Beyond the Box

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Television and the Internet

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This book is dedicated to my partner in all things TV and otherwise life and work related, Tom Skapes, and my partners in crime, Amanda Lotz, Susan McLeland, and Kelly Kessler.

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Introduction

Online/Offline: What It Means to "Watch (and Make) TV" in the Age of the Internet

It's true! TWOP does control the TV!

Veronica Mars got renewed over the weekend. Its creator, Rob Thomas, is a known TWOP ass-kisser … Thomas is very selective about which sites he credits for helping spread love about the show. Over the weekend, Glark said this:

"It wasn't a big surprise to us but a friend of the site confirmed last week that internal WB research documents site TWOP as a major source for gauging reaction to their shows so all your efforts probably made a significant difference to at least some people responsible for pulling the trigger on this renewal."

Oh Mighty TWOP! The entire television programming community bows to your prowess! It is because of this site, and some "internal WB research documents," that this detective show is staying on the air!

When it's time for Q&A, I get 90% of the questions. It almost makes me uncomfortable. We're doing ComicCon, and it's the same thing … It's just, I mean, I'm a writer. *It's odd to me because, in the* real *world – they don't do* Entertainment Tonight *about the* writers … *It's really interesting culturally, I think. (Rob Thomas, creator and executive producer,* Veronica Mars, *interview, July 18, 2006)*

Granted, those of us on the boards talking and speculating about Lost *make up a small portion of the viewing audience. However, in the back of my mind I'd at least like to think that TPTB [The Powers That Be] have some poor intern slaving away reading the*

boards. We may represent a small portion of the viewing audience, but we are the most visible and vocal … That, I would hope, should account for something in their world. (Posted by Leuthen)

I did enjoy reading this [article], but one thing I noticed is that you constantly refer to the "imagined community" that Adult Swim has with its viewers, and this community is not imagined, it's called a message board. I'd suggest you visit there every once in a while … It is very real … Enjoy. (Posted by Kevin)

I was at a conference and we got into a minor fight on a panel as to "what is television?" So the way these things typically work is, people inside the beltway fight about it first, but then eventually it slips out into the real world. And I think it's quite possible that, for my kids [who are eight and eleven], the Internet is television is the Internet and the distinction is blurred … But it's just now that that's starting. (Rick Mandler, vice-president and general manager of ABC's Enhanced TV, interview, June 22, 2006)

In an episode from the first full season of the cult show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (March 1997–May 2003), the lead heroine (Buffy) becomes incapacitated after a spell renders her weak and frightened – in fact, she has "become" the Halloween costume she wears, a Victorian era damsel, clearly in distress. As children-turned-demons under the same spell begin to over-run the town our heroine is supposed to be protecting, it is up to Buffy's best friend Willow to take charge. Willow quickly becomes frustrated with Buffy's ineffectuality and in a moment of exasperation she exclaims, "You couldn't have dressed up as Xena?!" ("Halloween," 1997).

This moment in a series that would quickly mushroom into a cult hit and become the passion of many a TV critic and academic caught my attention as a graduate student in film and television studies. Only a few months earlier, my *Buffy* fandom had emerged as I sought diversion from the work of my Masters thesis. At that time, a colleague of mine was working on *Xena: Warrior Princess* (1995–2001), and I had already become a fan of *that* show while helping her tape episodes (Parks 1997). The *Buffy* episode I describe above came next in my academic trajectory – and was in fact the one that set me on the path towards my dissertation. At first the episode registered with me primarily because of the gender issues at work. (Buffy had chosen her damsel

get-up to please her new beau – who, she was worried, was finding her unfeminine in her Slayer mode.) Soon, however, I found myself entranced by the fact that this TV series evidenced awareness so quickly in its run that people who were watching *Buffy* might also be watching *Xena*. In short, that episode cemented my fandom because it recognized me as more than a *Buffy* fan.

I had been invited in, and there was no going back. As I worked away at unraveling the narrative complexities and gender dynamics of these two shows, I became involved in online fan forums for both series. Four years after I watched the *Buffy* episode that called out to me as a *Xena* fan, I found myself watching *Xena* episodes written *by* Internet fans as well as episodes *about* Internet fans.[1] One didn't need to *be* a fan to realize that both *Buffy* and *Xena* had astonishing fan bases – and I begin this book with an examination of the role the Internet played in the enjoyment of these shows for some viewers. I begin here also because, in the wake of *Buffy* and *Xena* as cult TV and Internet phenomena (along with *The X-Files*, 1993–2002, and *La Femme Nikita*, 1997–2001), I began to notice that other TV series – more "mainstream" TV series, for lack of a better qualifying term – were emerging with equally impressive online fan bases. In addition, many of these shows, through either direct textual moments or via producer and writer interviews in entertainment forums, were evidencing a heightened awareness of the existence of their fans both online and offline. What might these developments be able to tell us about what it means to watch and make TV today?

The epigraphs at the beginning of this chapter provide an indication of how the Internet has begun to alter people's experiences with television today – from viewers to producers to writers to executives. Like me, the individual fans cited here demonstrate interpellation; collectively, these quotes also demonstrate the incredible range of experiences in tele-participation that can occur when TV and the Internet meet. For fans of the series *Veronica Mars* (2004–2007) who relied on the popular TV website Television Without Pity (TWOP) for news and for a place to discuss the show, their TV experience included a sense of pride in the power they held as arbiters of taste: "Oh Mighty TWOP! The entire television programming community bows to your prowess!" Fans of *Lost* (2004–) such as Leuthen express more hesitancy about whether or not producers are paying attention to their online discussions, but clearly have confidence in their own

importance as part of the viewing audience for that show: "We may represent a small portion of the viewing audience, but we are the most visible and vocal." And Kevin, an Adult Swim fan responding to an online academic discussion about the Adult Swim community (2001–), reminds those academics that for some TV viewers, part of watching TV includes keeping track of what "competing experts" have to say *about* watching TV. As Rob Thomas, creator and executive producer of *Veronica Mars*, notes, "it's really interesting culturally" – at the very least!

The above examples merely scratch the surface of online activity concerning television series, but they are indicative of the significant relationships that exist today between the Internet and TV. From dialogue in *Buffy* acknowledging a crossover fan base with *Xena*, to plotlines in *Xena* acknowledging the blurred boundaries of the imagined and real online fan communities of that series, to the executive producer of *Veronica Mars* giving a website the scoop on the show's renewal status – the Internet has become a site for tele-participation that opens up for viewers and creators myriad ways in which to experience watching and making TV. This book aims to explore the role that the Internet has come to play in both the reception of TV series *and* their production, and the reciprocal dynamics that emerge. I argue that visiting online sites linked to TV series, among other activities typically associated with "the fan," is becoming an increasingly common activity for "regular viewers." I discuss as well how TV writers, producers, executives, and marketers seem to be incorporating an awareness of such activities into the shows themselves. Viewers are responding to various kinds of calls to tele-participation – invitations to interact with TV shows beyond the moment of viewing and "outside" of the TV show itself. I break down these invitations to tele-participation into three categories – overt, organic, and obscured – working to situate these three modes within a changing industrial landscape of increased competition for viewers. Through an examination of the basic narrative structure and content of various shows, exploration of online activity concerning the same texts, and interviews with fans, writers, producers, executives, marketers, and popular critics, this book examines shifting understandings of what it means to watch and make TV in a multimedia world.[2]

Derek Johnson (2007) argues that this development of television inviting the audience in to participate can be traced to the 1980s in the

United States, as cable began to reach out to "fan groups" with channels devoted to extremely specific content. Slowly, broadcast TV responded by pursuing more niche audiences than mass. By the late 1990s, networks – both broadcast and cable – sought to retain viewers by creating a more intense relationship between the audience and a show, increasingly through multi-platforming that gave television programs life in the worlds of film, print, the Internet, etc. To a degree, one goal of this book is to trace this historical development in the world of TV by focusing on a series of programs over twelve years (1995–2007) in order to examine *how* this "more intense relationship" has developed, *why* it has developed, and to what ends.

Where my work diverges from Johnson's is in the arena of how widespread these changes have become – how common. Johnson's examples of how the television industry has been inviting viewers in to participate will resonate with my discussion of *Lost* in chapter four, but these invitations (and how audiences respond to them) exist across a wider range of programming than Johnson's work indicates. Likewise, while my approach in this book works with Jason Mittell's argument that "the consumer and creative practices of fan culture … have become more widely distributed and participated in with the distribution means of the Internet, making active audience behavior even more of a mainstream practice" (2006: 32), Mittell's explanation that increased narrative complexity in television shows is supported by and supportive of this development does not account for "simpler" texts' invitations to participation.

My work here, then, is an elaboration on and fine-tuning of the excellent examinations of tele-participation that occur in work such as Johnson's and Mittell's. How are texts as *varied* as *Buffy*, *Xena*, *American Idol*, *Family Guy*, Adult Swim, YouTube, Current, *The O.C.*, *Degrassi: The Next Generation*, and *Lost* linked through tele-participation? How do their variations contribute to equally varying, but nevertheless related, strategies of invitation that contribute to a range of relationships rooted in tele-participation? Henry Jenkins's work in *Convergence Culture* (2006) is close in spirit to my own here, as he explores a range of texts rooted in tele-participation to different degrees, from TV to film to literature, and their audiences. Like Jenkins, I aim in this project to achieve a similarly broad look at how "consumers are encouraged to seek out new information and make connections among dispersed media content" (3), but I choose to

focus on TV – however uncertain a category that is now – in order to provide a more complete examination of how convergence culture operates within this medium.

Throughout this book, I will question what kinds of relationships exist between viewers on the one hand, and writers, producers, executives, and marketers on the other. One thing that will become clear is that there is no set "assessment" of the impact I propose. Much depends on from whose perspective one is examining the relationship. At times issues of genre become paramount; at other times issues of narrative structure; and at still others the primary issue is one of who the desired target audience might be. Another point of clarification involves the scope of Internet TV fandom. In this book, I do not include a thorough examination of the phenomenon of fan fiction and other fan art, and while I do focus on specific fan bases, my primary aim is to unravel how online TV fan-like activities demonstrate an awareness of and attitude towards the originating text's creators and networks – and how originating texts and their creators and networks demonstrate an awareness of viewers' activities. Thus, while I am indeed focusing on ways in which viewers and creators use the Internet, or even "just" a sense of the Internet, to participate with the TV text, I am not coming even close to covering all of the many ways in which the Internet connects to TV. In the spirit of scholarly camaraderie, I will assume that those reading this book can seek the full scope of the Internet/TV connection through an examination of work by colleagues in my field.

Focusing primarily, then, on distinct examples of how the Internet and TV meet, I hope to demonstrate that people's experiences with watching and making TV today are increasingly inseparable from tele-participation (be that literally or conceptually). Clearly, this raises important issues of access to and literacy concerning the Internet, along with issues of who comes to represent the ideal viewer to those working within the industry – issues which I intend to address throughout the book. Along the way, this book will necessarily explore experiences of power in relation to TV: Who has it? Who *feels* that they have it? How does a sense of power translate to issues of representation – particularly for groups that may feel otherwise disenfranchised with regards to TV?

On one level, I am examining the growth of the producerly TV text – television programs that in various ways encourage viewers to feel as if they have a means to contribute to the content of that program

(Fiske 1987). How does TV today demonstrate an awareness of not only the presence of viewers, but the presence of viewers who feel as if they can – and perhaps should be allowed to – contribute to the meanings of that text? One can see the producerly text at work when, for example, an episode of *Xena* makes a plot joke out of TV viewers' desire to know whether or not Xena and her female companion Gabrielle are lesbian lovers.[3] Was Internet fandom of the show a necessary component in the decision to write such a storyline? Perhaps – perhaps not. But clearly an awareness of what many viewers were thinking about in terms of the meaning of Xena and Gabrielle's relationship was a component. How does such an example relate to a more literal example of the producerly text – such as when hopeful film and TV creators upload their own productions to the website for Current.TV so that web viewers can select those they would like to "green light"?[4]

Along with examining the development of the producerly text, I also seek to reconfigure Annette Kuhn's (1992) understanding of the social audience in light of the significant changes that have occurred within and around TV since the mid-1980s. A social audience can be thought of as a collective; people "come together" (sometimes literally) to watch a show, guided in part by the work of the television industry. "Spectators," on the other hand, are individuals who engage with a TV show but who may or may not do so with any sense of belonging to a larger collective of viewers (either symbolically or literally). This distinction between the social audience and the spectator (admittedly blurred) is useful for exploring the notion of tele-participation via the Internet. Under what circumstances and in what ways do viewers see themselves as part of a social audience? Does being part of a social audience factor into how viewers receive and interpret TV texts? How do distinctions made by producers, writers, networks, and marketers about various aspects of being a spectator within a social audience – if any – factor into the design of the TV text, and what role does an awareness of Internet fandom play in how the social audience is understood?

One of the themes that will become evident in this project is that the industry is working increasingly to create and/or sustain social audiences for their shows, looking to past examples of how and why fans developed into social audiences for guidance. One of the foremost motivations appears to be the element of sociality itself – that being part of a social audience allows individual spectators to socialize with others around a TV program. Rhiannon Bury (2005) argues that such

sociality helps to create and sustain communities, especially in the age of the Internet. While I will not be exploring the concept of community per se, I will examine the importance of socializing to tele-participation, how the Internet is a dynamic in this relationship, and how the social audience can become a force to be reckoned with from the perspective of the industry.

As I mentioned above, one way in which I attempt to unravel such complexities involves the categorization of invitational strategies. As with any attempt to categorize, significant vagaries and overlaps will emerge; however, my research indicates nuances in these strategies that call for classification of some type. The first style of invitation that I focus on is "overt" – a situation in which writers' and producers' intent to activate viewer participation is easily discernible within the text of the series. For example, I spend time exploring how *American Idol*'s (June 2002–) success as a show resides in its direct appeal to viewer participation ("You vote, you decide") and how this has expanded over seasons to more actively encourage Internet participation specifically. How can this show and its corresponding Internet activity be examined to gain insight into issues of viewer power in light of past academic debates about the ability of TV viewers to carve out their own interpretations and responses to TV?

The second style of invitation I discuss I refer to as "organic," an apparently natural style designed carefully to appear as if the show (or in some cases network) is not "asking" the viewer overtly to extend the text. With organic invitations, the show/network assumes that tele-participation is an *already* occurring element of viewers' ways of watching. For example, the teen series *Degrassi: The Next Generation* (2001) – as it airs on the N network in the United States – features interstitials that mimic Internet chat and cell phone text messaging, in a manner that might seem like a foreign language to adult viewers but that is clearly understood easily by the show's desired demographic. How might such strategies indicate a generationally influenced shift in the ways that TV producers and marketers understand their audiences? How might the actual messaging that occurs on websites associated with the series feed back into this loop?

The third category of invitation that I utilize is perhaps the messiest due to its complexity and ambiguousness, and that is the style I refer to as "obscured." By obscured, I mean to describe a style of invitation that is apparently careless, operating at a primarily aesthetic level; in

other words, any invitation to participate resides primarily in the *narrative structure and content* of the show itself through a certain "messiness" that demands viewer unraveling. From an outsider's perspective, it can appear as if fans are seizing upon textual elements that occur by chance, allowing for specific pleasures of "insider status," puzzle-solving, and prediction and speculation. For example, the ABC series *Lost* features intricately designed back-stories woven into episodes in atypical ways; the show features as well myriad and obscure clues as to the potential meaning of characters and their stories via references that range from the philosophical to the popular. This narrative design in no small way demands the Internet as a site in which viewers can seek information, engage in their own theory-making, and (as seen in the epigraph quote by Leuthen) voice concerns and ideas to producers and writers – or, at the very "least," to interns. The ratings success of this series, and the importance it has played in reviving ABC as a player in the industry, make the exploration of this series' invitational strategies all the more intriguing: What can we learn, and what might the industry be learning, from a show that has landed in the Top Ten while engaging in a style of invitation that is most akin to that found in the traditionally denigrated domain of cult TV?

While I engage in the categorizations I have laid out above as a means of organizing and addressing variations, I seek as well to thread these modes of invitation together. To use an outdated analogy, these varying strategies all to some degree appear to be rooted in an understanding of the Internet as the water-cooler of the new millennium. While Phillip Swann (2000) argues that the proliferation of program choices via the expansion of cable and satellite has made it harder for people to discuss any given show around the water-cooler at work (with so many shows on, what are the chances that one's co-workers will have watched the same thing you have?), the Internet seems to operate for many viewers as their water-cooler (who needs co-workers when you can reach out across geographical boundaries to chat about that episode online?).

I also use the water-cooler analogy because I argue in this book that the Internet has reinvigorated elements of oral culture – specifically, storytelling as understood by Walter Benjamin (1968). On one (and perhaps the most obvious) level, most TV-oriented websites clearly invite the viewer to *participate* in the interpretation and understanding of a story – that has been told to them *by* TV. According to Benjamin, the element of participation is a key dynamic of storytelling.

On another level, I argue that the Internet – through stoking participation – in turn influences the storytelling that emerges from TV, such that TV as a storyteller in turn stokes participation on the part of those listening. In short, the Internet's placement "between" sites of production and sites of reception creates a sense of proximity among those at work in these sites that in turn encourages a sense of reciprocity and closeness between industry professionals and viewers (see Johnson 2007).

While I will discuss Benjamin's understanding of storytelling further on, here I simply note that for Benjamin, one of the most elemental dynamics of "good" storytelling is some measure of reciprocity between the storyteller and the listener – such that the distinction between these two positions is somewhat muddled in the larger scheme of things. In order to explore this dynamic of reciprocity, I weave throughout this book stories offered to me by writers, producers, marketers, Internet professionals, and network executives – along with stories and opinions I gathered from viewers of the shows I examine. In the many interviews I conducted and surveys I designed, I sought greater understandings of how those who consume media imagine and relate to those who produce and promote media, and of course vice versa.

Beginning in 1999, I began a series of email conversations with adult viewers of *Xena: Warrior Princess* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* for my dissertation, which focused on the representation of female friendships on these two series. I found the majority of these respondents through postings I placed on fan sites for the shows; as I began developing this work for publication, the changes occurring with the Internet and television kept bubbling up and encouraging me to examine viewers of different programming that had significant online presences. I began to wonder: What might be different from the era of *Xena* and *Buffy* – when most series with online presences could easily be labeled "cult" – and the era of what media management and consulting firm Pricewaterhouse Coopers called "the rise of lifestyle media" (2006) – when the idea of a social audience for a television show existing through the Internet was seen as an about-to-be "given"? What new understandings of television were emerging for viewers and industry professionals? How might understandings of fandom and fan activities have changed? Or broader senses of what constituted a good storytelling experience?

To begin exploring these questions, in 2005 I designed a survey about television viewing and Internet activities and, through online postings at fan and industry sites for the series I had decided to explore, as well as at the numerous more generalized media entertainment sites that had grown online since 1997, I invited viewers to take part in the survey. In an attempt to broaden my sample beyond those already online, I also solicited involvement from college students at my home institution of Columbia College, Chicago. Those who completed the survey were then invited to participate in follow-up email conversations that were show-specific, most of which occurred via a temporary LiveJournal site that allowed participants to speak online with each other, as well as with me, if they wished.[5]

Across these multiple years and surveys, I received survey responses from a total of 143 individuals, 65 from the 1999 survey and 78 from the 2005 survey. Among the first group of earlier viewers, I relied primarily on 40 respondents; among the second batch, I relied on all 78 and engaged in follow-up exchanges with 56.[6] The majority of respondents in both samples identified as White, female, and US citizens. The end result of this drawn out process was a rich series of exchanges among myself and participants that offers a sense of what has changed in terms of the relationship between television and the Internet and how these changes have created and/or sustained broader changes within the television industry. Combining the surveys with my interviews of industry professionals, I discovered an excitement about television and its power to promote a participatory experience that is creating new (and often confusing) notions of storytelling and ownership. I also found creators and consumers eager to share their stories with a readership beyond myself. I hope those reading this book take heed of the voices found throughout its pages, considering my own voice as but a guide through this invigorating terrain of tele-participation.

Cult Television and Extension of the TV Text

Fictional worlds, of necessity, always exceed *the texts that describe them. (Gwenllian-Jones 2004: 92; my emphasis)*

One of the more intriguing relationships I found across the earlier and later years of my audience research revolved around viewers' sense

of whether or not they were watching "acceptable" or mainstream television, and whether or not they perceived their TV-related activities to be "typical." Thus, in order to situate this project further, here I examine briefly the role that cult TV has played in academic understandings of the social audience. Cult television shows historically have been the primary sites around which viewers have participated with the TV text, and most academic research concerning fan activities has centered on such programs.

Scholars writing about cult TV fandom often disagree as to the minutiae of what constitutes a cult television text and as to what constitutes cult TV fandom, but many describe a form of tele-participation that necessarily includes a show that "prompts" (somehow) a need for viewers to ponder the world of their program in all its complexity. This "pondering" might take any number of forms: creating a fanzine, joining a club, contributing to fan-based encyclopedias, writing slash fiction … but whatever the form of tele-participation might be, a general scholarly consensus has emerged that cult TV is uniquely poised to prompt such activities and that true cult TV fandom demands this tele-participation.

While Sara Gwenllian-Jones, in the above quote, seems to imply that *any* fictional television show can prompt such activity, most scholars writing about cult TV fandom (Gwenllian-Jones included) reserve a special place for cult TV in the pantheon of television fandom. There seems to be something "different" about such texts and the fandom they inspire. For example, Gwenllian-Jones argues elsewhere that cult television can be defined by a series of narrative traits that induce tele-participation that – in today's TV viewing world – leads a fan naturally to the Internet:

> From 1990 onwards, a number of television series have been produced and marketed precisely in order to attract particular microcultures and to foster within them *not just regular viewers* but also a high proportion of fans … Intertextuality, metatextuality, self-referentiality, story-arc and stand-alone episodes within the same series, an exaggerated play of fracture and textual excess and generic interconnections with wider subcultures (science-fiction, fantasy, horror, conspiracist, ufological) are knowingly employed to seduce viewers into intense engagements with the fictional worlds and fantastic logics of the cult television series' diegesis. The wide open, *producerly* texts of these series appeal not so much to their audiences' desire to be entertained as to its need to be imaginatively involved. (Gwenllian-Jones 2003: 166; my emphasis)

This somewhat overwhelming list of narrative traits is representative of many other scholars' assessments of "what it is" about cult TV texts that promotes cult fandom.[7] I agree with the general argument that shows that become cult programs tend to share specific narrative traits (such as those listed above) and that these traits are conducive to tele-participation. However, I am more interested in exploring here briefly if there are elements found in cult TV and in cult TV fandom that are not necessarily exclusive to the domain of cult. How have more recent TV shows perhaps borrowed from the strategies of cult television and its fandom to create more mainstream programming that *does* attract "just regular viewers"? Indeed, how might such narrative strategies currently be reconfiguring the very idea of "the regular viewer" to more closely approximate "the (cult) fan"?

One valuable line of inquiry can be extrapolated from Matt Hills's discussion of cult TV fandom. Hills (2002) argues that one important element in defining a cult text is that the audience claims the text as in fact cult. This inclusion of the viewer serves two useful purposes. First, allowing for viewer distinctions helps to delimit definitions of cult TV that rely solely on textual characteristics. Second, highlighting the audience clarifies that part of defining cult TV must of necessity include the audience and their experience with the text. For the purposes of what this book will examine, Hills provides a useful guideline: in attending to the activities of the audience (rather than focusing *primarily* on the structure and content of the text), we might find that social audiences today engage in activities and relationships with non-cult TV programs in very "cult-like" ways.

Hills himself hints at this possibility when he struggles to make a distinction between soap operas and cult TV by arguing that a characteristic narrative element of cult TV is an "endlessly deferred narrative" (134). Yet, many scholars describe soap narratives in exactly this manner.[8] More to the point, listening to the social audiences of soap operas *and* of cult texts might reveal competing perspectives. For example, in my own audience research on *Buffy* and *Xena*, many fans of these shows assessed their texts' narratives as soap-like (Ross 2002). By consistently keeping in play the social audience, their interactions with the TV text, and the text proper, it becomes apparent that a good deal of what scholars describe when discussing cult TV (and cult TV fandom especially) resembles the descriptions forthcoming in this book – in terms of both what social audiences are doing *and* in terms

of what writers, producers, networks, and marketers are doing. For example, both Hills and Gwenllian-Jones (with her co-editor Roberta E. Pearson, 2004) describe cult TV fans as members of communities that tend to produce tertiary texts such as fan fiction, music videos, or websites and that tend to engage in tertiary activities such as traveling to visit sites from a show, or impersonating a character. As Hills (2002) puts it, "an important part of being a cult fan … involves *extending the reader-text* … relationship into other areas of fan experience" (22, my emphasis).

Yet, most of the shows I examine cannot easily be labeled cult. My point is not so much to argue that academic definitions of cult TV are flawed; rather, it is to suggest that specific facets of cult TV narratives *and the tele-participation that intermingles with these facets* may be as important in other kinds of programs as they are in cult programs. By emphasizing the dynamic of "extending the reader-text," we can begin to imagine possibilities beyond (without leaving behind) the cult. As S. Elizabeth Bird's (2003) research on an online fan community for *Doctor Quinn Medicine Woman* demonstrates, even the most "unlikely" of television shows can inspire intense tele-participation. In addition, Hills points out that a wide range of fandom and fan activities exists, making fandom in general difficult to define; by emphasizing the concept of the social audience, we can also begin to imagine possibilities of tele-participation beyond (without leaving behind) fandom.

Based on my observations of Internet activity related to television, activities and textual strategies that used to be primarily the domain of cult TV and its fans are increasingly a part of TV making and viewing more generally, suggesting the importance of audience and industry research today to understanding both "TV" and "TV fandom." To take one example, Will Brooker's examination of the official *Dawson's Creek* (January 1998–2003) website and how some viewers used it revealed that for most participants, the website extended the TV text of *Dawson's Creek*, but to a limited degree. Website users primarily turned to the site for basic information on the show, rather than for chatting about the show with others.

Brooker describes the website as a prime example of a program

> deliberately overflow[ing] the bounds of television … rais[ing] important questions about the experience of watching television, and the concept of the television audience. To what extent has the nature of watching

television changed due to dedicated websites that offer an immersive, participatory experience? (Brooker 2004: 569–70)

In short, Brooker discovered that the importance of the website to regular viewers was limited – that, for this group of participants, "the nature of watching television" may not have changed much, regardless of whether or not a "website that offered an immersive, participatory experience" existed.

Brooker's study is important in three key respects. First, the website for *Dawson's Creek* is designed in a manner similar to websites that preceded it for programs designated "cult." Second, this similarity suggests that the managers of this site have a vision of the social audience as likely to respond to such a "cult" appeal online – even though most critics have firmly and consistently labeled the series a teen soap opera. And third, regardless of what the managers of this site may have assumed or desired, in the case of Brooker's subjects at least, viewers were not responding to the site in its fullest capacities.

Hills (2004), in fact, refers to *Dawson's Creek* as an example of "mainstream cult." The distinction he is making between cult and mainstream cult is "between fan cultures that construct their own intertextual links between programmes … and fandoms that largely follow intertextual links put in place by the media industry to court such fans" (63). In other words, many of the activities fans of this show engaged in resembled those of cult fans – but these activities were not likely to have occurred if not for the strategies evident within the text and/or on the website.

Still, Brooker's actual audience research (as opposed to, in this case, Hills's textual and industrial analysis) suggests that "cult-like" strategies are no guarantee of cult-like consumer behavior. If "overflow" exists but tele-participation is limited to the degree that Brooker describes, why study it? To begin with, perhaps it is not as limited as Brooker suggests (thus the scope of this book in terms of approaching a variety of shows). In addition, the fact that industry professionals seem to be seeking tele-participation and extension of the TV text suggests that the tele-participating viewer is becoming a prototype – and real or imagined, the *perception* of the social audience is often as important as the *actuality* of the social audience when it comes to what the industry will offer.

TV, like other arts, is a *shared* practice, bounded by the limits (in the US) of a commercial industry that today includes the Internet. As Raymond Williams argues:

> The relationship between the making of a work of art and its reception is always active, and subject to conventions, which in themselves are forms of (changing) social organization and relationship, and this is radically different from the production and consumption of an object. It is indeed an activity and a practice … only accessible through active perception and interpretation … We have to break from the common practice of isolating the object … We have to discover the nature of a practice and then its conditions. (Williams 1980: 47)

As with any shared *practice*, then, there will be a range of constantly shifting activities. What I propose to examine in this book is such a range. In the spirit of Williams, I seek to "discover the nature" of practices involved with TV and the Internet and the conditions (including the limits) of those practices, refusing to isolate the object of TV from the audience *or* from the industry. And in the spirit of Hills and Brooker, I seek to discover the *changing* nature of the practices associated with television in the age of the Internet.

Managing Tele-Participation: Industry and Viewers

> "*Individual" viewing encounters a variety of institutional practices, from the director watching back-episodes of a soap opera before plotting his first block, through the producers watching the first assembly of an episode, to school children in the playground competing to retell the previous night's story. (Tulloch 1990: 19)*

> *To gauge the response of his viewers, [Dan] Schneider [creator of Nickelodeon's* Zoey 101*] said, he reads Internet message boards. (Arthur 2005: 6)*

Although these two quotes commenting on the relationship between TV creators and viewers are separated by 15 years, they collectively zero in on a common dynamic between professionals and "regular

consumers" that reaches far back in time: few consumers leave a text at its reading, and few producers leave a text at its point of official completion. This is especially true for something like series television, which relies on a continuity from episode to episode that makes the text "never-ending" from both a creative and reception context. One can see this relationship at work as well in newspapers' publications of serial stories and comics, and also in the marketing of stars from the era of classical Hollywood cinema. We are facing a relationship with long and vibrant roots in media that historically precedes television.[9]

Magazines in particular became a favored site for the filmgoer of the 1940s and 1950s who wanted to follow something specific about a film in more detail, and therefore it is hardly surprising that a primary forum for tele-participation has been the same. Cult TV shows especially have capitalized on the magazine format, offering fans details on everything from dialogue to upcoming casting decisions to interviews with producers, writers, and stars. Some fans turned also to fanzines – homemade fan creations offering fan fiction and fan commentary.[10] Today, more mainstream magazines cater to fans of specific shows as well; *Entertainment Weekly* has become noted for its periodic "fan issues" on series ranging from the cult show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* to the top hit *Seinfeld*.

Another forum for fans of cult programs that has reliably produced interaction with producers, writers, and stars has been the convention. In 1971:

> Creation Entertainment [began] a 34 year tradition of producing the world's leading conventions for fans of genre television and films. Creation has organized over 2,300 events in major cities throughout the globe. Creation is also the acknowledged leader in the manufacture of fine collectibles, apparel and autographed items for fellow fans! As fans ourselves, we take pride in delivering the best! (www.creationent.com/)

Some of the earliest TV series Creation Entertainment produced conventions for were *Star Trek* (1966–9) and *Doctor Who* (1963– December 1989, first run) – both cult programs.[11] Such conventions have traditionally focused on cult TV programming, whereas more mainstream fare has sought other venues. Series featuring teens, for example, have taken advantage of the American mall to bring stars

(with producers hidden in the background) to teen viewers assumed to be primarily interested in the characters and their actors rather than their creators.

With the proliferation of access to the Internet and the World Wide Web, viewers of any number of styles of programming could create and find sites offering many of the advantages of entertainment magazines, fanzines, and conventions. While at first the history of such sites appears to have belonged to the cult TV show, the reader will see in the remainder of this book that "regular"/"non-cult" sites have proliferated to much the same degree as those for cult programs. An important differentiation exists between those online sites created by the industry and those created by viewers – a differentiation similar to that which exists between most fan magazines and fanzines: official publications, be they online or in print, have agendas and advantages different in kind from those created and maintained by viewers (such as official sites providing easier access to creators and copyright per-missions). Nevertheless, a largely, though not always consistently, symbiotic relationship has emerged between the industry-industry sites and the viewer-viewer sites that allows each "group" to use the other for their own ends – with the balance of power almost always residing in the hands of the industry. While I will examine this "deli-cate ecosystem" in future chapters, my point here is to more generally explore how the Internet especially has become a site at which the industry and its needs intermingles with the viewers and their needs more thoroughly than before.

This intermingling of producer/pursuer and product/consumer/ pursuer is an important area of change to consider. As Philip Napoli points out, "the pursuit of [media audiences as an economic product has affected] … the structure of media industries and the behavior of media organizations" (2003: 6). Tele-participation has become an increasingly crucial element in industrial strategies to capture the ever-splintering audience, as well as a crucial element in viewers' expecta-tions for television. The Internet, meeting television *and* meeting the viewer, is an important part of this historical reconfiguration of televi-sion in its broadest sense. As computer technology developed to make the creation and maintenance of websites easier beginning in the 1990s, broader cultural and societal changes occurred as well – from an increased emphasis on computer literacy in the classroom and demands for digital divides to be bridged (through initiatives such as

bringing the Internet to public libraries), to shifts in the dynamics of family life.[12] It didn't take long in the bigger scheme of things cultural and social for the Internet to become naturalized for many – or at least for those who "count."

Concurrently, changes in technology directly related to the television industry also began to occur. The development of digital cable and satellite in particular has created what John Ellis (2000) refers to as a shift from a television era of scarcity to one of proliferation and fragmentation. The resulting increased competition for viewers in the midst of a splintering general audience led to new conceptions of the social audience – *and* new conceptions of the industry itself. Today, there exists an increased importance of the niche market, discrete collections of viewers demarcated most often along lines of age (especially 18–49 and teen), gender, race, and income. One need only look at the full cable spectrum of channel choices to see how many stations break down along specific lines of viewer demographics (Lifetime for women, Spike TV for men, The N for young adults, BET for African Americans) and/or lines of content assumed to correspond to desired demographics (Food Network, Travel Channel, BBCAmerica). Competition has only increased as new technologies allowing the development of DVD, digital video recording, and video streaming have offered alternative modes of viewing to consumers with the means.

To more directly link such broad changes to the project at hand, one can "imagine the possibilities" – many of which have come to fruition – in terms of channels devoted to specific social audiences. The Sci-Fi Network emerged on cable in 1992 and continues today as a site for the distribution of primarily cult science-fiction and fantasy shows, with the attendant assumption that viewers seeking out this channel are willing to pay for it. The N bills itself exclusively to young adults as members of a social audience seeking a network they can *literally* relate to: one promotional bump airing during commercial breaks features a teen girl annoyed by her kid brother receiving a pager text message *from The N* which reassures her that someday things will get better.

I raise this context here to demonstrate the complexities of what can occur when technological, cultural, social, and industrial changes converge: the viewers to whom The N and Sci-Fi pitch themselves have little trouble navigating such systems of relationships, even though it is unlikely that the average viewer of a program on either network knows the web of corporate bonding that exists beyond it. This seamlessness

demonstrates the degree of finesse with which the television industry has learned to *manage* such changes as the ones I describe in this book – a level of expertise that extends to, and may even rely on, the Internet (Johnson 2007). Further, some viewers I spoke with for this book *do* indeed understand the complexities of ownership/production and distribution *because the Internet has made such information available*. Typically, viewers seek out such information as they work to solidify their sense of being members of a social audience – for example, when trying to obtain permission for stills, or when trying to save a show from cancellation. The overall picture is one of a fine balancing act between the power of the industry on the one hand and the power of viewers on the other, and throughout this book I work to lay out the industrial frameworks within which the various invitational relationships I explore take place.

An Aesthetics of Multiplicity

Robert C. Allen and Annette Hill (2004), in a discussion concerning the future of television, make two astute observations about the nature of this medium. First, "change … is not something about to happen, but something that has been a part of the experience of television since its introduction" (537). The impact of the Internet on TV creating and viewing, while unique in its specific manifestations, is part of a historical continuum that includes fears of TV "dying" accompanied by heightened expectations for TV's ability to radically alter the society and culture within which creators and viewers live. Second, "transformation[s] of television … [take] place in relation both to those with the money and inclination to invest in the latest technology and those for whom television still means a few broadcast channels" (537). In other words, while the specific slice of change I am studying here is just that – specific and a slice of much broader trends and patterns – this does not necessarily mean that such developments have not/do not/will not come to have significant impact on those who may not be involved directly with such change. In fact, this may be one of the more pertinent elements of this book: when the inclinations, abilities, and actions of the few impact the many, we are dealing with crucial issues of power and privilege.