as a powerful reinforcement for certain behaviors. This study examines the ways in which television writers use their subcultural celebrity status to produce and police fan behaviors and identities.

Research Questions

RQ1: What are the various social media strategies that writers' room Twitter accounts use to engage with fan audiences?

RQ1: How do these posts and social interactions of writers' room Twitter accounts hail particular fan identities? In what ways do these ideal fan identities serve industry interests?

Methods

To explore the ways in which writers' room Twitter accounts engage with audiences and hail ideal fan identities, I engage in analytics-supported qualitative analysis of a sample of tweets from writers' room Twitter accounts. Using Sysomos and the Twitter API, I scraped one month of Tweets from each writers' room Twitter account, as well as the corresponding month of @mentions for that account. For each account, my sampling period began one week before the television show's most recent series premiere. There were two major aspects of my analysis. First, I synced the two datasets produced for each account in order to track patterns of interaction and non-interaction with fans who tweeted to the writers. Second, I conducted textual analysis of the Tweets in order to identify the strategies being used to manage fan participation and hail particular fan identities.

Findings and Discussion

All of the writers' room Twitter accounts that I examined selectively engaged with fans in ways that hail a fan identity that labors for and promotes industrial interests. However, the strategies that they use vary considerably. While some writers' room Twitter accounts focus on crass promotion, others work to foster a deeper level of fan engagement. The techniques that they use to do so range from cultivating a sense of personal intimacy to providing backstage information about production processes to directly engaging with and affirming creative fan practices, such as fan art and cosplay. These more intimate relationships are then used to encourage fans to engage in behavior that is beneficial for the show—for instance, raising the show's visibility on

social media during specific temporal windows that matter for ratings, voting for the show in online contests, and encouraging friends to watch—as well as to support textual readings of the show that are preferred by producers.

Although all writers' room Twitter accounts are geared toward promoting fan identities that are productive for the industry, the specifics of the fan identities hailed vary based on the particular branding that the show and its network (or online distribution platform) are looking to support. For example, the writers' of *Faking It*, a sitcom on MTV—a network invested in its youthful brand—disclose (or perform the disclosure of) intimate personal details and highlight fan creativity. These tactics build a sense of community among their followers, hailing a fan who feels a loving sense of responsibility toward the show. On the other hand, the writers' of *Orange is the New Black* use irony and the repeated invocation of non-television taste cultures to hail a fan with a discerning television palate and reinforce the notion of artistic authority in quality television that Netflix's premium brand demands.

Through the lens of writers' room Twitter accounts, this project identifies a number of different ways that the television industry is using Twitter to manage its audiences.

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