When the World Ends: Study of #FakeWesteros Twitter Fan Community During the Final Season of *Game of Thrones*

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ABSTRACT

#FakeWesteros is an online fan community that originated on Twitter when the worldwide blockbuster television series *Game of Thrones (GoT)* aired its first season in 2011. Fans from around the world live-tweeted episodes as a role-playing activity, assuming the identity of a character from the series in their tweets. This poster will present an analysis of this practice during the 2019 airing of the final season of *GoT*. Preliminary results reveal how fans responded to the controversial last episodes, demonstrating how Twitter was used to express their thoughts and feelings regarding the characters, the narrative and its creators. Findings indicate how this innovative use of the digital space represents evolving forms of information sharing. Findings inform ongoing research into the information-based practices of fans and provides new insights into the evolution of online communities, particularly how loyalty to a shared identity can extend bonds beyond fandom.

KEYWORDS

Fans; Game of Thrones; Twitter; Sentiment analysis; Qualitative analysis

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Entertainment; Popular Culture; Communities

INTRODUCTION

Online communities, open collectives of dispersed individuals operating within the virtual space, are important sources of knowledge (Faraj, Jarvenpaa, & Majchrzak, 2011). Fandom is the community or culture of fans of a popular media object, such as a narrative or celebrity; online communities of fans generate knowledge and develop virtual identities that represent evolving information practices within a fandom (Booth, 2008). As digital media and technologies increasingly converge and become embedded in everyday lives, the study of such practices is particularly valuable in providing key examples of how people's interactions with information is evolving

(Forcier, 2017). This research-in-progress explores one such example in context. Relatively few studies have focused on the information-based practices of fans (e.g., Price & Robinson, 2016). This case study will further contribute to this new and growing thread in LIS research.

HBO's *Game of Thrones* (*GoT*) is a fantasy television series that has spanned eight seasons and 72 episodes, with an average viewership of 44.2 million viewers per episode (Pattern, 2019). Few television series have achieved the same pinnacle of mainstream success in the last decade and *GoT* has developed a global following as a result. Nevertheless, producers of the television series faced severe backlash following the final season, due to the perception that storytelling was rushed and inconsistent with quality fans had come to expect (Tefekci, 2019).

As a social media website, Twitter has transformed from a text based to a visual based platform, where over 275 million users worldwide can interact and share information online (statista.com). One particular community of fans on Twitter serves as a gauge for the severe reactions to *GoT* reported by journalists. #FakeWesteros is made up of over 100 Twitter users who have each taken on a *GoT* persona to interact with other fans online. In addition, a number of Twitter users follow the community, which has been boosted, over time, thanks to recognition from the television network Sky and various fan websites. For instance, #FakeWesteros member @NiceQueenCersei had over 58,000 followers at the time of the series finale.

What distinguishes #FakeWesteros members from other fans is that their interactions on Twitter are filtered through their *GoT* persona, responding to events in the show or comments in a way that readers would anticipate the character to respond. The use of externally hosted digital media, like memes, video clips and animated GIFs in addition to the text of tweets, increasingly, represents the most common form of information sharing for members. This example of virtual roleplay as information sharing demonstrates new ways of engagement and knowledge generation using digital media, which has implications for information researchers studying the creation and transmission of information in the digital realm. #FakeWesteros is also of interest to researchers studying the lifecycle of fan and leisure-based communities.

Specifically, what becomes of online communities once their original purpose for coming together is achieved.

METHODOLOGY

Twitter users identified with the hashtag #FakeWesteros in their profiles or in user-created lists were compared to generate a list of the top 50 most active community members during the airing of season eight from 12 April to 20 May 2019. Using the Twitter API, the timelines for 50 members during the above period were evaluated, including both textual and graphic content of tweets. Analysis of each timeline adopted a constructivist grounded theory approach, as defined by Charmaz (2014), which permits an inductive and recursive development of ideas and theoretical models through the empirical analysis of data. Themes were identified representing the reactions of community members to the conclusion of the show.

To further contextualize results, tweets were analyzed using natural language processing and the VADER sentiment analyzer in Python (Hutto & Gilbert, 2014).

EMERGING THEMES AND FINDINGS

A key theme of #FakeWesteros tweets was a keen awareness of the impending end to the series in relation to a concern for its impact on the community. This concern was expressed universally among members in their tweets, from earnest expressions of mourning for fallen characters and fear that real friendships might fade to entreaties that fellow members stay in touch after the end of the series. The use of humor and pastiche, involving the intertextual layering of information found in previous research (Forcier, 2017), served to "soften" what, for many members, was a deeply emotional experience.

An unexpected finding was that the criticism toward the show's producers was not reflected in members' tweets. Prior to the airing of the final episode, the negative mainstream reaction to the series had been covered extensively by journalists (Tefekci, 2019), suggesting that *GoT* fans were universally upset with the conclusion. However, while some members sympathized with the popular negative reaction, solidarity with *GoT*'s performers and producers is the common feeling that prevailed in #FakeWesteros. This result supports findings on the role of loyalty in multi-community engagement (Hamilton, Zhang, Danescu-Niculescu-Mizil, Jurafsky, & Leskovec, 2017), highlighting how members must weigh their loyalties within overlapping fan communities (e.g., #FakeWesteros vs. mainstream *GoT* fandom).

CONCLUSION

Days before the series finale, user @IronbornTheon wrote: "while I'm both excited, dreading it, and sort of not wanting to see it, I have realized that just because the show is going off the air, doesn't mean the community is going anywhere."

The activity of #FakeWesteros members aligns with previous findings on the negotiation of narrative information (Forcier, 2017). However, the multimedia content members produced and interactions they continue to have moves beyond the information behavior model developed in previous research. The data collected for this case study represents the negotiation of social identities and interpersonal relationships in the digital space.

The case study demonstrates how information is transmitted and transformed innovatively and multimodally in online fan communities. It further demonstrates how identity and loyalty shape collective practices and individual behaviors. All findings support ongoing research into the information behavior of transmedia fans.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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