

Enunciative Fan Production and Social “Flows”

“We Can’t Stop”: Live-Tweeting, Time-Shifting, and the Flow of Programming

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When Miley Cyrus teamed up with Robin Thicke to perform on the 2013 MTV Video Music Awards, the negative reviews erupted almost immediately. Cyrus and Thicke performed a mash-up of her summer hit, “We Can’t Stop,” and his controversial single, “Blurred Lines.” Both artists have received criticism for not only the content of their songs, but also their related videos. Cyrus has since been criticized for the nudity and bizarre behavior in the music video for her latest single, “Wrecking Ball” (at one point she is shown licking a sledgehammer, and, later, she is naked and straddling a giant wrecking ball), and Thicke had previously been blasted for promoting rape culture through his lyrics (the lines “I hate these blurred lines, I know you want it, The way you grab me, Must wanna get nasty,” were seen as especially problematic). These minor controversies set the stage for the now infamous mash-up on the VMAs.

During the performance, Cyrus, clad in a flesh-colored pleather bikini and wielding a teddy bear and a large foam finger, repeatedly engaged in a dance move known as “twerking,” which she interspersed with frequent tongue thrusts and suggestively rubbing her crotch, while Robin Thicke essentially served as a human prop in his black-and-white striped suit. In addition to sparking discussions about feminism, sexuality, and cultural appropriation, this performance is also significant for generating a record-breaking amount of social media discussion—it now holds the record for most-tweeted-about VMA performance of all time with 4.5 million mentions during the two-hour production, with a high of 306,100 tweets per minute.¹ One of the most fascinating aspects of this event, though, was how the live-tweeting allowed audience members who missed the initial performance to “catch-up” via a Twitter-enabled form of time-shifting.

Through the use of live-tweeting, Twitter can act as a highlight reel for viewers that is often so extensive that one might never even have to consume the original text. This practice is especially useful for programs not broadcast on national TV that viewers might be unable to access otherwise (pay-per-views, regional sporting events, etc.). Furthermore, viewers frequently obtain more information from reading their Twitter feed than they would from simply viewing the show alone; Twitter users often post links to pictures, memes, videos, articles, and other paratexts related to the program.

Additionally, since fans and industry personnel alike use live-tweeting to generate interest and engage in discussion of a given text, the practice allows viewers to feel like they are a part of the episode/experience when interacting with stars and other industry insiders. In addition to providing suggested hashtags, producers often incorporate live-tweeting back into the program narrative when tweets are featured via scrolling text at the bottom of the screen. For instance, TLC’s “Friday is Briededay” lineup encourages

¹ According to Helen A.S. Popkin’s article, “Miley Cyrus twerks her way to top of Twitter at 300,000 tweets per minute,” posted on *NBCNews.com* on August 26th, 2013.

viewers to tweet photos of their engagement rings and their own wedding-related experiences with the #brideday hashtag, and then features a selection of these tweets on the actual program.

Live-tweeting also provides viewers with a sense of community by enabling them to discuss the text with other geographically-removed audience members in real-time, as well as allowing additional opportunities for engagement with the text during commercial breaks. As mentioned at the start of this essay, this engagement can continue beyond the initial airing of the program due to the potential for an ever-evolving discussion as users continue to post with the designated hashtag. As this new form of audience engagement continues to evolve, reception studies scholars must consider the implications of this practice for viewing habits and social flow.