

Enunciative Fan Production and Social “Flow”

Clued In: The Fringenuity Save My Show Campaign

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With the show *Fringe* perennially on the bubble, some highly engaged fans of the show set up a campaign to save the show from cancellation. The campaign, which they dubbed Fringenuity, actively sought to target Twitter’s algorithms, and to capitalize on the increased attention towards audience engagement valued by advertisers and producers’ alike. The key objectives of this campaign were as follows: getting specific hashtags to trend weekly on Twitter, encouraging heavy engagement with advertisers of the show on Twitter and Facebook, as well as live viewing to help with ratings. By reading up on the science of Twitter’s algorithms, these fans understood how Twitter’s top trending algorithm values “brief ruptures of the ordinary”¹ or spikes in conversations over volume. Consequently they devised a plan that relied on unique hashtags for each week’s episode. Detailed instructions went out to the group’s followers well in advance of each episode, highlighting the specific hashtag for the week, and stressing that this hashtag could only be used an hour before the episode aired to ensure it retained its novelty and thus had a higher chance of successfully making it as a Top Trending topic. With hashtags such as #crosstheline, #beabetterman or #loveistheanswer, the campaign also masterfully selected hashtags that were sure to spark conversations that went beyond those talking about the show. Additionally, fans engaged with advertisers through Twitter and Facebook sending messages of thanks, or pictures that reflected purchases of the advertiser’s products. The strategy certainly paid off with the selected hashtags trending on Twitter during the first six weeks of the campaign, causing Fox to take notice. By the end of February 2012, Fox was actively integrating the Fringenuity hashtags on the live broadcast of each episode and in its promo material. While the ratings for the show never significantly improved, its passionate and loyal fan base, and its status as a top-rated show on Twitter were partly instrumental in Fox’s decision to renew the show for an abbreviated fifth season in April 2012.²

The Twitter conversations that emerged around *Fringe* implies a slightly different register than Fiske’s articulation of fan talk as an outward or verbal articulation of the meaning-making of social identity and social experience that emerge through media texts.³ Instead, the regimented nature of these conversations reflects the increasing savvy of fans to the practices of the industry. These fans willingly embrace the labor and value-exchange that is often an off-shoot of fan activities, recognizing the role they serve as consumers of content, and as commodities for advertisers. On one level, it represents fans’ negotiation of power within the very limited structures offered by industry concerns and imperatives. The tactic employed here - the specific manipulation of Twitter’s algo-

¹ See <http://www.niemanlab.org/2011/10/why-hasnt-occupywallstreet-trended-in-new-york/> for more details about Twitter’s Top Trending algorithm

² <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/live-feed/fringe-renewed-fifth-season-317063>

³ Fiske, John. "The Cultural Economy of Fandom." In *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media*, edited by Lisa A. Lewis, 30-49. London: Routledge, 1992, p. 37

rhythms reflects a form of resistance to the registers that prove most alluring to the industry; revealing in some sense the artificiality and the lack of defined value that underlie much of the focus on these forms of engagement. While it remains a trendy topic, social connectivity (within the Television context) remains a messy and underdeveloped tool for audience measurement.

At the same time by operating within the bounds set forth by the industry, the fans' capacity to resist is limited to the parameters that are most useful to the television industry and its partners. Jose van Dijck (2012) has noted how previously casualized rituals of sociality (i.e. chatting with friends, or sharing pictures or other information) take on new values through social media becoming "formal inscriptions" that work to engineer sociality. She further argues this coded sociality "renders people's activities formal, manageable and manipulable."⁴ Fan talk therefore has emerged as a critical axis in understanding the relationships between the media industry and its fans in an online context. While it does serve as a key resource that is often appropriated by the industry as a means to reach the most passionate and engaged fan-base, this increased attention by the industry allows for more fan agency, offering up the possibility for fans to barter and negotiate their commodity value in ways that prove most meaningful in achieving their aims. It suggests perhaps the need to more fully interrogate assumptions that see fan labor as a zero-sum game; a purely exploitative mode of engagement where all benefits are ascribed to industry forces.

⁴ Van Dijck, Jose. *The Culture of Connectivity*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013.