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Realities of Change: The changing nature of television in the past twenty years

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Abstract

This thesis argues that in order to understand the changes that have occurred in the television industry and television spectatorship since the mid-1990s, it is important to look at the transitions which have occurred in three key areas: 'textual production', 'reception and response', and 'economics'. Textual production refers to the various industrial structures which surround the creation of a text and impact its content; reception and response refers to the ways in which an audience receives their television content, and the methods by which they communicate about it with each other and with content creators; and lastly, economics refers to the variety of financial, commercial, and regulatory structures that surround the production, distribution and reception of the television text. By providing historical context in order to contrast and highlight the shifts in these key areas, as well as the technological environment in which they occur, a holistic understanding of the period can be gained, through the framework of a circuit model. This thesis argues that the changes that occurred during this period in the primary nodes of textual production, reception and response, and economics are interrelated, and could not have occurred independently of each other.

The thesis draws on case studies from the period, specifically *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Lost*, and *American Idol* with each series illustrating one of the three key areas of transition. The fourth case study, *Survivor*, specifically the twenty-third season, is utilised to show the complex interrelations of these areas, and how their simultaneous analysis can elucidate the macro-level shifts that have occurred in the past twenty years. The case studies cover the major developments in entertainment programming of the period, namely narratively complex television, and reality television. Finally, comments are made about the possible future directions of both television and Television studies.

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Realities of Change: Television in Transition

Introduction

When teaching an undergraduate television studies course, I always begin the year by asking my classes about their television watching practices. These students are mostly Generation Y, digital natives, generally more comfortable with media technologies than those who have come before. More and more I find myself being told that they do not watch television. From my experience, and anecdotally, students have always been reticent to admit to their television consumption, but it would seem to me that the rationale has shifted from cringe due to admitting to an enjoyment of popular/populist culture to a genuine misrecognition of their actions as “watching television”. But pushing a little deeper, I find that they all have their favourite series; they are familiar with most of the current programming, even if it is only to express anti-fandom, and they have, in the preceding weeks, seen multiple episodes of television content, if not entire seasons. But as far as they are concerned, they do not watch television. For many of them, television means being beholden to network structures, to broadcast timetables. For many, it refers to a piece of hardware, something which sits in the corner of the lounge room, or on the wall of the bedroom. For many, television means a set of viewing practices, something they remember from their childhood, or that they’ve seen people do on screen. But for them, these ideas bear little or no resemblance to how they see their own actions in relation to modern television content. This shift in the understanding of what television means encapsulates several of the ideas key to this thesis.

Television has always been a medium in transition, shifting with the whims of the viewing public, and with the constant adaptation of television networks, producers, and advertisers to maintain ratings and maximise revenue, as well as to creatively push the narrative potential of the medium. There has been ongoing tension in many locales between public service broadcasting

and commercial television, with commercial television constantly stretching to find programming which will provide better ratings than that which is currently screening, since ratings attract advertisers and provide the necessary return on investment. Throughout the history of television, almost all aspects have been perpetually in transition, including television technology, audience viewing patterns, viewer engagement, programming patterns, and the economic models of broadcasters and producers. In the past 20 years, these shifts have been dramatic; some noticeable to the viewing public, others subtle, almost unnoticed. It is these shifts which are at the basis of this thesis; the necessity to highlight the different transitions which have occurred, to identify what might have caused them, and to suggest how they might be linked.

The central argument of this thesis is that the major shifts in television which have occurred over the past 20 years can be separated into three main categories: how people watch and engage with television; the ways in which television texts are created, right down to the underlying textual structure and form; and the core economic structure of the television industry. It is my contention that all three broad shifts are fundamentally related, that none of these shifts was a *fait accompli*, and that none of them could have occurred without the others. In this introduction, I aim to lay out the underlying structures which describe the modern televisual landscape and how we have arrived here, as well as to provide a framework in which the complexities of these interrelationships can be understood.

It is crucial to acknowledge that, in the twenty-first century, the definition of television has become a point of some contestation. Part of what makes the main argument of this thesis complicated is that the notion of television is not as clear cut as it was 30 years ago. While it can usually be identified using Justice Potter Stewart's rubric for pornography ("I know it when I see it"), this doesn't assist us with creating a firmer definition. Throughout this thesis, I will draw the broad strokes of a new understanding of what television might mean, by discussing the variety of

forms that television can take, and discussions in which it is invoked in this new media age. Due to limitations of space, I have chosen to focus on entertainment television, leaving to one side news and current affairs coverage, sports content, films made for cinematic or home video release, and clips or series made for distribution on the internet.

Television studies Methodologies and the Circuit Model

Television studies has historically drawn on the history of Cultural Studies, utilising a 'circuit model' framework in order to structure its enquiries into the medium. Circuit models in this context refer to theoretical models which lay out two to three elements of an overarching system that impact each other, a "heuristic model for scholarly analysis and teaching, a model for how to approach and conceive of the object of enquiry" (D'Acci 424). While it has become common in the scholarship to simply note that these types of frameworks are commonly used, work from the late 1970s and early 1980s by scholars such as Todd Gitlin and Stuart Hall can be seen as establishing a solid modern base for the work which has followed (Gitlin; Hall). Hall in particular lays out a structure (which he acknowledges owes a debt to academic traditions in mass communication, and even traces back to Marxist theories of commodity production) which is based on a looped model, invoking production, the text and reception as three critical moments for understanding television. However, Hall crucially acknowledges the similarities in the moments of production and reception, effectively labelling them identically in his model, and thus effectively completing the circuit. Joseph Champ has provided a comprehensive coverage of some of the early origins of the 'circuit of culture' that was developed by Du Gay, along with Hall and others, and Julie D'Acci has mapped out the variety of circuit models that have been broadly adopted by cultural studies over the years (Champ 85–6; Du Gay et al. 3–4; D'Acci 424–33). While it has become common in Cultural Studies to utilise the three nodes described by Hall - production, text, and reception - other theorists have also suggested different fourth nodes, such as common sense, socio-historical context, or technology (O'Shaughnessy and Stadler 58; D'Acci

427; Goode 60). Paul du Gay et al's circuit model addresses multiple modes of theoretical reading, such as representation and identity, alongside the more traditional Marxist nodes of production, consumption and regulation (Du Gay et al. 3). All of these models acknowledge the holistic approach required to study television, although their application can still result in one node being prioritised over others.

All of these models have clear value for understanding specific aspects of a text or an industrial moment but still seem to be consistently overlooking changes or moments of impact that I see as crucial. They can lead to the neglect of key shifts that have occurred within the industry or, on occasion, the obfuscation of other external changes that might have had an impact. Importantly, taking a lead from Luke Goode, an effective holistic model needs to include technological shifts, but to resist isolating them as a separate node within the circuit (Goode). Technological shifts offer new possibilities to the industry, and can be adopted by audiences in unforeseen ways in order to change their modes of engagement. Technology plays a critical role in the ways in which audiences can engage with television, and in recent years, in how they can respond to the industry. Many shifts in televisual technology may seem to be aesthetic or for convenience, but can also have a significant impact on the types of television that are produced, and how audiences choose to consume them. The changes that come from the shifting technological landscape also affect the opportunities available to television creatives for communicating with their viewers, which can have further impacts on the types of television produced, and also how the audience is monetised. As traditional revenue sources suffer in the modern technological landscape, the new technologies can also allow for new economic streams. This range of technological impacts suggests that technology operates at a different level, as a substrate that permeates all three of the other nodes, rather than just as a "sub-heading within the study of media production" (Goode 61). All shifts in television and television studies occur within a perpetually changing technological environment. Thus, while technology cannot and should not

be ignored, it needs to be understood in terms of its own growth and development, with sociological and cultural impacts on that development taken into account. The broader technological shifts can then be acknowledged when addressing aspects specific to televisual technologies, and televisual technologies can be acknowledged for their impact on shifts in the television industry. However, this process is reciprocal, with the television industries and audiences having an impact on the development of televisual technologies as well.

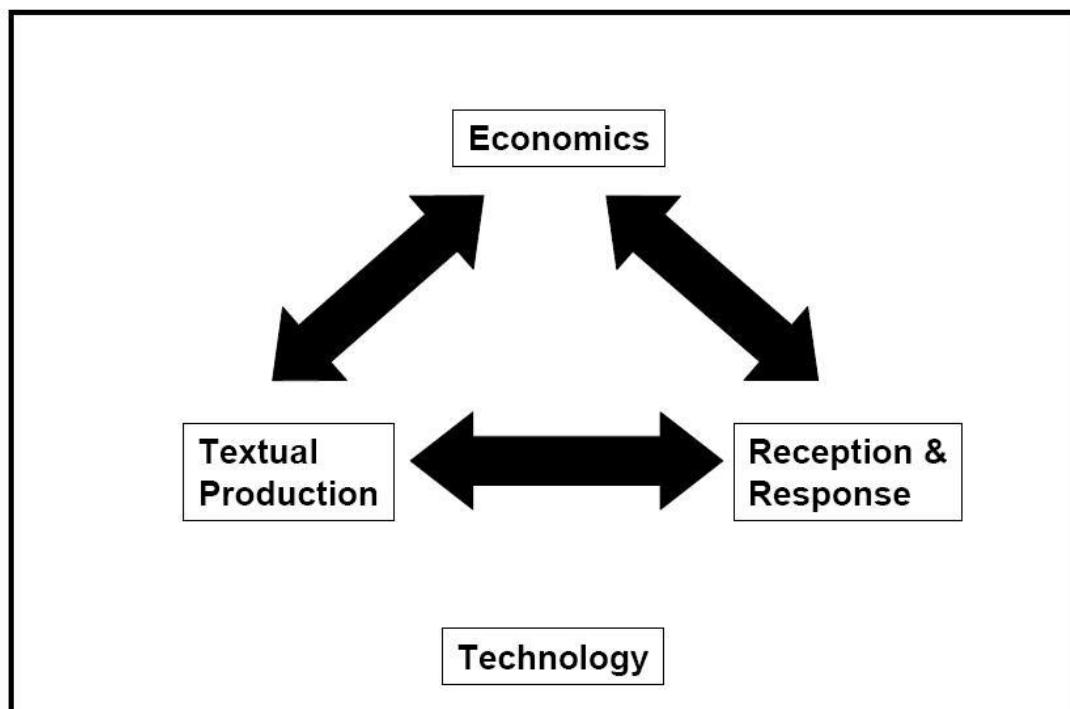


Figure 1 - A New Model for Television studies

Once technology is removed from the circuit to stand alone, the three standard nodes within the circuit model need to be revised in order to understand the contemporary situation, providing the new model pictured in Figure 1. The first node I identify is that of 'textual production'. This draws on aspects of both text and production, but considers the text more at a macro-level than at the micro-level that the analytic paradigms of cultural studies tend to produce. This node addresses questions of the rise of new genres and televisual forms, shifts in narrative modes, industrial shifts in the ways that creatives work on television series, and the ways in which

television series are cast, staffed, and written. The text was often studied as something produced in a vacuum, or at best as the product of a single author with complete control over the final product. Textual production takes into account the variety of factors which can impact on the production of a text, and allows for a deeper understanding of the shifts that might have occurred in the creation of the texts themselves.

The second node I wish to highlight is that of 'reception and response'. This bears significant similarity to the previous node of reception, but takes into account not only how an audience might read a text, but also how they might receive it technologically, how they might engage with it, and how they might speak back to it, either to the creatives or to fellow audience members. In the cultural studies model, reception was very much focused on the messages decoded from the text, whereas my node of 'reception and response' broadens this understanding significantly, allowing social and technological changes to be addressed, along with the ways in which television content might stimulate conversation, discussion, or even the creation of new cultural products.

Finally, I believe that the economics of the television industry needs to be addressed explicitly within this model, and, therefore my third node is 'economics'. Economics is a slightly contested term; here, I am utilising the broad conception that often features in television studies in the work of scholars such as Amanda Lotz, John Fiske, and John Caldwell (Lotz; Fiske, *Television Culture*; J. T. Caldwell, *Televisuality*); that is described as media economics by Philip M Napoli (162–7); and is noted as a crucial condition of the media industries by Timothy Havens and Amanda Lotz (6–7). Jonathan Gray and Amanda Lotz have briefly sketched the increased interest in television economics in recent years, connecting it to much of the work that has occurred in media industries and production studies (Gray and Lotz 107–8). Economics has not previously been included within traditional cultural studies models, probably because the industrial

framework of broadcast television is not seen to have shifted much since the introduction of pre-recorded tape content in the 1950s. Even with the introduction of competing cable and satellite networks in the 1970s and 80s, the economic structure of the industry – that is commercial television interspersed with breaks for multiple thirty-second-long paid advertising segments – did not shift greatly. However, with greater levels of fragmentation, shifting viewing models, and new modes of engagement, the traditional notion of a second order economic transaction (selling airtime to advertisers, rather than audiences paying directly) is becoming less viable as the sole production of revenue. This new node will take into account the ways in which television is garnering revenue and shifting cost centres in order to maintain a sustainable business model. Economics can also be expanded to contain notions of regulation, which can have an impact on corporate development, competition, and modes of revenue.

Elements of my work draw on an emerging methodology, described by Jennifer Holt and Alisa Perren as Media Industries (Holt and Perren), which aims to understand the shifts in industrial frameworks by drawing on prior work in cultural and creative industries studies on this subject, as well as the complex relationships which go into the creation of a media text.¹ This school of thought comes out of the intersection of the humanities scholarship of The Frankfurt School, and the social sciences area of ‘mass communication’, but looks to find new modes of interrogation which “[consider] the interrelationships between industry, text, audience and society” (Holt and Perren 4). The origins of this area of scholarship are also explored by Timothy Havens, Amanda Lotz, and Serra Tinic, who lay out the broad boundaries of this type of research, as well as the nascent field of production studies, which does some similar work (Havens, Lotz, and Tinic; J. T. Caldwell, *Production Culture*; Mayer). Both my textual production and economics nodes are

¹ In an interview, Holt has said regarding the solidification of the field: “we don’t suggest that we ‘invented’ this field by any means...we just want to begin the process of identifying, historicizing and theorizing the vast range of industries, analytical tools, critical traditions and potential paths of inquiry that comprise what the field of media industry studies looks like to us, at this point” (Jenkins, “Studying Media Industries”).

inflected by this methodology, but the additions of reception and response, as well as the technology substrate, provide finer detail when investigating the complex interrelationships of the shifts that have occurred for television since the mid-1990s.

Periodisations of Television

While the medium of television has been constantly in transition, undergoing gradual changes over extended periods of time, it is important to grasp how the changes that have occurred have had wide-reaching consequences. In order to best understand where we find ourselves, we need to know how we got here. Several theorists have described the history of television by breaking it down into periods. In this section, I identify the three different periodisations which have gained significant traction within television studies and, in order to get the finest understanding, I have chosen to draw on elements from all three. Each focuses on disparate but important elements in television history, as well as drawing on different geographic bases.² The similarities between their approaches means that the final period which they all identify correlates directly with the time period that will be the focus of this thesis; that is, the period that begins in roughly the mid-1990s.

The three sets of theorists who have developed theories which periodise television of the last 60 years in similar ways are John Ellis; Jimmie Reeves, Mark Rodgers, and Michael Epstein; and Amanda Lotz. John Ellis describes the eras of scarcity, availability, and plenty in *Seeing Things*, published in 2000. Jimmie Reeves, Mark Rodgers and Michael Epstein describe and flesh out the periods they call TV I and TV II in a 1996 book chapter, and expand on it to describe a new period (TVIII) in a subsequent piece in 2002. Finally, Amanda Lotz has described the Network era, the Multi-channel Transition, and the Post-network era in her 2007 work, *The Television Will Be*

² It is important to acknowledge that these periodisations focus exclusively on Western Anglophone nations, which have a very specific set of industrial and political realities. Other nations will have had their own specific national periodisations, which while interesting, do not apply to the specifics of this thesis.

Revolutionized. Each of these schemas is valid, highlighting slightly different shifts, but generally referring to similar periods and movements within television's industrial and viewing practices. It is important to note that while none of these periodisations is exclusively geographically focussed, Ellis tends to focus more on the UK environment, while Lotz and Reeves et al are more interested in the US model. This does occasionally lead to some differences between periodisations.

Ellis' first period, the era of scarcity, is typified by "few channels broadcasting for part of the day only" (*Seeing Things: Television in the Age of Uncertainty* 39). The television set was introduced in Britain as a consumer object in the late 1940s and early 1950s, and coincided with the development of domestic consumption in an age of growing choices, a departure from the Fordist model which was typified by little individualisation. Television became a symbol of domestic consumption, but also helped to push further consumption, showcasing idealised views of households for whom consumption was important, but also a given. Lynn Spigel suggests that in the United States, households were spatially reconfigured in order to find a space for the television within living rooms, a practice which can be seen to have been mirrored all over the world (38). Television scheduling was frequently established to mimic the expected patterns of everyday family life (e.g. the Toddler's Truce³); however, people also began to schedule their lives around television. The scarcity of programming (usually only one or two channels) meant that a large proportion of the population was having a shared experience on any given night: watching the same programming, participating in a large imagined community, experiencing content which was able to stimulate 'watercooler discussion' or even national debate. Programming was designed to appeal to the masses, so as to be of interest to the family as a whole. This period saw the beginnings of the symbiotic relationship that exists between the television industry and the

³ The Toddler's Truce was a period during the 1950s on British television where the broadcast was shut off between 6pm and 7pm, with the nominal purpose of allowing children to be put to bed, and to discourage continuous television viewing (Brookes 374).

public, with the industry shifting in order to meet the desires of the audience, and the audience reconfiguring their personal spaces and time in order to accommodate the new medium.

In trying to trace the birth of Cult television, Reeves, Rogers, and Epstein formulate their own structure around television history, initially using the terms TV I and TV II (coined by Stephen Behrens and cited in Reeves, Rogers, and Epstein 24). TV I is seen to relate to “network era television” (Reeves, Rogers, and Epstein 25), the period from roughly the 1950s to the late 1970s in the US, where a small number of networks were in complete control of all content that appeared on television. Where Ellis characterised the introduction of the television in the UK as a departure from Fordism, Reeves et al suggest that in the US context, the television and Fordism are strongly linked, as is the birth of mass consumption. Television content was also aimed at the mass audience, and attempted to win the highest ratings across the population as a whole. As such, the theorists claim that programming content was aimed at ‘core American values’, and tended to focus on broadly popular genres such as sitcoms and crime shows (25).

Lotz’s take on the Network Era is fairly similar to both the era of scarcity and TV I; all three cover the same time period and, as would be expected, have very similar aspects. She, however, is quick to point out that the framework for the network era was not novel, but in fact grew out of the radio network structure. For Lotz, the important aspects are the lack of economic competition, the development from the economic model of a single sponsor for programmes to the 30 second advertisement, the sale of this advertising based on rough audience measures, and the lack of choice for viewers in what they watched or when they watched it.

We can see a common thread running through all these descriptions: minimal range of content, aimed at attracting large mass audiences. This period also importantly saw many households introduced to television. This led to people learning how television might form a part of their

lives, at the same time as the industry was developing an understanding of how television might fit within the media landscape and society as a whole.

Subsequent to these initial periodisations, each theorist has defined a second era, again with similar sets of characteristics. Ellis says that by the end of the twentieth century, we moved out of the era of scarcity, into the new era of availability. For Ellis, the indicators of availability include multiple channels broadcasting simultaneously, and the entry into the national market of cable and satellite services, alongside traditional terrestrial broadcast.⁴ The key audience position for this period is that of “managed choice” (Ellis, *Seeing Things: Television in the Age of Uncertainty* 61). He suggests that many viewers at his time of writing in 2000 were still coming to terms with what this era meant. Ellis points as an example to the US model, where traditionally three networks had offered the terrestrial free-to-air television viewing. However, with the rise of cable networks, a far greater number of channels, frequently with a much more defined appeal, became available to viewers, and the viewing numbers for the traditional major networks began to drop off rapidly.

A great deal of emphasis is placed on the changing world which surrounded the era of availability – the end of the Cold War, the rise of globalisation, and the possibilities for the production and marketing of products outside of the traditional narrow national markets – all contributed to the changing landscape. Mass production was no longer required, and where previously consumption had been a means of establishing communality, it now acted as a point of difference, as individualisation of commodities became a way of establishing identity. There are definite parallels to be drawn between this level of consumption for the establishment of identity, and the growth of individual choice of televisual content. The notion of the monolithic eyeball, the

⁴ Terrestrial broadcast has traditionally referred to analogue broadcast of free-to-air television. In the digital age, it also includes digital broadcast which makes use of radio-waves, instead of broadcasting via satellite or cable.

whole country watching the same programming, was diminishing, and, instead, channels were marketed to individual tastes, to niche and minority audiences. Viewers were able to create their own individual identity through their choices of content. Ellis notes Charlotte Brunsdon's connection of the satellite dish and the video recorder to this greater availability of choice and differentiation, as new technologies provided viewers with more options and greater control over content (Ellis, *Seeing Things: Television in the Age of Uncertainty* 63–64). The fragmentation of viewership becomes key to this period, although it is still relatively constrained by broadcast schedules.

The development of entertainment brands is also identified as a key feature of this period. This applies not just to networks, who sought to strongly differentiate themselves from each other, but also to the content itself, which developed its own branding in order to broaden its commercial appeal. The concept of the 'spinoff' became more popular, although Ellis suggests that in fact that term is a little too simplistic when a variety of tie-ins across different media is often pre-planned in the development of a project. We see characters from programmes being given their own shows, as well as video games based on films, films based on television shows, in later years there are interactive media online to allow a 'personal connection' to fictional characters, and throughout all these examples, many opportunities for merchandising on a number of levels.

Reeves, Rogers and Epstein's second period also applies to a similar era at the end of the twentieth century to that of Ellis. Just as they saw TV I to be closely related to Fordism, TV II is described as having a complicated relationship with the post-Fordist period of overconsumption that arose in the US at the end of the 1970s. The authors take note of the changing television landscape, which saw the rise of new distribution technologies (cable and satellite), as well as technologies of control (remote controls and video recording devices) and even new screens

within the household, such as the personal computer. All of these technological advances provided viewers with a greater range of choice, and a greater level of control over their choices, allowing them to overconsume in this aspect of their lives as well.

Where Reeves et al's analysis provides an interesting counterpoint to that of Ellis is in the way that they make at least some attempts to identify the process of progression between TV I & II. They identify *Star Trek* as content firmly within the TV I period, but note that this was one of the first programs to suggest that pure viewing numbers were not the only aspect to consider when evaluating the economic worth of a program. By attracting active and engaged viewers (and by extension, cult viewers), television networks were able to see additional benefits. Networks also began to identify 'quality demographics', which might be worth more than others to an advertiser. Further changes were also seen in programming, with some attempts in mainstream episodic programming to add a level of continuing narrative.⁵ TV II was the period when many of the post-modern effects of television began to be seen, especially the blurring of established genres. Small amounts of niche programming became visible, although the true rise of niche programming was yet to come.

Lotz terms her second period Multi-channel Transition, a term which I find very useful, as within the terminology there is an acceptance of a sliding scale, a suggestion that the move from one period to another is not clean cut, but instead may happen over time, and at different times for different people depending on class, region, etc. The multi-channel transition begins in the early 1980s, and incorporates 20 years of gradual change. This period saw broad changes in technologies of control, such as the entrance into common usage of the remote control, and the VCR. Another notable change was the rise of cable networks in the US, with the growing success

⁵ *Hill Street Blues* (1981-87) is often identified as an early text within the episodic framework which sometimes carried storylines over multiple episodes.

of HBO and other niche networks.⁶ Providing further competition were additional broadcast networks, such as FOX (launched in 1986) and the youth-oriented WB (launched in 1995). This growing number of broadcast and cable channel options led directly to a fragmentation of audiences, which had both a financial and cultural effect.⁷ From this fragmentation comes a move towards the niche targeting of networks (e.g. networks focused on news, sports, or even on a specific ethnicity or gender) in order to capture and maintain a specific demographic. All of these shifts combine across this twenty year period to form the Multi-channel Transition.

Once again, similarities between the groupings of each of these theorists become very apparent, especially the importance of the diversity of networks' programming content, which led to a greater range of choices being presented to the audience. In reaction to this, the branding of both networks and programming becomes important, as does the recognition that sheer viewing numbers may not be the only marker of the economic value of an audience.

The third section in each of these theorists' periodisations requires some deeper analysis, as these are perhaps the least clearly defined. This period is also the most important for the purpose of this work, as this is the period that has seen the changes that this thesis seeks to identify. To try to develop the clearest understanding of this period, I am also drawing on additional theorists who have added to the discussion of the changes we are now seeing.

At the time of writing, in 2000, Ellis notes that his third period, the era of plenty, is "confidently predicted by the television industry itself" (*Seeing Things: Television in the Age of Uncertainty* 39). The period would see television scheduling reduced in importance, as content becomes available

⁶ Lotz notes that by the end of the '99-'00 television season, broadcast networks only accounted for 56% of the viewing population (13).

⁷ By 'cultural effect', Lotz is referring here to the idea that no longer can an audience be assumed to be receiving the same media, and as such, they will have a differentiated cultural experience.

through a variety of technologies, and on demand. Ellis comments that the industry is pushing forward into this era of plenty, even while most viewers are still learning how to best work within the era of availability.⁸

The brands that arose in the era of availability come to play a major role in the era of plenty. The vastly increased quantity of content that is available needs to be distilled by the viewer, and Ellis notes that brands are one of the ways that consumers are able to differentiate amongst the multitude of content with which they are faced. The rise of new technologies also grants technologically-aware viewers new modes of navigating the modern televisual landscape. Ellis sees the Electronic Programme Guide as crucial to identifying content of interest, and effectively formatting one's own television schedule. He also identifies a downside to the era of plenty, which he identifies as 'time famine' – a feeling that one is missing out on content that one might enjoy, through not having enough time to watch it all, or even enough time to locate it. Other new technologies, such as Personal Video Recorders and On Demand viewing, work to alleviate some of the concerns surrounding 'time famine', but still leave a persistent feeling of disquiet. Looking forward into the era of plenty, Ellis sees broadcast television continuing as the dominant form in the foreseeable future.⁹

Ellis provides a very clear explanation of different periods of television history, as well as making some very accurate predictions about where television would head in the decade following his writing. However, where his analysis falls a little short is in the moments of transition between the periods. No attention is paid to what drove the industry to move from the era of scarcity to

⁸ I would suggest that recent turmoils within the entertainment industries would suggest that they are less keen to push forward than Ellis believed – strike action by the Writers Guild of America in 2007-08 was partially centred on the distribution of receipts from new media, a key concept within Ellis' definition of the era of plenty.

⁹ A greater discussion of the technological shifts that have assisted the changes in this period will be addressed in Chapter 2 of this work.

availability, or how viewers or the industry coped with that transition. This lack of acknowledgement of transition seems to suggest periods which are clear-cut and discrete, but consequently leaves a very important gap as we currently find ourselves in a very similar transition, from availability to plenty, and audience and industry alike struggle to find their direction forward.

Reeves, Rogers and Epstein extend their previous descriptions of TV I and TV II, by introducing the concept of a TV III in a book chapter looking at the success of *The Sopranos* in developing a brand for HBO (Rogers, Epstein, and Reeves). They suggest that TV I & TV II had several things in common which make them distinct from the scenario in which we find ourselves today. Quoting Timothy M Todreas, they remark that both eras had notable 'bottlenecks' in distribution. While different, these bottlenecks meant that the distributors of content had comfortable and economically rewarding positions. In TV I, the lack of breadth of the broadcast spectrum meant that a small number of players operated within any given local market, and there was very little in the way of competition. In TV II, although competition arose from cable and satellite networks, regulatory controls were put in place to protect cable companies who had invested in infrastructure, making it difficult for new companies to usurp their power.

It is important to note that television is paid for, traditionally and for the most part, by "second-order commodity relations" (Rogers, Epstein, and Reeves 46), meaning that people are offered television for free on the understanding that they will also accept that some of the airtime will be sold to advertisers, that they will be commodified, and their viewing time sold. This is a different system to the film and the music industries, where people pay directly and individually to receive a particular product. We start to see a rise of a similar model in television in the US with premium cable channels, such as HBO, exempting viewers from commercial advertising in return for a monthly subscription fee, or operating a first-order commodity relation even more directly with a

pay-per-view system. This type of economic system changes the model under which television operates, as it frees networks from the concerns of answering to advertisers, and instead allows them to screen material intended directly for their target market. On the other hand, it also makes them increasingly responsible for, and theoretically responsive to, their customers, as each customer has the choice to retract their patronage on a monthly basis.

This differing economic system means that, once again, network strategy must change. In order for viewers to be aware of the value they are receiving from their subscription, the value of the network brand becomes crucial. The authors point out that the now ubiquitous ‘bug’ – the network logo watermarked in the corner of the screen – is a constant reminder of the network that is screening the program you have chosen to watch.¹⁰ They suggest that TV I might be thought of in terms of mass marketing, TV II in terms of niche marketing, and TV III in terms of brand marketing. The current period is also notable as one of consolidation – a period where the large players are all conglomerates, owning many companies in many disparate entertainment and media fields, frequently able to develop internal synergies which increase the value of all the associated brands as a whole.

Lotz alludes to the fact that her final term, the Post-Network era, is problematic in its terminology, as it can have broader implications than those she intends. The phrase ‘post-network’ has been used by numerous commentators and theorists as a catch-all term to describe everything that has followed the network era. Lotz justifies her use of the term by suggesting that, following the Multi-channel Transition, the current era shows more “comprehensive” changes from the initial network era, and the term represents a “break from a dominant network-era experience” (15). Some key factors that typify this period include: the rise in

¹⁰ Another interesting ramification is that if the programming is recorded to a DVR, or even shared digitally online, the network bug still remains, frequently the sole advertising to still be visible, making even those who are not subscribers aware of who is responsible for screening their content of choice.

diffusion of personal computers; greater viewer control over where and when to engage with content; the changes in possibilities for successful financial models of production and distribution, including possible replacements or alternatives to the 30 second advertisement; greater possibilities for more accurate audience measurement, and also for gathering significantly more data about audience structures; a possible lack of distinction amongst a younger generation of digital natives between television and computing technology, and a rise in technological multitasking within the same generation; and finally, new programming trends to meet these changes.

Lotz makes the comment that she is writing on what is the cusp of another transitory period, such as was seen in the early 1980s, as the network era became a period of multi-channel transition. Such an awareness means that she is able to write with a great deal of reflexivity, and rather than being prescriptive, is able to identify changes that she has seen occurring, and from which she is able to draw some tentative but very convincing arguments. It is this notion of a period of transition that I feel best suits the analysis I am doing here, as even across the period of interest, there have been significant changes in all aspects of the televisual landscape.

Each of these schemas has significant merit, and all can be seen to apply accurately to the past 60 years of television in the US and the UK, as well as having occurred at different times across the Western world. However, in the last couple of years, it is the terminology used by Reeves, Rogers and Epstein which seems to have been adopted for referring to the current televisual situation. TV III (or, recently, TVIII) seems to have been selected as the preferred terminology in academia, although discussions of the period still frequently refer to Ellis or Lotz at the same time. For the purposes of this thesis, I have chosen to use the TVIII nomenclature, acknowledging while doing so that there are additional complexities to consider beyond those laid out by the original description. What is not contested among any of these scholars is that television has undergone,

and is still undergoing, a process of dramatic change. As Glen Creeber and Matt Hills write in their editorial introduction to a 2007 themed issue of *New Review of Film and Television Studies* focused on TVIII, “the way television is made, the way in which it is distributed, the way in which it is regulated, the way in which it is consumed, the way in which it is perceived and even the way in which it is studied are all in a process of radical transformation” (1). Although this is subsequently tempered by acknowledging “scholarly caution” (2) in trying to precisely define or periodise a medium which is so broad and diverse, Creeber and Hills still point to the major changes that are occurring within the field, the importance of the discussion about them, and the similarities in themes that arise from any discussion of these changes.

In the same themed issue, Matt Hills identifies a movement within Television studies that aims to call the nature of television itself into question (Hills, “From The Box In The Corner”). Many of the changes that have occurred within the past 15 to 20 years have worked against the ways that television has been traditionally theorised, with time-shifting and home-video technology working against notions of flow; media and platform convergence against notions of television’s space within the home; serialised complex series against the notion of the glance; and, DVD boxsets against the notion of segmentalisation. Hills is cautious about defining these shifts as TVIII, as he suggests that this discussion formalises TVI and TVII as “stable discursive objects” (“From The Box In The Corner” 44), rather than as the ephemeral and shifting generalisations I have previously outlined. It is important, as we move forward with the discussion in this work, that we accept that TVIII speaks to a series of generalised shifts, occurring in different locations in different times, with different cultural meanings, and retaining different aspects of what has come before. These are not terms as clearly defined as reigns of monarchs, but instead bear more relation to artistic movements, where the beginnings of one can plainly be seen in the endings of another and a clear line dividing the two is impossible to draw.

The formative years of television history in much of the western world have been well documented, with significant analysis applied to the first fifty years across several different countries. Most of these analyses acknowledge or predict the fundamental shift that began approximately in the 1990s, and has continued forward from that moment. This period may in fact be characterised as a period of transition, constantly shifting rather than being a stable, cohesive era. While this may complicate the analysis, it also allows us to consider the specificities of this particular period, and understand the elements which have remained consistent throughout the period as well as those that have continued to shift, ultimately changing the nature of television.

Many of the shifts that are described subsequently can be seen as at least representative of the shifts in the Western, Anglophone world, but may be applicable to other nations more broadly. Significant work in the past twenty to thirty years has been put into identifying the unique nature of individual national industries, under the general concept of Global Television Studies. Key broad works have included collections from Lisa Parks and Shanti Kumar, Myung-Jin Park and James Curran, and Tasha Oren and Sharon Shahaf, as well as individual work from Joseph Straubhaar, Albert Moran and Justin Malbon, Denise Bielby and C. Lee Harrington, and Chris Barker (Parks and Kumar; Park and Curran; Oren and Shahaf; Straubhaar; Moran and Malbon; Bielby and Harrington; Barker). In addition to these, there have been important pieces of work which look at the specificities of a regional or national television culture, including work by Michael Keane, Anthony Fung and Albert Moran; Michael Curtin; Anna Cristina Pertierra and Graeme Turner; John Sinclair; Biswarup Sen and Abhijit Roy; and, Marwan Kraidy (Keane, Fung, and Moran; Curtin; Pertierra and Turner; Sinclair; Sen and Roy; Kraidy).

Programming Shifts

For audiences, one of the most obvious shifts that occurred is the types of television available to them. There has been much critical and popular discussion of a new “golden age” of television, as well as a suggestion that fictional series television has matched or surpassed cinema as an art form. At the same time, there has also been wide-ranging consternation around the declining quality of television, much of this focused on the decline of current affairs programming, and the rise of reality television. Having an understanding of these programming shifts, where they have come from, and what they might mean, is crucial to understanding the period of TVIII.

Cult and Quality television

Those who have been celebrating television’s artistic resurgence often point to programming that exemplifies a particular style of fictional television drama. The concepts of “Cult television” and “Quality television” have both been employed to try to describe this particular mode. Neither of these concepts is new, but they are relatively amorphous, with differing understandings of what the terms might mean and encompass. I am suggesting that what we have seen in recent years is a blurring of the boundaries between these low- and high-culture concepts, respectively, in order to create something that is not novel, but which draws on elements of both.

Cult television is a concept that has benefitted from some academic attention in recent years. Early mentions of the idea can be found throughout the 1990s, usually in reference to *Star Trek* (1966-69), *Twin Peaks* (1990-91), the 1960s *Batman* series (1966-68) or *The X-Files* (1993-2002), but the concept remains largely undefined until the early twenty-first century.¹¹ Early mentions of the concept tend to use it in an offhand manner, not defining it as a concept, but simply as something understood, much as one might use the term ‘comedy’. Reeves, Rogers, and Epstein

¹¹ While much of the content that we now understand as falling within the purview of Cult television drew academic attention prior to the 1990s, its nature as Cult television was not noted.

are one of the early groups to make use of the term, positioning it obliquely as the television of the teenagers, of those interested in science-fiction (22–24). They also position Cult television as being associated with TV II, with a movement away from the marketing and programming to a single monolithic audience, and the shift toward niche interests.

Sara Gwenllian-Jones and Roberta Pearson edited one of the first collections of work dedicated to Cult television in 2004, and in the introduction they struggle with how to define an object which seems to be obvious, but yet defies definition. They point to a colloquial definition of content seen as “offbeat or edgy, that draws a niche audience, that has nostalgic appeal, that is considered emblematic of a particular subculture, or that is considered hip” (ix). This understanding immediately poses some problems, as it draws on multiple models – it might be something inherent in the content, it might be the audience it attracts, it might be a reading of the text that a particular audience makes, or even how an assumed audience of the text is depicted. They also draw on Umberto Eco’s discussion of what makes a cult text in relation to film, in which he suggests that cult texts must have a world which is realised enough that fans can adopt as much or as little from the core text as they choose, without having too much of a sense of dislocation. Again, the connection is simultaneously made to both the content of the text, or the world that is created and offered, and the audience of the text, or the fans that have adopted and manipulate the text. Gwenllian-Jones and Pearson come to the acknowledgement that content, distribution, and audience all need to be equally valued in discussing Cult television, another circuit model of three nodes.¹²

Skipping ahead to a 2010 collection edited by Stacey Abbott shows a shift in the understanding of what Cult television means, both to scholars and to the public as a whole. In her introduction to

¹² While my work will certainly agree with the notion of needing to study multiple areas in order to understand the television industry, the way that these areas are defined is refined.

that work, Abbott suggests that Cult television is no longer restricted to “socially awkward teenage boys” (1) or to the traditional genre of science fiction, but instead can be seen across a wider variety of programming. Drawing on a model that privileges the audience over the text, Abbott points to fan actions around sitcoms and Quality dramas that mimic the way fans have utilised traditional cult texts. Crucially, Abbott identifies the economic balance which networks seek; the balance between maintaining ratings and attracting the sort of audience commitment typified by Cult television and an engaged fandom. Particularly insightfully, she suggests that Cult television has perhaps not changed as much as perceptions and assumptions about it have changed. It appears that she is referring to the perceptions and assumptions of the public, but this can be extrapolated to academia as well.

At the same time as the academy was recognising Cult television as an object of study, further work was being done to highlight a second important shift in fictional television: Quality television. This term has become slightly contested in recent academic discourse, and therefore, a deeper understanding of the term is required. It is important to note that we are discussing American Quality television here, as opposed to its British counterpart. Quality television has a terminological history in the UK which is discrete from its usage in the North American context, although this new context can be applied to television with a provenance from around the world. This distinction becomes important when discussing modern television, as there is a significant difference in the programming encapsulated by the two terms. The modern usage of the term Quality television stems from Robert Thompson’s work in 1996, suggesting that the 1980s and early 1990s had seen a second golden age of television, reminiscent of a nostalgic view of early television in the 1940s and 1950s (11). Thompson suggests a rubric for understanding this model of Quality television, whose salient points include appealing to upscale demographics; attracting creatives who have worked in ‘artistic’ media such as independent film or previous Quality television series; scripting for ensemble casts; incorporating at least an element of serialisation;

producing complex writing; and frequently blending previous genres in order to create something novel. Again, as we saw with the definitions of Cult television, these do not focus just on the text, the mode of production, or on the target audience, but on a complicated mix of all of them.

Quality TV: Contemporary American Television And Beyond, edited by Janet McCabe and Kim Akass in 2007, provides some interesting and useful interventions into the concept, taking Thompson's definitions as a starting point, but critiquing some of the assumptions that have been made, as well as highlighting the terminological issues of Quality television. The term 'Quality television' semantically inspires inherent value judgements as to the 'quality' of this type of programming. Sarah Caldwell has also identified the contestability of the term, suggesting that Quality television and 'good television' are not necessarily synonymous (S. Caldwell). I firmly believe that a new term is needed to define this subset of television series; however, suggesting a new term is beyond the purview of this work. An acknowledgement of the contested nature of the term is important at this juncture, but for now, an updated definition of the term seems to provide a working understanding of the modern context: "politically engaged, often independent TV that aims to enlighten, as well as to entertain" (Sayeau cited in Fricker 14).

Both Cult and Quality television have frequently been positioned in opposition to 'regular' television, to an 'other' which is equally ill-defined and subjective (Gwenllian-Jones and Pearson xiii; Jancovich and Hunt 27; Pearson, "Observations on Cult Television" 9; Dunleavy 33; Thompson 13). But in doing so, at times the similarities between these two concepts are ignored, as they are effectively positioned in opposition to each other. Abbott notes a crucial insight within the essays in her book that I believe forms one of the important moves within TVIII: a blurring of the lines between Cult television and Quality television. Many new series can be seen as drawing on aspects fitting within descriptions of both Cult and Quality television. Series such as *Heroes* utilised many of the characteristics associated with Quality television: long serial arcs, large

ensemble cast, the blending of the superhero genre with elements of horror, detective/noir and comedy, and courting a desirable “quality” niche audience. However, *Heroes* also presents as a cult text, drawing on the superhero genre, sometimes stylised as a comic book, making use of transmedia texts to create a large storyverse for engaged fans to explore, and strongly appealing to a specific sub-culture. While the series eventually lost favour with viewers, this blending of cult and quality elements proved quite successful in its debut season.

The other blurring which has occurred, and which makes these nomenclatures even more problematic, is the blurring between Cult/Quality television and “regular” television. We are seeing more television which is aimed at a mainstream audience adopting the tropes of Cult or Quality: adding genre elements, serial storylines, literary source material, or ensemble casts, and hence making even the most basic definition of Cult/Quality as oppositional to mainstream moot. However, these terms still have validity, if used in order to understand the origins of the shifts within mainstream television, and perhaps as a pointer toward where we might see future shifts. As with many generic terms, these terms are not rigid, nor mutually exclusive, but add to an overall understanding.

Reality Television

The success of Cult and Quality television are not the only programming shifts to have happened in the past twenty years. Reality television has developed into a major ratings force, and has become an object of significant academic study in the past fifteen years. Annette Hill suggests that very little of reality television is new in and of itself, noting that *Survivor* (2000 – present) owes as much to the game show as *Britain’s Got Talent* does to the variety show. Many of these formats pre-date television, stretching back to radio, and even further, to traditions of music hall and vaudeville. However, Hill points to Reality television undertaking a “continual evolutionary process” (34, 128–30), subsuming prior formats and concepts and recontextualising them into novel hybrids, in a process that allows for the constant production of new content to meet

market demands. This concept is supported by Michael Curtin and Jane Shattuc, who point out that the rise of reality television seemed to be just a revival of previously rehearsed formats (104). By viewing reality television as a form continually in transition, it might be considered an exemplary style in a period of television that is also about transition and transformation.

Despite the scholarly work which has been produced on reality television in recent years, there is little consensus on the precise date for the emergence of reality television as a genre. Scholars make different historical claims depending on which national context is prioritized or how reality television is generically defined. Moments such as the PBS documentary series *An American Family* (1973), *Candid Camera* beginning in the late 1940s (1948-2004), and fly-on-the-wall MTV series *The Real World* (1992 - present) are seen as some of the precursors to what we now recognise as the reality television format. The most concise recent periodization of Reality television comes from Misha Kavka, who identifies a pre-reality TV period that includes some of the aforementioned series, a first generation from 1989-99 which includes *Cops* (1989 – present) and *The Real World*, a second generation of competitive surveillance programming from 1999-2005, and a third concurrent generation from 2002 onwards (Kavka, *Reality TV*). Where almost all accounts are in unison is in identifying some key moments in the global reality television market. The airings of the first season of *Survivor* in the US (2000), and the 1999 first season of *Big Brother* in The Netherlands (1999-2006), are frequently identified as significant for the emergence of reality television as a distinct and widely recognizable format and for the changed global scheduling practices that the series initiated.

Lotz describes the success of unscripted programming (the general industry term for reality television), specifically of *Survivor* and subsequent series, as “unexpected” (220). She points out that prior to *Survivor*, US networks were using low-cost news-magazine unscripted programming in the face of rising costs of scripted programming, but that *Survivor* reconfigured expectations

for the position that reality television could fill in the programming schedule. Expectations were not high for the first season of *Survivor*, with CBS head Les Moonves being quoted as saying that it was being launched in summer where it could be guaranteed to make a profit, due to the reduced competition (Huff 6). However, *Survivor* provided ratings and economic proof that reality television could compete successfully with scripted programming in the primetime schedule. Hill also identifies economic concerns that were facing networks and producers in the 1990s: the rising costs of producing or paying licence fees for scripted television, versus a constantly diversifying market (39). Reality television was seen as a cost-effective answer, with the low possibilities for syndication or home-market sales offset by low cost production. Lotz points out that unscripted programming reduces the need for deficit financing, which was making television production a greater financial risk (89).¹³ Even in later years, as the costs of certain reality series (such as *American Idol* (2002 – present)) rose, ratings for premium reality series have more than compensated.

Transmedia television

The final programming shift that needs to be highlighted, transmedia television, is less bound by genre than the two previous, but has come to equal fruition within this period. Henry Jenkins provides an early academic investigation into transmedia storytelling, referring to it as “a new aesthetic that has emerged in response to media convergence – one that places new demands on consumers and depends on the active participation of knowledge communities” (Jenkins, *Convergence Culture* 20–21). These factors are vital in all the case studies presented in this thesis. Transmedia storytelling involves a narrative which is explored across multiple platforms, whether they are television, film, the written word, graphic novel, video game, webisode, alternate reality

¹³ Deficit financing refers to a system that was common in US television production where the network paid the production company a licence fee to broadcast the content a set number of times, but the production company retained ownership of the original material. The license fee did not usually cover the full budget of production, requiring subsequent syndication, home video, or international sales in order to turn a profit.

game, social media, or any other medium that might be utilised to tell a portion of a story. Many television series in the past 20 years have begun to explore the possibilities of transmediality, some simply through a dedicated website, others by pushing the bounds of narrative possibility. Jonathan Gray has noted that the myriad texts which surround many modern television shows shape the core text almost as much as the core text itself (Gray 6).

While 'transmedia' may have begun as a marketing buzzword, relating mainly to marketing structures and cross-platform adaptation, academic and industrial understandings of the term have shifted in order to recognise the potential that can exist for deeper audience engagements with texts. Elizabeth Evans (20–39) traces a history of transmediality, highlighting its growth from a "promotional practice" through to the use of novelisations as a method of expanding fictional worlds. Evans shows the ways in which *Doctor Who* has engaged with multiple platforms in order to create a narrative which, in the words of Henry Jenkins, is "so large that it cannot be contained within a single medium" (Jenkins, *Convergence Culture* 95). Similarities with this description exist in Will Brooker's intervention into Raymond Williams's original conception of television flow; when engaging with televisual characters via an email after an episode of television has ended, Brooker suggests that he has 'overflowed' the bounds of television (Brooker, "Living on Dawson's Creek: Teen Viewers, Cultural Convergence, and Television Overflow" 456–57), surely a metaphor for a narrative that was unable to be contained within the singular medium of television. For Jenkins, the crucial element of successful transmedia storytelling is that the story must be comprehensible to those who choose to only engage with the core text, rather than the peripheral elements (Jenkins, *Convergence Culture* 101–04). There must be enough narrative pleasure in the core text for viewers who do not investigate any of the paratexts and only watch the television series, probably the great majority of viewers. However, Jenkins quotes Neil Young describing the possibility for "additive comprehension" (Jenkins, *Convergence Culture* 123), giving the viewer greater insight into the characters and the narrative of the core text, which may allow

them to interpret or appreciate the narrative on a different level than those who are not aware of the peripheral narratives. These potentials are being explored widely by television creatives, both for their storytelling potential, and for the ability to heighten engagement, maintain viewership, and increase ‘buzz’ and discussion online about the series, all while leading viewers back to the core text (Gillan 164–65). Jason Mittell has noted that transmedia storytelling serves to make fandom more visible and accessible, as television producers look to address multiple levels of audience engagement (Mittell, *Television and American Culture* 434–35); the presence and address of fans via social media can lead to additional levels of promotion for a series, as well as providing multiple points of entry to the core text.

While the changes that have occurred across TVIII have been varied, and have occurred in numerous areas, it is programming shifts which are probably the most visible to audiences. As such, these shifts form the structural framework of this thesis, providing a way in which the available content can be broken down and understood, in order to have a deeper grasp of the circuit model I have designed. The programmes I have selected to highlight the shifts of this period have the status both of case study, and of key exemplars of these programming shifts.

Thesis Structure

In order to investigate the changes that have occurred across the television industry and audience since the mid-1990s, I will be drawing on four case studies from across the period, which highlight several shifts in the three nodes of my circuit model. All four case studies come from US broadcast television, the largest single Western viewing market, and a dominant exporter of cultural content. The case studies I have selected for this thesis have not been selected on the basis of ratings success, although several of them have been highly successful in this regard. They have not been selected on the basis of critical acclaim, although, again, all have had some level of critical acknowledgement. They have not been selected on the basis of

economic success, although their individual longevities suggest that they have been more successful than most. They have not been selected as pinnacles, nor necessarily first occurrences in their selected fields, although all have elements of innovation. They have been selected because each series has done something distinctive, in which either the show itself has played with form or structure, the producers have played with distribution methods or economic return models, or the audience has played with forms of engagement. Each of these case studies has proved innovative in several of these fields, but for each case study I have chosen to highlight the area that seems to stand out as most innovative. Each of these case studies has been “regular television”, fitting within the structures of television broadcast that have become familiar to viewers over decades. However, each case study has also been extraordinary, allowing observers to identify a shift in television which is matched by other television content at the time and subsequently. Two of the case studies highlight the success of reality television, *American Idol* (2002-present) and *Survivor* (2000-present). The other two are dramas which fall at least partially into both the categories of Cult and Quality television: *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) and *Lost* (2004-10). Collectively, the four case studies cover fourteen years of broadcast television and show shifts which have occurred from the earliest years to the most recent of this period.¹⁴

As I noted above, the focus will be on the American television model, and the changes that have occurred there. This has been a conscious decision, as the United States is the largest Western television content producer, the largest Western television audience, and the economic centre of production for film and television. The US television industry is constantly watching the global market, adopting any shifts that they identify that might work within their own specific national broadcast system. In turn, many of the world’s television industries have their attention directed towards the US, looking for any industrial shifts that are successful, so that they might be

¹⁴ As *Survivor* and *American Idol* are still screening at time of writing, the span of their influence may be broader – this work takes into account the texts up until, and including, the 2013 calendar year.

adopted locally. This is not to suggest that the US is a paradigm of world television, but that it frequently does act as a conduit for shifts in the television industry. While this is not a hard and fast rule, as can be seen by John Sinclair's work on Latin American television (Sinclair), it is a process that can be identified as having occurred regularly over the past 50-60 years. However, where relevant, I have acknowledged that the televisual landscape is now global, especially with the rise of the internet as a communications and distribution medium, and it is important to recognise that television is no longer as bounded by national borders as it once was. The work done within this thesis is specific to the US national industry structure, and cannot be applied wholesale to other nationalities, although certainly some of the changes have occurred in other national environments as well. The model presented here may well be applicable to other geographic areas, although the differences in industry structures, regulatory controls and technological availability means that each of the nodes will have a slightly different bearing on the industry as a whole. This thesis makes no claims that the application of this model will produce universal results, but the openness of the nodes may well allow other theorists to apply it to different situations.

As identified in the proposed circuit model, technology plays a key role in all the nodes, both in what it allows for, and in the ways that it becomes utilised by producers and end users.

Therefore, before undertaking the case studies, the thesis examines the technological advances which have occurred prior to and during the key period of investigation. This is not intended to be an all-encompassing description of every televisual technological advance, but instead is designed to provide understanding of what some of these key moments are, as well as to highlight the way in which televisual and communications technologies are constantly in transition. Once these underlying technological shifts have been clarified, the following four chapters each address one of the four case studies to provide examples of each node in my suggested structure. The chapter on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* describes the node of 'textual production'; on *Lost* describes

‘reception and response’,, and the *American Idol* chapter describes ‘economics’. Finally, the analysis of *Survivor* works to show how all these areas can be drawn together in order to understand the macro-level shifts that have occurred in television in the past 20 years.

The question “what is television?” will continue to be debated in discussions of the medium for some time. However, one of the ways that we can move towards an answer is by understanding how television is shifting and what television has been, in order to garner some understanding of where television might be heading. By developing an appreciation of the period of TVIII, and a structure for discussing it, I aim to strengthen the understanding of what television has meant over the past twenty years, and to suggest some ideas of what it might mean in future.

The Technology Layer: Tech in Transition

Introduction

To try to discuss the shifts that have occurred in the television industry since the mid-1990s without acknowledging the role that technology has played would seem foolish, since television is by its very nature a medium based on technological development. Technology is at the foundation of the television industry, required for production, broadcast, and reception, and governing what is possible for both broadcasters and audiences. The technology underpinning television can be broadly divided into four categories, although there is certainly some crossover between them. Firstly, we can consider the technologies of reception, which have changed the ways in which viewers have been able to access and receive television content. The new ways in which content is received and selected by viewers has an impact on the content that is viewed, and therefore on the content that is created. Secondly, the rise of the internet and digital computing technology has led to an increase in viewers' abilities to communicate amongst themselves, and to respond to the creatives behind the content they watch; I refer to these as 'technologies of response'. Thirdly, there have been shifts in the technologies of aesthetics, the technologies which change the ways television looks or sounds. And lastly, technological shifts have changed the control that viewers can exert over television content, fundamentally changing the nature of televisual flow. Where the first category was interested in the distribution method, this category is focused on the control over the content that the viewer has while watching.

These nodes do not directly connect to the nodes of the circuit model described in Chapter One. A one-to-one relationship would indicate that each categorical change in technology only has an impact on one aspect of the television industry, whereas I would argue that the shifts have far wider effects, impacting each of the nodes in the model and intersecting to create broader shifts across the industry. For example, we see a shift in reception as the home DVD market becomes a

dominant force in television. The connection between this and the node I have called reception and response is clear, but this technological transition has affected the other two nodes as well. The rise of DVD, and the ability to watch and rewatch television, has impacted television production, which saw a higher level of complexity and open-endedness written into each episode of television. Moreover, the sale of DVDs has had serious implications for the economics of television, as it created a direct after-market revenue stream, encouraging producers to accept lower ratings or licence fees with the potential for greater revenue later, aside from syndication. Because technological shifts operate at a different level to and outside of the nodes of the televisual circuit model, but simultaneously impact every node, they must be conceptualised separately.

The concept of transition, which was an important notion in the discussion of the televisual periods in the first chapter, remains critical when discussing televisual technology. It is important to acknowledge that a technological innovation does not suddenly become ubiquitous, but instead has a long adoption period, meaning that audiences are frequently using multiple different technologies simultaneously to access any given piece of content. While these technologies provide opportunities to producers and viewers, the adoption of these technologies, including specific uses that the technologies might have, can be significantly staggered, and should not be presupposed purely on the basis of availability.

In part because of such staggered rhythms of adoption, it is important that we do not treat technology as a determining force, but recognise that as much as technology shapes the televisual experience, technology is also shaped by people. It is often created in response to a demand, and its adoption is dependent on the users rather than the creators. Finding a balance between technological determinism and a social constructionist approach is important, to better understand the complexities of the role of technology in the shifts in each of the nodes specified

in this new model. Technology thus plays a critical but subsumed role in the circuit model I described in the first chapter. It does not appear as a node within the model, as it might in other circuit models, because of the way in which it is inherently integrated with each of the nodes. Technology's role within society, culture, and industry subtends each and every node, and must always be addressed in concert with each of the nodes. Because not all technologies which impact on television are designed solely to be used in relation to television, we must think of them as part of broader socio-technological shifts, such as the growth of the internet and the rise in the popularity of mobile technologies.

One difficulty in trying to provide a description of the history of technological change is the risk of sounding like a technological optimist, or worse, a marketing shill for the technology industry. While I do frequently point to the benefits for audiences or broadcasters of the technologies described below, I also highlight concerns and obstacles that might surround the use of those technologies. It is important to bear in mind that, while I might speak of possible benefits which stem from the use of these technologies, this assumes a "perfect" viewer, aware of all available functionality and capable of putting it to its fullest use. It must be noted that the average viewer may not choose to use the technology in such a way, or even be aware of its potential. This chapter does not aim to provide a detailed understanding of how each technology operates, but instead to identify the progressions of and transitions between technologies that are of interest to this thesis as a basis for the subsequent chapters. How technology actually works is of less interest in this chapter than how it can be put to use by consumers and by industry. The chapter itself mainly addresses the technology as it is seen by the end-user; the four sections are user-centric, as are the ways in which individual technologies are discussed. The rationale for this is that the development of these technologies is almost always market-driven; they are created in response to a perceived gap or desire in the market for the capabilities of the technology, and they are usually marketed in terms of what affordances or increased value they may provide to

users, rather than by what capabilities they provide to the television industry. This user-centric framework mirrors how the majority of viewers tend to perceive these technologies, although the additional benefits to creatives, producers, and distributors are also noted where appropriate.

Technologies of Reception

Broadcast technologies have evolved significantly since the early days of television, and while different countries have made use of different forms of these technologies, we can still see similar advances at similar stages worldwide. The histories all begin with a standard analogue transmission which was frequently made problematic by limited room on the broadcast spectrum and imperfections in broadcast signal and reception. As cable and satellite broadcast options became available, broadcasters gained the ability to offer a wider number and range of channels, which ushered in Lotz's era of Multi-channel Transition. These technologies allowed for the creation of niche networks and better reception quality, although each has brought its own problems and disadvantages for reception, and generally each successive technology came with a higher cost of entry than its predecessor for audiences, who needed to purchase additional hardware.

Cable technology development opened the way for television networks to develop new economic models, specifically around pay television. Cable television in the US began to take off in the 1970s, offering homes across the country a wider variety of programming than had previously been seen in the Network era (Banet-Weiser, Chris, and Freitas 1). Because of the different economic model, cable offered an opportunity for smaller companies needing smaller revenue streams to enter the broadcast market, offering content that was of more specific interest to smaller groups, known as 'narrowcasting'. This allowed cable networks to target their audiences in narrower bands than had traditionally been possible (Mittell, *Television and American Culture*

32–33). It was also seen as being able to offer “less...crassly commercialized television, less intrusive advertising and more interactivity on the part of the viewer, more viewer empowerment” (Banet-Weiser, Chris, and Freitas 2), although in the modern reality of cable television many of these elements are no longer noticeably different from network television; Banet-Weiser et al note that “the hyperbolic promise of cable was never quite fulfilled” (8). In the US, niche networks were able to fund their content through subscription packages. The success of this model led some premium channels to develop their own brands and charge a subscription fee for the individual channel (such as HBO). In this way, networks were able to target their content even more directly to subscribers, and as such provide even more accurate demographics information to advertisers, as well as targeting specific audiences with certain programming.

The launch of HBO in the early 1970s and its growth in popularity by the end of the decade and through the 1980s began a major shift in how people thought about the television industry. Although initially a space for live sport, syndicated films, and content too graphic for the networks due to FCC oversight, HBO changed gears in the late 1980s to develop a brand based on “high quality original programming” (Leverette, Ott, and Buckley 1, 3). In describing the industrial complexities of HBO, Toby Miller suggests that it “represents the organized, centralized, inflexible post-Fordism of contemporary cultural capitalism” in terms of its corporate structure, while it “represents... disorganized, decentralized, flexible post-Fordism” in its hiring, contracting, and workplace strategies (“Foreword” x), allowing for a business model which is much more versatile than previously seen in the television industry, shifting to address the changing desires and requirements of viewers. Avi Santo has also identified how HBO works against the way in which TV ‘feminizes’ viewers, with HBO’s discourse of quality being connected to masculinization, “repositioning its audience as powerful bearers of cultural capital that is free from the commercialized trappings of regular television” (34). HBO’s twenty-first century marketing

slogan, “It’s not TV, it’s HBO”, highlights the attempts to distinguish their content from what is available on network television, and emphasises the discourse of ‘difference’ which HBO seeks to create for its subscribers. By establishing this discourse of difference, HBO is able to leverage – rather than suffer – the value judgements which exist around television as a low-quality medium, presenting its offerings as more culturally desirable.

Home video developed a complex relationship with the television, changing the way in which the television set was conceptualised and fundamentally altering Raymond Williams’ iconic description of televisual flow (Williams 86–96). Derek Kompare identifies a major sea change in the television industry beginning in the mid-1970s with the introduction of home video capabilities, specifically the VCR, and continuing with its successors: the laser disc player, the DVD player, and digital video recorders which can record to DVDs or hard drives (DVRs and PVRs) (336). For Kompare, despite the multiple uses to which many of these devices can be put, the most important commonality is that they can “selectively play back prerecorded programs” (Kompare 336), meaning that they have become crucial technologies of reception. Kompare is careful to note that he does not see these technologies as a resistance to television, but simply as a new way for both viewers and the television industry to configure the traditional televisual experience so as to serve their individual ends.

The film industry saw the economic possibilities of the VCR’s launch in the mid-1970s, which led to the creation of the home video market (Klinger 58). Previously, the film industry had relied on first-release box office takings as their almost sole source of income, with repertory re-releases and later sales to television networks almost an afterthought. The home video market suddenly allowed films to be watched and re-watched, to be rented and owned. A market developed for archivists who built collections of films, removing some of the mystique which surrounded films

of the past that were often difficult or impossible for people to watch until that point. This secondary market grew substantially, becoming a key feature of the film industry's economy.

The introduction of DVD technology in 1997 is identified as having given the home video market renewed vigour, not just by enabling a re-marketing and commercialisation of the entire history of film and television, but also for its increased audio-visual capabilities, smaller requirements for storage, the ability to add additional paratextual features, and the random access capability of digital storage.¹⁵ Jonathan Gray suggests that there are three different levels on which the medium of television specifically benefitted from the introduction of the home DVD format. Firstly, it allowed for the archiving of television for home viewers. Although it had been possible to commercially sell television episodes on VHS tape, DVDs meant that significantly more television content could be stored in considerably less space, allowing for the collection of full-season boxsets as a viable option for the home viewer. Secondly, the increased quality of both video and audio allowed audiovisual aficionados to achieve a high quality of presentation. Barbara Klinger refers to this as the “hardware aesthetic”, connected to the “material pleasure” of providing “compelling audio-visual experiences” through advancing and improving technology (Klinger 75–76). Finally, Gray suggests that the pricing of TV series on DVD, significantly higher than the average film, gave TV series a perceived greater cultural value: “TV DVDs are often the ones one must save up to buy, that need to go on wishlists, and/or that are bought as special treats for oneself, while film DVDs... become more quotidian purchases” (Gray 106). Gray also points out that boxsets, especially those of TV series, have become cultural artifacts themselves, the boxset for the original *Battlestar Galactica* series coming in a case shaped like a Cylon head, or an initial release of the *Freaks & Geeks* boxset coming as part of a full yearbook for the school year featured in the series, connecting back to Klinger's notion of the hardware aesthetic.

¹⁵ ‘Paratextual features’ here is being used in the context established by Jonathan Gray, as an extra-textual media text which exists alongside and analogous to an original text (6).

The ability to release television content on DVD had some notable effects on the television industry, or at least on the production of several television series. Amanda Lotz points to *Family Guy* as an important text in the early days of television on DVD, since it was cancelled in 2002 after three seasons of moderate ratings, but re-commissioned in 2005 after exceptionally strong sales of the DVD boxsets (129). As of 2013, the series is still on the air, generating significant profits for FOX/20th Century Fox, especially as it has now comfortably gone over the 100 episodes required for the series to be sold into syndication. Equally notable are two other first-season cancellations from FOX, *Wonderfalls* and *Firefly*, both cancelled after receiving very low ratings, but making significant money back for their production companies through solid DVD sales, as well as providing existing viewers with an opportunity to see unaired episodes, and the ability for new viewers to discover the series long after they went off air. *Firefly* was enough of a success on DVD that Universal Pictures greenlit the feature film *Serenity* (Whedon), providing additional narrative closure to fans of the storyverse. Lotz notes that ratings success is often not a good indicator of success in the home video market, with series that have received good ratings, such as the *CSI* and *Law & Order* franchises, having significantly less success on DVD than lower-rating series such as *Buffy*. Although an argument could be made that a higher-rating series is less likely to draw new viewers to it on DVD, having already captured its market share on initial broadcast, a counter-claim could be made that certain series are more narratively appropriate for DVD. Series which have extended narrative arcs as well as those which are narratively complex and benefit from being rewatched may be more likely to be successful on DVD, as opposed to the relatively episodic nature of the television procedural, which gains very little from repeat viewings.¹⁶

¹⁶ Relatively low ratings but strong DVD sales might be one indication of a Cult television programme, a narrower appeal, but attracting fans who are more likely to engage with the peripheral paratexts.

The X-Files is usually referred to as the first major television series to be sold on DVD. The first season was released in 2000, and the appendix to Derek Kompare's "Publishing Flow" shows that by 2003, approximately 50 different television series had taken to releasing their seasons in DVD boxset form. It would now be considered unusual for a television show that runs at least an initial full season to not release a DVD of that material (353–55).¹⁷ Kompare notes that many of the aesthetic design features and extratextual material incorporated into the *X-Files* boxset, such as additional 'bonus' material, have become common industry practice for future television boxset designs (349).

As broadband has become more readily available throughout the developed world and traffic speeds have gradually increased, Video-On-Demand (VOD) services have come to prominence. These tend to take one of three main structures: those provided by a network or distributor, offering the content to which they have broadcast rights (such as cbs.com or TVNZonDemand); aggregator sites which purchase the rights to previously aired content and make their money through advertising on the site or throughout the video (such as Hulu); and aggregator sites which are funded through a subscription model (such as Netflix).

The availability of streaming television often gives viewers the sensation of access to television content 'whatever, whenever, wherever', but this obscures the ways in which content may be unavailable, or restricted to certain people. Streaming may encourage people not to create their own personal archives of television content as it appears to be always available on demand, when in actuality, content might vanish from streaming sites should licence agreements lapse. Most of the streaming options from free-to-air broadcasters are also time restricted, with content only available for a matter of weeks after the initial broadcast, before disappearing from

¹⁷ This generalisation is limited to scripted fictional television shows. It is important to note that it has been rare to see a DVD release of reality television, although there are exceptions, as we shall see.

availability again. The notion of 'wherever' can also be critiqued, as the streaming sites may in fact create their own version of a digital divide. A crucial element that all of these sites have in common are geo-restrictions to ensure that they are only accessible to people from within the country at which they are aimed. This means that those who are outside the countries where this access is provided can often feel that they are excluded, especially if they are closed out from discussions online due to their inability to access the content. International distribution of television content can be significantly delayed, making it difficult for international audience members to watch contemporaneously with global audiences through traditional distribution channels. Tama Leaver has referred to the experience of watching US television outside of the US as evoking the "tyranny of digital distance" (Leaver, "Watching *Battlestar Galactica* in Australia and the Tyranny of Digital Distance" 146), drawing on terms from an Australian historian who was describing the impact on Australian identity of their geographic distance from the United Kingdom. While the effects of some elements of geographic distance, such as communication, have diminished in the digital age, these distribution windows have frequently left audiences waiting, and excluded from online discussions.

Those excluded sometimes bend internet-based technologies of reception in ways not sanctioned by producers. Still, the response by the television industry has been relatively muted; major players haven't taken the same active steps to try to reduce and combat piracy as the music and film industries.¹⁸ The illicit availability of television content has the effect of creating a level of global synchronicity for audiences. Michael Newman comments that with the increasing popularity of peer-to-peer file sharing (p2p), "the transnational flow of TV can more easily bypass official channels" (Newman 468), allowing viewers to side-step the traditional distribution

¹⁸ From the late 1990s, the music industry became aware of significant amounts of music being shared online, mainly through different variants of peer-to-peer sharing software. These concerns have since been mirrored by the film industry, with commercial associations from both industries taking active steps to try to reduce and combat piracy.

methods. Additionally, p2p access to television content allows audiences to decrease the likelihood of being spoiled on plot developments by viewing closer to the time of original broadcast, and allowing viewers to participate in some of the discussions that occur around the time of initial airing.

P2p downloading also circumvents some of the geo-restrictions that have been imposed by online legal streaming websites. Piracy of television differs from many other areas of online piracy, in that a prime driving force is not usually cost, but content availability; users are often not trying to avoid paying for the content, rather they have no legal way of accessing the content. However, even within piracy communities there are practices of legitimization which see certain types of television, namely Quality and Cult television, being more commonly shared and accessed than others. This reflects a broader process of the legitimization of television, a concept discussed at length by Michael Newman and Elana Levine (Newman and Levine 1–13). Newman notes that certain genres of television, frequently those which are feminised, such as soap opera or talk shows, are often not made available through p2p networks (Newman 467), whereas mainstream drama series, especially those which are narratively complex, with high production values, are readily available. This reflects decisions being made by the users of p2p networking about what to upload or access, but can also be self-perpetuating, as the most accessed files are often those which appear first in search engines. This leads to an ‘echo chamber’ effect where users are most likely to see and hear about certain types of television, leading them to download and watch those types, which in turn increases the chance that more people will see and hear about them, in a circular structure.

All these technologies have one thing in common: they still provide television content as we have traditionally understood it. While some of them may remove the television content from the conventional economics of television broadcast by separating it from the advertising with which

is it usually interspersed, the television text itself remains remarkably similar across these formats. Audiences gain the ability to archive, watch, and rewatch, and gain certain levels of control, as we will see shortly, but the form of the content does not differ dramatically with the mode of reception. However, as these new forms of reception become more standard among the audience, they allow producers to consider how they might change the narrative and aesthetics of their content, allowing increases in narrative complexity, as we will see when we discuss *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, or building more information into the television image, as we will see when discussing *Lost*.

Technologies of Response

The rise of the internet as a home medium from the early 1990s onwards has been well documented, and marked a change in the ways in which people communicated (Castells 1974–76). While it is still important to think of the internet as a medium in transition, which has been adopted at varying rates by different nations and different socio-economic groups, the speed with which the internet has spread is impressive. Gary Edgerton points out that the internet has been adopted faster than any other communication technology in the US, vastly outstripping the rate of adoption for radio, the personal computer, and even television itself (Edgerton 411). The internet has led to the increasing ability of audiences to communicate with each other, as well as creating pathways of communication between audiences and creatives. Crucially, the adoption of the internet has been global (although certainly the digital divide between developed and developing nations must be acknowledged), which has meant that communication has been possible between even wider groups, opening up the possibility of viewing communities across international borders. Interpersonal communication about television was certainly possible prior to the rise of the internet and mobile technologies, with a history of viewing parties, fanzines, and letter-writing campaigns existing in television fandom (Oehlberg et al. 3; Bacon-Smith 38–39; Coppa 45; Brower 167–76). However, the internet makes such communication even easier, and

furthermore, the technology allows for audiences to become visible to each other. Seeing other viewers allows for the creation of an imagined community, and fosters a sense of camaraderie and belonging, with a further possibility of encouraging viewers to participate to a greater extent.

While not directly televisual, the rise of internet availability within the home, and concurrently the rise to near ubiquity of the personal computer, have had a dramatic effect on the ways that audiences watch and engage with television. The early days of the internet saw Usenet newsgroups form around television shows, allowing audiences and fans to come together and communicate about the programmes that they enjoyed (or at least watched). Frequently coming together around cult shows or culturally devalued programming such as soap operas, Usenet groups allowed people to find fellow viewers, in at least a pseudo-anonymous, geographically-distributed manner, to discuss developments in the show and any other aspects of the programming that were of interest. In addition, these spaces allowed for the advertising or planning of meet-ups and events, occurring in 'meat-space'.¹⁹

Subsequently, these spaces developed into nascent message boards online, and free web-hosting sites allowed viewers to set up basic unofficial websites for their chosen programmes. Early fansites were lo-fi, due to bandwidth speed restrictions, but often included episode synopses and transcripts, spoilers, casting information, contact information for star fanmail, stills and PR images from the programmes, fan-made art such as computer wallpapers and icons, short audio clips, and information about airdates for upcoming episodes. Message boards had both 'official' and 'unofficial' versions. Official boards were provided and hosted by production companies or networks behind the individual series, and often strictly moderated for content, keeping them on topic about the television series, and within approved areas of discussion. Unofficial boards were

¹⁹ A term adopted by online communities to refer to face-to-face meetings in the same physical space. The communities tend to eschew 'real world' or 'real life', as they tend to set up a dichotomy which depicts online activities as somehow not real.

usually fan-made, created and hosted by groups of fans, focused on a single text, a genre, or a particular creative, but without the strictures of official boards, which frequently controlled standards, moderating for language, inappropriate behaviour, or even at times behaviours such as the discussion of spoilers. These boards brought together like-minded people, but gave them the freedom to discuss other areas of interest, and develop even stronger virtual communities.

Fansites were also a space for the sharing of transformative works based on the original text, often frowned upon by those who had control over the original copyright or intellectual property (Jenkins, *Textual Poachers : Television Fans & Participatory Culture* 30–1). Fan-fiction and fan-art allow fans to create their own works inspired by the storyverse or characters of which they are fans, at times in homage and at other times extending storylines, filling in gaps left incomplete by the source text, or else re-envisioning storylines, creating new relationships, new characters, resurrecting past characters, or killing off those that they disliked. These forms of user-generated content were ideally suited to the early days of the internet, with low file sizes meaning that access was easier, even for those on low-speed dial-up connections. The technology required for creating the pieces was also minimal, with free (albeit basic) word processing and image manipulating software forming a part of most operating systems available at the time.

The launch of YouTube in 2005 provided yet another platform for viewers to upload content, both official and user-generated. While streaming video was not completely unknown prior to the launch of YouTube, it had been relatively unsuccessful, requiring bandwidth greater than was available to the average household and being limited in terms of content available. YouTube had a relatively simple interface, and allowed anyone to upload content. While some content owners have monitored YouTube closely for anything that they feel might be infringing on their intellectual property, others have developed a more *laissez-faire* attitude, allowing audiences to share clips and their own creative endeavours.

Contemporaneous with YouTube was the dramatic expansion of social media, the realisation of what some technology commentators have called Web 2.0.²⁰ Social networking sites were based around networks of people, rather than necessarily providing content. Social network technologies allow for a more overt crafting of online identity, as users employ fandoms and cultural artefacts for the construction of an online persona. This identity may be created through distinguishing oneself as a fan of a particular text or type of text (such as identifying as a fan of science fiction, or of emo music), or by taking on the persona of characters from a preferred text and recreating them in an online arena (Booth 515). As these technologies have become more commonplace, their usage has become more a part of everyday life and culture, normalising such practices.

These new social networks also facilitated a greater level of communication between audience members, or at least a far more visible form of communication. Discussions of television episodes, spoilers, speculation, casting, and any other related elements have shifted from centralised forums specific to a particular text or type of text, to de-centralised discussions open to individual networks of fans. The real-time nature of modern social networking sites, especially the open nature of Twitter, has allowed fan groups to engage in conversations regarding episodes as they are broadcast, providing more of a sense of belonging to a broader community. This visibility may create an environment which is more encouraging to audience members who had previously only engaged with their chosen texts in a solitary fashion or in small face-to-face groups, allowing them to demonstrate that they are a part of a much wider community, and possibly providing a template for how they might choose to engage with other audience members.

²⁰ To give some idea of the larger social networking sites aimed at the Anglophone market, MySpace launched in 2003, Facebook in 2004, Bebo in 2005, and Twitter in 2006.

None of the communication technologies discussed here have any explicit links to television; none were created with their effect on the televisual landscape in mind. However, communication between groups of audience members, and between creatives and their audiences, has become a vitally important aspect of building a solid audience base (for creatives) and demonstrating engagement (for fans). These technologies allow viewers to develop a sense of community, permit creatives to easily engage with viewer reactions, and enable television executives to demonstrate to marketers the affective connection of their audiences with the text.

Technologies of Aesthetics

While inherently connected to the technologies of reception, there have also been shifts in the television aesthetics available to viewers. Crucial to these shifts has been a global move away from the original analogue distribution which marked the early decades of television towards a digital distribution model. This model allows for a greater number of channels to be broadcast within the same bandwidth, avoids some of the reception problems which could be found when using analogue signals, and enables the provision of additional facilities such as Electronic Programme Guides (EPGs). In addition, the analogue switch-off, where governments bring to an end any broadcast of an analogue television signal in favour of one that is purely digital, has an additional economic benefit to associated technological industries. This process has been happening steadily across the developed world, requiring citizens to purchase some form of new technology in order to be able to receive the digital signal.

The ability to broadcast in high definition became a reality in the mid-2000s. The increased picture quality contributed to the blurring of the distinctions between the televisual and the cinematic aesthetic, traditional distinctions which had positioned the televisual picture as subservient to the cinematic, as it consisted of a smaller screen of lower quality, both in terms of

image and in terms of content. While the shift to HD may not seem to have a great deal of impact on entertainment television, and could be seen as a supplier-driven push to encourage people to upgrade their television hardware and accessories during a slow development cycle, I will argue later in this thesis that this development has been used by some creatives to very good effect in service of their narrative goals.

The reduction in cost of LCD and plasma television monitors has led to an increase in the uptake of large-screen flat-panel televisions in the early twenty-first century. The increase in popularity of these large-screen, high-definition televisions has seen some shifts in the television aesthetic, with certain visual tropes more commonly associated with film cinematography, such as long shots, becoming more common in television. However, simultaneous with this shift, the ready availability of mobile and handheld devices has meant that television is also being watched on smaller and smaller screens. Max Dawson has described the different attitudes from creatives towards the availability of content on these new smaller screens, which he sees as representing either a move to modify the content to take advantage of the capabilities of these different mediums, or to develop new and unique modes and narrative styles which might be best suited to these new screens (234–5). Dawson’s opening anecdote to “Little Players, Big Shows”, which describes watching an episode of *Lost* on an iPod, highlights the difficulties faced by producers who wish to make the most of the opportunities afforded by the large HD screens that some viewers have, but who run the risk of creating content that cannot be fully understood by those who engage with it on smaller, lower quality devices (231).

Technologies of Control

The aforementioned technologies have enabled the new ways in which users can receive and discuss content, and changed the way the content looks, sounds, and feels. However, possibly the most visible shift to audiences has been in the control they have over the television content that

they watch. The notion of choosing when to watch content, at what pace to watch it, and within what (and whose) televisual flow has created an individualised televisual experience for viewers - in certain locations and socio-demographic groups anyway – and put them firmly in control of their own viewing habits. This shift in control has been happening gradually over decades, with many of these technologies now utterly subsumed into standard television use and practice, and others more recent in the process of gradual adoption by the viewing public.

The introduction into common usage of the remote control was the first time that the balance of control over television viewership shifted in the direction of the audience. The technology of the remote control was first produced in the 1950s, but it became a standard component in the 1980s, modifying the ways in which viewers engaged with the television (Mittell, *Television and American Culture* 416). Providing the audience with an easier mode of channel surfing and removing the need to leave one's seat immediately shifts the balance of power, even with the limited channel choices available at the time. Raymond Williams' notion of industry-created flow, so instrumental within television studies, is automatically problematised as it becomes easier for audiences to move between channels, to mute advertisements, or to move across the spectrum during ad breaks, creating their own individualised flows. Jason Mittell has pointed out that the remote control became almost a necessity for audiences to manage the multitude of channels that became available during the era of Multi-channel Transition or TVII (*Television and American Culture* 416).

The VHS/VCR was the next tool that put control into the hands of viewers. As previously described, its introduction to the consumer market in 1975 gave audiences control over when they watched particular programme content (Klinger 58). This sudden ability to time-shift changed the mindset of audiences and heralded the beginnings of a shift we see coming to fruition in the present day, with audiences no longer satisfied with their content being beholden

to the whims of the broadcaster. No longer did one need to be on the couch at the appointed time in order to engage with content; instead, one could record programmes to watch later, which meant a shift in control. The ability for the average person to archive television also became crucial, as television content was no longer seen as ephemeral. As will be evident when I discuss the narratively complex television dramas which subsequently arose, the ability to rewatch content and engage in repeated viewings changes the demands that we put on a series, and encourages producers to shift their requirements of television text, narrative, and content.

The introduction into the home market of the Digital Video Recorder (DVR) or Personal Video Recorder (PVR), recordable first to a DVD format and subsequently to a hard disk drive, was another sea change in audiences' engagement with television, which I will later suggest also had ramifications for television producers and broadcasters. While these new devices ostensibly offered the same capabilities as the VCR had previously, there were several key differences which extended the shift in balance of power from producers to audiences. Firstly, DVRs and PVRs changed the notion of time-shifting. With VCRs, one could only watch recorded content while nothing else was recording; it could only operate in serial, rather than in parallel. This meant that if one chose to record some television content, one needed to wait until that recording was complete before the tape could be rewound and watched. The ability of the newer technologies to provide random access means that viewers can choose to start watching the recorded content, or anything else previously recorded, while recording continues. This becomes crucial in changing the viewing habits of some audiences, as it allows viewers to be more proactive in avoiding the advertising interruptions inherent in commercial television by letting them start watching the content slightly later, and thus fast-forward through the advertisements. The presence in most DVRs of multiple tuners also theoretically allows for the consumption of more television content than was previously possible, with many DVRs allowing the simultaneous recording of more than one channel.

A key feature of many DVRs is the Electronic Programme Guide (EPG). Providing a list of the upcoming programmes on the available networks, often 7-8 days in advance, allows audiences a way of navigating the significant quantities of television content now available at any moment. The ability to plan and record ahead, frequently setting up recordings for multiple items many days in advance, means that one is no longer required to think about, or even necessarily know the time and date that a particular programme is broadcast. The recording is set, and the programme will simply be available once it has been recorded. In addition, EPGs and DVRs frequently provide the ability to record every episode of a particular programme, which means that the viewer does not need to set something to record every week; once it is set, viewers will receive the content they want with no further action required. Content is still coming in via 'pull' rather than 'push',²¹ but it is an automated 'pull' that dispenses with viewers having to concentrate on regularly finding the content they want. As scheduling becomes less and less important to audiences through technological shifts, networks in turn must rethink their traditional branding and marketing practices. Networks have had to change tactics in order to try to retain viewers from the end of one programme into the next, as well as to find new modes of advertising that are not as easy for viewers to avoid. In addition, US networks, especially cable networks, have worked to establish an identifiable brand for their network in order to encourage brand loyalty across different series.

The rise of video-on-demand (VOD) services has been a recent development which appears to put even more control in the hands of the viewer. US-based services such as Netflix and Hulu, which offer VOD, give the impression that anything the viewer wants is available immediately at their fingertips. Viewers are able to watch multiple episodes of a series, one after the other,

²¹ Pull indicating content selected by the viewer from a large range of options, push suggested that the material is provided to the viewer by the distributor upon it being available.

‘binge-watching’; consuming significant quantities of a given series in this way removes some of the episodic nature of television content. The large archives give a sensation of content overload, far more than could ever be watched by one person, thus making the curation and selection of televisual material more important to the viewer. The connections between these sites and social media allow for some level of collective curation, as viewers can see what their communities are engaged with, acting as a form of recommendation engine. In addition, these sites often have their own algorithms for recommending content based on what has been previously viewed and rated by the user, meaning that each viewer may receive their own unique set of recommendations. However, these algorithms are confidential and proprietary, and theoretically could be manipulated by the service provider in order to promote a particular item which has economic benefits for them. While this is just speculation, it is important to consider ways in which users may not be experiencing a transparent system, despite the rhetoric which suggests that all power and control is being given to the viewer.

Conclusion

When describing the circuit model this thesis proposed, I positioned technology outside the circuit itself, operating as an independent force. Very little of the technology I have described is purely televisual, but instead is technology that can have a wide variety of uses, with its connection to television being only one of them. Some of these technologies have been designed with television in mind, with alternate uses discovered subsequently; others were never designed to be televisual, but have been adopted by broadcasters, producers, or audiences who have seen the potential that they might have. These technologies are inherently integrated into modern life, and the effects of their use are complex due to their bi-directional nature: the effects of technology are as determined by the ways in which it is used by society as societal norms are constructed by the advent and adoption of new technologies. Thus, the following case studies will draw on the relevant technological moments discussed here while identifying the ways that

technological transitions have supported shifts in producer and audience behaviour in order to increase the economic value to distributors of televisual content. In the process, the case studies will highlight how technologies have been adopted by users in unforeseen ways in order to create a richer, more powerful experience and a deeper level of engagement.

Buffy the Vampire Slayer: New modes of Textual Production

Introduction

The first case study to be investigated is *Buffy, the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003), referred to hereafter as *Buffy*. Positioned at the beginning of what I am identifying as TVIII, it provides an excellent example of the shifts in the burgeoning convergent televisual landscape. These shifts meant that the producers of *Buffy* were forced to address the technological restrictions that had challenged preceding television, but the producers also worked to establish new modes of communication, engagement and economic success. It is also important to note the changes in the way *Buffy* was received across the course of its seven-season run. Engaged audiences chose to watch and interact with the series in unexpected, unpredictable ways which led to the producers working to adapt to these changes, in addition to the new structures they were already implementing. The main focus of this chapter will be on the 'textual production' node, looking at the ways in which *Buffy* marked a different form of television, utilising new narrative structures made in a different way with a different production organisation. I will also, however, use *Buffy* to signal developments in the other nodes, in order to better anticipate the shifts associated with the subsequent case studies.

Crucial to *Buffy's* role in the shifting television landscape was the relatively novel narrative complexity that it provided, producing multi-layered ongoing storylines that encouraged viewers to return week after week. This narrative complexity is arguably the most critical textual element of *Buffy*, and most of the other important shifts that occurred in and around *Buffy* should be understood as offshoots of, or at least in relation to, this narrative shift. In order to successfully maintain a coherent complex storyline, the production team needed to be rethought, which led to the model of the television showrunner, the single person who is involved in the key aspects of developing and running every episode of the series. In addition, these narrative shifts were

facilitated by emerging televisual and para-televisual technologies, such as DVD distribution and early internet communities, as well as the ability to build out to further narrative extensions. The majority of these shifts are 'top-down', occurring on the production side and being handed down to audiences. I do not believe these shifts are deterministic, however, and audiences obviously had significant agency in relation to which aspects they adopted and responded to. Nonetheless, given *Buffy's* position as a transition text in television production mechanisms, this case study will mainly focus on textuality from the side of the producer, leaving the bottom-up fan-driven shifts to be considered in more depth in the chapter on *Lost*.

One point to acknowledge is *Buffy's* place within the academic canon. Unlikely as it may seem, *Buffy* has been one of the most addressed texts in the past twenty years of television studies, holding the unique honour of being the only television series to have its own scholarly journal, *Slayage*. Addressing topics from linguistic modes to gender representations, researchers have used *Buffy* as a text to understand a myriad of philosophical and sociological ideas. David Lavery, trying to summarise the field of *Buffy* Studies, describes more than fifty different disciplines or fields that have arisen from or been used to address the text (Lavery 5). As early as 2004, Lavery highlighted the breadth of publications already available that focussed directly on *Buffy*, in the forms of edited collections, monographs, journal articles, and conference papers. Early publications focused more on philosophical and cultural readings of *Buffy*, with edited collections such as *Fighting The Forces: What's At Stake In Buffy The Vampire Slayer* (Wilcox and Lavery) covering areas such as postmodernism, race, religion and art. Other publications, such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Philosophy* (South), used the text of *Buffy* to explain broader philosophical themes or looked at the neologisms which stemmed from the series, as in *Slayer Slang* (Adams). Some of the academic work on *Buffy* can also be connected to the growing field of Fan Studies, with early work by Judith Tabron making those connections, and authors such as Matt Hills making reference to *Buffy* in broader works about fan studies (Tabron; Hills, *Fan*

Cultures 36). A recent issue of *Slayage* covers topics as diverse as queer theory, justice, Foucauldian readings and intertextuality (*Slayage* 10.1, Winter 2013).

In production terms, however, *Buffy* does not appear to have been an obvious target for such academic attention. It was hardly a ratings success, being moderately successful as a WB show, but trailing behind contemporary shows on the other major networks; it received moderate acclaim from some television critics but was never a significant award recipient; and at least on the surface, it did not appear to be engaging with the vampire traditions prescribed by the literary canon. What we might see in *Buffy* scholarship is the emergence of the 'aca-fan', or scholars straddling the divide between academia and fandom, which at times manifests itself in a shrinking critical distance and a heightened emotional engagement with the text, much like that of the show's general audience. However, despite this extended attention, little has been written about the relationship of *Buffy* to the contemporary television industry, and the role that it played in television development.

I contend that *Buffy* is exemplary of a new form of television production, or what I am calling 'textual production' in a conscious attempt to signal the inextricability of text and production mechanisms. In regards to narrative, *Buffy* can be described as a notable step toward increased narrative complexity in primetime television drama; however, this contribution could not have happened without the production and reception conditions which supported this level of complexity. The industrial frameworks which surrounded the production of *Buffy* were markedly different from those of 20-30 years earlier, especially concerning the role played by Joss Whedon as executive producer and showrunner, and, crucially, as a writer. The evolving nature of Whedon's role is strongly correlated with the increasing narrative complexity which became apparent throughout the series, as well as with the new avenues of communication open to television audiences. Although the complexity of the series is discussed, I will not be conducting

a textual analysis, but instead will be analysing what specific conditions might have allowed this series, and those that followed, to make such significant changes to what had been a relatively stable televisual structure.

Origins and Teen TV

The textual origin of the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* series is slightly different from that of many television series, but provides an important background to the textual and industrial conditions of making *Buffy*. Wanting to invert the traditional horror trope of the defenceless blonde cheerleader, Joss Whedon wrote a script for a film with the same title, produced in 1992.

However, he was unhappy with the end result, and left the project after being asked to undertake several rewrites to alter the tone of the script. The film was not a major success, garnering mixed reviews and making a moderate return at the box office. Gail Berman of Sandollar Productions owned the television rights to the film, and approached Whedon about revisiting the character as the basis of a television series. Whedon saw the possibilities of recreating the character, this time more in line with his original vision. The only components carried over from the film to the television series are the title, the character of Buffy Summers, and her role as a vampire slayer.

With the exception of Buffy, no characters from the film feature in the television series. The vampire mythology is significantly different; for example, vampires turned to dust when killed in the television series, whereas the bodies remained in the film. On several occasions, there are references in the television series to events which preceded its own diegesis that fall within the time frame of the film, but Whedon has always insisted that these references refer to the original script as he wrote it, rather than the film as it was produced.²²

²² Hereafter, all references to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Buffy* are to the TV series, not the film, unless noted otherwise.

The role that *Buffy* played in the network politics of the time is also crucial to understanding the shape that the series took, and why it was greenlit. *Buffy* debuted on the WB network just over two years after the launch of the network, and played a crucial role in building the WB's network brand. The WB was created to be the "fifth network" (Daniels and Littleton 1), marking a true end to the network era, often referred to as TV I. Although the three-network reign had ended with the arrival of the FOX network in 1986 (Wee 45), the launch of the WB, followed by the launch of UPN five nights later, finally saw the end of the network era as it had been understood, as the television market became even more fragmented. The networks' programming had been designed to appeal to the widest audience possible, given the lack of niche choices available. The WB was envisaged as a network for teens and young adults (Daniels and Littleton 53; Wee 43), eschewing the traditional attempt to seize the greatest market share in favour of a dedicated audience whom advertisers and programmers could specifically address, signalling a shift in mindset in how programming might be considered.

Valerie Wee identifies the way in which the WB focused the majority of their programming on the newly-formed notion of "teen television", citing *Buffy*, *Dawson's Creek* (1998-2003), *Felicity* (1998-2002), *Roswell* (1999-2002), and *Popular* (1999-2001) as examples (50). This notion of teen television drew strongly on the tropes of Quality television, including ensemble casts, a focus less on familial and more on friend and collegial groups, and an element of self-reflexivity. In seeking to establish some working parameters for defining teen television, Sharon Ross and Louisa Stein suggest that the category could be delineated on the basis of "content, audience address, programming context, or demographics of reception" (4), suggesting that a variety of factors might play into what is understood as 'teen'. They note a set of generic plot lines, such as "a social outcast befriends the troubled boy from the wrong side of the tracks" (Ross and Stein 3), that could apply to any number of teen television series, but they also identify a number of reception practices, many of which would be foreign to shows outside of the teen television

'genre'.²³ These might include the dissemination of specific music tracks or fashion items by having them featured in television series, or content based in the world of the television series being produced by the audiences themselves (Ross and Stein 3). It was this combination of accessible content with added levels of audience engagement that was so successfully utilised by the WB in developing and maintaining their brand, and the first relative ratings success they encountered in pursuing this model was with *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Daniels and Littleton 139–40).

However, Mary Celeste Kearney is quick to point out that it is unlikely that a television show will survive the ratings battle if it only attracts a teen audience. Despite this being a powerful market segment, with teen consumers spending a significant amount each year, teens actually watch less television on a weekly basis than their adult counterparts, and are more likely to be involved in alternative activities, such as being online. Executives from both FOX and the WB have acknowledged that targeting solely the teen market is not a viable business model (Kearney 18). These executives point to the fact that although teen television has become exceptionally popular, it attained this popularity by reaching demographics outside of the teen market. As was suggested in the preceding chapter, the changing televisual landscape and increase in televisual options has led to a process of narrowcasting. At the same time, John T Caldwell has suggested that some niche markets are more valuable than others, mainly based on their economic potential and disposable income (J. T. Caldwell, *Televisuality* 9). By the early 1990s, however, marketers had begun to recognise the limitations of the niche market, with any one market being too small to generate large returns, especially given the inability to grow the audience beyond the niche boundaries. Programmers thus began trying to create an ideal series, one which would appeal to several different niche audiences by finding traits to target that were similar across this

²³ For more discussion of teen television's positioning as a genre, see Ross & Stein's introduction to *Teen Television*.

combined audience. Kearney suggests that the WB managed to target not just the teen market, but further markets who shared a “similar cultural sensibility” of youthfulness (20). This can extend the demographic both through a process of ‘reading up’, where younger viewers aspire to engage with the programming of the teen market, and of ‘reading down’, where older viewers choose to use ‘teen programming’ as a rejection of socially-imposed adulthood, an adoption of a youthful attitude, or a form of nostalgia.

It is interesting to note that while *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* originally featured mainly teen characters, many of the recurrent themes throughout the show extend far beyond the teen demographic, and many characters have aged out of their teens by the end of the show. Themes of friendship and love, lust and loss, death and grief, and sacrifice may be familiar to teen viewers, but also speak to a much wider audience. Kearney notes that many reviewers in the first season read the metaphor of the show as “school is hell”; she posits that a retrospective look at the show suggests that the more accurate metaphor would be “life is hell”, a more universal sentiment speaking to a much broader viewership (32). At the same time, the near universality of school-based education means that the audience was able to connect emotionally with the series, even in the earlier seasons set in high school.

Thus, *Buffy* was able to draw on a much wider audience than simply the teen market at which it was ostensibly aimed. Certainly a ‘genre’ audience – one attracted to science fiction material – was drawn to the content, but many audience members also came from more traditional televisual backgrounds who might normally have shunned such a genre. They were kept viewing by the show’s ‘emotional heart’, strong characters, and storylines which spoke to people from a variety of demographics and backgrounds. This positioning allowed the WB to create other shows with similar traits – teen casts but universal themes – and led to the relative success of contemporaneous programming such as *Dawson’s Creek* and *Roswell*, which both had remarkably

similar average ratings to *Buffy*. Supernatural, fantasy, or science fiction elements continued to play a key role in successful series on the network, including *Charmed* (1998-2006) and *Smallville* (2001-2011), but the focus always lay on the relationships at the core.²⁴

Narrative Complexity

One way in which *Buffy* differed from most preceding series and influenced those which followed was in its introduction of complex serial narratives. In his seminal essay on narrative complexity, Jason Mittell frequently draws on *Buffy* as an important example of the introduction of narrative complexity into primetime popular television. Mittell highlights a number of key elements which led to the increase of complexity in televisual narrative, including the move to television of a number of (now) auteurs, changes in expected audience size and demographic breakdown, the evolution of technologies both televisual and communicative in nature, and the embrace of fan culture as a subcultural phenomenon coupled with the growing acceptance of an active audience (“Narrative Complexity” 30–32).

Steven Johnson is another critic who has considered the importance of narrative complexity. He is especially interested in the variety of ongoing plotlines at play in any given episode of a modern narratively complex television series. He provides an analysis of the number of characters and character connections in an episode of *24*, contrasting it with a similar analysis of *Dallas* to indicate the increase in attention required by modern viewers (*Everything Bad Is Good for You* 109–15). A similar analysis looks at the number of plotlines in an episode of *Starsky and Hutch* (1975-79) against an episode of *Hill Street Blues* (*Everything Bad Is Good for You* 70).

Johnson does not aim to argue that most popular culture is art – in fact, he does not attempt to make a connection between complexity and quality – but simply claims that many forms of modern popular culture from the mid-1980s onward require a higher level of attention from the

²⁴ *Dawson’s Creek* was a notable exception to this, having success without appealing to a genre audience.

audience for full appreciation. While there may be a level of simplicity to his analysis, and his conclusion is more sweeping than might be justified, his work certainly serves to reinforce Mittell's argument that narrative complexity has been increasing, and provides basic quantitative support for what television scholars had been noticing with growing regularity.

Mittell's discussion draws on *The X-Files* as a case study, describing the series as exploring the possibilities of narrative complexity by combining self-contained episodes with ongoing serial storytelling. While there are certainly antecedents in the primetime soaps of the 1970s and some of the Quality dramas of the 1980s, especially the MTM-produced shows,²⁵ *The X-Files* and *My So-Called Life* (1994-95) are seen as shows which spearheaded this movement in the early to mid-1990s. However, Mittell is careful to point out that the most successful of these, *The X-Files*, came under significant criticism for a failure to find the key balance between these two different styles of story arcs, noting a "detached independence" in the non-serial episodes, which at times even contradicts the already-established ongoing mythos of the serial story-telling ("Narrative Complexity" 33). Where the endlessly deferred series-long narrative arcs of *The X-Files* may have eventually worn thin for even dedicated viewers, *Buffy* and its spin-off *Angel* (1999-2004) were more successful in maintaining the balance. With perhaps a slight exception granted for the first season, in which establishment and exposition took a dominant role over serial narrative, *Buffy* was able to create episodes which could, in theory, be watched in isolation, yet continuously added to the ongoing mythos of any given season. By using story arcs that were mainly limited to a given season, rather than the series as a whole, Whedon avoided the feeling of endless deferral of resolution, providing some level of catharsis by wrapping up key storylines, even if

²⁵ MTM is the production company operated by Mary Tyler Moore and Grant Tinker, producing such series as *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970-77), *The Bob Newhart Show* (1972-78), *St Elsewhere* (1982-88) and *Hill Street Blues* (1981-87). See Jane Feuer et al's excellent book on the history of MTM and the foundations of modern Quality television (Feuer, Kerr, and Vahimagi).

simultaneously creating a new level of emotional or apocalyptic turmoil.²⁶ Whedon's use of the seasonal 'big bad', the evil character seeking to bring about the end of the world, meant that every season built to a climax, with aware viewers knowing that they would see some level of finality by the end of the twenty-two episodes that make up each season.

Whedon was also careful to ensure that within apparently self-contained episodes, there was always some form of extension of the ongoing serial narrative. Mittell identifies the critically lauded episode "Hush", the only episode in the show's run to be nominated for an Emmy award, as a perfect example of this fine balance. Aside from the stylistic innovation within the episode (a plot device is used so that the characters all lose the ability to speak, meaning that roughly 60% of the episode is without dialogue), the episode presents a relatively standard "monster-of-the-week", a trope common in several science-fiction or fantasy television shows, with its antecedents in crime or medical procedurals. However, despite this surface appearance, and in spite of the difficulties caused by the lack of dialogue, the ongoing narrative of the season is moved forward considerably in "Hush". Buffy and Riley discover each other's secret identities, and there are early indications of the importance of Tara to Willow, coupled with subtextual hints to their forthcoming relationship. Both of these moments prove to be vital in the remaining episodes within the season. "Hush" is often considered an extraordinary episode of *Buffy*, frequently appearing in lists from audiences and critics as among the best episodes from the series. However, even when looking at other, less extraordinary episodes, the same pattern of advancing the ongoing narrative can be seen. The Season 2 episode "Halloween" in many ways follows in the tradition of 'special Halloween episodes' on many episodic American dramas and comedies. It features a self-contained plot-line, involving a villain of the week who wreaks his havoc and is finally beaten by the gang of heroes. But within this episode, there are subtle

²⁶ The number of times that the characters in *Buffy* have faced "the end of the world" becomes a running joke in the series.

changes in relationships, which continue and expand in later episodes. The viewer is given their first insight into the background of Rupert Giles, and peeks inside the psyche of Angel to better understand why Buffy might have a strong attraction to him; Xander is given a role as a soldier, his skills from which are recalled repeatedly in future episodes; Willow is seen to be gaining a little confidence, and once again she attracts the interest of Oz, a connection which will later bloom into a relationship. These may seem like minor character points, but they are all woven neatly into the 'story of the week' plotline, instead of being additional, extra plot points. The effect of this is that, rather than having key moments signposted, viewers are left to guess what might be irrelevant and what might have vital ramifications in the episodes and seasons to come.

Johnson's analysis of the number of characters and character connections in an episode can also serve to highlight the complexity that typified *Buffy*. Very early on in the series, *Buffy* established a core group of characters, which always numbered at least five, the majority of whom remained with the series for all seven seasons. In addition to these core characters, a number of others had smaller roles which lasted for one or multiple seasons, allowing their characters to be expanded and fleshed out. This breadth of core cast meant that, although she is the eponymous heroine, Buffy does not always have to bear the narrative weight of any given episode. Within the early seasons, certain episodes were centred around Willow, Xander, Giles, Joyce, Jenny Calendar, and others, with Buffy taking a lesser, or at times almost non-existent, role in the episode. Even in Buffy-centric episodes, it is rare for other key characters not to be present, usually interacting not just with Buffy but with each other in ways that modify their interpersonal relationships and thus the dynamic of the show.

This success with narrative complexity sets *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* apart for a number of reasons. Firstly, it encourages a continued fandom, more so than a standard episodic programme. If engaged viewers are concerned that they will miss vital information by missing a particular

episode, they are much more likely to value their regular viewership, which usually means watching live at time of broadcast. This has obvious implications for networks in terms of higher ratings, which in turn leads to higher chargeable advertising rates. Ivan Askwith has also worked to decipher how we might understand the relationship of the engaged viewer to the televisual text, and extrapolating from that, their value to the advertiser. Askwith highlights five possible outcomes of a viewer choosing to watch a television programme and becomes engaged with it, with these possibilities likely to be progressively cumulative; they:

- a. Watch the entire program without changing channels.
- b. Become a regular and loyal viewer of the program.
- c. Be a more attentive viewer when watching the program.
- . . . As an added bonus, the viewer may also:
 - a. Become passionate about the program.
 - b. Convince others to watch the program as well. (Askwith 23)

All of these processes are seen as being beneficial to advertisers, thus to networks, and therefore to producers. Askwith draws heavily on the work of Henry Jenkins, especially his notion of 'affective economics' to explain how this sort of active engagement might have more benefit to advertisers than just a regular "monolithic block of eyeballs" (cited in Jenkins, *Convergence Culture* 66). Jenkins explains affective economics as a new movement that "[seeks] to understand the emotional underpinnings of consumer decision-making as a driving force behind viewing and purchasing decisions" (Jenkins, *Convergence Culture* 62). He further explains that marketers and networks are coming to agree with a theory long proposed by fan groups, that the quality of the engagement of the viewers is more important than the quantitative number of viewers.²⁷

²⁷ Further discussion of the nature of, and the crucial role played by, affective economics will occur in the case study of *American Idol*.

Buffy was never a show that rated terribly, but it also was never a huge ratings success. At a rough average of 5 million households across its 7 years, it struggled to make it into the top 100 viewed programs on US television during its run. However, these numbers were less of a concern to the WB, and later UPN, due to the specific audience targets in which they were interested. *Buffy's* increasing serialisation and narrative complexity encouraged viewers to return week after week, discussing online when the next new episode would be screening, so as to ensure that they didn't miss a minute. This highly engaged fanbase could be relied on to tune in, to watch live, and, as Askwith suggests, to encourage their family and friends to join them.

While narrative complexity was not a completely novel phenomenon, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* can be seen as appearing at a critical moment within the changing narrative landscape. Where earlier programming such as *Hill Street Blues* and *The X-Files* had relied on a mainly episodic structure, with occasional one-off episodes or moments of seriality, Whedon worked hard to build his ongoing storyline into the monster-of-the-week scenarios. By adopting a large ensemble cast and season-long story arcs, Whedon succeeded in attracting a strong loyal audience who could be relied on to watch every episode, a level of engagement which could then be leveraged into a strong marketing position.

The Rise of the Showrunner

Increasingly complex storylines were a relatively novel concept within the television industry, but they could not exist within the production structures of the network era. The diverse and dispersed nature of the production and creative teams which have traditionally worked on television series would struggle to manage the complex and ongoing story arcs required by narratively complex television. It is no coincidence that *Buffy* was both an early exponent of televisual narrative complexity and also an industrial space in which the showrunner came to the

fore. The notion of a showrunner is critical to the successful production of coherent complex television.

Television authorship has always been a contested notion in Television studies. The industrial realities which surround the creation of television content, the extended time over which television is produced, and the multiple creatives who contribute to its production and creation make it very difficult to identify any one distinct 'author'. Writing in 1990, Robert Thompson suggests that television's appearance as "authorless (or, to be precise, so confusingly polyauthorial)" means that it is unable to be understood through traditional modes of criticism (Thompson and Burns ix). Mittell notes that it is important to think about who authorship is important to and why, implying that there might be different understandings for the industry, for the audience, and for scholars or critics, or at least understandings drawn from differing imperatives ("Authorship"). Echoing Thompson, he highlights that in any modern form of cultural production, there are likely to be multiple people responsible for the final work, even in literary work that is traditionally seen as single-author text. However, Mittell identifies that notions of authorship tend to favour the person seen as having 'originated' the work, or at least with having the overall responsibility for the final product, as is the case with the director of a film. The industrial specificities of television, however, mean that in any given season of television multiple directors and writers are often used, with the responsibility for the final product resting with the producer or producers of the series. Mittell refers to this as "authorship by management", where the overall control and direction can be seen to reside with the person or group of people who hires and assembles the creative team, controls the overall direction, and is ultimately responsible for the final product.

Interestingly, the authorship of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is very rarely a point of contestation. The positioning of Joss Whedon as 'author' of the series comes at a critical juncture in the television

industry, and can be seen to coincide with the rise of the notion of the television showrunner. In tracing the origins of the term, Michael Newman and Elana Levine identify that it was first used in the mid-1990s, and seemed to be gaining traction as a popular term in the early 2000s – in other words, concurrent with the run of *Buffy* (39). They note that the role is usually a ‘hyphenate’, whose incumbent often fills multiple roles for the series, frequently being a lead writer and usually also having a production role. Most crucially, I would argue that the showrunner also usually has an Executive Producer credit, giving them oversight of hiring decisions, especially in the creative team, and thus over the creative direction of the series as a whole. The role is one which combines “corporate management... and creative initiative” (Newman and Levine 39), a definition which indicates the industrial and economic requirements of a television series while also allowing it to be seen as a creative endeavour.

The role of executive producer has been largely ignored by most television studies scholarship, possibly because of the industrial specificity of the position, combined with the fact that the title does not necessarily mean a great deal, as it can often be awarded as a form of non-economic compensation, or a way for someone who has played a major role in the early stages of a series to maintain a financial interest in the production. Mittell points out that by the final episode of *Lost*, there were nine executive producers listed in the credits, with several having little to do with the production of the series by that point (“Authorship”). However, as the notion of the showrunner has taken hold, it has brought an additional definition to that of the executive producer, allowing the contribution of the showrunner to be recognised with an accredited term.

There have been rare academic attempts to apply cinema auteur theory to the medium of television, but Mittell notes that these authors’ work usually “derives more from literary studies” rather than from television or media studies models (“Authorship”). Recently, the term ‘auteur’ has been adopted by Newman and Levine in order to try to formalise an understanding of the

position of the showrunner. Newman and Levine's connection of the showrunner with the notion of the auteur is used to suggest that the term 'showrunner' works to legitimate television, to provide a singular 'author' responsible for all aspects of the creative side of production, much in the way that auteur theory did for film. They suggest that the presence of a 'showrunner-auteur' brings the promise of 'art' to a televisual project, while other series are more likely to be seen as commercial productions. Perhaps most crucially, they suggest that many showrunner-auteurs have a distinctive feel to their oeuvre, meaning that subsequent series can be identified as theirs through similar features. While this may not pertain directly to *Buffy*, being Joss Whedon's first television series, *Buffy* does constitute the beginnings of Whedon's particular style, such that his subsequent series, even those narratively unconnected, are described as existing within the 'Whedonverse'. This has the additional economic benefit of bringing an existing audience and fanbase to any new endeavours that have the showrunner-auteur at the helm.

The role of the showrunner arguably becomes more crucial with the rise of narratively complex television. In episodic television, the necessity to have someone overseeing the narrative direction is less important, as there are fewer narrative strands which need to carry through the multiple episodes of a season or a series. However, with the rise of prime-time serial television it becomes more crucial that someone be responsible for guiding the story arcs of the series. Joss Whedon was known for working closely with the writers on the series, offering guidance on how their individual episode might fit into the larger whole, often providing the story basics from which the writers would create the teleplay, and inevitably contributing on some level to the script of every episode of the series (Pearson, "The Writer/Producer in American Television" 18). In this sense, the showrunner can be seen as the overall creative 'director' of the series, ensuring that it has a cohesive direction, and allowing for the telling of complex stories.

Crucially, 'showrunner' is not just an industrial term of convenience to describe a creative who wears many hats. The notion of the showrunner has also become a key point of identification for active audiences, a way of personifying the object of their fandom beyond the visible lead actors. Mittell points to the way in which regular *Buffy* viewers were able to understand what appeared to be bizarre plot twists which made no sense at the beginning of the fifth season by putting their faith in the showrunner ("Authorship"). The almost mantra-like "Trust Joss" which appeared repeatedly in fan forums shows a fan community who is putting their faith in a creative seen as having the best interests of the series at heart, and who has enough control over the series as a whole to be able to guide its direction. The showrunner also acts as a point of contact, personification, and identification for the fanbase. As these showrunners become more identifiable to the fanbase, they develop their own level of celebrity, which allows them to fabricate a persona which is visible to the audience. Social media, especially the rise of Twitter, allows showrunners to speak directly to the public, to continue to present that persona. In addition to this, the DVD paratexts that I will discuss subsequently, such as commentary tracks, provide further insight into the way in which the showrunner sees the series, as well as their interactions with other creatives in their team.²⁸

New Distribution Methods

Televisual narrative complexity was facilitated by the burgeoning capability of viewers to watch and re-watch television series outside of broadcast times. One of the issues that had stifled the ability of television creators to produce narratively complex television was the scarcity of accessibility of broadcast television. Without the ready availability of playback devices, or an easy method of post-broadcast distribution, it was difficult to guarantee that viewers would watch

²⁸ Twitter postdates Whedon's work on *Buffy* by several years, but other major US showrunners, such as Shonda Rhimes, Kevin Williamson, Bill Lawrence, Shawn Ryan, and Kurt Sutter have been regular users of Twitter at different times. Some series have larger participation in Twitter amongst their creative teams; a list of all creatives on Twitter from the series *Supernatural* (2005-present) can be seen at <http://www.supernaturalwiki.com/index.php?title=Twitter>.

every episode of a series in order, and the ability to re-watch was dependent on syndication and re-runs. While VHS went some of the way to remedying this situation, it is with the rise of DVD that viewers were finally able to exert some meaningful agency over their television viewing, and creatives were able to create television series which invited a deeper level of engagement.

The first season of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* was initially released on VHS in 1999, a move that, while not unheard of, was not common practice. This followed the more common release of a couple of 'compilation tapes', where two well-received episodes, not necessarily consecutive, were combined on a commercial VHS and released to allow new viewers to have a 'taste' of the show.²⁹ As previously suggested, the release of full seasons of television on VHS had been viewed as problematic, both through the lack of a market, and due to the large amount of space taken up by a full series of television on VHS. The DVD of the first season of *Buffy* was interestingly released first in Region 2, which is to say, in the United Kingdom and Europe in 2000.³⁰ It was presented in an aesthetically pleasing package which folded out into the shape of a cross, in keeping with the mythos of the show. This was followed by the Region 1 release (North America) in early 2002. From that time, DVD boxsets of the individual seasons followed in fairly quick succession, originally in boxes which contained a half-season each, then in slimline boxes which contained the full season. Finally, a full boxset was released, containing all seven seasons.

Although film DVDs began to be released at approximately the same time as *Buffy* was being conceived and produced, there was a significant delay before TV series releases were considered. It would be difficult to suggest that Whedon conceived of his series as one which would have an

²⁹ This occurred in the first season with the episodes "The Witch" and "Never Kill A Boy On The First Date" on one tape, "Angel" and "The Puppet Show" on another, and the pilot episodes of "Welcome To The Hellmouth" and "The Harvest" on a third.

³⁰ One could speculate that the earlier Region 2 release might have been connected to the burgeoning market in Europe for interesting television in English, combined with the erratic distribution and broadcast of the series across the European zones.

extended life on a medium that was so new. However, it has become clear that as the technology developed, Whedon embraced it as offering significant potential for expanding his audience base, allowing a show which had initially had slow ratings to pick up viewers by giving them an opportunity to 'catch up'. But it was also an avenue for sharing additional textual and paratextual material, and a stream of income that still extends to the present day, a decade after the broadcast run ended. It may not be a coincidence that the first season of *Buffy* is the most episodic and contains the fewest serial elements; it seems reasonable to assume that as these new viewing technologies proliferated, Whedon became more aware of the potential that could be exploited to tell more complex stories.

Prior to these releases, engaged viewers who had found a text which they enjoyed and wanted to explore in more depth had the option of recording the episodes themselves from the television broadcast. This allowed them to catalogue and collect episodes for rewatching and analysis, but this method also posed some problems regarding quality of broadcast signal, the interspersal of advertising, and simply the need to record every episode religiously, and in order. There were also concerns about space, given the number of episodes that would fit on a standard VHS tape. However, until the availability of 'official' releases, these homemade collections provided audiences with the potential to engage in some fan practices, such as proselytising to friends and acquaintances, re-watching and analysing the text and, for some, engaging in the fetishisation of collecting that would later surround the DVD boxsets.

From the first release, the *Buffy* DVD boxsets contained a number of special features, providing additional textual or paratextual information for interested viewers. These included audio commentaries from Joss Whedon and other writers, directors, and producers; 'gag reels' of actors making mistakes and having fun on set; interviews with key production staff; featurettes on a variety of topics; and even scripts of selected episodes. The full series boxset also came with

an additional disc that contained extra material including an extended retrospective. A limited edition version of this 40-disc collection was even shipped with a signed note from Whedon, acknowledging what the series personally meant to him. These details may seem a little pedantic, but I believe they show clearly how aware Whedon was of the changing technology, and also of his audience. Only one disc out of 39 does not feature some extratextual material. Whedon seems to have been well aware that the people most likely to purchase the DVD sets were those who were already engaged viewers, seeking to watch and re-watch their chosen text, and immersing themselves in the world that he had created. Engaged viewers are also those most likely to be interested in, and actively seeking, the sorts of extratextual material to be found on these DVDs.

However, it is also on DVD that a television series might finally find itself as a true, 'canonical' text. There has been significant discussion amongst television scholars as to where the true television text lies.³¹ Certainly, an argument for Raymond Williams' notion of flow would suggest that the moment of broadcast is vital. If, however, we choose to think of television more as a literary form, then it is when it is released on DVD that the consumer is first able to access the text as an uninterrupted whole, without advertising, in the author-intended order, and without the delays caused by the vagaries of the network broadcast system. Thus, the DVD release of a television series might be considered as the authentic version, a term Jonathan Gray draws on in relation to film DVD releases (83).

Gray also suggests that it is through the paratextual features on a DVD – the commentaries, interviews, and featurettes – that fans strengthen their view about the position of the author, traditionally such a contested role in television (110). The omnipresence of Whedon amongst the

³¹ A small subsection of the earlier discussions on this area can be found in the work of Nick Browne, Robert Deming, John Fiske, and Raymond Williams (Browne 175–77; Deming 32–3; Fiske, "Moments of Television: Neither the Text nor the Audience" 63–4; Williams)

paratextual features cements his role for the audience as the leading voice behind the creation of their chosen text, and while other writers and producers are also given the opportunity to express themselves, they seldom do so without referencing Whedon and his impact on, involvement in, and guidance for their work. Thus, the DVD artefact serves to reinforce Whedon's position, not only as showrunner, but as the ultimate creative behind the series, responsible for the entire creative vision of the show.

DVD was not the only new form of distribution which came into popular use during the run of *Buffy*. The home computer also became a distribution portal as internet speeds increased, computing hardware allowed for greater storage, and software was developed to compress digital audio and video into manageable sizes. Online music sharing had become popular in 1999 with the rise of Napster, and soon afterwards, fan groups began sharing television episodes in a digital format. This digital sharing had advantages over VHS beyond simply saving physical space: it allowed viewers to share their libraries of the show even more willingly, as making a copy was a comparatively simple task. It also allowed audiences outside of the United States to engage with the show on a more timely basis, rather than waiting for a local network to start screening the new season (and, in my own experience, frequently missing the first episode of the new season because the network did not widely advertise it).

As with the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) in the example of music, television network executives have not usually looked fondly on the online fan distribution of their textual material. While not as litigious as the music industry, some networks and conglomerates have been quite active in enforcing 'takedowns' – sending cease-and-desist letters to sites hosting their material, advising them of the nature of the copyright infringement, and requesting its removal with threats of possible legal action. In an interesting counterpoint, Joss Whedon has, at times, been an advocate for the fan distribution of his textual material. The best example relates

to the episode “Earshot”, which was postponed in the US due to some similarity in content with the real-life Columbine shooting which occurred on April 20, 1999, a week before the intended airdate. Whedon called on his viewers in Canada, where the episode still screened as planned, to share the episode online so that all the US viewers would be able to watch it as well. This slightly anarchic suggestion seems to indicate that for Whedon, his primary concern is sharing his text with his audience; all other responsibilities, including the subsequent effect on ratings and the economics of the industry when the episode eventually did air in the US, appear to be secondary. This was further played out several years later, when he actively engaged in free online distribution of a new text, *Dr Horrible’s Sing-Along Blog* (2008). Here, the project was not an economic success until several months after its initial release, when the web series was made available for purchase (Bercovici). It is not coincidental that the idea to self-distribute *Dr Horrible* came about during the 2007/08 Writer’s Guild of America (WGA) writer’s strike, where showrunners came to the fore as some of the most visible and articulate spokespeople for the writers. Much of the disagreement between the industry and the guild was about revenues around online distribution (Banks 23), with Whedon’s project proving that with the right project (and admittedly a vocal, existing fanbase), online distribution could be a financially viable model (Leaver, “Joss Whedon, Dr. Horrible, and the Future of Web Media” 161).

Online Fan Communities

The rapidly growing availability of the internet meant not only a new avenue for distribution, but also an additional means of communication and engagement. By being able to communicate with other fans, to share information and ideas regarding the series, audience members were better equipped to follow the complex storylines presented in the later seasons of the series, with the visibility of their communications online providing Whedon and the writers with even more confidence to delve deeper into narrative complexity.

Buffy was one of the first television series to have active audience communities online at the time of airing.³² The notion of the virtual community first began to take hold in the early 1990s.

Howard Rheingold, a pioneer writer on virtual communities, defines them as “social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry . . . public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace” (5). Rheingold is particularly interested in the “leverage” that virtual communities bring to the average person, as long as the technology is used appropriately and intelligently (4). The launch of *Buffy* in 1997 coincided with an increase in home internet access in the US. As viewers were becoming accustomed to the changing narrative formats being offered by television through this period (increased narrative complexity, for example), households were simultaneously becoming aware of some of the potential offered by this new communication technology. Television fandom had existed prior to the internet, especially surrounding early cult programming such as *Star Trek*, with this fandom disseminated through published fan-zines or amateur-produced printed content, usually photocopied, which allowed fans to express themselves. However, web technology allowed for audiences to connect much more simply; by finding other audience members, no matter how geographically dispersed they might be, fans came together on a number of different levels to form a concerted and visible fanbase – a novel occurrence for a fledgling show.

When discussing the virtual communities that surrounded (and continue to surround) *Buffy*, it is important to distinguish between top-down and bottom-up communities. As previously described, top-down communities refer to those created and/or maintained by the producers or networks responsible for the show, even if only initially. Bottom-up, conversely, refers to ‘grassroots’ organisations established and maintained by the fans themselves, distinct from any

³² Some work has been published regarding the use of Usenet by fans of series such as *Twin Peaks* (Jenkins, “Do You Enjoy Making the Rest of Us Feel Stupid?”); however, the initial broadcast of *Twin Peaks* pre-dates any significant public usage of the World Wide Web.

official approval or endorsement. *Buffy* was one of the earliest television series to have an active fanbase operating within top-down 'official' virtual communities, with a detailed ethnography of the official message board, operated initially by the WB network, appearing in Sarah N. Gatson and Amanda Zweerink's study, *Interpersonal Culture on the Internet: Television, the Internet and the Making of a Community*. Gatson and Zweerink note the importance of "The Bronze", the name of the community space on the website, as a part of the marketing of the show, but also identify the "subversive core" of those participants who worked to build a community there (27).³³ These spaces allowed for the discussion of plot developments and history, meaning that viewers who chose to engage in these spaces were able to gain a deeper appreciation for, and more fully understand, the degree of narrative complexity being written into the series.

One of the vital aspects of participation in a virtual community built around a television show is that it automatically indicates an increased level of engagement. Mary Kirby-Diaz describes the actions of a fan who actively seeks out a virtual community on the object of his/her fandom as "crossing the border" – moving from a solely televisual experience into even more engaged and active behaviour (65). She is careful to point out that one can be a fan of a television show if he/she simply engages with the chosen program on an episode to episode basis, but she is particularly interested in those viewers who choose to extend their engagement into the virtual sphere. She suggests that these virtual communities allow the creation of a 'cult fandom', one which can be preserved years after the initial text has finished its broadcast run as fans continue to gather to discuss their text, to plan and advise about future events, and to share fan-generated content.

³³ The Bronze is the name of the local nightclub within Sunnydale in *Buffy*, the only regular space exclusively designed for social interaction.

One activity that has been prominent within the online *Buffy* communities has been the spread and publication of fan-generated material. This fan-produced material does not need to stray particularly far from the text, although, as we will see, some prosumer content can be viewed as a narrative extension of the core series. In the earlier years of the series, as the online community was just developing, a number of fan-sites were published that were dedicated to *Buffy*. These frequently did not feature highly original artistic material, but instead became sites where engaged audiences could interact with aspects of the official material. For example, some sites featured episode transcripts, where a dedicated fan had sat down with their VHS tape of an episode, and slowly and methodically transcribed it. Some featured detailed episode guides, tracing key moments from earlier episodes through to their importance in later ones. Other sites featured small audio clips, usually only a second or two long, captured from the episode. The technically-minded fan could use audio, usually a smart retort or clever quip, to replace the standard sounds on their desktop computer. Further sites featured screen-captured images from the show, or high-resolution desktop images released by the network as a marketing tool.

This was not, however, a cultural shift occurring amongst *Buffy* fans alone. As well as sites that focussed purely on *Buffy*, other sites that were coming to prominence dealt with popular culture and television in general. The AV Club, a section of the satirical newspaper *The Onion*, began featuring reviews of television episodes alongside those of films and albums. The rise and success of Television Without Pity also provided an avenue for viewers to read the (often biting) recaps of episodes, and to contribute their own thoughts and ideas. These sites provided spaces for pop culture audiences to come together, to read popular criticism, and frequently to engage and discuss the material as well. These sites had relatively low barriers for entry in terms of technical skill compared to early Usenet groups, and as such, these types of discussions were opened up to broader communities. It is possible to see some of these spaces as regulatory, since the effect was to separate texts which were worthy of discussion and appreciation from those which were

worthy of scorn, snark, and derision. I would suggest that the acceptance of a series like *Buffy* in these spaces contributed to the ongoing critical and cult success it enjoyed, and the continued discussion after the end of the series may in turn have contributed to its success on home media.

The presence of the online community also speaks back to the 'top', since in some ways it can shape the ongoing televisual text. As distinct from film or literature, where the text is usually completed before an audience has the opportunity to engage with it, television's serial nature means that writers and producers are able to engage with their audience while still working on future episodes. Whether they choose to do so usually remains up to each individual creative; how much effect such interactions might have is at times a point of contention both in the fan and the academic community. However, some television creators have been open about the effects that the discussions of the virtual fan communities have had on their work. Joss Whedon is one such author, with his production team frequently quoted as saying that they have listened to audience responses, and used them as a gauge for how to adapt the series' writing and plot direction (Mazor). It could be that some of the relationships which occurred in later seasons of the show have similarities to those discussed by fans, and were adopted by producers in response to such fan discussion. These responses on the part of creatives as a reaction to audience discussion have the additional effect of helping to construct a firm and responsive concept of the author for the fans; Alan Wexelblat has suggested that "fans need a powerful, or at least well-known, author in order to maintain a superior feeling" over non-fans, and by demonstrating their ability to respond to fans through the text, creatives can appear authoritative and authorial (Wexelblat 211).

Narrative Extensions

A final way in which *Buffy* was able to build complexity into its narrative was through narrative extensions. By inviting viewers to extend the story outside the bounds of the traditional television

text, the creators offered the audience optional additional points of engagement as well as additional layers of complexity. By extending these across multiple platforms, the producers increased the likelihood of drawing new viewers to the core text, ideally without alienating those who wished to engage on a more basic level with the television series. For those who do choose to engage with these extensions, new stories can be told, characters' pasts and futures can be examined, gaps from within the story can be filled, and some elements can be re-imagined. In the case of *Buffy*, it is important to note that Joss Whedon's name is attached to almost all the narrative extensions, serving the dual role of authorising this material as 'authentic', but also reinforcing his position as showrunner, author, and creator.

The notion of transmedia storytelling, the telling of a story across multiple media platforms, was not entirely novel in the late 1990s, but the late 1990s was certainly the point at which more authors became interested in the potential of the form. Henry Jenkins has dedicated a chapter in his book *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* to discussing the move towards telling a story over a variety of platforms. Jenkins takes as a case study the *Matrix* franchise, looking at how the full story was told through the core film texts, but also through anime shorts, comics, and video games. In the final analysis, he claims, the Wachowski siblings, while having impressive ambitions, failed to create a truly successful narrative experience. Jenkins suggests that the problem remained that the films were still strongly identifiable as the core text, but too much information necessary to understand them was presented in the additional texts, meaning that audience members who only chose to engage with the core text were left at times bewildered and confused. Extrapolating from this, a model could be suggested – not unlike the model of televisual narrative complexity itself – in which the core text is readable and understandable on its own, but which also serves as a springboard for additional narrative extensions in order to create a greater depth of understanding, or to provide additional or further textual material.

Buffy has been connected with a variety of narrative extensions, canonical and not, both during its broadcast run and after, significantly extending its life. The most obvious narrative extension is that of *Angel*, the spin-off from *Buffy*, which screened on the WB from 1999-2004. Screening directly after *Buffy* in the television schedule (as long as *Buffy* was broadcast on the WB), *Angel* existed within the same storyverse, which allowed characters to move between the two series, providing extensions for some storylines, and closure for others. At times, references or 'in-jokes' were made which would only have been comprehensible to engaged viewers who watched both series, providing a level of enjoyment to dedicated viewers, as well as a feeling of inclusion and being a member of a select community. However, the two series could be watched independently of each other, and had their own distinct tones and aesthetics. By utilising the same media form as the core text, *Angel* was the easiest narrative extension for audiences to access, and almost certainly the most commonly used.

During *Buffy*'s run, there were other official narrative extensions which provided audiences with further points of engagement. Nintendo released a *Buffy* game for the Gameboy Color in 2000, set during Season 4. The newly-launched Xbox featured a *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* video game, including the voice talent from the show, set between Seasons 2 and 3. *Buffy The Vampire Slayer: Chaos Bleeds* is a 2003 game, launched across a range of consoles, that operates as a 'lost' episode from Season 5. There have been several other releases which engage with characters fulfilling similar sorts of roles to those in some of the more self-contained episodes. These games provided extensions for active audiences, allowing them to feel like they have some control over the action of their chosen text, although whether or not the videogame narratives should be considered part of the official television canon is questionable. However, what is crucial to the games is the way in which they invite users into a world that they already know well. Many of the games allow the players to assume the role of familiar characters, guiding them through

recognisable locales and battling vampires, including villains they know from the series. *Chaos Bleeds* even includes a “Bunny Catcher” mini-game, a reference to the repeated series in-joke regarding Anya’s leporiphobia.

Following the broadcast run of the show, Whedon worked to maintain his fanbase by releasing an official Season 8, this time in comic book form. The serial nature of comic books is not dissimilar to that of a serial television series, allowing for episodic releases as part of the ongoing storyline, featuring cliff-hangers or surprise endings. The similarities between serial television and comic books also extends to narrative complexity; comics are one of the few mediums where narrative complexity is *de rigueur*, drawing on multiple ongoing storylines, and, frequently, large ensemble casts, or characters that disappear and reappear often years apart. Mainstream long-running superhero comics in particular frequently invoke memories of incidents and characters which have come before. Comics were not a new addition to the *Buffy* transmedia offering; extensions of the Buffyverse had also existed during the run of the broadcast show, filling in gaps in the history (such as *Tales of the Slayers* or *Tales of the Vampires*), creating new characters within the same storyverse (*Fray*) or extending other characters’ backstories or ongoing stories (*Oz*, *Giles*, *Jonathan*). It is important to note that while there is dispute amongst *Buffy* devotees as to which of these are canonical, story overviews for all of these were approved by the network and Mutant Enemy (Joss Whedon’s production company), , meaning that they are official *Buffy* merchandise, separating them from non-canonical fan fiction, and perhaps encouraging additional viewers to engage with them.

It would appear that the decision to release such a quantity of additional material has two opposing side-effects. In some ways, the creators are providing some of the extensions sought by engaged audiences – a deeper understanding of character history, events which may have affected a character’s decision-making or reaction within the core text, or the ramifications of

events within the core text. With texts that do not have such detailed narrative extensions, these understandings are left up to the imagination of the individual viewer. But in a text as detailed as *Buffy*, where the creator has openly acknowledged that he has plotted out, in great depth, events that stretch far beyond the core text, these extensions provide a level of consensus amongst the series' audience and an ability to understand the storyverse as it was intended by the creator. Thus the narrative complexity begun in the source text is able to be fleshed out and expanded in the extensions, allowing for even more complex stories to be told.

The other side-effect is that by creating further story-lines, additional narrative extensions with new characters and new motivations, the production of fan-fiction is actually encouraged. Fan-fiction often takes the form of filling in moments in the story left untouched by the authors, whether they are moments from a character's back-story, occurrences between episodes or seasons, action which occurred off screen, action that follows the completion of the series, or rescripted moments from the series that the fan was unhappy with or imagined differently. This can extend to the 'slash' sub-genre of fan-fiction, which usually takes the form of erotica, pairing together two characters that do not have a romantic or sexual relationship in the canon text.³⁴ Frequently these character pairings are same-sex, or cross lines of taboo (for example, incestual or cross-species) in ways which US broadcast television, with strict codes enforced by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), would struggle to represent. However, fan production is not solely restricted to the production of written fiction; these narrative extensions take on such a variety of different forms that it could be seen as encouragement to creative viewers to extend the transmedia flow themselves. *Buffy* prosumers expanded across a variety of media, creating fan-art (such as computer desktop images and posters), fan-vids (often a collection of clips, set to a popular piece of music, although inventive creators were also able to re-edit the core text in

³⁴ Early work in this area focused on the fan fiction written about *Star Trek*, including work by Henry Jenkins and others (Jenkins, "Star Trek Rerun, Reread, Rewritten" 101–03; Green, Jenkins, and Jenkins)

order to change the narrative), filk (original music based on the storylines of the core text) and fan comics. Other extensions are on offer when audience members are able to meet, either at official conventions or at fan-coordinated meetings: cosplay (dressing up as your choice of character), LARPing (Live Action Role Playing) or pen-and-paper based Role Playing Games. All of these provide further engagement for audiences emotionally invested in the storyverse. *Buffy* may not have been the first television series around which most of these occurred (*Star Trek* being an important early example), however, it did arise at a time when some of these pastimes were becoming more mainstream, moving out of the niche audience and into spaces of broader appeal. In addition, the narrative complexity with which *Buffy* is imbued made it an ideal candidate for in-depth explorations of the detail of its storyverse.

Conclusion

Buffy the Vampire Slayer arrived on the television scene at a crucial time in the emergence of TVIII. While no one aspect of the program was unique or vastly different from examples that had come before, *Buffy* functioned as a key moment where a variety of new concepts came together in order to create a new model of television production, distribution, and reception which provided a template for many series to come. The textual production of the series saw fundamental shifts which have since become commonplace in the modern television industry. Joss Whedon was not the first of the new breed of television showrunners, but he has become emblematic of the type of showrunner who creates a series and guides it throughout its run, providing both narrative and aesthetic direction, as well as a point of identification for the fan community. The textual structures and narrative arcs of the series, almost unique at the time, can now be commonly found in many network and cable series. *Buffy* cannot be considered an unqualified success, although its longevity in popular culture has been greater than the series might have anticipated, and as technology continued to develop, along with shifting patterns of audience usage, such a template required modification. However, it has become clear that many

of the steps taken by the producers and viewers of *Buffy* gave future television producers a platform on which to build, highlighting key areas where change was ready to be accepted, both by networks and the audience. In the following chapter, my analysis of *Lost* will identify a show that picked up where *Buffy* left off, extending some of the narrative capabilities of television even further, creating new paratextual and extratextual avenues, finding novel ways to engage with the ubiquitous virtual communities, and starting to explore new marketing opportunities well beyond anything considered by Whedon.

***Lost*: Reception and Response**

Introduction and Origins

Only a few months after the final episode of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* aired in 2003, a new narratively complex, science-fiction-inflected television series went to air. While there might not seem to be many narrative connections between a teen comedy drama about vampires and an adult-aimed drama focused on the aftermath of an air crash, *Lost* can be seen as picking up *Buffy*'s televisual mantle, not only for audiences but also for critics. *Lost* has enjoyed a privileged position within academia in much the same way that *Buffy* did, receiving a disproportionate level of attention and discussion. From early in its broadcast run, television and popular culture scholars noted evidence in the series of a variety of interesting developments, including elements of production, narrative, economics, industrial practice and, most interestingly for this chapter, audience and fan practice. Roberta Pearson, in the introduction to the book *Reading Lost*, which was published only three seasons into its broadcast run, suggests that scholars already saw the series as the epitome of TVIII, the new televisual era that at the time was still in the process of being defined (Pearson, *Reading Lost* 1). But while the producers of *Lost* utilised numerous textual and economic developments, almost all of them can be read in terms of the novel forms of audience engagement which *Lost* encouraged, and which fans of *Lost* pioneered. The ability for fans to engage with each other and with creatives was being explored; audiences were utilising newly available and increasingly commonplace technologies to receive and engage with this text, and also to craft, transmit, and share their own responses. Building on the narrative and structural changes that *Buffy* popularised, *Lost* became an example of a televisual text which TVIII audiences worked together to understand; it provided them with multiple levels on which they could choose to engage, and opened up channels of communication between producers and audiences. However, these processes can be read from both directions: as audiences exploring and discovering new modes, and producers seeking out ways to encourage and commodify these

burgeoning novel relationships. This chapter draws on some of the emerging theories of fan studies in order to understand the relationships which existed between audiences of *Lost*, but also addresses the steps taken by producers that encouraged these new modes of engagement. Shifts in modes of audience engagement are crucial to an understanding of TVIII, and *Lost* producers and audiences both used technologies in predictable and in unforeseen ways, in order to explore the new possibilities of ‘forensic fandom’ for those engaging with narratively complex storytelling.

Lost: After Buffy

Lost aired on the US broadcast network ABC from 2004 to 2010, a total of six seasons comprising 121 episodes. Initially dreamed up as a cross between *Lord of the Flies* and *Survivor* by an ABC executive, an initial pilot script was written and discarded before J.J. Abrams was approached to create the pilot that eventually went to air. Abrams is often named as the ‘author’ of *Lost*; however, his engagement was collaborative and short-lived. Along with fellow executive producer Damon Lindelof, Abrams created the characters as well as the initial series bible,³⁵ and when Abrams left for a new project halfway through the first season, Lindelof and Carlton Cuse took on the roles of executive producers and showrunners. Lindelof and Cuse became the focal point amongst the production staff for fans, and can probably best be seen as the ‘authors’ of the series.³⁶

In many ways, *Lost* is a logical extension of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. In a period of rapid change in the televisual landscape, *Lost* adopted and extended many of the shifts that I have identified as occurring in *Buffy*, while simultaneously stretching the boundaries of what could be achieved on

³⁵ A series bible is a large document put together by the writers or showrunners which lays out all the details about character, setting and narrative which have been or will be established.

³⁶ Alan Sepinwall has provided a detailed narrative of the origins of *Lost* in his book *The Revolution Was Televised* (ch. 6).

a network television series. Similar to *Buffy* writers, *Lost* writers opted for narrative complexity, creating deep and rich storylines that ran the full length of the series; but in this case, some storylines were never fully resolved. Where *Buffy* mostly restricted itself to season-long arcs, *Lost* established a central premise which would not be fully resolved until the final episode of the entire series. This central premise allowed for a deeper level of narrative purpose, with each episode having an individual narrative arc, but still pushing towards a single final denouement.

At its heart, *Lost* has a multi-layered central enigma: where/what/when is the island, and will the central characters escape? The pilot ("Pilot" – Season 1, Episode 1) commences in a fairly standard survival mode: a commercial airliner crashes on what appears to be a deserted tropical island. The plot of the pilot episode plays out in ways which could be expected for a standard drama; injured people are assisted, while heroes in the form of Jack Shephard (Matthew Fox) come to the fore. The central question of the series is openly expressed at the end of the pilot episode by the character of Charlie Pace (Dominic Monaghan), who, having encountered a polar bear, rapid shifts in weather, an unknown monster, and a sixteen-year-old recording in French repeating on a loop, asks rhetorically, "Where *are* we?". This question then plays out across the six seasons of the series' run, albeit with significant plot shifts and narrative techniques, including flashbacks, which give viewers a greater understanding of the characters; flash-forwards (beginning at the end of Season 3, and running into Season 5), which serve as a plot device to indicate that some of the survivors find a way back to the mainland; and 'flash-sideways', which serve to show an alternate reality in the sixth and final season, although in the final episode the true nature of the 'flash-sideways' is revealed to viewers. The central enigma of the series (will any of the survivors escape the island?) is resolved in the final episode, although many fans expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of resolution of many of the other mysteries within the series. While there are smaller story arcs which exist within the series, and episodes which include self-contained storylines, as has been true of many series, *Lost* is focused on moving

towards this ultimate resolution of the central enigma, a concept previously unseen in a series of this length.

One of the unique aspects of *Lost*'s narrative structure is the singular nature of this enigma to be solved throughout the entire series. Jason Mittell has drawn on the narratological concept of "unity of purpose", which usually describes a singular narrative goal in an episode, and has taken the idea a step further to suggest that every episode within the series is dedicated to bringing the characters and the viewers closer to the final resolution ("Lost In A Great Story" 125–28). He observes that the process of watching leads viewers to think about the totality of the series; every episode requires viewers to assimilate any new information that has been received, and use that information to reconfigure their understanding of the series and the enigma at its core. Thus, as the viewer learns more about the DHARMA Initiative or the Hanso Foundation in *Lost*, it gives them an idea of what the island might be, or might have been in the past; it begins to explain the buildings found on the island, and adds to the overall understanding that viewers will have of the series as a whole. This unity of purpose relates not only to the narrative drive of the show, but also to the character development. Roberta Pearson has argued that every aspect of the characters and character development in *Lost* is also directly related to the central enigmas of the show ("Chain of Events" 147). She highlights the fact that in media interviews, the producers chose to foreground discussions of the character development in the show over the mysteries or the mythology. This occurred especially in later seasons, as it became apparent that many fans had a deep and detailed interest in the nature of the enigma. However, Pearson also points to the producers' awareness of the dissatisfaction expressed by many fans over the failure of previous television shows with long-running mythologies to satisfactorily resolve them. Thus, built into all character exposition and development is an awareness that everything that we as viewers learn about them helps us to understand the central mythology a little bit better. Character development and narrative exposition become closely intertwined.

Given the uniqueness of this integration of character and long-form narrative, I would argue that this series requires its own generic category, or at least sub-category: what I would call the 'enigma serial'. In the terms set out by Trisha Dunleavy (152–58), this sub-category sits somewhere between complex serials and series-serials, with a basic programming format that is modelled on a traditional American serial, which is to say, season runs of between 12 and 24 episodes with the aim of continuing for multiple seasons. However, the 'enigma serial' relies on an underlying story arc, a central enigma, on which all narrative development is based. This sub-categorisation helps to clarify how *Lost* advanced its narrative form differently than its predecessors. As previously mentioned, *Buffy* has been acclaimed for the way it mixed the traditional serial mode of televisual storytelling with ongoing story arcs, which usually ran for the length of a season. *The X Files* has also been identified as having an ongoing story arc which lasted the length of the series. But this story arc was frequently interspersed with individual, stand-alone episodes which did nothing to add to the ongoing mythology. The unity of purpose presented in *Lost* is probably most similar to early British series such as *The Prisoner* (1967-68), which certainly provided a central enigma, but most of these had very short runs. With only 17 episodes in total, *The Prisoner* did not have the opportunity to explore the possibilities of this narrative form.

If *Lost* were the sole example of this new form, then trying to define a category specifically for it may seem futile. However, the notion of the enigma serial can also be seen in some of the programming subsequent to *Lost*. Series such as *FlashForward* (2009-10), *Traveler* (2007), *The Nine* (2006-07) and *The Event* (2010-11) have all presented an over-arching enigma as the premise for the series as a whole. Unfortunately, these have all either been cancelled, or are too early in their run to discern whether they will succeed in maintaining a long-form story arc to the eventual conclusion of the series. All can be seen as attempts to fill the enigma serial mould

established by *Lost*, though many have fallen victim to the vagaries of broadcast television economics before their promise could be fulfilled. Several of these series have been seen as attempting to imitate the success of *Lost*, with others being criticised for overly complicated storylines, or raising too many questions without offering enough answers to satisfy viewers. Finding a narrative balance that is satisfactory to viewers without being overly complex seems to be crucial to the success of the enigma serial.

A complex narrative such as *Lost* opens up a great deal of story-telling possibilities, as well as a number of economic and transmedia options, but it also can create significant confusion among its viewing audience.³⁷ The difficulty of keeping track of numerous characters, storylines, mysteries and mythologies means that even engaged viewers might feel confused, or concerned that they have missed a salient plot point. The relevant details within each episode are often individually so minute that it is very easy for any given viewer not to make a connection to a previous episode, or even a previous moment within the same episode. However, the internet allows for the observational and decoding powers of audience members to be combined into collective intelligence, in order to identify salient plot points, separate important from meaningless information, and posit possible connections between points before the details are made clear within the text. This joint decoding may have been feasible in the pre-internet era, through ‘watercooler’ discussions or within a social group with a common textual interest, but the internet allows for a much more detailed analysis, as well as an exponentially larger pool of intelligence to be applied to the mysteries generated by the enigma serial (Levy, cited in Jenkins, *Convergence Culture* 27).

³⁷ As previously defined, ‘transmedia storytelling’ refers to a narrative that stretches across multiple forms of media, with each form telling a unique element of the story.

What becomes important to many fans is the fact that any detail provided by creatives in each episode of the show may or may not be important to resolving the mythology. In a standard mystery, such as a police procedural, several crucial clues are provided which are signalled as such, and a certain enjoyment can be felt by the audience if they successfully interpret the clues and pick the correct villain. Narratively complex television in TVIII has taken this a step further, with it frequently not being apparent whether something is a clue or simply an ephemeral detail. In *Twin Peaks* (1990-91), which might be seen as a precursor to the enigma serial, David Lynch created highly complex episodes with numerous potential clues that were open for interpretation. His experience as an arthouse film director meant that the composition of every shot was dissected and examined by fans, desperate to discover which details would serve as clues that might clarify the mystery. Henry Jenkins quotes one fan posting on the Usenet group as saying, "Can you imagine *Twin Peaks* coming out before VCRs or without the net?" ("Do You Enjoy Making the Rest of Us Feel Stupid?" 120). The ability to forensically analyse each episode, almost on a frame by frame basis in the search for illumination, was not possible prior to the VCR. The work required for such a detailed analysis also far exceeded the capabilities of any individual fan. Without networked computing, allowing for the pooling of collective intelligence, such analysis would have been almost impossible. In a quote remarkably similar to that of Jenkins' Usenet contributor, Carlton Cuse, showrunner and executive producer of *Lost*, is reported as saying, "I think that *Lost* would never succeed in the pre-Internet era. It's the fact that the show is complicated and intentionally ambiguous; it allows fans to become involved in its analysis" (cited in Gillan 155). The awareness shown by Cuse of the kind of work being done by fans, as well as the importance of the technology of the time, highlights the intentionality of the encoding within narrative complexity being done by the producers and writers.

An additional level of narrative complexity which *Lost* draws from *Buffy*, and then extends, is in the breadth of the ensemble cast. Robert J Thompson has identified ensemble casts as an

indication of the move towards Quality Television, beginning in the early 1980s, which would imply that large ensemble casts are not a new phenomenon (14). However, the scale of the ensemble in *Lost* dwarfs that of any of the shows which preceded it. Where large-scale ensemble casts might have been seen in earlier series such as *The West Wing* (1999-2006), which at several times had eight to ten main characters, *Lost* frequently had up to twenty characters regularly appearing, which required viewers to maintain a knowledge of their back-stories and previous interactions with other characters. The initial scenes of the show introduce fifteen characters, as well as a number of minor characters and extras, and it is only in rewatching the series that a viewer can be certain who is important, and who is not. The character of Jack Shephard is established early on as being significant, since he is the first character whose name the audience learns, the crash is seen in flashback from his perspective, and he is the focus of the camera for the first 10 minutes of the series. Moreover, extratextually, Matthew Fox is a recognisable actor, having previously enjoyed long-running television success in the series *Party of Five* (1994-2000). Given the economics of television, this means he is most likely to take a lead role and to stand out to audience members as the protagonist; the audience is able to understand the series as being focussed around his character's experiences. However, this idea is soon confused, as we see further flashbacks from the perspectives of Kate Austen (Evangeline Lilly) and Charlie (Dominic Monaghan). By the time several of the survivors set off on an expedition across the island to try to radio for help and Jack is not among them, it has become apparent to the viewer that he is simply one character among many.

The relationship dynamics between several of the core characters are established in the first 20 minutes of the series, but there are far too many characters for most viewers to keep track of on an initial viewing. Appearing on screen with speaking lines in the pilot episode are the aforementioned Jack, Kate, and Charlie, as well as John "Sawyer" Ford (Josh Holloway), Claire Littleton (Emilie de Ravin), Sayid Jarrah (Naveen Andrews), John Locke (Terry O'Quinn), Boone

Carlyle (Ian Somerhalder), Shannon Rutherford (Maggie Grace), Hugo “Hurley” Reyes (Jorge Garcia), Jin-Soo Kwon (Daniel Dae Kim), Sun-Hwa Kwon (Yunjin Kim), Walt Lloyd (Malcolm David Kelley), Michael Dawson (Harold Perrineau) and Rose Henderson (L. Scott Caldwell), as well as Vincent the dog, in an important but non-speaking role. There are also several incidental characters that appear only for an episode or two, such as the pilot, Captain Seth Norris (Greg Grunberg) and the US Marshal, Edward Mars (Frederic Lehne). It is utterly unclear to a first-time viewer which of the characters introduced in the pilot will be important over the coming seasons, and hence in which characters they should invest their interest.

As was identified in my analysis of the textual production of *Buffy*, the detailed level of narrative complexity was only possible through having a showrunner who was in control of the series, able to guide the overarching story arcs, and maintain continuity of narrative and aesthetic. Similar to the position held by Joss Whedon with *Buffy*, Lindelof and Cuse adopted the position of showrunners, crafting the long-running story arcs, being the visible face to audiences of the series, and thus serving as the target of both fan accolades and attacks. In a period when paratextual releases became more common and were shared more widely, Cuse and Lindelof became the faces that were seen, the voices that were heard, and the minds that were understood to contain the secrets of the series that the fans were attempting to decode. Just as Whedon was seen as responsible for the outcomes of the characters on *Buffy*, Cuse and Lindelof were seen as the puppet masters of *Lost*, hopefully understanding the secrets of the series, and masterminding the web of relationships between the characters. They were seen by fans as having ultimate responsibility for the narrative drive of the series, to be celebrated or vilified on the basis of each plot development.

Lost thus took its lead from the shifts in serial narrativization begun with *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, but also found ways to heighten these experiences, and push them further. The

awareness of the new modes of engagement that were available to and utilised by audiences meant that producers and showrunners were able to create a greater depth of narrative complexity than had been found in television up to this point. The series offered a deep and rich cast of characters, providing multiple points of engagement with different characters for a wide and diverse audience, but also multiple different depths of engagement for all but the most casual viewers, dependent on the level of intellectual and temporal commitment they wished to make to the series. The producers of *Lost* were clearly aware of the different ways in which audiences were able to engage with the series; it is by addressing their varying audience groups on their different levels, and by creating a series which allowed varied levels of engagement, that *Lost* was able to be such a success.

The Differing Modes of Audience Engagement

In the discourse of television studies, it is common to refer to either television audiences or television fans as if they are singular, discrete groups. However, it is important to consider that any given viewer may be participating with a television product in a variety of ways, moving between different ‘audiences’ and gaining a unique experience because of the variety of options available. Engagement with a given television text can be thought about in terms of degrees of participation in any subset of a series of reception and response practices. These might be usefully subdivided into consumption practices, engagement practices, and creation practices.³⁸ Each of these categories involves multiple types of reception and response, which I will detail below, but it is important that none of these forms be valorised above another – they are simply different means of receiving and responding to television texts. However, there is a form of tiering which occurs between these practices, as engagement practices must be predicated on some form of consumption practice, and it is highly likely that creation practices will be

³⁸ This breakdown of audience practices is informed by Christy Dena’s tiering of ARG players, the framework of which cannot be directly applied to television audiences, but which will be discussed later in the chapter (Dena).

predicated on some level of engagement practice. Because of the nature of these relationships, there also tends to be a tiering of audience size, with the largest audience participating in the most basic consumption levels, and the size of the audience reducing as greater investments of time, attention, and production are required.

Turning our attention first towards consumption practices, we see there are multiple levels on which audiences can choose to consume the available content. Primarily, we can think about television viewing as the most basic and simultaneously the most vital form of engagement.³⁹ However, even watching the text may involve different levels of engagement. A viewer might watch a programme when they remember that it is on, or simply by virtue of the television being on at the right time. Alternatively, it might be 'appointment viewing', where the viewer intentionally chooses to watch the episode at the time of broadcast. Technological developments mean that viewers might choose to record episodes for the purpose of time-shifting to watch later, and this recording may also work to create a personal archive of the text. Consumption might entail single-use viewings, or might involve rewatching or block viewing. However, there are further modes of engagement which are extensions of these practices that add a depth of engagement. As discussed in the 'Technology' chapter, the burgeoning home video market has allowed viewers to purchase episodes, seasons, or entire series of their chosen text, either to watch for the first time outside the restrictions of broadcast, to re-watch episodes multiple times, or to watch in a 'marathon' fashion. These sets, especially when tangible as opposed to digital, also provide a form of cultural capital to fans, with some of the specialised boxsets becoming an overt demonstration of fan engagement. In addition to this, other paratextual merchandise provide additional means of consuming television products. These might be narrative extensions, such as transmedia texts in the form of webisodes, novelisations, or comic book extensions, or

³⁹ While it is feasible for people to engage in other aspects without having watched the series, this is a relatively uncommon practice.

any variety of tangible merchandise, such as posters, action figures, replica props, or branded clothing.

What is critical about the consumption practices that constitute the basis of audience engagement is that they are mono-directional. They revolve around reception, the consumption of texts and paratexts, but there is no outward communication. They can be seen as mainly top-down, producer-driven and, at the most basic level, controlled by broadcast schedules and network decisions. This is not to take agency away from those involved in these practices, but to suggest that such practices are perhaps the most controlled and the most connected to the consumer capitalist nature of television spectatorship. In contrast, the second mode of practice, that of engagement, is significantly more 'grassroots', although it may also be encouraged and promoted by producers and networks. Practices of engagement are generally communicative in nature, dialogic, conversational, and can often lead to the formation of communities, or at least the acknowledgement of Benedict Anderson's notion of imagined communities.

Communal viewing is an example of a basic collective engagement practice. The practice of family groups or groups of friends coming together to watch a television show as a communal activity is not novel, and dates back to the early days of television, when spectatorship was seen as an activity which brought the family together. The rise of new technologies has allowed for extensions of this collective viewing, with social networks providing a platform for viewing communities to come together virtually, and some new applications such as GetGlue actually connecting viewers who are watching outside of original broadcast schedules. In addition to these forms of communication at time of viewing, there are also various means by which audiences can discuss the content outside of these specific times. Message boards and social

media groups allow for discussion, analysis, speculation, and 'drilling down'⁴⁰ into the depth of content which has been provided.

These practices all have the effect of making engaged spectatorship or fandom visible to some extent; either to people in the immediate vicinity or, in the case of communities on the internet, to a wider group of viewers, strengthening the imagined community. Visibility has a dual purpose: being visible to producers provides fans with a level of legitimacy, meaning that they may be considered in discussions regarding the future of the object of their particular fandom; and being visible to other fans means that their contributions to the community may be seen, appreciated, shared, and acknowledged, as these inter-fan engagement practices also include and allow for the sharing of paratextual material. With the rise of Web 2.0, the internet has directly facilitated the sharing of material. Social sites such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Tumblr are built around the ability to share content with your network, and there is a level of cultural capital which can be accumulated within the community by sharing interesting and exciting paratextual material.

These communication media do not simply allow audience members to communicate with each other, but also open up avenues for communication with producers, networks and creatives. Whereas previously the only avenue for communication was by means of fan letters, which had a low response rate giving letter-writers the feeling that there was little chance of being read, social media has created a level of open communication with some television creatives. There are still a relatively low number of creatives who take advantage of the opportunities presented, but more frequently those who are involved in the production of cult texts are present in spaces such as Twitter, usually to broadcast news about the show, but often also to communicate with colleagues and with fans. To an extent, the lives of these creatives are made ordinary by their

⁴⁰ A term from Jason Mittell which will be subsequently discussed ("To Spread or to Drill?").

performance on Twitter, as they simultaneously demonstrate their position inside the television industry and pull the curtain back to display the banality of their lives, which fans can liken to their own experience. This view into both their work and their lives means that the audience can feel a direct connection to the 'celebrity' producer and also gain insight into some of the production processes, thereby increasing the affective connection between the fan and the object of fandom.

The final level of engagement belongs to those who take up creative practices related to their viewing. In these practices, we see a focus on production, drawing on elements of the source text in order to create something which is novel but which speaks to the demonstration of fandom. These modes of creation can take numerous forms, from the detailed engagement with spaces such as fan-led wikis, to fan art and image manipulation in the creation of GIFs and memes, to the creation of fan fiction and fanvids. These practices illustrate the desire of audience members to utilise their own creativity and skills, while expressing their investment in a source text and providing an opportunity for the development of cultural capital through a demonstration of skill or talent. The fan communities in which the outputs of these creative practices are shared also serve as a permissive space, highlighting to fans the creativity that is possible and frequently providing both technical and creative support.

In some ways, the depth of a viewer's fandom might be 'measured' by the number of these practices in which they engage, although not all of these practices have the same level of fan value. However, I am not seeking to quantify the depth of engagement of audience members; instead, my aim has been to highlight the variety of ways in which viewers can engage with the object of their fandom, in order to look at the ways that *Lost* provided entry-points on numerous levels for viewers, engaged audiences, and fans, allowing them to easily interact with the text on whichever level(s) they chose.

Fans and Fan Communities

Fan studies has a short but burgeoning academic history. As Henry Jenkins has noted, throughout the 1980s and 1990s most fan studies were rooted in the work of Michel de Certeau (Jenkins, "Interactive Audiences?" 134), who distinguished "between the strategies of the powerful and the tactics of the disempowered" (Gray, Sandvoss, and Harrington 1) in order to establish the power differential between mainstream producers and fans. However, such an analysis places limitations on our understanding of a community, automatically categorising fans as disenfranchised and relegating them to the position of the 'other' in an area in which the literature is already "haunted by images of deviance" (Jensen 9).⁴¹ In his later work, Jenkins acknowledges de Certeau's influence on the field, but moves away from characterising fans as a diminished and aberrant class. He looks to a different theoretical basis, Pierre Levy's concept of collective intelligence, in order to understand the changing nature of fandom in the digital era. Jenkins describes online fan communities as being a clear example of Levy's cosmopedia, or space within which "citizens more fully recognize the potentials of the new media environment" (Jenkins, "Interactive Audiences?" 136) to provide platforms for information-sharing. Online communities give fans a space "focused around the collective production, debate and circulation of meanings, interpretations, and fantasies in response to various artefacts of contemporary popular culture" (Jenkins, "Interactive Audiences?" 137). The lack of restriction on location allows for the development of a global community, and although fan communities existed prior to the internet, ease of access improved dramatically as costs of entry to the online world decreased. Instead of needing to seek out minority groups through conduits such as fanzines, which may have been very difficult to find in smaller communities, fans in the digital environment are able to reach each other across the world, meaning that the tipping point for the creation of a fan community is significantly lower.

⁴¹ By this, Joli Jensen is referring to the fact that much discussion of fandoms prior to the 1990s had been focussed on their abnormality, how fans presented behaviour that deviated from accepted norms.

The increased availability of and access to computer-mediated communication has dramatically increased the rate of communication between fans. Matt Hills has identified this increased speed of communication as being important to this changed fan community, describing it as “just in time fandom” (Hills, *Fan Cultures* 178). No longer restricted by delays in production and distribution of content, fans are able to communicate immediately after the airing of an episode, constructing their own meanings, deciphering mysteries, and sharing ideas. This has advanced even further in the years following Hills’ 2002 work, as the ready availability of broadband and internet-capable devices, along with the rise in social networking, has meant that fans are frequently communicating during the airing of the episode itself, not just in the ad-breaks but actually during the broadcast as part of their communicative engagement with the series. This adds a level of social interaction to the process of watching television, but also restricts these discussions to a limited geographical range, encompassing those who are in an equivalent broadcast time zone.

The increased speed of reception and lowered costs of production in the digital environment also allow for significantly increased quantities of fan-produced texts. Not only have traditional forms such as fan fiction flourished, but other forms have become much easier to generate and share, such as filk (songs composed in homage to a text) and fan vids, frequently mash-ups or music videos, which became much more common after the launch and success of YouTube in 2005. At times, some forms of fan production shift the genre dramatically, or create material that would be unsuitable for the original demographic. These sorts of shifts can be seen in fan vids which re-edit a television drama to match the tropes of a sitcom⁴² or in the creation of erotic fan fiction.

⁴² Significant academic discussion has occurred in several different fields regarding the ethical, legal and economic ramifications of this sort of fan creation. However, apart from the instances where corporations in charge of the intellectual property have issued take-down notices, most of these discussions have been removed from the fans themselves, and these issues tend not to be negotiated by them.

Frequently these interpretations can be seen as negotiating or even rejecting the authorial intent of the original text, while others draw very knowingly on the key facets of the text or its tropes to further the viewer's understanding of the underlying meaning of the original.

The ways in which fans communicate and engage can be studied through observing the communities they form. Fan communities not only allow fans to communicate with each other, sharing ideas and meanings, they also allow content producers to observe and engage with their fans. Joss Whedon, along with other creatives on *Buffy The Vampire Slayer*, frequently communicated with *Buffy* fans through online forums. Although the anonymity of online discussion groups has been criticised, the official fan forum for *Buffy*, The Bronze, featured confirmed identification of creatives from the show. By providing verification of the appearance of creatives, the official forum assured fans that they were actually engaging with the real creative, and not someone simply using the creative's name in a pseudonymous space. The level of engagement on the part of the series' creatives was usually relatively superficial, since they answered the odd fan question, or occasionally engaged in pre-announced Q&A sessions. These types of engagement can be seen as being economically motivated, keeping engaged fans happy through a small amount of contact with the creatives behind the series. J Michael Straczynski, the creator of *Babylon 5* (1993-98), took things a step further, engaging heavily with science fiction fans well before the series was given the green light, and using the interest he built amongst fans both as a reason for the series to be commissioned and as a pre-established fan base throughout the run of the series. This engagement was not consistently designed to keep fans happy; Ivan Askwith categorises much of Straczynski's interaction as "hostile and controversial", especially when defending his series against its critics (Askwith 91). But the sheer volume of his engagement, over 17,000 messages on the *Babylon 5* Usenet groups by one estimation, speaks to his interest in communicating with his fans, hearing their responses to his text, and actively discussing it with them (Lancaster 20).

***Lost's* Forensic Fandom**

Lost as a series attracted a very committed and active fanbase. Fan communities were not just cultivated and courted by the producers of the show, but the content of the show was also intentionally structured to appeal to engaged fans. This included creating the sort of mysteries that allowed for in-depth discussion amongst fans, which itself had a history in Cult television. Introducing his discussion of online fan engagement with *Twin Peaks*, Jenkins quotes a contributor to alt.tv.twinpeaks as writing, "Break the code, solve the crime", an indication that fans of *Twin Peaks* were working together to try to "solve" the puzzle presented before the author's solution was broadcast (Jenkins, "Do You Enjoy Making the Rest of Us Feel Stupid?" 116). While the internet was still novel and restricted to a limited number of fans, we can already see the precursors of the type of problem-solving fan community which arose so successfully around *Lost*.⁴³ One of the reasons that the active fan communities of *Twin Peaks* and *Lost* were so similar is that both of the source texts have a similar narrative base: they are narratively complex, and centred around solving a single enigma, for which clues are offered piecemeal throughout the series. Fans come together, sharing intelligence and working collectively, in order to try to decipher the solution before the producers reveal it within the text.

Twin Peaks may have been idiosyncratic in its time but since *Lost* it has become clear that a new framework is needed to help us understand the changing model of fan engagement with a television text. Jason Mittell has chosen the term 'forensic fandom' in order to describe this type of detailed fan engagement (Mittell, "Lost In A Great Story" 128). Forensic science has come to the fore of popular culture consciousness in the early twenty-first century, in part due to increased and focused news coverage of crime, but mainly through the dramatic success of forensic procedural television shows, such as *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* (2000-present) and

⁴³ In a new foreword to the paper, Jenkins points out that when he first delivered the paper, the notion of newsgroups, Usenet and virtual communities was largely unheard of in the academic community.

its spin-offs. Many television viewers have been exposed to the process of forensics and detection, as well as the detailed levels of scientific rigour applied to the resolution of each mystery. Thus, the process of identifying 'evidence', establishing its veracity and connection to existing pieces of evidence, and creating or revising hypotheses on the basis of each new piece of information has become naturalised amongst a significant portion of the television audience, as has an habituation to reading texts that model this process. Viewers thus become used to seeing how crimes might be solved by using these processes and, in the tradition of classic 'whodunnits', they mimic these procedures themselves in order to try to solve the mystery. These skills are then being extrapolated from *CSI*-style shows, and applied to other mystery/enigma/narratively-complex series.

We can understand forensic fandom as naming the way that fans engage with minute details of a series to a degree over and above what would normally be expected from a television viewer, or even from the majority of fans. Where the act of watching television has traditionally been defined by the 'glance' (Ellis, *Visible Fictions : Cinema, Television, Video*), certain types of television, such as *Lost*, encourage the viewer to watch much more closely, to not only 'gaze' at the television, but to re-watch with the purpose of actively decoding while watching. *Lost* constantly generates mysteries, some of which will be resolved within the episode, others of which will last for several episodes, and a few of which will withstand resolution until the end of the series. The viewer is invited to actively participate in working to solve these mysteries, to hunt out clues or suggestions within the text (or even at times outside the core text) which may provide an indication of what the mystery might mean to the ongoing storyline. This decoding can work in several ways, such as making connections amongst comments made by disparate characters; understanding allegorical, literary, or historical references hidden in the text by the authors; noticing elements hidden within the televisual imagery; or identifying elements in extra-textual material which relate to the core text. Fans are invited to mimic the crime scene

investigators (CSIs) whom they are familiar with from police and forensic procedurals. A common trope, such as the CSI reviewing surveillance video and urging a technician to “Pause! Wind it back! There! Zoom in on that!” in order to identify the villain becomes aped by viewers, who are able to pause the televisual text should something catch their eye, zoom in on a particular quadrant if they are watching on a computer screen, and possibly even sharpen the image in order to discover a clue which would slip past those who are only ‘glancing’ at the series. In *Lost*, this was clearly exemplified in the second episode of the second season (“Adrift”) in which some survivors, attempting to escape the island on a raft, are attacked by a shark. The scene is fast-paced, edited to very short shots and set at night, making it difficult to identify details. However, an observant fan noticed that by freezing the sequence at exactly the right point and enhancing the image, a DHARMA Initiative logo can be seen branded on the shark’s tail. While this had no immediate meaning to any of the viewers, it did indicate that the DHARMA Initiative may have had something to do with the attack, and led viewers to further question the Initiative’s motives.

Mittell defines forensic fandom in terms of its relationship to the fans of *Lost*. He suggests that the narrative structure directs viewers to “parse the show more than simply consume it” and actively “discourages casual consumption” (Mittell, “Lost In A Great Story” 128). This is not a series where viewers can dip in and out, skipping episodes or viewing them out of order, without risking serious confusion. He suggests that in order to be a fan of *Lost*, one needs to follow each episode closely, recognising references and connections to past episodes, adding to one’s existing store of knowledge and hypotheses. He makes a connection to Steven Johnson’s claim that much modern television requires a significantly higher level of engagement and “cognitive work” than its predecessors (S. Johnson, *Everything Bad Is Good for You* 62).⁴⁴ Mittell further suggests that these complex narratives operate counter to a concurrent movement of spreadable media,

⁴⁴ While this analysis of *Lost* fandom does marginalise the sector of fans who chose to watch *Lost* by prioritising and speculating on the relationships between characters over the mythology or the enigma, the degrees of engagement in both of these fan sectors are not dissimilar.

typified by short video clips which immediately catch and dispose of one's attention, encouraging the viewer to share it with their social network. Instead, he suggests that complex narratives are "drillable", urging and compelling fans to push deeper, to get down below the surface in order to make connections and resolve mysteries (Mittell, "To Spread or to Drill?").

This drillability is not unique to Quality narratively-complex dramas. Mittell makes a case for sports fans engaging in drilling down, as they keep records of statistics and construct fantasy teams. This analogy can also be related to television in terms of soap opera fandom, where there have always existed "fan archivists and textual experts" ("To Spread or to Drill?"). In studying soap opera fandom, Nancy Baym has observed that soap opera fans must share textual knowledge with each other, because there is more material available than any one fan could manage (Baym 115). To cope with this, knowledge is pooled, much as it is by *Lost* fans. For soap opera, this requirement is a consequence of the long-running histories of many soaps, as well as of the significant quantities of textual material broadcast on a weekly basis. However, to combat this, soap opera texts have built in significant narrative redundancy, and do not usually engage in complex narratives. While *Lost* is a finite text, limited to fewer broadcast hours than most soaps produce within a year, the textual density is significantly greater, with more knowledge available to be pulled from every image, let alone every storyline. In both cases, fans have a significant amount of information to understand and manage, and, in order to maintain a full understanding, communal effort is required. The internet facilitates finding these knowledge-sharing communities, as well as the provision of spaces in which they can communicate, making something which was previously possible, but underground, easier and more visible.

While a form of forensic fandom existed around *Twin Peaks* in the early 1990s, the limited availability of the internet, along with the comparatively short run of the series, meant that such fan-produced analysis was restricted to a relatively small number of fans over a period of just

over a year. *Lost*, on the other hand, appeared at a time when broadband internet was readily available, and social networking and computer-mediated communications were becoming commonly accepted and practiced. Fans were able to engage with the text on their own terms, at a variety of levels, from the most fleeting to the most forensic. Where fleeting had previously been the dominant mode of viewer engagement, suddenly viewers could discuss series in much greater depth, and could find likeminded people with whom to discuss them. Mittell identifies a vital feature of forensic fandom as the ability for people to work together to decipher mysteries (“Lost In A Great Story” 129). In fact, it has almost become necessary to utilise the collective intelligence provided by online fan communities in order to decode and decipher the density of puzzles presented. Describing a knowledge community, Levy writes that “no one knows everything, everyone knows something, all knowledge resides in humanity” (cited in Jenkins, “Interactive Audiences?” 139), suggesting that a single member of these communities is not able to attain full understanding, but by sharing individual expertise, the community as a whole is able to create a complete picture. This seems to accurately describe the situation facing *Lost* fans, for whom it would be almost impossible to individually discover all the material buried in the text, but who, as a group, are capable of remarkable levels of analysis. Baym, discussing soap opera fans, suggests that, when working together within online communities, fans are able to accumulate “unprecedented amounts of relevant information”, allowing them to engage in epistemophilia, the pleasure of knowledge (cited in Jenkins, “Interactive Audiences?” 139). Being able to contribute information or ideas to this community also leads to the accumulation of cultural capital, an additional benefit to the engaged fan.

Lost’s Spaces of Online Fan Communication

As is the case with almost any internet phenomenon, discussions about *Lost* were not limited to any one venue or mode of communication. Such discussions occurred in numerous spaces around the net, with participants varying from only a couple to thousands. I am particularly

interested in two of these spaces, due to the level of engagement and their very different backgrounds: The Fuselage and the Lostpedia. These two spaces represent the different means by which fan communication can be enabled, with The Fuselage functioning as a producer-driven, top-down venue, and the Lostpedia being fan-created and therefore bottom-up. These two spaces became complementary in their functionality, providing different experiences to fans but both being useful to fans who wanted to increase the depth of their engagement with the series.

As with *Babylon 5* earlier, fan communities were actually ‘courted’ by the producers of *Lost* before the show aired. Sharon Ross has noted that ‘buzz’ for the show was built online before clips were even available for the show, created by fostering online conversation and discussion among J.J. Abrams’ existing fanbase, as well as among fans of Cult television who were already the imagined audience of the series (198-99). These fans were thus primed and ready to launch discussions across a variety of platforms as soon as the series began airing. However, the dispersed nature of these discussions lead to a fragmented fan base, and steps were taken in order to try to consolidate some of these discussions.

The Fuselage was an online message board commissioned by first-season producer David Fury and sponsored by JJ Abrams, giving it the “official” stamp of approval without its being directly affiliated with ABC (Lachonis and Johnston 20). Fury had previously worked on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, and was familiar with The Bronze and its success as a space for bringing fans and creatives together. The producers of *Lost* worked to actively extend this model, with a number of the writing and production staff posting under authenticated and official accounts, known as VIPs, on the message boards. Writers and even the showrunners frequently appeared on the message boards to answer fan questions, to discuss matters of narrative and production, and occasionally to tease fans with little hints as to the nature of some of the mythologies. Several of the creatives have commented that they enjoyed having the capacity to communicate with the fans of their

show, although they also noted surprise at the depth of passion exhibited by some fans (Lachonis and Johnston 21–26).

The Fuselage also served as way for the writers of the series to identify how well the audience understood the complex storylines being put forward. Executive Producer Bryan Burk has been quoted as saying that the creative team used the message boards as a guide for whether or not the subtleties had been understood, and thus whether further clarification was needed (Lachonis and Johnston 53). Having this sort of post-broadcast focus group allowed the writers to include vague or obscure connections, and then subsequently gauge whether they needed to be clarified or made more obvious in future episodes.

In contrast to The Fuselage, the Lostpedia provided a different sort of online space for fans of *Lost* to gather and communicate. The Lostpedia is a community-initiated wiki, founded after the US airing of the first episode of the second season. As with the common ethos of wikis, the Lostpedia allows all users to post information and edit pages, to record any insights they may have established regarding the mythology of the series, and thus to keep track of many of the important details. A job that would be completely impossible in scale for offline viewing groups to attempt is thus made possible by crowd-sourcing; that is, by having a large group of fans who are emotionally invested in the source material doing the work. Keeping up with the cast of characters of *Lost*, in spite of its scale, is one area which proved more manageable for fans through the availability of sites such as the Lostpedia, since otherwise it required a continuity of viewership, along with rewatching key episodes, in order to maintain the complex web of relationships in the viewer's mind. While the number of possible inter-character relationships was significantly higher than was traditional for television series, and therefore required more attention to follow, the complexity of the individual characters was also heightened. Each of the main characters was given a detailed back-story, played out in the flash-backs which featured

prominently in the first three seasons of the series. Shawn Shimpach has identified a trend in television drama toward this complexity of both character and character relationships, describing a move towards “characters whose actions are motivated by deep and complex syntheses of psychology and biography, revealed piecemeal over the course of several seasons” (49). Shimpach ties this breadth and depth of characterisation to the notion of ‘investment’ for the viewer, as well as to the variety of transmedia storytelling options which are available, allowing significantly more complex stories to be revealed for any given character. Tracking this number of characters across multiple media platforms would have been impossible for most fans to accomplish individually, but sites such as the Lostpedia provide a central repository for the storage of accumulated knowledge regarding these characters. Minute details, which may not have been retained by the viewer, can easily be checked online. Individual viewership is still possible, but it requires a slightly more superficial engagement, probably only purely with the core text; the forensic depth of material available will likely be missing to a viewer who engages with the text in an information vacuum.

Even small elements which have only a minor impact on the plot can still provide some insight into character and hence narrative development, if they can be successfully tracked throughout the series. Midway through the first season, for instance, in “Whatever The Case May Be” (Season 1, Episode 12), Kate Austen is seen in flashback to remove an envelope from a safety deposit box during a bank robbery, later discovered in a locked case on the island. Within the envelope is a toy airplane. How the airplane came to be in the safety deposit box is not revealed until the end of the second season (“The Exodus Pt 2” – Season 2, Episode 24). The significance of this plane is unclear; although Kate says it belongs to the man she loved and killed, this is not clarified. In a later episode in the first season (“Born to Run” – Season 1, Episode 22), Kate is seen again in flashback, along with her childhood sweetheart, burying the airplane in a time capsule. Finally, five seasons later (“The Incident Pt 1” – Season 5, Episode 16), Kate is seen, once again in

flashback, stealing a lunchbox which would eventually become the time capsule, and meeting Jacob, one of the key figures from the Island, for the first time. Tom, her childhood sweetheart, can be seen playing with the toy airplane. This has emotional meaning to the viewer, as in “Born to Run” he is shown to be killed while helping Kate escape from the police, providing significant emotional impetus for Kate throughout the series. This is a significant amount of what would appear to be trivial information regarding this character, involving one other minor character, but it all contributes to the overarching understanding of the character and her motivations, and thus the ability to jog one’s memory is invaluable. The Lostpedia includes a page which has an entire chronology of the appearances of the toy airplane, edited and expanded every time more information came to light.⁴⁵

Interestingly, the Lostpedia diverges from the ethos of wikis, and specifically fan-wikis, in a number of key ways. Firstly, the Lostpedia does not require all information posted to be fact; instead, theories regarding the show’s mythology were strongly encouraged (although quite strictly delineated). This meant that alongside the details of what had happened in any given episode, theories could be expounded, elaborated on or dismissed by other fans, which in turn allowed for much stronger theorising to occur. It is interesting to note that the “theories” pages of the Lostpedia are still actively edited, years after the final episode of the series screened. Although it is unlikely that there will be any further canonical text to confirm or reject the theories being debated, this is still an area ripe for discussion among fans.

Secondly, the Lostpedia differed from other fan-wikis by being interested in more than the source-text of fandom. Alongside the descriptions and discussion of the canonical text, the Lostpedia also includes description and discussion of fan-made texts, or fanon. Those who

⁴⁵ The chronology of the history of the toy airplane appears at http://lostpedia.wikia.com/wiki/Kate's_toy_airplane.

contribute to Lostpedia are very careful to distinguish between what is considered canon, semi-canon and non-canon,⁴⁶ but this does not preclude all of these things from being included in the wiki. Jason Mittell has written a detailed discussion of the Lostpedia from the privileged position of an aca-fan (Mittell, "Sites of Participation"). As someone who regularly contributed to the site, adding and editing information, and at one point moderating the community, Mittell displays an intimate knowledge of the inner workings of the site. He draws on his significant primary experience to discuss how the structure of the site works to "blur boundaries and hierarchies between fiction and truth, canon and fanon" (Mittell, "Sites of Participation" 2.36). Despite Mittell's 'insider' status, I would argue that the Lostpedia actually works very hard to make these separate materials highly distinctive. Articles on the site that contain non-canon material contain clear disclaimers, such as "Fanon: Fan created content. Distinct from Hoaxes and Parodies"⁴⁷ or "Real World Article: written from a Production point of view"⁴⁸ which is used to distinguish articles written about actors, directors, writers and other real world creatives on the project. By carefully categorising and identifying articles which do not relate to the core canonical narrative, the Lostpedia is able to maintain a level of authenticity as a trustworthy repository of information, while simultaneously catering to the sector of the fanbase that has a strong interest in fan-produced content and extra-textual information. This differs from the core ethos of Wikipedia, where all content must be referenced to an evidence base, and opinions are expressly forbidden. The Lostpedia, while communal, and encyclopaedic in tone, performs an additional problem-solving and speculative function which distinguishes it from the dominant modern wiki, and also provides a point of entry for some fan-produced work.

⁴⁶ A full breakdown of sources and their canonical level can be found at <http://lostpedia.wikia.com/wiki/Canon>

⁴⁷ As visible at <http://lostpedia.wikia.com/wiki/Jackface>

⁴⁸ As visible at http://lostpedia.wikia.com/wiki/Matthew_Fox

The *Lost* Experience

One important facet of the Lostpedia was its facilitation of *The Lost Experience* (TLE). TLE was an Alternate Reality Game (ARG), one of the more complex and unusual forms of fan engagement offered by the producers of *Lost*. The most concise definition of ARGs comes from Jane McGonigal, who defines the ARG as “an interactive drama played out in online and real spaces, taking place over several weeks or months, in which dozens, hundreds or thousands of players come together online, form collaborative social networks, and work together to solve a mystery or a problem that would be absolutely impossible to solve alone” (cited in Jenkins, *Convergence Culture* 126). ARGs had been used as marketing tools since 2001, when a successful ARG named *The Beast* ran as an underground promotion for the Steven Spielberg film *A.I. Artificial Intelligence* (2001). Will Brooker suggests that *The Lost Experience* even exceeds the bounds of most ARGs, not just relying on internet-based puzzles, but extending across several other mediums, including into real-life spaces (Brooker, “Television out of Time: Watching Cult Shows on Download” 54–56). Despite the fact that McGonigal’s definition allows for such extensions, these have remained rare, due to the difficulties of geography for in-person participation when engaging with an international online audience.

The Lost Experience, which began in May 2006 to coincide with the broadcast in the US of the twentieth episode of the second season, “Two For The Road”, functions on several levels. At its base, TLE was an extra-textual narrative. It allowed for the presentation of additional storylines or explanations of certain points from the primary narrative which were unable to be contained within the episodes of *Lost*. This also functioned to limit the amount of information in the television text that less engaged fans needed to manage; by only including in the core text relatively essential information, the producers were able to make the series more accessible to those who were not engaging with the web material, and, conversely, to provide a much richer and more detailed mythology to those who desired it. Many of the organisations that featured in

the original text, such as the Hanso Foundation or the DHARMA Initiative, were only portrayed as shadowy figures and never really given significant exposition. *TLE* provided significantly more information regarding their origins and their intentions, giving fans that followed the ARG a much better understanding of the storyworld in later seasons. The Lostpedia also functioned as a cosmopedia, a space for the sharing of collective intelligence, for fans who were following *TLE*. Arguably, without a centralised space in which fans could engage and discuss elements of the ARG, the ARG would not have been nearly as successful, or even able to function.

Derek Johnson has provided a cogent description of some of the material released as part of *TLE*. He describes the way that:

Advertisements supposedly paid for by the Hanso foundation aired during ABC programmes, pointing viewers to the Hanso website where they could search for clues on a site that hailed them not as *Lost* viewers, but as web surfers sharing the Foundation's philanthropic interests. Print advertisements begged newspaper readers to discount claims made about Hanso by the tie-in novel *Bad Twin...* Staged public appearances on *Jimmy Kimmel Live* (Jackhole Industries, 2003-) and at the San Diego Comic Con even went so far as to purport that while *Lost* was fictional, the Hanso Foundation had a real history worthy of both cover-up and investigation. (D. Johnson, "The Fictional Institutions of *Lost*" 42)

Players of the ARG were able to navigate through a number of websites, set up to provide context and background to these claims, but which also contained 'Easter Eggs', hidden content which could be accessed by manipulating the website based on clues from the paratextual advertisements (Jones 73). Podcasts were released, which contained further clues, and provided some elements of the narrative. Clues were hidden in various related sites, which led to players locating the scattered parts of a video, which provided more background information when played in the correct sequence. At one point, players were encouraged to act within the 'real

world', with a limited release of Apollo Candy bars, a brand which only existed within the diegesis of *Lost*, in multiple locations around the world. The bars themselves were printed with a website, which enabled players to find even more information.⁴⁹

Mittell describes the blurring of reality and fictional boundaries on Lostpedia through its engagement with *TLE*. The nature of *TLE* as an ARG is to work to blur the distinction between reality and fiction as a facet of the 'game' (McGonigal). An informal slogan for ARGs is "This is not a game", highlighting the fact that ARGs should never break the suspension of disbelief, and should always portray themselves as existing within the 'real world' (Örnebring 449). When the puppet-masters of the ARG chose to insert game objects into the Lostpedia itself, editing the wiki under the pseudonym of one of the game characters, some of these lines became very blurred indeed. As Mittell says, "the way the material was placed on Lostpedia probably violated the community's policies on posting original content and properly labeling [sic] noncanonical contributions, policies that both players and the administrators happily overlooked" (Mittell, "Sites of Participation" 2.35). In some ways, the pleasure experienced by fans engaging in this mode of forensic fandom extended to an acceptance that those who were smart enough would be able to discern fact from fiction; this may have extended to a level of elitism, a belief that those who were worthy of being able to distinguish the difference would be able to do so, and thus provide themselves with a level of cultural capital.

TLE also provided a further level of engagement for fans who desired a deeper involvement with the core text. Although the image of the passive television viewer has been relatively debunked since the mid-1980s, *TLE* provided an avenue for fans to actively engage with the story, giving them a sense of agency and of being directly involved in the expanding storyverse. In Johnson's

⁴⁹ A full description of the many parts of *The Lost Experience* can be found at http://lostpedia.wikia.com/wiki/The_Lost_Experience.

terms, *TLE* “enabled viewers to experience everyday life as part of the *Lost* hyperdiegesis – not just in the digital realm, but across a range of mediated experience” (D. Johnson, “The Fictional Institutions of *Lost*” 42). As I just established, *TLE* worked very hard to blur the boundaries between the fictional and non-fictional world, establishing websites for corporations and foundations from within the storyverse which gave no indication as to their fictional basis, even going so far as having a fictional character from the ARG, Hugh McIntyre, appear on real-world talk show *Jimmy Kimmel Live!*, in order to blur the boundaries even further (“Wednesday, May 24 2006”). This blurring brings the fan even more into the world of the series, heightening their engagement, with the aim of an increased emotional investment with the ongoing narrative.

In an early analysis of *The Lost Experience*, Mittell seems unconvinced by the ARG, suggesting that the game fails to engage properly with either existing ARG players, or with engaged fans of the series (Mittell, “Lost in an Alternate Reality”). By trying to appeal to both parties, neither party ends up being satisfied with the result. Interestingly, in a later publication, his opinion seems to have shifted; the aspect which he initially suggested was the most successful, the novel “Bad Twin” by fictional author Gary Troup, he subsequently associates with most other ancillary texts of *Lost*, describing them as unnecessary to most fans, due to an incoherence of transmedia storytelling (Mittell, “Lost In A Great Story” 130). While tie-in novelisations are familiar to many science fiction franchises, “Bad Twin” is complicated by also being a material object within the world of the core series, a tension which is not played out successfully in the novel itself (Abba 70). Where Mittell was initially quite condescending about *TLE*, in his later work he seems to have taken a different approach, acknowledging the possibilities opened for forensic fandom. As an outsider, I would speculate that this shift in position may have stemmed from two factors – firstly, that at the time of writing the first article, *TLE* was still ongoing, and was possibly still finding its feet in terms of gauging the difficulty level of the puzzles it was presenting. Secondly, with subsequent series, the transmedia plotlines may have been given more depth and more

resonance with the core text, connecting back to the television series in order to give a pleasure of recognition to those fans who had decoded the ARG's mysteries.

When considering how fans might engage on different levels with *TLE*, and subsequently with forensic fandom, we can look to some of the theory that has been developed about the levels of fan engagement with ARGs. Christy Dena's theory of tiered engagement within ARGs provides a framework for understanding fan engagement in a knowledge community. While this bears some relation to the levels of audience engagement previously described for television viewers, it is important to note that by taking part in a paratextual ARG, fans are already engaging on a significantly deeper level than many of those who simply watch the television programme. The broadest level, into which the majority of fans fall, is that of the casual player, or the "reader" (Thompson cited in Dena 44). These fans engage with material that has been produced by other fans, in this instance reading fan-fiction or browsing the Lostpedia. They follow the ARG, 'read' it, but do not participate directly in the communal solving of puzzles. While interested in these paratextual media extensions, such fans are either unable to or uninterested in actively being involved in their creation (Dena 44). Above this base tier, Dena expands on three different but apparently equal tiers, which have different functions, specific to ARG engagement. At the second level, we find a group which engages in discussions and hypothesising through sites such as the Lostpedia. These fans do not engage in the collection or analysis of data, instead acting as readers, but in addition provide their own feedback and opinions to the discussion. Above these fans is a smaller group again: those who seek out connections by researching historical, linguistic, literary or other sources, and who look for hidden clues within the presented material. And finally, the smallest group is those who actually produce content, uploading detailed synopses of

episodes, analysing each frame of the text in order to identify moments of possible interest, and/or completing character pages with the most up-to-date details provided by the text.⁵⁰

Working within that model, but suggesting equivalent tiers for our medium, we can form a structure to provide an understanding of *Lost* fans within online communities. As different from Dena's tiers, which she describes as being relatively discrete, these groups tend to act as subsets of the set before, with most fans within the smallest group also participating at all the levels below them. These tiers provide us with another way to understand Mittell's concept of drillability (although the metaphorical "up" and "down" directions are inverted in the fan-tiering model). Fans have the option of purely engaging with the surface text, the original as broadcast on television, just like the viewers engaging solely in consumption practices. However, if they choose to investigate further, they can 'drill' down through the text, reading, hypothesising or even code-breaking, and utilising whatever knowledge they might already have in order to cast some light on one of the mysteries. Fans at any level are able to bring their own specialist skill set to the task, perhaps offering a combination of skills which has not been previously applied to any given puzzle. Whether the fan has an in-depth knowledge of English philosophers, and thus is able to realise that Jeremy Bentham might be an alias for John Locke, or has skills at image manipulation, and so is able to identify the minutiae in the background of a critical scene, many fans have the ability to contribute at almost every level of the tiered pyramid, and thus add to the collective knowledge pool. This knowledge pooling extends to the ARG; the proficiencies needed in order to solve the ARG reach far beyond what any one fan would have, including knowledge of multiple languages, cryptography, mathematical coding, and computer programming.⁵¹

⁵⁰ It is important to note that the tiers are ordered here in terms of the procedural production of information, and not necessarily in terms of which groups have more participants, nor in terms of their cultural hierarchy within the community.

⁵¹ A list of the required proficiencies can be found at http://lostopedia.wikia.com/wiki/The_Lost_Experience#Clue-solving.

Mittell acknowledges the possibilities for forensic fandom within the ARG, but only goes as far as connecting them to the ambitions of extending beyond the core text (“Lost In A Great Story” 130). However, I believe that these types of detailed engagement with paratexts are worthy of further discussion. In many ways, the ARG provided a replication of the sorts of engagement which fans were already experiencing with the core text. The similarities in tiering show the close relationship between the nature of fan engagement in these two different media. The types of decoding of mysteries required in order to successfully participate in the ARG replicate very closely the decoding work applied to the central enigma of the core text through sites such as the Lostpedia. Just as with the central enigma of the series, solving the mystery is not a solitary affair; viewers can choose to either go along for the ride, watching the series and being presented with the resolution, or they can choose to engage with the fan communities, interact, benefit from the collective knowledge and intelligence, possibly contribute, and end up with an understanding they could never have achieved on their own.

Conclusion

What we see when we look at *Lost* is a perfect storm of events: a period in time when viewers were able to access content in new and different ways, which put them in control of their own viewing practices; a period in time when fans were able to engage with each other in ways which defied geographical boundaries, in spaces which gave them the freedom to work together without commercial control; a shifting approach to television narrative, allowing producers and writers to take more artistic licence, to explore the types of stories that might be able to be told on television; and new modes of transmedia storytelling becoming available, allowing for far greater depths of narrative to be drilled by the most ardent fans. *Lost* was the right series at the right time, a program which allowed fans to make the best use of the new technologies they were adopting – and giving them a purpose for adopting these technologies – in order to decode the mysteries on offer, to discuss elements that puzzled them, and to dig down into the multi-

layered story to whichever level suited them. *Lost* may not have worked at any other period of time, and most other series could not have had the impact that it did, as it paved the way for producers and fans to think differently about what television drama might be able to offer.

Together, *Buffy* and *Lost* present a picture of the shifts that occurred within the broad genre of popular television drama in the period of TVIII. This is not to say that all television drama followed this trend; the blockbuster success of forensic procedurals such as *CSI* has meant that traditional police, medical, and legal shows have continued to feature in primetime schedules. However, these two series signalled a shift in the ways in which some producers chose to address their audience, some writers chose to tell their stories, and some viewers chose to engage with the televisual text. These series were successful enough to be renewed for multiple seasons, and engaged cult audiences in ways which allowed for additional revenue streams to be explored, experimented with, and consolidated. *Lost* may not have provided an easy-to-follow blueprint for ratings success, as the numerous failed imitators indicate, but it *did* encourage networks to be more adventurous in terms of narrative experimentation, and to recognise the multiple levels and modes of engagement that could be offered to viewing audiences, and the depths that engaged fans desire from their cult texts.

American Idol, and the Economics of the *Idol* Format

Introduction

The shift towards narratively complex television has been laid out in the preceding chapters on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Lost*, but this was not the only generic shift to occur in the period of TVIII. At the turn of the millennium, reality television became a dominant force in the primetime schedule, taking numerous forms and providing a new economic structure for broadcast television. The *Idol* format, as exemplified by *American Idol*,⁵² sits directly within the time period being examined within this thesis, exemplifying a number of the key elements of TVIII. The series typifies the rise of reality television to ratings success and cultural prominence, as well as the way in which reality formats came to be franchised, imported, and developed. It is, however, in its novel economic structure that *American Idol* provides some exciting developments which address the problems that have arisen for networks and producers in the era of TVIII. This chapter seeks to look at *Idol* in terms of the economics node of Chapter 1's circuit model, to highlight the importance that shifts in television economics have played since the mid-1990s. I argue that *American Idol*'s economic success is grounded in the breadth and diversity of revenue streams that the producers have developed, meaning that should one particular stream shrink in any given season, the impact is reduced due to the existence of other streams. By encouraging a live viewing audience, the series arrested the steady decline of ratings that have generally occurred during the period thus far, caused by audience and platform fragmentation. *Idol*'s multiple revenue streams also allow for economic success in the face of the declining popularity of the thirty second advertisement, which has been the dominant mode of revenue for commercial television since its introduction.

⁵² Subsequent references to *Idol* in this context refer to *American Idol*, although when discussing different geographic locations they might refer to specific local productions. To differentiate a specific localised edition, I refer to the franchise/format as 'the *Idol* format'.

In Chapter 1, I discussed the origins of reality television and the different forms that it can take. Reality television is one of the new types of television that I suggest is closely tied to the period of TVIII, even if it is grounded in techniques that existed previously. *American Idol* can be seen as one of the earliest ‘blockbuster’ reality television series, gaining very impressive ratings on a major US network, and regularly winning its timeslot for most of the 11 years it has run to date. Previous series such as *The Real World* had introduced the concept of reality television to American viewers, but it was the network ratings successes of *Survivor*, *American Idol*, and *Big Brother US* (2000 – present), all of which were launched in 2000-02, that cemented the place of reality television on US television schedules. Reality television has been divided into numerous contested sub-categories by different scholars (Kavka, *Reality TV*; Hill; Huff; Biressi and Nunn; Murray and Ouellette), but it would seem uncontroversial to describe *Idol* as being an example of a competitive, skill-based (possibly vocational) reality television series.

American Idol has been described as less a television show than a “convergent media identity” (Gray and Lotz 136). The ability to engage with the series on multiple levels, both with the television episodes and the myriad of related outputs, means that audiences have the opportunity to experience *Idol* as a truly transmedia phenomenon. However, where many transmedia texts have required their audiences to seek out each element, *Idol* blurs these boundaries by finding a place in many of the spaces already utilised by their audience. The prevalence of *Idol* on social media, in celebrity magazines and websites, on television talk shows, in mainstream media, and in commercial retail outlets sees the series expanding well beyond the confines of the television medium and gaining a place as a cultural phenomenon. The transmedia nature of the text provides a level of economic stability for the producers of *Idol*, meaning that should the audience move away from one specific element of the text as a whole, there are still revenue streams from numerous others. Where other texts have utilised transmedia for its

storytelling potential, or explicitly to create increased audience engagement, *Idol* leverages the potential specifically to create economic stability, as well as the secondary effect of encouraging a stronger affective connection with the core text, and subsequently the associated peripheral brands.

There is a methodological difficulty in writing about the economics of a series like *American Idol*, in that so many of the finer details of its economics are closely guarded as commercial secrets. Even finding accurate voting numbers can be difficult, with round numbers being announced during airings some weeks, but no official comprehensive numbers ever being released. The work of Bill Carter highlights many of these difficulties, but also demonstrates how elements that are visible within the text can be utilised, as well as details which have been released in mainstream media or in academic publications (Carter). I have adopted a similar approach, drawing on a mixture of types of sources, but where I have had to make assumptions they are always identified as such.

American Idol

American Idol was first broadcast on FOX in the summer of 2002, and was immediately a ratings success. Drawing from the *Pop Idol* format (discussed below), *Idol* harks back to the talent shows of the 1950s and 60s (Holmes 150), providing opportunities for unknown singing talent to be discovered and publicised on a large scale. The series follows the same pattern every season, beginning with open auditions of varying quality, followed by a bootcamp (known as Hollywood week) which usually requires competitors to sing both solo and in groups, followed by a final elimination in order to determine the individuals who will perform in the live shows. The live shows subsequently air twice per week, with a performance show based around a musical theme and then a results show, in which the audience's voting is tabulated and the contestant with the

fewest votes leaves the competition. Various additional elements have been included or removed over the seasons, but this general formula has stayed the same.

Looking at the structure and history of *American Idol* can be very enlightening regarding the economic benefits of the form. At its heart, *Idol* has the appearance of the traditional variety and talent shows which were popular in many Western television cultures in the past. However, this form had declined in popularity in the latter part of the twentieth century, described by Guy Redden as having peaked in the 1970s and 80s (Redden 130). However, in 1999, a novel format was aired in New Zealand, under the name *Popstars* (1999), which focused on the creation of a Spice Girls-esque girl group. Where this differed from previous programming was the visibility of the audition process, and the 'behind-the-scenes' view of the management team working to construct the most marketable group possible. This structure was a success in New Zealand (Cleave), and led to the series being sold as a format, initially to Australia, and from there being franchised around the world.⁵³ It was the success of the British version which inspired Simon Fuller to create a slightly different format, one which focuses on developing a solo artist instead of a band, and with the audition process rather than the artist development process as the key element. *Pop Idol* (2001-03) was the first of the *Idol* formats to air, screening in Britain in late 2001. While it was not the ratings success that some subsequent versions achieved, the format sold well internationally. There was some hesitation in the US about purchasing the series, with all the major networks initially passing, but anecdotally, Elizabeth Murdoch, an executive with Britain's British Sky Broadcasting Group (BSkyB) and daughter of Rupert Murdoch, who owns the FOX network, is said to have been familiar with the series in the UK, saw the potential, and urged her father to pick up the series for the US market (Baltruschat 133).

⁵³ The show was notably sold to the UK, the United States, and Canada, as well as an estimated 50 other countries. It has been a significant success in Germany, where it has run for 10 seasons at time of writing. The trajectory of this format is charted out by Denise Bielby and C Lee Harrington very clearly, with further insight provided subsequently by Misha Kavka (Bielby and Harrington 115–18; Kavka, *Reality TV* 150–52).

International remakes of television content are not new, with transnational adaptation commonly visible throughout the history of television. From a purely economic perspective, it is sensible to try to extract the greatest amount of revenue possible from a brand, and selling it internationally greatly enhances those possibilities (Moran and Malbon 11). One of the advantages of reality television for producers is the saleability of its formats. There are obvious benefits to format creators, who stand to receive significant economic gains, but also to the producers who adopt a pre-existing format, since there is perhaps a little more certainty in an uncertain television market when a format already has tested appeal with at least a certain sector of the international audience. The specificity provided by a format, especially in subsequent national iterations, means that production companies can identify specific moments or concepts to recreate or to avoid. A former executive of FremantleMedia notes that when a format is franchised for export, it is usually because the original has had success in its primary iteration, and so it is in the interest of the producers not to “improve the show backwards” by making alterations to the format which have the possibility of negatively impacting the success (cited in Moran and Malbon 68). In the first season of *American Idol*, producers were able to use the weekly tapes of the recently-aired first season of *Pop Idol* as templates on which to base their new show (Baltruschat 133). While it is important to adapt the programming to local cultural specificities, maintaining a structure as close as possible to the original is seen as being both safe and advantageous.

Tracking *American Idol*'s genealogy can demonstrate the potential expansion that a reality television format might have. The success of the *Popstars* format made it clear that interest existed for this type of talent format, and that a market existed for this content internationally. Fuller was able to critically review *Popstars* and identify what he saw as its weaknesses, specifically its lack of an emotional climax. This allowed him to modify the concept into

something different enough that he was able to create his own format, calling it *Pop Idol*.⁵⁴ This format was subsequently franchised internationally, becoming an even greater success than the initial *Popstars* format. Since the format continues to be owned by 19 Entertainment, Fuller's production company, Fuller earns revenue from every episode produced internationally, *American Idol* earning 19 Entertainment US\$96 million in 2008 alone, on a gross profit margin of 77% (Wyatt).⁵⁵

One key idea we can take from the genealogy of *American Idol* is that smaller nations can play a role in the development of reality formats. Countries such as New Zealand do not commonly find much of an international market for their television content, with limited runs of select content within other Commonwealth countries being the exception rather than the rule. However, with the ability to design and 'test' reality formats, smaller nations are able to contribute to the global television market. The spread of the *Popstars* format clearly highlights this potential, as does the success of other NZ-created reality formats, such as *Treasure Island* (1997-2007).⁵⁶ The other major benefit is to nations that are not traditionally part of the Anglophone television market. With television formats not being language-specific, nations like the Netherlands are able to compete very successfully against more established exporters of content, with Dutch company Endemol being described as "the world's largest format specialist" (Moran and Malbon 13). Content such as *Expedition Robinson* (1997 – present) from Sweden has also been subsequently franchised to enormous success, especially in the US under the name *Survivor*.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ A subsequent lawsuit regarding similarities between the *Popstars* and *Idol* formats eventually reached a confidential settlement out of court.

⁵⁵ FremantleMedia receives a portion of 19 Entertainment's profits, which Wyatt suggests is somewhere between a third and a half.

⁵⁶ The series had nine seasons in New Zealand, and was also produced in Ireland and Australia.

⁵⁷ There have been other similar series produced that are not officially versions of the format, such as the aforementioned *Treasure Island* from Eyeworks Touchdown and *Castaway 2007* (2007) from the BBC.

Regional remakes of reality television have an additional benefit of being able to draw on elements of national identity, which allows the audience to feel a deeper sense of engagement. By feeling that the local variant of a reality format has national relevance, the viewer feels a greater sense of personal connection to the text, which is vitally important when encouraging viewers to vote. It is not coincidental that *Idol* host Ryan Seacrest frequently refers to “your American Idol”, again making the connection of ownership to the audience. The individual national variants of *Idol* are also able to invoke specific discourses that are relevant to their particular national values. When engaging with contestants, the format allows for the expression of what is important to specific cultures. Thus, in *Australian Idol* (2003-09) we see a discourse of ‘the Aussie battler’, someone who has faced difficulty in their life, but has pushed through the adversity in order to achieve something, even if that achievement is simply a spot on the series. In *New Zealand Idol* (2004-06), a discourse of *whanau*, or extended family, becomes apparent, with one’s worth being demonstrated by one’s roots in the community.⁵⁸ I would agree with Katherine Meizel that, in *American Idol*, religion becomes a key discourse, especially in appealing to specific communities in the American South and Midwest, where the series is a particular success (102–33). This localisation of the form encourages audiences to connect emotionally with the series, playing directly into the notions of affective economics (to be discussed subsequently). Through the invocation of themes or tropes that are seen as important to the nation at large, the viewer feels that s/he is being spoken to directly, as part of their specific national identity, and the emotional connection to the core brand is strengthened.

Several key players, both persons and corporations, are integral to the ownership of the iterations of *Idol*, as well as the ownership of the format itself. When *Pop Idol* was first created, a deal was developed that gave Simon Fuller’s company, 19 Entertainment, the rights to the show

⁵⁸ Interestingly, this discourse is not limited to Maori and Pasifika contestants, where the notion of *whanau* might be seen to be culturally significant, but also seems to be applying to Pakeha contestants, such as in Season 1 when contestant Michael Murphy returned to his home town of Taupo.

and the option to manage the winners, while Simon Cowell would be able to sign and manage any other contestants through his company Syco, and BMG Entertainment⁵⁹ would release the resulting records through S Records, a subsidiary unit of BMG operated by Cowell, who would retain the recording rights (Clawson 14, 80). This agreement saw Cowell and Fuller both having significant economic incentives to make the series a success and, as we will see, it encouraged the diverse revenue streams which have made *Idol* an economic juggernaut.

Crucial to this structure is the international television production conglomerate with which Cowell and Fuller co-produce many of the key iterations of the *Idol* brand – FremantleMedia. Fremantle is owned by the RTL group, which is majority-owned by Bertelsmann, also the owner at the time of BMG Entertainment, providing yet another level of vertical integration and synergy. Fremantle/RTL are one of the largest players in the European television market, and in recent years have become very successful through the sale of reality concepts and formats. The breadth of Fremantle's existing distribution network certainly helped the spread and distribution of *Idol*, but Fremantle also brought to the table significant experience in merchandising, home video, and brand licencing, all of which added to the possible revenue streams of the product as a whole.

Economic Benefits of Reality Television

Reality series such as *American Idol* have several key economic benefits for producers, networks and/or advertisers. The first, as is often argued, is that reality television has a lower cost of production than traditional scripted television (Rendon). This is certainly true of some types of reality television, especially the early formats such as fly-on-the-wall docusoaps (e.g. *Cops*, *The Real World*, *Airport* (1998-2008)). Ted Magder has calculated the 2001-02 per episode costs of *Idol* as being significantly cheaper than action-drama series *24* (2001-10), and a little cheaper

⁵⁹ Contestants were usually signed to one of the labels in the BMG group, RCA or Arista. In later years, BMG merged with Sony Entertainment to form Sony BMG, which took over the music distribution rights. Since 2011, contestants have signed to Interscope Records, a division of the Universal Music Group.

than procedural drama series *The Practice* (1997-2004) (140). However, I would suggest that there is not likely to be a great deal of cost difference between recent seasons of *Idol* and traditional scripted series due to *Idol*'s scale of production. *Idol* pays significant salaries to its host and judges (whose incomes have grown with the success of the series) along with paying for very impressive stage and theatre productions, clothing and costuming, backing vocalists and dancers, housing and transportation for a large number of contestants during the early elimination period, and rights clearance for all the music used in the series.⁶⁰ However, *American Idol* has significant economic benefits over most scripted series which lead to its economic success, as we shall see shortly.

One of the key arguments made regarding the economic success of *American Idol* stems from the devotion and emotional connection felt by many fans towards both the series and its contestants. In *Convergence Culture*, Henry Jenkins coins the term 'affective economics' to describe the emotional connection that audiences develop with a core text, such as *Idol*, and how that connection might be extended to associated brands (*Convergence Culture* 61–2). Jenkins suggests that whereas in the past, marketers had been concerned with 'impressions', which is to say the number of people who see their logo or advertisement, now the depth of engagement with the brand, or related brands, is considered important in converting an impression into an economic transaction. The emotive elements of competitive reality television, especially those with an audience voting structure, work to develop strong affective connections between fans and the brand, as audiences feel a level of ownership over the outcome. This in turn can lead to a feeling of affiliation with the products, companies, or brands which have an integral connection to the series, as they all become intertwined for the viewer. Audiences have generally become more aware of the economic realities of television, and the integral nature that marketing plays

⁶⁰ Details about the actual budgetary breakdown of *Idol* are not made public, and some of these costs may be covered through marketing deals or sponsorship because of perceived benefits and visibility for the goods and services providers.

in television and its funding, and thus brands can be seen as 'enabling' the viewer to have the content that they enjoy.⁶¹ Advertisers hope that this will drive consumer loyalty towards sponsor/advertiser brands which they see as facilitating their preferred programming.

Jenkins' notion of affective economics draws heavily on Kevin Roberts' theory of branding that he calls 'lovemarks'. In finding ways to adapt to a shifting marketing climate, Roberts identifies love as the most important driving emotion behind human action (Roberts 57). One key aspect of lovemarks for Roberts is that they cannot be created by corporations; they are "created and owned by the people who love them" (Roberts 71). What brands can do is build structures that allow fans to engage with them, to love them. Key elements of this are telling real stories, tapping into dreams, nurturing icons, building on inspiration, and establishing intimacy (Roberts 88–99). One of the main reasons that *Idol* establishes itself as a lovemark, and thus builds on affective economics, is that its form and structure inherently allow for the exercise of these elements. By presenting the real stories of their contestants, tied together with emotive elements which will have a resonance with the audience, the series invites the audience to see it as aspirational, motivational, and working for the good of its contestant. Whether dealing with disability, the death of family members, financial hardship, familial estrangement, or just presenting a desire to be seen as extraordinary, these stories are carefully curated to allow the fans to overlay their own desires onto the real stories, turning *Idol* into a lovemark, and allowing for the affective connection thus created to be carried over to the sponsoring brands.

One of the key concerns of many television executives in the twenty-first century is the decline of the size of the live viewing audiences, a decline which the format of the *Idol* series operates to

⁶¹ One notable example of this media savvy occurred outside the realm of reality television, in relation to the NBC series *Chuck* (2007–12). Fans of the series, fearing cancellation due to low ratings, created a movement where they went on a certain day to buy sandwiches from Subway, one of the major sponsors of the series. By demonstrating to Subway the economic power of the fan action, producers were able to secure additional funding from Subway, enough to make a subsequent season financially viable.

prevent. By creating a format that has a limited time period for interaction, producers provide significant incentive for viewers to actually watch as the series airs. This has the benefit of ensuring that the largest percentage of viewers possible appears in the Live Nielsen ratings, as opposed to the ratings which include time shifting of up to 3 or 7 days. The former figure is of much more interest to traditional advertisers, as non-time-shifted viewing makes it most likely that the advertisement is actually reaching viewers, rather than being fast-forwarded.

Interestingly, the successful production of live viewership builds itself, encouraging enough people to watch the series for it to become a part of ordinary cultural discussion and knowledge, which means that if people don't watch it, they miss out on being a part of a national discussion. In Season 6, Ryan Seacrest visits a Los Angeles farmers' market and conducts vox pop ('voice of the people') interviews about the previous evening's performance show ("S06E29 - Top 7: One Voted Off Live"). Everyone interviewed has an opinion on the series and who is most deserving; this is of course the result of judicious editing, but it further emphasises the idea that the series has entered into the national discourse and is connecting people within real-time communities.

The large percentage of live viewers also makes social media engagement between audiences easier. The rise of online spaces such as Twitter allows viewers to engage with other fans, even if they are not directly connected in social networks. This has the effect of making audiences visible to each other, creating a sense of camaraderie, and also reinforcing the importance of engaging live with the series. In recent years, *Idol* producers have encouraged this sort of engagement more actively by providing an 'official' *American Idol* hashtag (#AmericanIdol), and in the 2012 season providing additional contextual hashtags for specific moments to be discussed (for example, #LopezOnIdol when Jennifer Lopez performed, #TellJimmy for a segment where viewers were encouraged to let mentor Jimmy Iovine know whether they agreed with him). Providing pre-determined hashtags means that discussions across Twitter are consistent, and can be easily joined or followed, but it does perhaps show an attempt to manipulate something which is

usually seen as emergent and defined by the crowd.⁶² The social media engagement is also increased by ensuring that all the finalists on *Idol* have their own Twitter accounts and actively make use of them during their time on the series. This gives audiences a sense of connection with the contestants, a feeling that they are being seen and heard, which increases their sense of intimacy with favoured contestants and with the show. This directly invokes the idea of a lovemark, which in turn increases the viewer's engagement, eliciting a form of affective economics which can boost the revenue stream from advertisers.

This visibility on social media also sends strong signals to marketers that the series has become implanted within the national social consciousness. Social media such as Twitter and Facebook become forms of dispersed 'watercooler conversation', allowing for discussion and gossip, including conversation regarding eliminations, song choices, etc. But, of course, the key difference that we can see here is that rather than being externally invisible, as traditional interpersonal communication has been, these communications are much more widely visible, meaning that other audience members can see fan practices being modelled, while advertisers and marketers can see the audiences to whom they are advertising and possibly even engage with them. The audience is no longer monolithic, but instead can be scrutinised on the level of the individual, which may help with understanding the different demographics involved. Where traditional ratings systems have provided broader demographic information, the information tracked on social media may allow for a more detailed comprehension of the shape of the audience. The audience also has more of a feeling of personal investment, since they are able to visibly engage and possibly express their contestant preferences, knowing that they are visible to

⁶² Hashtags were not a designed feature of Twitter, but instead an emergent phenomenon created by users; by placing a hash symbol (#) in front of a specific term or acronym, users make it easier for others to identify their tweet as a contribution to a broader conversation when using the search function. There is still no direct engagement in Twitter with the hashtag process ('Trends' include both hashtags and other words/phrases being commonly used on Twitter at the time), but the word and concept have entered into the lexicon of Twitter users, and are specifically connected to the site.

other fans and even to producers. The move to include audience tweets in the live show broadcast is a way that the producers indicate to fans that they are seen, and provide a feeling of being heard, of being listened to.

***Idol* as transmedia phenomenon**

American Idol is a series that exists not just as a broadcast television show, but also in numerous additional spaces. By carefully cultivating the image of the series and its contestants, within the series itself and externally, *Idol* develops a reach that extends well beyond its limited broadcast hours, and ensures both greater revenue and a greater importance for the series within the broader culture. This has distinct advantages for building the image of *Idol* as a social phenomenon, which in turn encourages brands to associate their image with the series. By existing in multiple media spaces, and cultivating the celebrity of the contestants, the series ensures multiple revenue streams and forms of audience engagement. While business models have been constantly shifting, these multiple streams mean that the loss of one stream is not a death knell for the series, but instead that loss can be supplemented by any one of the other streams, or additional emerging streams.

Merchandising

Idol has very cleverly managed to exploit a significant number of merchandising opportunities, which all provide financial benefits to the show's producers. The most immediate merchandising opportunity comes out of the fact that the show produces, by default, a cultural product that has a prepared audience. The 'winner's single'⁶³ and subsequent album have traditionally sold very well, although it is interesting to note that in recent years this success has been more muted, with no winner's single reaching number one on the Billboard Hot 100 chart since Taylor Hicks in the fifth season. Only 20 singles from former *Idol* contestants have ever made the Top 10 on the

⁶³ The 'winner's single' refers to a song performed by the finalists in the grand finale, and released immediately as a single by whichever contestant wins.

US charts (excluding the winner's singles), with only two of those making number one, and both of those from season 1 winner Kelly Clarkson later in her career.⁶⁴ However, by having recording deals lined up for the winner, initially with RCA Records and J Records (both part of Sony Music, which merged with BMG in 2004), and later with Universal Music Group, the audience knows that if their selected contestant wins, there will be a product for them to purchase. In addition, recent seasons of *Idol* have utilised the benefits allowed by the long tail of digital distribution (Anderson 180–82); by releasing every performed song for sale, the producers ensure that even if any given song does not hit the top of the charts, that there will still be solid sales across the large number of available tracks.

The act of having voted for their chosen contestant or contestants also means that the audience has an emotional investment in the outcome. Christopher Bell has described the parasocial relationship that exists between contestants and fans on *American Idol*, which he suggests is grounded not just in recognising or liking the contestant, but in the audience member identifying with the contestant (55). The audience member is able to see themselves as potentially being in the place of the contestant and participating in the competition, an identificatory framework carefully cultivated by the series itself, as we shall see. Ryan Seacrest also plays a crucial role in the development of this relationship, constantly telling the audience that it is their 'responsibility' to vote for their chosen contestant, that only they can keep the contestant in the competition (Bell 59). The parasocial relationship that the show strives to create between viewer and contestant may well explain the success of *American Idol* finalists in the music charts. By experiencing an affective connection with the contestants, viewers and consumers feel that they have had a hand in their success, which can translate into a desire to own a part of their eventual output.

⁶⁴ Collated sales information for former *Idol* contestants can be found at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Idol_alumni_single_sales - these figures come from various sources, but can mostly be traced back to official figures from *Billboard*.

The success of *Idol* seems to fly directly in the face of the troubles being faced by the music industry at large. This raises an interesting counterpoint – it is striking that the television programme has been such a success when it is so heavily rooted in the music industry, at a point in time when many sources agree that the music industry is under fire. It is interesting to note that part of *Idol*'s success has been its ability to react to shifting technology and to change existing business models, as these are precisely the elements that the music industry has been accused of being unable to adapt. The series has stayed on top of the technological shifts that have heavily impacted the music industry, adapting to changing music industry models with later seasons seeing studio versions of every performance being available for sale on iTunes. Once again, audience members are encouraged to be consumers, and to demonstrate their fandom even before the release of official singles by purchasing the tracks of their Idols. In the mid-2000s, ringtones of each contestant were made available for purchase, capitalising on the burgeoning mobile market.

19 Entertainment has been very careful to ensure that they maximise the benefits of a show which inherently brings together talented creatives. By tying all finalists into management contracts, 19 Entertainment ensures that they are able to generate earnings from any outputs that any of the finalists might have. Thus, when a contestant like Chris Daughtry was eliminated before the final of the fifth season, 19 Entertainment could still earn significant money from the notable success that he has had subsequently as an artist. This is not a unique situation, with artists such as Clay Aiken and Jennifer Hudson also not winning the series, but going on to have highly successful music careers. It is difficult to know the exact details of these management contracts, as they are treated as highly confidential, but they would appear to cover all facets of

potential and future earnings in the entertainment industry (Olsen).⁶⁵ Segments of the contract that have been leaked to the media indicate the extent of this coverage, for example:

I hereby grant to [the] Producer the unconditional right throughout the universe in perpetuity to use, simulate or portray (and to authorize others to do so) or to refrain from using, simulating or portraying, my name, likeness (whether photographic or otherwise), voice, singing voice, personality, personal identification or personal experiences, my life story, biographical data, incidents, situations and events which heretofore occurred or hereafter occur, including without limitation the right to use, or to authorize others to use any of the foregoing in or in connection with the Series ("19 Group 'American Idol' Contestant Agreement Excerpts").

These contracts are signed by all contestants on the show, with the ability to lock contestants into further contracts (recording, merchandising, etc.) at the discretion of the producers. These contracts also represent a dramatic degree of control over both the professional and the personal lives of the contestants and, ethical concerns aside, provide significant opportunities for the producers to maximise the economic benefits of each contestant.

Another source of revenue which is heavily promoted during the run of the show is the American Idol Summer Tour, in which the Top 10 contestants from the season embark on a tour stopping in 40-50 cities across the continental United States. Income doesn't just come from ticket sales, although that is significant, but also from the additional opportunity to sell merchandise directly to fans. As an added benefit, this type of concert works further to legitimise the finalists as authentic pop stars, which may well have further knock-on effects regarding the sale of their musical outputs. The tour generates additional revenue by being sponsored; in 2012 the tour was

⁶⁵ It is unclear whether Jennifer Hudson's original *Idol* contract sees the producers earning money from her burgeoning acting career.

officially known as “CHIPS AHOY! & RITZ Present American Idol LIVE! Tour '12”, with sponsorship provided by Kraft Foods in return for naming rights for their cookie and cracker brands. This adds another level of security to the financial success of the tour, and also brings the Kraft Foods corporation on board as another of the ‘trusted brands’ that connect with the affective economics surrounding the series.

The producers of *American Idol* have ensured that there is a wide range of merchandise available that carries the *Idol* branding. A brief look at the current official web store AldolStore.com shows some of the breadth of merchandise, with traditional items such as t-shirts and keychains available, as well as less conventional items including branded lip gloss, a pin-striped fedora, and rhinestone-studded dog tags. Further to this, video games, books, and other related material have licensed the *Idol* brand, all feeding fees back to 19 Entertainment. Not all of these items seem to have an immediate correlation to the core brand, but *American Idol*'s position as a lovemark means that engaged viewers use consumption to demonstrate their fandom in a myriad of ways, and the producers ensure that they have as many choices as possible.

While competitive reality shows such as *Idol* have a low re-watchability factor, the producers have still released some DVDs of the series for sale. The traditional ‘complete series’ model of DVD release would usually feature every episode from a particular season, but this is not practical for *Idol* since many seasons run to 60 hours or more of programming. The narrative structure of this type of reality television also does not lend itself to repeated viewing, with the high levels of narrative redundancy that are built in, as well as the traditional focus on suspense and the reveal. Instead, the producers have released compilation DVDs, pulling together the most memorable performances, both good and bad, from a season. Scholars have previously identified the *schadenfreude* enjoyed by many viewers in watching the poorer performances during the audition process (Barton 232–33; K. Meizel 484), a phenomenon producers became aware of,

too, as exemplified by the fact that the number of episodes devoted to first-round auditions increases dramatically across the first seven seasons. Thereafter, the inclusion of the poor performances on the DVD release allows for comic or cathartic release, while inclusion of the good permits an element of nostalgia in looking back at performances of contestants who have since demonstrated their ability as singers and stars.

Product Placement

In order to counter the concerns that many viewers no longer see the traditional 30-second advertisements in the usual breaks, *Idol* is one of many series that has returned to the model popular in the 1950s of building the advertising into the fabric of the show itself. Frequently referred to as 'product placement', *Idol* takes it a step further by including a number of brands, which appear from episode to episode and even season to season, both as background advertising and as products used and commented on by the hosts, judges, and contestants. Recent research has differentiated amongst tiers of product placement based on criteria such as whether the brand or product is visible and whether it is actually used/interacted with by the onscreen talent. This is important as it can then be qualified by the "reinforcement context"; in other words whether the engagement with that product or brand is positive, neutral or negative (Pervan and Martin 105). Positive engagement with a brand by someone who the audience regards positively, such as a favourite contestant seen actively enjoying a particular brand of soft drink, will have more of an effect on the viewing public than if the brand's logo was simply visible in the background.

American Idol has taken this a step further, not just having the brand visible, but actually working to incorporate several brands contextually into the sets. We might refer to this tactic as *mise-en-scène* economics, where the brand is embedded into the programme setting to such an extent as to be inextricable from the surroundings. The most obvious example of *mise-en-scène* economics is in the 'green room' where contestants are interviewed before they take the stage. The term

green room is a misnomer, as the walls are usually bright red, with animated Coca-Cola logos moving over them. The viewer's attention is never actively drawn to these logos, but their movement ensures that the brand is very visible. The hypnotic nature of the movement of the logo may even lead to a deeper level of brand penetration. No camera shot is possible within this space without the Coca-Cola logos being visible on screen. Meizel also notes that the shape and colours of the *American Idol* logo are very similar to those of key sponsors Ford and Old Navy, which, although it might be a coincidence, is certainly convenient (28). One of the most apparent instances of mise-en-scène economics is the branded cups which appear on the judges' tables throughout the run of the series. These cups are always branded with the Coca-Cola logo (with the exception of a brief interlude when they were branded as Vitamin Water, a Coca-Cola brand). It has been indicated by the judges or presenter once or twice during the run of the series, I believe accidentally, that the contents of the cups are actually not Coca-Cola, but that is the assumption that would otherwise be made. These cups are usually carefully aligned so that the brand is always pointing directly towards the camera, ensuring that almost any shot of the judges includes this branding, and the judges are frequently seen drinking from the cups. These types of branding become so embedded in the programming itself that, as the viewer becomes familiar with the series, the branding may actually be less jarring than some less blatant forms of product placement.

Other brands are also incorporated into the programme itself, although perhaps not to the extent that Coca-Cola appears. Each year, *American Idol* partners with a specific telecommunications company in order to provide SMS voting to the audience, using AT&T (or their brand Cingular Wireless) since 2002. This means that only audience members who have phones on their specific networks are able to cast their vote using that technology. With Ryan Seacrest announcing the voting methods and SMS numbers after each performance, and the appropriate details appearing on screen, this means that the brand and logo are both mentioned and displayed multiple times

per episode, leading to a high level of brand visibility. There is also an increased probability that regular *Idol* viewers and voters might choose to shift to the relevant phone service provider, given that only subscribers are able to vote by this method. (As we shall see below, it is also possible to vote online and by phone.)

There are obvious limitations to building branding into the set of the series itself, especially the problem that a key element of the branding may at times be obscured by action occurring directly in front of it. As an alternative, *Idol* sponsors are able to make use of a common element of twenty-first century television that first came to popularity in television news – the hyper-mediated television image. Viewers have become habituated to images and text superimposed over the background image, such as we have seen with the “news crawl”, the text which scrolls constantly at the bottom of the screen on 24-hour cable news channels. In recent years, networks have increasingly used this space to promote upcoming content, either later that evening, or in subsequent days or weeks.⁶⁶ *Idol* makes use of this trend in order to provide key pieces of information, such as voting numbers and terms and conditions, but also includes brand logos in this space. Every voting number that appears is accompanied by the logo of the telecommunications company with which *Idol* is partnered, making it one of the most commonly seen brands throughout the episodes.⁶⁷

In addition to these brands being integrated into the set and into the television image itself, there are regular segments of the programme which are directly sponsored. The most obvious of these is the Ford Music Video, which appears in the results show that follows each live performance

⁶⁶ There was famously a kickback against this on social media when a large countdown clock to the return episode of *V* aired for a week over the bottom portion of the screen for nearly all of ABC’s primetime content. This particularly frustrated fans of *Lost*, as the crawl was a constant presence on the show, even obscuring some subtitles at one point (“‘V’ Countdown Clock Sparks ‘Lost’ Backlash”).

⁶⁷ In earlier seasons, this was also accompanied by the host naming the company verbally as part of announcing the voting numbers.

episode. The effect of this segment is twofold: firstly, it serves to legitimise and authenticate the contestants as genuine popstars, by showing them within a structure in which 'real' music stars are usually seen. The second is that each music video usually serves as a minute-long advertisement for a product from the Ford range. Sometimes the video involves directly demonstrating features of a selected Ford model, such as the Season 7 music video for 'Tainted Love', which showed somebody selecting the song they wished to listen to by voice command ("American Idol 7 Ford Music Video - Tainted Love"). The contestants are usually seen to appreciate the utility of these features, creating a positive reinforcement context, as mentioned earlier. Other Ford Music Videos simply have the car as one element of the action, with the brand being visible, as in a Season 11 music video for 'Ghost Town', where the cars are simply a means of transportation, although there are close-ups of both the brand and the make ("Ghost Town - Ford Music Videos - American Idol"). The producers do not take any steps to hide the sponsorship of this segment, with it always being openly referred to as the Ford Music Video.

One interesting area of 'sponsorship' appears in a series of special episodes dedicated to charitable giving that ran during the sixth, seventh, and ninth seasons of the show. Calling these shows "Idol Gives Back", the producers encouraged the viewing audience to make charitable donations to the programme in order to support certain worthy causes. Various popular music stars performed and video vignettes with celebrities aired alongside video footage of Seacrest and former contestants visiting areas of poverty. However, significant amounts of time during the episode were also dedicated to discussing the contributions being made by many of the corporate sponsors of the show. Making public the donations made to a specific cause by large corporations may be seen as helping encourage audience members to also donate, but it also plays into the larger affective connection between sponsor and *Idol*, as well as creating a stronger emotional connection between brand and viewer.

There are other instances of product placement within the series which are slightly more integrated than the segment sponsorship, in which the product is utilised directly by the contestants or judges, usually accompanied by a comment regarding the ease of use, comfort, or some other positive aspect. Whenever the contestants need to travel around town, they are clearly driven in Ford vehicles, and can often be heard to comment about the comfort, or one of the features of which they are availing themselves. This level of product placement is often seen as a heightened level of brand integration, as not only is the brand highly visible, but key features are put into active use, providing a positive reinforcement context as discussed above. An extension of this occurred in the final episodes of recent seasons, where the last two contestants have each been invited to nominate a person who they believe has been instrumental in supporting them. Those people are then invited to the finale as VIP guests, and 'surprised' on camera with the gift of a new-model Ford vehicle. The thrilled reactions of the recipients could be read as simply being thrilled at being given a new car, but there is a subtext which suggests that they are particularly pleased that the car is a Ford.

In recent years, contestants have also been seen more frequently using cellphones in order to receive key pieces of information or make contact with friends and family at home. This use often highlights either the manufacturer of the phone or at least the network on which it is connected. Near the end of the run of each season, the Top 3 contestants are taken back to their hometowns for a hero's welcome. This week also usually coincides with the week in which either the judges or the producers choose a track for the contestant to perform. Much is often made of the contestant receiving this track, either on a portable music device or at times on an existing mobile device that they have. In later seasons, additional communications technologies have been utilised to demonstrate the possibilities of the technology, with many of them demonstrating an ability to affect the user on an emotional level. In the 2011 season, a clip aired showing the remaining top four contestants video-calling home using MSN Messenger on

Windows 7, speaking to family, sharing video and audio files, and having emotional conversations. In particular, finalist James Durbin was seen speaking to his girlfriend and son, with the latter singing his ABCs back to his dad. This is an affecting moment, at the same time that it clearly works to serve a commercial motive, indicating the ability of these specific technologies to connect people who are geographically separate, and connecting these emotional moments with the technology brand, making it a literal display of affective economics in action.⁶⁸

Cultivation of Celebrity

The *Idol* format generates significant economic value through the construction of celebrity through the contestants. In order to generate sales of music and to promote the related economic transactions, it is important that the audience regards contestants as genuine, authentic pop stars. Significant work has been done on the role of the celebrity in late twentieth-century and early twenty-first century popular culture, with Chris Rojek's 2001 book *Celebrity* being a landmark work in this area (Rojek). Graeme Turner has also highlighted that one of Reality Television's key modes is the development of celebrity, through what he terms the demotic turn, which he describes as "the increasing visibility of the 'ordinary person' as they turn themselves into media content through celebrity culture" ("The Mass Production of Celebrity" 153). Much of the existing academic material on celebrity takes a cultural studies approach, looking at the cultural impact of celebrity and its modes of mediated construction. While some work has discussed the commodification of celebrity (Marshall; Rojek; Turner, "The Economy of Celebrity" 193–96), I am most interested in how celebrity becomes essential to the development of economic opportunities in *American Idol*.

⁶⁸ Interestingly, the choices of who the contestants each speak to also suggests some of the ways in which their individual narrative is being framed, and this particular segment could easily withstand further analysis.

Simon Fuller, the co-creator of *Pop Idol* and the person who has maintained executive control over the international television format, has a self-conscious understanding of the importance of the construction of celebrity to the *Idol* framework. Albert Moran notes his initial success as the manager of musician Paul Hardcastle, and subsequent success as the creator of both the Spice Girls and S Club 7, bands known as much for their members as for their music (Moran, *New Flows in Global TV* 71). Fuller is very aware of the specific machinations which have led to his success, commenting: “My business is creating fame and celebrity” (Mosey, cited in Moran, *New Flows in Global TV* 73). By envisaging the artists as “commodity brands” (Moran, *New Flows in Global TV* 73), Fuller has been able to leverage all the possible commercial opportunities that arise from their celebrity.

Idol is constantly dealing with conflicting imperatives in relation to its contestants and their celebrity. On the one hand, it is critical to the text of the series that the contestants be seen as ordinary in order to inspire identification with the audience; on the other, they must be capable of being seen as prospective stars, so that by the season finale, the winner can emerge as an authentic pop star. As the viewer sees the contestant rise from fellow consumer to star, the celebrity possibilities of the contestant are revealed.⁶⁹ Simultaneously, the ordinary lives of the contestants are presented on screen, showing families, schooling, workplaces, friends, colleagues, and lives. The producers of *American Idol* work very hard to present the contestants both as ordinary and extraordinary, as gifted and hard-working, as lucky and as worthy.

The relationship of *American Idol* to celebrity has changed over the years of the show’s run, allowing the series to create a stronger connection to the music industry and fans. Early seasons

⁶⁹ Key to later seasons has been the self-identification of many contestants as viewers of the series; the opening sequence of the eleventh season includes home-video footage of tenth season winner Scotty McCreery as a child, prophetically announcing himself as the new *American Idol*.

were much more strongly focused on highlighting the meritocracy, the worth of the winners as singers and musicians, so that the winner was not just cast aside as meritless due to their reality television origins. The success of Season 1 winner Kelly Clarkson, who went on to become a significant player in the pop music industry, established the series as a space capable of producing genuinely talented performers who are able to sell albums on a consistent basis. This success, combined with that of season two runner-up Clay Aiken, meant that *Idol* developed more credibility, and so the series was able to shift its focus more to the personal stories and merit of individual contestants, emphasising their initial ordinariness, prior to the development of their star potential.

Obviously, the notion of authenticity is problematic, not only for Reality Television but for the pop music industry in general (Holmes 154–5). *Idol* counters this issue by laying bare the artifice of the construction of the pop star. The producers of *American Idol* ensure that there are elements within the television text which overtly develop the notion of the contestants as stars. ‘Behind-the-scenes’ sequences in the programme show the contestants being styled, choosing outfits, and going through hair and makeup. Some seasons depict the contestants undergoing their first professional photo shoot and being given media training. In later seasons, contestants pay a visit to the offices of celebrity website TMZ.com in order to get advice on how not to appear on their site in a negative light. While this may come across as artificial in many ways, it speaks to the awareness of the audience of the constructed nature of modern celebrity, which audiences understand to involve a process through which all major figures go, and thus, paradoxically, to be an inherent mark of modern celebrity authenticity. In recent years, reality docuseries such as *The Spin Crowd* (2010) and even *Keeping Up With The Kardashians* (2007 – present) have exposed many of the behind-the-scenes elements in the construction of celebrity; they serve as instructional to viewers in appreciating the steps being taken to shape the contestants into viable, authentic celebrities.

The contestants' roles as potential celebrities are also highlighted by their presence in extratextual media texts. During the run of an *Idol* season the contestants are frequently fodder for gossip magazines and websites, discussing everything from their performance in the competition to their family life, relationship status, or sexuality. *Idol* seems to encourage viewers to engage with these sources by avoiding much, if any, discussion of tabloid aspects of contestants' lives during the show itself, but occasionally making reference to incidents, thereby driving viewers to the internet to find out more. When Casey Abrams was admitted to hospital in Season 10, only passing mention was made of his illness, but enough to pique the interest of curious viewers who would want to learn more about his situation. Fans were left to find the details on websites like *The Hollywood Reporter* and *MTV*, legitimising Abrams as both a celebrity and a musician. The contestants' presence in these texts may be fleeting should they be eliminated early in the competition, suggesting that they fall into Rojek's category of the celetooid (20–21). However, the work being done by these paratextual media in developing the aura of authenticity of the contestant-as-celebrity is critical to driving sales of the eventual cultural products which surround the series.

It is important to note that there is a key disadvantage to the competitive reality television formula which still needs to be overcome by networks. Traditionally, one of the main revenue streams for television content has been the ability to sell it into syndication, or at least to gain further revenue by re-airing a series. The market for re-watching older seasons of a competitive series, or for watching it after the fact, would appear to be relatively small. The disinterest in this is possibly best exemplified by the failure of the FOX Reality Channel, which was designed to mainly show re-runs of reality seasons, along with a small selection of original content. The channel launched in 2005, but closed down in early 2010, and it is reasonable to assume that the rationale for ceasing transmission is that it was not achieving enough of an audience. Where the

narratively complex television form actively encourages rewatching and forensic fandom, and therefore can be relatively confident of additional revenue streams through syndication, re-broadcast, and home video sales, the reality form needs to be confident of regaining its investment in its first run, as any subsequent income from the television product itself is uncertain. As opposed to the value of Reality TV format sales, there is not a large international market for the resale of the programming itself, which removes another common source of revenue for mainstream American programming.

Cross-Promotion Opportunities

Although this is not of direct benefit to the producers, the network on which *American Idol* airs in the US, FOX, is able to generate significant interest in its other properties by means of cross-promotion. With *Idol* having been the highest rating series on the network for several years, FOX works very hard to ensure that this popularity is converted to higher ratings for other programming that appears on the network. The simplest way in which this occurs is having host Ryan Seacrest announce at the end of each episode what programme is about to follow, in a direct effort to maintain the audience's attention into the next programme (in a manner very reminiscent of Raymond Williams' traditional notion of flow (Williams)). In addition to this, the practice of displaying watermarks in the lower quadrant of the screen to advertise upcoming programmes has become common across much of primetime television, as this serves to bring content to the attention of a large number of people.

The large audience that attends each live episode of *American Idol* also provides opportunities for the actors or cast of other FOX television series to be seen, and either to be talked to or to be talked about. The appearance of David Boreanaz and Emily Deschanel on *Idol* seemed to serve no purpose other than to allow Ryan Seacrest to mention that the FOX series on which they both star, *Bones*, would be celebrating its 100th episode in the coming week ("David Boreanaz and Emily Deschanel (American Idol 4-6-10)"). Boreanaz and Deschanel were named, displayed, and

situated slightly apart from the rest of the audience, but were not asked to speak or in any way engage with *American Idol* directly. However, such a visit also has the dual function of highlighting to the audience that the *American Idol* studio is an important place, a place where celebrities gather, and giving the audience the feeling that they are part of this place, watching and enjoying the performances on *Idol* while rubbing shoulders with celebrities.

These types of appearances can also work in the opposite direction, exporting *Idol* celebrities to FOX shows rather than importing FOX celebrities to *Idol*. In a 2012 episode of *Hell's Kitchen US* (2005 – present), another FOX reality show, two former finalists from *American Idol*, winner Lee Dewyze (from the ninth season) and Top 3 contestant Haley Reinhart (from the tenth season), were the celebrity guests at the chef's table in the kitchen ("10 Chefs Compete"). While there is nothing in their history on *American Idol* to suggest that they have any culinary expertise, their appearance on the programme establishes them as meaningful celebrities (the celebrity at the chef's table on the other side of the kitchen was David Beckham), raising their individual profiles in a way which might lead to further music or merchandise sales, while it also ensures that *American Idol* is kept in the public consciousness. The two are neither romantically linked nor did they even appear on the same season of *American Idol*, so their appearance on *Hell's Kitchen* seems to have been very highly constructed.

In addition to appearances on other reality series, *Idol* contestants and judges also appear on various talk shows, news shows, and morning shows that air on FOX. These segments often serve as extended advertisements for the series and the cultural products it creates. This includes contestants appearing on talk shows in the days after they are voted off to discuss their time on the show.⁷⁰ This then draws viewers of *Idol* to the affiliated morning shows, in order to get more

⁷⁰ These have included *American Idol Extra* (2006-09) which aired on the FOX Reality network, Ellen DeGeneres' talk show for the year that she was a judge (2010), and *Live with Regis and Kelly* (2011).

insight into the programme itself, and may also serve to bring viewers of the morning shows to the audience of *Idol* in the evenings. It can also be seen to be highlighting the aforementioned celebrity status of the contestants, legitimising their fame through their appearance on these types of shows.

The recent industrial trend towards vertical integration also allows for additional cross-promotion opportunities. The Fox Broadcasting Company, which operates the network on which *Idol* airs, is owned by the Fox Entertainment Group, a large media conglomerate wholly owned by Rupert Murdoch's News Corp. However, the Fox Entertainment Group (FEG) also owns a number of motion picture production and distribution companies, including Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation, Fox Searchlight Pictures, and Fox Studios Australia. In order to leverage the most value from these related holdings, the cast of upcoming films from FEG affiliates often appear in the audience and are highlighted on camera, or speak briefly to Ryan Seacrest. In addition to this, in most seasons the contestants will attend either a movie premiere or a private screening of an upcoming film. Once again, appearing on a red carpet works to assert the celebrity of the *Idol* contestants,⁷¹ but as they inevitably gush over the film and proclaim its brilliance, it serves as an advertisement for the film itself. The 2008 film *Horton Hears A Who!* provides an excellent example, with an *Idol* episode showing the remaining contestants attending the Los Angeles premiere of the film, meeting the stars, walking the red carpet, and later commenting on how much they enjoyed the film. Later in the same episode, *Horton* voice actor Jim Carrey appears in the audience in an elephant costume, mugging for the camera ("S07E21 - Top 12: One Voted Off Live"). Traditional PR images of the contestants on the red carpet are then made available online, and it is very hard to discern whether they are advertising the film or the television series.

⁷¹ There is an additional level of cultural cross-pollination at work here, with Seacrest being well known for conducting red carpet interviews at the major US award shows. His presence on the red carpet with the cast adds an additional level of legitimisation.

Monetising the Audience

Further to the advertising and marketing opportunities which have been opened up by multiple revenue streams linked to mechanisms of celebrity construction, *American Idol* has actively worked to monetise the audience through the show's 'overflow', a term coined by British scholar Will Brooker to describe the engagements with a show outside of the traditional bounds of the airtime ("Living on Dawson's Creek: Teen Viewers, Cultural Convergence, and Television Overflow" 457). One example of this would be the affordances of the AmericanIdol.com website as an official online space for the show. The website carries a lot of additional content: interviews, video footage, photographs, and downloadable content, as well as a space for the fan community, which encourages fans to visit the site frequently to engage with the series and contestants. However, this space also acts as an additional place for advertising and marketing to the audience. The website carries the logos of the three major sponsors (AT&T, Coca-Cola, and Ford) at the top, as well as additional advertising for music from *Idol* alumni. Sharon Marie Ross has highlighted the way in which viewers are encouraged to visit the website in order to be a part of the "social audience" (74), but the underlying goal for producers is to find a way to convert the cultural capital they offer into economic capital for themselves (75). By urging the television viewing audience to visit the website, producers have further opportunities to gather demographic information, to market to viewers, to advertise the extra-textual commercial content available, and to deliver more engaged viewers to their advertising partners.

In addition, the very act of voting for one's preferred contestant is a money-spinner for the *Idol* producers. Voting methods have changed over the run of the show, but as of 2012 there are three main methods: telephone, SMS, and online voting. Firstly, there are toll-free numbers which people can dial from any US telephone number, although these numbers have a tendency to become clogged during periods of high use. Secondly, viewers can use their cellphone to vote by text/SMS, but only if they have a subscription to the US mobile provider AT&T. Jason Mittell

has suggested that the voting information provided willingly by the voters gives the industry an alternate method of “[constructing] the size and engagement of the audience” and highlighting their “active participation” with the show, which justifies the higher costs of advertising throughout the series (Mittell, *Television and American Culture* 92–3). Finally, in recent years, voting has been allowed online, but only if the voter has a Facebook account described as “registered within the Continental U.S., Hawaii, Alaska, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands” (“Frequently Asked Questions - American Idol”). This voting platform, while not costing the viewer anything, most likely means that the network is provided with significant demographic details by Facebook about their most engaged audiences, the voters. This is of further economic value to key sponsors and advertisers, as they are able to see in much greater detail to whom they are advertising, and are able to target their promotions accordingly.

Conclusions – Numerous and Varied Revenue Streams

American Idol has been an undeniable economic success, even if the exact extent of the commercial success is difficult to gauge due to the commercial sensitivity of the information. However, what is most interesting is that the success of *Idol* is not based on having found a single ‘silver bullet’ that makes the show commercially viable, but rather drawing on a number of smaller opportunities which combined create an economic force in the television industry. The benefit of such an approach is that should one area be less successful in any given season, the show does not suffer markedly, since the slack is picked up by other areas. Thus as ringtones become a less attractive commodity due to a shifting consumer market, there is a compensatory improvement in sales of digital tracks of the performances from each week. *Idol* has also been very aware of and open to technological shifts, both in the television and in the music industries, and has adapted to them, rather than trying to reverse or fight against them. Some of the techniques adopted have been resurgences of marketing strategies that date back to the birth of commercial television, such as segment sponsorship and product placement, while others have

been novel and untested, such as a move towards sales of the music content in a number of emergent formats. *Idol* has developed a template for other twenty-first century television programmes, allowing other series and networks to pick and choose the techniques which will work best for their form, and perhaps encouraging them to experiment with new ideas.

What is critical is that *American Idol* is both representative of, and a product of, the era of TVIII. It is constantly grappling with new modes of audience engagement, the increased availability of the audience as well as the fragmentation of content and viewing platforms. It is dealing with the explosion of new televisual formats and sub-genres presented by the rise of reality television, as well as the diversity of content available both locally and online. It has had to compete with a wide variety of entertainment options being made available by the internet, streaming services, peer-to-peer filesharing, and the expansion of cable networks, all of which have a direct economic impact on television production revenues. And in the face of these obstacles, *Idol* has maintained both commercial and ratings success, changing its economic structures to address the shifting audience. By addressing the challenges forced upon it by the shifts of TVIII, *Idol* has shown some of the ways that television economics have shifted since the mid-1990s, which in turn have had an impact on the series as a whole. With *Survivor*, I will look at the interrelations between all these nodes, and the balance which the era of TVIII has required from successful television series.

Survivor: All Together Now

Introduction

The final case study, *Survivor*, is another example of 'blockbuster' reality television, possibly the most successful reality television series ever produced in the United States. *Survivor* is an interesting and important case study because it was initially novel, but has since become paradigmatic of a significant proportion of television broadcast during TVIII. This is particularly true of the competitive elimination sub-genre of reality television, but the tactics developed for *Survivor* have had an impact on other disparate genres as well. The effects of *Survivor* can even be seen in scripted television, with *Lost* owing some of its origins to *Survivor*'s success. While no one series can lay claim to being the single most typical series of the period of TVIII, *Survivor* pulls together many of the key shifts that have occurred throughout this period.

Survivor first aired in 2000 on CBS. It was created and produced by Mark Burnett, based on an existing format created by Charlie Parsons which had been broadcast in Sweden as *Expedition Robinson*. To date, *Survivor* has screened 25 seasons over the past 12 years, and has spawned over 40 regional variants, which, while officially based on the *Expedition Robinson* format, have capitalized on the ratings, and therefore the economic success, of the US series. The original series, *Expedition Robinson*, ran for 13 seasons in Sweden, with a peak in its ratings success in its fourth season that coincided almost exactly with the airing of the first season of *Survivor* in the US. This suggests a certain kind of zeitgeist, or level of general interest amongst the global televisual community in this sort of programming. *Survivor* in the US was an enormous ratings success, especially in its early seasons, with the first season averaging a 12.1/36 share in the 18-

49 demographic,⁷² and peaking at a dramatic 22.8/54 share for the finale. While the second season did not have quite the same peaks, it still averaged a 13.3/33 share, making it the most watched season of *Survivor*, and the highest rated series of the 2000-01 television season in the US. In fact, when looking at the most watched series of the 2000-09 decade, the top 10 spots are all filled by seasons of *American Idol* or *Survivor* (“Decade’s Top 125 Most-Watched TV Shows (2000-2009) | Television Blog”), which itself indicates the importance of reality TV to the emergence of TVIII. However, not all international productions of this format have been a success. The UK version of *Survivor* only ran for two seasons and is usually referred to as a ratings failure, although it rated well against other contemporary reality formats.

The aim of this case study is to draw on a specific season, the twenty-third, known as *Survivor: South Pacific*, in order to highlight *Survivor*’s position within TVIII. This will demonstrate how a discrete season of television can be analysed through the three key conceptual areas presented in this thesis: reception and response, textual production, and economics. The season was first broadcast in the US from mid-September until mid-December 2011, and featured 18 contestants, 16 of whom were competing for the first time and 2 contestants who had appeared on previous seasons and were referred to as returning players. It was the third season to be filmed in Samoa, with the subsequent *Survivor: One World* also being filmed there. However, while this chapter is focused on a specific season, no television series exists in a vacuum, and so it will initially be necessary to understand what happened in previous seasons, and how the text itself has shifted during its run. This chapter will begin with a description of the context of *Survivor*, explaining how it fits within my understanding of the key elements and shifts of TVIII and utilising episodes from the selected season as well as other seasons, where appropriate, in order to demonstrate how the shifts of TVIII might be visible within the text and surrounding paratexts. I argue that a

⁷² This means that Nielsen rates the series as having averaged 12.1 million viewers aged between 18 and 49 (the most valuable demographic), which is 36% of the people aged 18-49 who were watching television at the time.

complete understanding of *Survivor* produces insights that are greater than the sum of its parts, since we can learn more about the series and, indeed, television production as a whole by looking at these concepts holistically, in terms of their interrelations, and how they have driven and impacted each other. Thus, some of the key features of *Survivor* will be used to highlight the complex interrelation of these elements, in order to demonstrate that, while the three nodes of my model are separable as analytic tools, they nonetheless co-exist as inter-dependent elements.

***Survivor* as Reality Television**

Survivor has played a crucial role in the formation of the generic norms of the second generation of reality television, which in turn has inflected our understanding of the reality television industry as a whole. *Survivor* has cemented its place in reality television history by being simultaneously novel, unique, and an aberration. When it first screened, it introduced not only the new form of competitive reality television, but also demonstrated that reality television did not have to be about low production values, a cheap and niche form of television production. However, it has proven to be unique in its success, especially in terms of the ratings of its early seasons, and though many producers have attempted to replicate its success, none have managed to capture the cultural zeitgeist in the manner of *Survivor*. Finally, *Survivor*, similar to several of the other case studies, is simultaneously paradigmatic of the shifting television landscape and aberrant, gaining ratings successes in a time of fragmenting audiences and drawing on formal elements of the early reality television that had come before, while standing apart from it.

While reality series had been on US television since the late 1980s, *Survivor* is the series which Misha Kavka describes as the birth of the second generation of reality programming, an “evolutionary leap” (Kavka, *Reality TV* 75) which saw reality television shift from content with low aesthetic values and production costs to the much larger budgets of *Idol*, *Big Brother*, and

Survivor. Kavka also notes that these series introduced the element of competition to reality television, where previous iterations had usually focused purely on surveillance and observation. While these shifts may not be the only reasons behind the subsequent ratings success achieved by these series, they did mark a fundamental sea change in the way that this sort of programming was seen, both by audiences and by industry. Looking at it from the other direction, the ratings success of these programmes can be seen as one of the major factors in reality television becoming a dominant programming mode in the twenty-first century. Much subsequent reality programming on the American networks, and, indeed, on major channels internationally, has been an attempt to try to recapture the levels of ratings success achieved by these early variants.

Nonetheless, *Survivor* plays a contradictory role as reality television. In many ways, it is the paradigmatic example of TVIII reality television, which matches very closely with the rise of second generation reality television, while at the same time being very different to almost all other television being produced at the time. *Survivor* was one of the few programmes to define the reality boom, providing an early example of many of the shifts that we have come to expect from reality television. It has been responsible for turning some cast members into household names, with former contestants such as Boston Rob and Richard Hatch becoming celebrities within their own right. The series has caused words such as 'blindside' and 'tribal council' to enter the popular lexicon, along with several concepts such as 'being voted off the island' entering common parlance. *Survivor* can also be seen to have mapped out the ways that competitive reality television could function and succeed, giving networks and producers new ways of thinking about the economics of producing television. On the other hand, little of *Survivor* has actually been successfully reproduced: the level of penetration into the popular consciousness has barely been seen outside of these initial blockbusters; the novel economic funding structures of the initial season have not been reproduced elsewhere; and Mark Burnett remains almost unique within the US as a reality television auteur.

Survivor also has a relationship with celebrity, identified earlier as one of the dominant modes of reality television, yet this relationship is atypical for reality television. In the previous chapter, I described reality television's relationship to celebrity as either being in terms of the demotic turn (Turner, *Understanding Celebrity* 83),⁷³ which Turner defines as the need to present participants as ordinary or everyday; or alternatively, playing up the talents and skills of contestants, so that they become believable as celebrity-commodities.⁷⁴ *Survivor* walks a line in between these two positions; the contestants are usually ordinary citizens, although their individual special qualities are often highlighted (e.g., if they played football in college, or have survival skills, or managerial experience). *Survivor* does not specifically use celebrity as an integral element to drive the series, either economically or narratively, but it does utilise several celebrity-based structures which have become important in other reality series. Later seasons have seen *Survivor* involved directly in its own creation of celebrity, deriving the commodification of its stars not from external sources but internally, from within the series. The creation of "All-Stars" seasons allowed for the identification of players who have attracted their own individual fan bases, casting them as special amongst former players and giving them celebrity status. In addition to this, the trope in the latest seasons of bringing back individual "returning players", who often have points to prove, serves to distinguish between the ordinariness of the normal players, and the 'celebrity' nature of those who return. These returning players are often viewed as natural leaders within their tribes, and frequently are positioned as the focal point of the tribe. They often bring skills and knowledge which are advantageous to their new tribe (such as the ability to light a fire, build a shelter, collect water, or fish), and their experience is seen as something to which other

⁷³ See *The Real World*, *Big Brother*, *The Osbournes*, or any other reality series whose conceit revolves around the presentation of the participants as ordinary, everyday people.

⁷⁴ See *American Idol*, *Top Chef*, *The Voice*, or any other competitive reality series that revolves around a vocation, especially those vocations that produce tangible commodities.

contestants should defer. In turn, the deference of the contestants on the series has the subsequent effect of increasing the *Survivor* stars' perceived celebrity in the eyes of the audience.

Mark Burnett as Auteur; Jeff Probst as Face

Mark Burnett's role as *Survivor*'s executive producer is notably aberrant within the television industry. The creators or executive producers of reality television are often almost invisible to the general public and even to fans, with the hosts being the visible point of engagement with the audience. Burnett is an unusual case (with John De Mol being only other main examples) of a reality television executive producer who has a similar level of visibility as that of a showrunner of a fictional TV series, or of a TV auteur. Mary Beth Haralovich and Michael Trosset note that in scripted television series, the writer is the driving force (a role assumed by most showrunners of scripted series), while in reality television the guiding force is the producer (Haralovich and Trosset 77). Burnett's role in developing or identifying successful formats such as *Survivor*, *The Apprentice* (2004 – present), *The Contender* (2005-08), *The Voice* (2011 – present), *Shark Tank* (2009 – present), and *Are You Smarter Than A Fifth Grader* (2007-09) has meant that he is one of the most potent forces in reality television in the US. Vicki Mayer includes Burnett alongside television luminaries such as Norman Lear, Steven Bochco, Aaron Spelling, and Joss Whedon as content creators, encompassing not only their own work, but also the work of their creative and production teams (31). Interestingly, *The Apprentice* is the only one of Burnett's major successes that he actually created; every other success had already existed in a form or format elsewhere. Burnett has shown a keen eye for recognising the potential of different formats, and understanding how they need to be adapted in order to be successful with the US television audience. There is not a lot of generic consistency within Burnett's productions, in the sense of a common theme, although they are almost all competitive reality television, and several use that competition to drive an ongoing narrative. However, Burnett has developed his own fans who follow his productions, which means that networks might consider airing a production based

solely on his name being attached, in the same way that certain showrunners are attractive to networks because of the audience that they bring with them.

Where *Idol*'s Simon Fuller has been notoriously reclusive, happy to be the faceless Svengali, Burnett is known for self-promotion, using his personal narrative as a prominent discourse in discussions with industry and press alike. Burnett's personal history provides him with credibility for a number of his shows. His background in the British paramilitary establishes Burnett as someone with significant survival credentials, and, as he points out in his autobiography, he has become known as a "method producer" (Burnett 34), insisting that he complete anything that he would put reality contestants through himself. This was especially notable in his first reality series, *Eco-Challenge* (1995-2002), which focused on the world of adventure racing. Burnett was known for insisting on competing in every leg and challenge himself, not only to act as a scout, but to prove that it could be done. Moran notes Burnett's self-reliance and his self-description as an "adventurer and businessman" as two elements that construct his star persona (Moran, *New Flows in Global TV* 68). Burnett's experience as a salesman is also something that he emphasises strongly about himself, devoting an entire chapter of his autobiography to his experience learning to be a salesman selling t-shirts on the Venice Beach boardwalk. This ability to understand the psychological elements of sales, to grasp what the consumer wants and present what you have to sell in a way that the consumer believes that they want it, has proved crucial for Burnett, both in selling his product to the television network, and also in shaping a product that audiences want to watch and engage with.

Working in correlation with Mark Burnett as the auteur/showrunner of *Survivor* is the complementary role of Jeff Probst as the face of *Survivor*. Probst fulfils a greater role than that of the average reality host, providing significant structure to each episode, and acting as the authoritative voice of the producers during challenges and tribal councils. In addition, Probst

serves as a form of institutional memory, providing context to moves made in tribal councils and to events that occur during challenges. Having been on *Survivor* since the beginning, attended every tribal council, watched every challenge, and viewed every elimination, Probst provides an encyclopaedic knowledge of the history of the game. In addition, Probst positions himself as *Survivor* fan par excellence, modelling 'good' or 'appropriate' fan behaviour for the audience. Probst is deferential to the contestants and the game, is always present, and in later seasons demonstrates 'appropriate' online engagement by live-tweeting the episodes. Probst's knowledge is, I would argue, subtly contrasted with other forms of fan engagement, such as spoiling. Probst is always seen to be fascinated by the potential outcome, but never tries to guess, instead waiting to read the outcome of the vote.

Probst also operates as the public face of the series, providing continuity from season to season, and frequently appearing in promotional situations alongside Burnett. Where Burnett may be the man behind the curtain, Probst is the smiling, quick-witted front man, appearing in promotional materials, at conferences and on panel discussions, as well as engaging with the audience through multiple strands of social media. In later seasons, Probst has fronted YouTube videos before each season, providing an analysis of key cast members, their attributes, and their chances of success in the game ("Survivor: South Pacific - Jeff Probst Cast Assessment"). Probst won the Emmy award for Outstanding Host for a Reality or Reality-Competition Program for the first four years that the award was given (2008-11 inclusive), suggesting that he has become viewed as the quintessential reality television host. This double front presented by Probst and Burnett beyond the core text creates an interesting dual mode for multiple audiences: there's one front for those who are aware of the industrial context of the series, for whom Burnett becomes a key and iconic figure, and another front for those who engage with the television series as a text (and perhaps some surrounding paratexts), who may not know Burnett, but see Probst as the charismatic front person who guides the series, providing commentary and

continuity. This is not a strict dichotomy, with Probst still being an important figure for those who are familiar with the industrial specifics, and Burnett becoming an additional point of contact and interest for casual fans if they move to deeper levels of engagement. This dual mode allows for multiple levels of engagement with the production, and in many ways provides the series with a sense of authorial responsibility connected to one or the other of these key figures.

The Economics of *Survivor*

Ted Magder has described *Survivor* as “the golden calf”, a series which has generated significant revenue for CBS, while offering them little to no risk (Magder 140).⁷⁵ While *Survivor* now sits more comfortably within a traditional licence-based model for television, the initial economic structure which supported its commissioning raises some ideas for possible future television strategies.⁷⁶ *Survivor* proved to be a tough sell to US television networks, given that it had a relatively high budget, and presented a form of television that was a complete novelty on US networks. Having been repeatedly declined by several networks, Burnett eventually found some interest in the series at CBS, but the executives there were unable to convince CBS president Leslie Moonves that the show was viable enough given the financial risk. This eventually led to the unconventional process of Burnett going out to sell the advertising time himself, to ensure that CBS was financially protected. However, this also meant that Burnett received a cut of the advertising revenue when the show was a financial success, and allowed for a renegotiation of the licence fee to be paid by CBS after the first season, when *Survivor* had proven itself to be one of the most successful shows that season.

⁷⁵ Magder may be mixing the metaphors of the goose that laid the golden eggs and the fatted calf here, but the intention is clear.

⁷⁶ It is important to note that many commentators who have discussed this period emphasise the lack of clear information about Burnett’s negotiations with CBS. However, Bill Carter’s *Desperate Networks* goes into significant detail, and seems relatively credible, given his lack of personal investment in the subject matter (Carter 68–76). Misha Kavka provides a nice account of the differing stories, and concludes, as do I, that the Carter version seems the most believable (Kavka, *Reality TV* 97–98), but it is worth noting that some of the key figures in this story contest its veracity.

Traditionally, networks pay the licence fee to the producers upfront, and then work to recoup their expenditure through selling advertising based on predicted ratings. The license fee is usually lower than the cost of production, with the production company making their profits when the series is sold into syndication, a process known as deficit financing. The new strategy by Burnett and CBS meant that this process was avoided, with Burnett completely covering the cost of production from product placement, and CBS not being as reliant on ratings in order to recoup their expenditure. Jason Mittell suggests that solutions which avoid deficit financing have become common practice for networks and producers of reality television in subsequent years (*Television and American Culture* 91). He also notes, however, that the unusual relationship between Burnett and CBS has not been often repeated, suggesting instead that co-productions between networks and production companies is a preferred way in which to avoid the deficit-financing model for reality programming. The low value of rebroadcast for most reality programming, especially competitive reality, means that a profit usually needs to be made on the initial broadcast. Producers may not get the same sort of returns as those received by Burnett, but it is easier to get a project greenlit under this co-operative model, as the broadcasting network is much less vulnerable in the event of the series not being successful. Also, unusual for competitive reality television, *Survivor* has been sold into syndication, being picked up by the Outdoor Living Network in 2005 (Reality TV World). This provides further opportunities for the series to make money, which is simply profit given that deficit financing has been avoided.

Survivor is one of the few competitive reality television series to have released multiple full seasons on DVD. This sort of post-broadcast revenue stream is not usually available to reality producers, as once the season has finished, the syndication value has greatly diminished due to low rewatchability. However, the intricacies of *Survivor*, and the inherent narrative complexity (which I will discuss presently), provide numerous rewatching pleasures to the audience when

and provide opportunities for a deeper engagement. The DVD releases also provide opportunities for additional paratexts, with some season releases including commentary tracks, as well as behind-the-scenes footage and footage which did not make the final broadcast cut. While this material provides additional value to a DVD release, it can also be seen to add a level of authenticity to the series, a demonstration of the 'reality' of the content. By including material in which contestants discuss their time and experiences, and documentary material showing elements such as food preparation, the producers of *Survivor* work against the perception of the staged nature of the series, and present it more in line with an episodic documentary film.

Similar to *American Idol*, *Survivor* has had significant success with integrating product placement into the text. While the brands cannot be built into the setting, as they are within the *mise-en-scène* economics of *Idol*, the branded products become aspirational, something to be desired, acquired, or utilised. Brand name food products are frequently introduced as rewards for the reward challenges, even if the actual product does not seem particularly appropriate sustenance for someone who has been on subsistence-level nutrition for weeks. However, these products are presented as rewards, prizes for those individuals or tribes who are most athletic, intelligent, or adept at the proffered challenge. By casting these products as rewards or prizes, the desirability of these products is heightened – we can see the effort and energy that is put into attaining them, and so the cultural capital of the brand or product is raised. Alternatively, brand-name products are sometimes introduced as part of the supplies given to the tribes to survive. By providing tools or items with utility value, and then seeing them used in context, *Survivor* acts as a form of infomercial, not just announcing the existence of a product, but demonstrating its use within a contextual situation. Some commentators prefer to see this as product integration, rather than product placement (products being integrated into the diegetic narrative, rather than just appearing on screen), with Burnett himself describing the integrated products as the “17th

character” (cited in Wenner 115), which suggests the level of importance that Burnett places on their presence within the narrative.

The shifts in product placement throughout the series have been instructive, and possibly speak to a shift in the way that product placement is viewed, both industrially and by the audience. In Season one, Episode four, a supply drop is made to the Tagi tribe for winning a reward challenge. The instructions begin, “A store you all know has decided to show some support to the survivors here”. No further mention is made of who this patron is, not even when the crate arrives and is opened. However, on the inside of the crate is the repeated logo of the department store, Target, which would have been familiar to the majority of the *Survivor* audience, or at least the target demographic. This product placement is subtle, almost unspoken; it is not necessarily subliminal, but still makes clear to viewers who the contestants can thank for their good fortune. The second season saw Target providing luxury items as well as necessities to the winners of a reward challenge, although this time significantly more was made of it. Target was mentioned by name repeatedly, and the survivors were given a catalogue to look through to select the items they wanted or needed, suggesting a level of ‘appropriate consumerism’. In addition to these selected items, Jeff Probst also announced that Target had provided gifts of some basic toiletries, suggesting almost a level of altruism rather than the underlying capitalist drivers for this sort of brand integration. The overall value and quantity of product placement in the second season of *Survivor* increased substantially, going from US\$1 million dollars’ value to US\$12 million (Magder 148). Later rewards included a ‘picnic’ consisting of Doritos and Mountain Dew, neither of which would seem to provide the sort of nutrients that the survivors require to subsist in the Australian Outback. However, it is interesting that in a previous episode, one of the survivors (Tina) had commented on how much she missed Doritos (“S02E03 - Trust No One”). It is unclear whether this was prompted, or was just selected from the hours of footage given that it name-dropped a sponsor.

There are also occasions where the reward is something to be used not during the series, but afterwards, which can create its own set of narrative issues and dramatic possibilities. The prizes of a car, or a Visa card, are of significantly higher monetary value than those previously available, but provide no real assistance in winning the game, as opposed to the food and tools rewards, which have a 'diegetic' value within the game environment. The sole purpose of these rewards is to provide narrative drive, in the form of heightened stake, but with delayed gratification. The rewards have a significantly different meaning to the contestants when they have no direct impact on one's survival in the game; however, that does not mean that they cannot have an indirect effect. In an incident that has become infamous among *Survivor* fans, in the fourteenth season, set in Fiji, contestant Yau-man successfully won a reward challenge, with the prize being a 2008 Ford Super Duty truck. However, having won the prize, Yau-man announced that he wanted to try to make a deal, offering the truck to another contestant, Dreamz, on the understanding that should they both reach the final four, and should Dreamz win individual immunity, then Dreamz would surrender the immunity to Yau-man. Dreamz accepted the deal, and although it seemed an unlikely series of events, it eventuated that both Yau-man and Dreamz made the final four, and Dreamz did indeed win the individual immunity. Dreamz eventually chose to renege on the deal and did not surrender his immunity, keeping the truck and seeing Yau-man voted out. Throughout the course of these machinations, the name and brand of the truck were constantly repeated, and a vehicle which otherwise could have had no position within the series was built into the narrative of the season. Dreamz also spoke about his need for the vehicle himself, as part of his justification for reneging on the deal, thereby reinforcing the positive qualities of owning such a vehicle and imbuing the consumer object with perceived desirability.

By the time Season 23 of *Survivor* was produced, the attitude to product placement appears to have shifted. The subtlety identified in Season 1 is long gone, with one of the incidences of product placement in Season 23 being particularly blatant, even to the point of leaving the viewer feeling somewhat uncomfortable. At the same time, however, there are basically only two obvious moments of product placement in the season, with one being the appearance of the Sprint phone in Episode 13 which is used to show the survivors messages from home, as has become a regular occurrence in every season (“S23E13 - Ticking Time Bomb”). The other is the integration of the film *Jack and Jill* (2011) into the seventh episode. Although this integration follows earlier tactics by being presented as a reward, it feels crasser than almost any other previous reward offering.⁷⁷ The winning tribe is taken to a purpose-built cinema, invited to partake in traditional cinema food and drink (presented without brand names), and then shown the film as an “exclusive sneak peek”. When the reward is announced by Probst, he ties the central themes of the film to the task at hand: “*Jack and Jill* is about a brother and a sister... he doesn’t always get along with his sister, but in the end, he realises that he needs his twin sister in order to survive in the world. It’s the same out here for you guys. It is the bonds that you make in this tribe that help you survive in this game and get to the end” (“S23E07 - Trojan Horse”). The tribes are then separated into pairs of “twins” who have to work together in order to achieve their goal. This differs from most challenges, as the reward drives the shape and purpose of the challenge; the sponsor’s product intrudes on the integrity of the programme, rather than simply having competitive and diegetic implications. The ‘twin’ analogy here seems to be rammed home in a manner that is distinctly unsubtle, and is perhaps exacerbated by the subsequent portrayals and editing of the footage of the winning tribe ‘enjoying’ their reward. There are shots of the tribe laughing in a way which seems forced, including a telling shot of Rick laughing hysterically while in the row behind him, Sophie’s face is completely expressionless. The viewer is effectively

⁷⁷ It is important to acknowledge that the sense of crassness of this product placement may be exacerbated by the subsequent negative critical reception of the film, as well as the fact that the film content itself is crass comedy.

reminded that the success of *Survivor* (and of reality television as a whole) depends on putting people in a situation where they actually feel the emotions they exhibit, rather than having non-actors attempt to produce such emotions on a director's cue. When contestants are called upon to exhibit a specific reaction, the outcome can feel fake and uncomfortable to the viewer.

The most interesting moment of all, however, comes in a speech from Coach which sounds like it was edited down from a much longer statement:

Jack and Jill... loved it... I love Adam Sandler... personally, I'm a fan... It was good because it was funny, but at the same time there was a message, and the message was, hey, family comes first. It's a great message for us to be reminded, that going into these days to come it will get tough, it will get to be a point of compromise, but we have to be uncompromisable as a unit, unbreakable, that's what our tribe is, and now we're ready to play the second half of this game. ("S23E07 - Trojan Horse")

Coach's choice of the term 'compromise' seems too convenient to be coincidence; he has obviously been prompted to speak about the film, and I would guess he has been encouraged to be complimentary. His word choice around his fandom of Sandler seems defensive, even apologetic, as if to provide context for why he might have enjoyed a film that otherwise seems not to fit with his self-characterization throughout the season. His assertion that the tribe needs to be "uncompromisable" seems particularly ironic when he is simultaneously providing promotion for a film he may or may not have genuinely enjoyed. Whereas in previous seasons, enjoyment of a sponsor's product is demonstrated by the contestants and has seemed to be genuine, particularly when tied to the survivors' subsistence-level conditions, appreciation for a film becomes a matter of taste, with enjoyment needing to be spoken rather than demonstrated. This leaves the survivors literally taking part in an infomercial, and the crossing of genres makes the viewing experience forced and uncomfortable. Everything about this scenario feels artificial, from the bizarrely constructed cinema which is out of place nestled amongst palm fronds, to the insertion of trailer-like film footage into the episode, to the highly edited interview sequences

and cutaway shots of the contestants watching the film. The episode becomes a set-up for the product placement, rather than the product being integrated into the narrative of the episode.

The choice of this product as one of the few brands to feature on the season is interesting. The time delay between production and airing means that the episode would have been shot many months in advance of it being screened, meaning that the timing of the release of the film needed to be carefully matched to the screening date of the episode. There would have been very little point in this piece of product integration if the film had opened several weeks before the episode aired, or if it was broadcast too far in advance of the film. In addition, the advanced screening of the episode means that a cut of the film must have been available many months before the release, which is not always the case. It is not ever made clear whether what the contestants saw was actually a full version or a final cut of the film. Finally, the choice to promote another media product is also interesting. The film is produced by Columbia Pictures and, although they are no longer directly affiliated with CBS, there still appears to at least be some marketing synergies at play. This may not be the same level of vertical integration seen between *American Idol* and the related businesses of FOX, but the connection is still striking.

The other obvious piece of product integration in the season is the aforementioned Sprint phone, which provides videos from home to the remaining survivors. The arrival of the phone is announced excitedly by Brandon as “Everybody! We got Sprint tree-mail”, automatically placing the branding as significant (“S23E13 - Ticking Time Bomb”). The phone is contained within a bamboo container emblazoned with the logo, which is always directed towards the camera, in a similar manner to the Coca-Cola cups on the *Idol* judges’ desk. As the contestants begin to play their videos from home, the camera is aimed at the phone itself, always positioned so that the Sprint logo at the top of the phone can be seen beside the messages. In non-branded scenarios, the traditional editing technique would be to show the video playing within the diegetic reality,

and then to cut to the video being broadcast directly to the viewer's screen. However, in order to maintain the view of the sponsor's logo, and possibly also to demonstrate the video quality of the phone, the audience's view of the videos is always mediated by the phone. Using the branded product to show the videos from home is easily aligned with Jenkins' notion of affective economics, as discussed in the preceding chapter. Receiving contact from home is an incredibly charged moment in every season, one where the viewer is encouraged to feel the emotion of each survivor very strongly. By tying this brand to such an emotional moment, the audience is encouraged to connect these sorts of positive emotions with the brand itself. The affective connection with the brand object continues a little later in the episode, when the phone is returned to the contestants who have won the right to spend time with their loved ones. The survivors are exhorted by Jeff Probst to take the phone and "capture these memories", once again tying the technology to the possibility of savouring these happy moments. The survivors take photos of themselves with their loved ones, and once again, Coach steps up to provide some brand messaging, this time apparently more spontaneous: "This phone fricking rocks, man!", before expounding on a few features of the phone. Of course, there is a bizarre anomaly in this moment of product integration, in that the product being displayed and utilised is never once used for its primary function, that of actually making a telephone call. Instead, it is the ancillary features which are displayed, but the fact that it is nonetheless used to receive communications, especially from friends and relatives that the contestants miss, makes it a successful moment of affective engagement for ultimately economic purposes.

Interestingly, this example of product integration seems a lot less crass than the *Jack and Jill* example a few episodes earlier. There are a couple of possible reasons for this. Firstly, the emotional connection of the survivors to the experience of the Sprint phone seems a lot more genuine than the connection to the film, which seems extraneous and out of place. The phone provides something which is craved by the survivors, as opposed to the film, which actually feels

secondary to the thrill provided by the accompanying food and drink. Secondly, the film does not speak for itself, requiring the contestants to speak positively about it, as opposed to the phone, which is seen to be used in an emotionally charged atmosphere. The screening of *Jack and Jill* is in direct contrast to a similar reward from Season 20 (also set in Samoa), where three contestants win a reward to visit Robert Louis Stevenson's house and enjoy cinema food while watching the original Lionel Barrymore film of *Treasure Island* (1934). Here, there is no attempt made to tout the film itself, which in fact becomes secondary to an ongoing narrative regarding a clue to an immunity idol placed in the house. It does not even appear that the use of the Robert Louis Stevenson House is necessarily paid promotional consideration, although it is possible that it could be part of an agreement with the Samoan government or Tourism Authority to attract visitors to the country. The experience feels organic, unforced, and is in direct opposition to the impression created for the viewer by the *Jack & Jill* reward. I suggest that it is significant that this integration of a film trailer into the *Survivor* reward system has appeared only the one time on the show.

***Survivor* as Live Event**

While the airing of any given episode of *Survivor* (with the exception of the season finale) happens months after its recording, the series still works as 'live television'. There is no pretence that episodes are live, with a three-day period being covered in a 42-minute episode screened once every seven days, but the series still manages to encourage viewers to watch live, as if the episode were happening as it aired. This establishes a close analogy between *Survivor* and a live sporting event. The similarities are striking, and perhaps point towards some of the success that *Survivor* has had as broadcast television. While each episode has a structure which is predictable, the actual outcome is unpredictable, as it is not scripted. Every episode has a 'result', a key piece of information which the entire episode leads up to, which could be seen as the climax or the reason for watching the full episode. In many ways, being aware of this 'result' in advance would

make watching the episode redundant, or at least shift the site of pleasure. Thus, viewers are encouraged to watch 'live', at time of airing, or risk being spoiled.

Misha Kavka has noted the similarities between the temporality of certain types of television programmes, including reality television and the live sporting event. Specifically, she notes that there is a "zone of liveness" within which any given recording needs to be watched, before it becomes "old news" and is superseded (Kavka, *Reality Television, Affect and Intimacy* 17). This may partially be due to the weekly nature of reality television; once you have watched the subsequent episode, there is little incentive to return to watch the missed episode. Kavka suggests two specific pleasures that are present in 'watching live', meaning at the moment of broadcast. The first is the pleasure most commonly associated with sporting events, that of finding out the result as it happens. The "unpredictability of proto-climactic events" means that there is always doubt throughout the episode as to what the final result may be, and as suggested above, watching forearmed with that knowledge significantly changes the effect (*Reality Television, Affect and Intimacy* 17). Kavka's second pleasure, however, invokes the knowledge that the pleasure of watching is shared when watching live, with a substantial imagined community. This ability to subsequently discuss what has aired with others who have seen it makes one feel part of a broader community, as the experience is shared, even if the viewer is alone at the time of viewing. However, this pleasure is also restricted to the "zone of liveness", as once a new episode or match has aired, then the conversation moves forward and becomes focused on the most recent event. There are connections to be made here to the previous case studies: *American Idol* clearly is restricted to the zone of liveness, given that it goes to air live in one of the time zones,⁷⁸ and has further impetus to engage live provided by the call to action of voting for your favourite contestant. In addition to these, *Lost* provided some

⁷⁸ Oddly enough, despite being filmed in Los Angeles, US geography means that *Idol* goes to air live on the East Coast, and is shown delayed on the West.

impetus to watch the series within the zone of liveness, as otherwise, viewers were excluded from the fan discussions which existed around the series across social media. Fans also run the risk of being spoiled the longer they have to wait to watch an episode, a serious concern for many viewers in both reality and narratively complex television.

***Survivor* audiences**

When discussing *Lost*, I examined the tiering of fans and audiences in terms of their depth of engagement and responses to the series. This allows for the differentiation between mass and niche audiences of the same text, as well as a more nuanced understanding of the different forms of engagement which fans might have. These different forms of engagement become very important to the industry, as producers need to work to activate these groups in different ways. However, it is not simply in relation to cult texts such as *Lost* that we can consider this tiering of audience engagement. There are multiple levels on which viewers engage with any given television series, and *Survivor* is no exception. Just as with *Lost*, viewers may choose to participate only by watching episodes of the series as they are broadcast, but there are numerous additional levels of reception and response with which they might participate, deepening their engagement and thus their affective investment in the series.

The mass audience is the broadest level on which to consider *Survivor* viewers. By achieving an average 36 share of the 18-49 demographic across its first season ("*Survivor* (CBS) - Summer 2000"), *Survivor* reached an astounding breadth of people across the US. Traditionally, received wisdom about television would mean that *Survivor* could be understood as "lowest common denominator" (LCD) programming, usually referring to broad, unchallenging programming designed primarily to be inoffensive and to appeal to the widest variety of demographics while alienating the fewest. However, I would argue that *Survivor* does not fit into this understanding; rather, *Survivor* adds layers of complicated strategies, rapid changes in plot direction and pace,

intricate machinations, and an acknowledgement to viewers that they are seeing only some of what has happened, leaving them uncertain, right up until the votes are counted at tribal council, which way the decision will go. This uncertainty keeps viewers watching, but also encourages them to be more engaged than traditional LCD programming, discouraging the 'dip-in, dip-out' mode of viewing which typifies much programming designed for a broad audience viewership. Arguably, this may have the effect of maintaining ratings week to week, as audiences do not want to miss out on crucial information.

As well as attracting a broad audience, *Survivor* is also notable for engaging and activating a strong and devoted fanbase, although it is arguable whether the series can take credit for this, or whether the agency for this should be given to the fans. The ways in which the producers of *Survivor* have chosen to engage with their fans, or have encouraged their fans to engage, have shifted over the run of the series, but that is to be expected given the shifts in technology that occurred across this period. One shift that has been particularly notable was the drive to encourage fans to participate and engage with the series and with each other on social media. Unlike formats such as *Idol* and *The X Factor*, the audience has no means of directly engaging with or affecting the voting or eviction process, and so engaging socially provides at least some sense of empowerment. An addition to many of the later seasons (initially in the first All-Stars season, but consistently from *Survivor: China* onwards) was the introduction of the fan favourite award, an award with a variable prize which is voted for by the *Survivor* audience. This would appear to be an acknowledgement of the desirability of giving fans a feeling of being engaged and empowered.

Fans of *Survivor* were some of the earliest to understand and make use of the collective power of the internet. Henry Jenkins' work on spoiler communities around *Survivor* clearly shows the organisational potential seen by fans of the series in working together to utilise any skills or

privileged access that they had in order to try to 'beat' the producers (*Convergence Culture* 25–58). These attempts to discover key information about the series before it airs can be seen as working directly in opposition to the unpredictable nature of the outcome of the series, which is one of the series' dominant narrative features. Jenkins' work demonstrates just how ready fan groups were to adopt the internet as a space for discussion, analysis, shared enjoyment, and community-forming. One of the things which seems to have allowed them to come together is a "common enemy", a perceived opponent against whom they are competing. With the idea of fans competing against the producers,⁷⁹ represented by Mark Burnett, battle lines are immediately drawn and fans, especially those interested in spoiling, come together with a common goal – to try to discover what will happen in the season before the producers can air it. This is generally in opposition to the fan-producer relationship in Cult television viewing, where the producer is seen as a collaborator, a co-conspirator. However, in some instances, that relationship could be seen as antagonistic, such as when a showrunner makes a narrative decision which upsets the fanbase, or in the case of Ronald D. Moore, the showrunner of *Battlestar Galactica* (2004-09), makes a creative decision which impacts on a space which the fans see as their own (Scott). Moore created a series of webisodes which filled a narrative gap left in the season finale of the second season, a space which fans had already been filling with their own work, and which left some feeling that their material had been invalidated by an overreaching creative (Scott 213–15).

Such instances of fan/producer antagonism are not uncommon; while some forms of fan engagement are encouraged and stimulated by producers, others are seen to go too far,

⁷⁹ This is interestingly compared to a decision made in the 16th season (*Survivor: Micronesia*), which was also known as "Fans vs Favorites", as it featured 10 fans of the series as one tribe, competing against 10 returning contestants. We can see the same metaphor of fans being put up against 'the production', although in this circumstance the production is represented by former contestants instead of the producers. Of course, another reading would allow for the fact that all contestants are competing against the producers, and so by allowing the fans to fill the role of contestants, this is being played out in full.

potentially impacting on intellectual property owned by the producers, or in other ways impacting the producers' ability to monetise their content. Simone Murray has described the way that producers find themselves in "the paradoxical position of seeking to generate maximum emotional investment by consumers in a given content brand, but of needing to corral such emotional attachment into purely consumptive—as opposed to creative—channels" (10). However, fans are not a group so easily corralled; Henry Jenkins describes fans generally as "out of control" and "rogue readers" ("Star Trek Rerun, Reread, Rewritten" 86). Fans often feel a level of ownership over the objects of their fandom, which creates tension with producers who claim a legal ownership. Derek Johnson has described this in terms of "fan-tagonism", highlighting the struggle which perpetually exists between how audiences evaluate, discuss, and engage with the text, and producers' proscriptive ideals about appropriate audience engagement (D. Johnson, "Inviting Audiences In -- The Spatial Reorganization of Production and Consumption in 'TVIII'" 63–4). This tension is best exemplified through the struggles that have surrounded user-produced content, with producers asserting legal intellectual property ownership of the content and characters, and users affirming an imaginative right to the storyverses that they see themselves as sustaining through their engagement with the official textual material. Attempts by producers to assert intellectual property rights and shut down fan-created websites which host fan fiction or fan art have been met with angry responses by fans, and sometimes with boycotts or other attempts to affect the companies economically (Heilman 319–20). Social media has also opened up spaces for fan-tagonism; Myles McNutt has written several pieces on the possibilities and pitfalls that Twitter offers drama showrunners, especially in relation to antagonistic relationships with both fans and critics (McNutt, "Replying with the Enemy"; McNutt, "The Personal Stakes of Social Media"). McNutt notes that these antagonisms have gradually led to at least two high profile showrunners leaving Twitter, even if only temporarily, and, as such, the interactions may not have the same outcome of creating stronger fan communities such as those created by Burnett's adversarial relationship with fans.

Survivor has some unusual limitations in terms of possibilities for producer-approved fan engagement. As previously suggested, fans are not able to directly engage with the events of the series, nor are there many opportunities for economic engagement with the series. The opportunities for merchandising are relatively limited. CBS features some basic forms of merchandise in their online store, including replica buffs (the headscarves which identify contestants as belonging to a specific tribe), some clothing items, a replica voting pen, and perhaps most oddly, a life-sized standee of Jeff Probst (“CBS Store | Survivor”). It is perhaps the lack of these traditional economic and communicative engagements that leads the producers to encourage the variety of forms of social media engagement that they do, such as encouraging discussion on Twitter during the live broadcast, and providing extra video material on YouTube. As previously discussed in the *Idol* case study, social media engagement has the additional benefit of creating an audience that is visible to advertisers, helping to justify the high costs of advertising during the live broadcast or, in the case of *Survivor*, the high cost of production.

In later seasons of *Survivor*, the producers have appeared to make an effort to demonstrate what they see as ‘model fan behaviour’. The series frequently features contestants who have watched the previous seasons, as might be expected, and several contestants who self-identify as fans of the series. In the 23rd season, Cochran is exemplary of this kind of character, given his status as both audience member and contestant. However, Cochran is positioned slightly differently from many of the other viewers who become contestants, self-identifying as a “super-fan”. I believe that Cochran is intentionally positioned as a fan to demonstrate what the producers see as ‘appropriate’ forms of fan engagement. Cochran is very much presented as an ‘academic’ fan of *Survivor*, with the fact that he had used *Survivor* as a case study in an essay written at Harvard Law School listed as his credentials for posing a threat within the game. On his profile on the CBS website, Cochran describes the essay as being “one of the few times in my life where my personal

interests and academic obligations coincided perfectly” (“Survivor Cast: John”). Cochran is able to immediately identify Coach and Ozzy, the returning players, when they arrive, and he knows exactly how many times each has played. He also announces that he has a buff collection, demonstrating to the audience the ‘appropriate economic engagement’ of a fan. His fandom is expressed right up to the end of the season; when he is addressing the final three as a member of the jury, his opening statement is “More than anyone else in this game, I am such a fan of Coach” (“S23E15 - Loyalties Will Be Broken”). His fandom, both of the series and of individual players, is presented as simultaneously excessive, as much fandom is in popular discourse, but also as an appropriate channelling of these excesses. The message is clear: if you are going to participate in the excesses of fandom, this is the ‘right’ way to do it.

Survivor has to walk the line between mass audience and fandom very carefully. Its nature as reality television and its ratings success mean that it needs to ensure continued mass popularity, attracting the broadest possible audience; simultaneously, the engaged fanbase that it has cultivated over the years must be developed and encouraged, in order to foster the additional revenue streams which have made *Survivor* such an economic success. Thus, *Survivor* performs a level of bi-modal address, maintaining a traditional appeal, albeit one that it has helped to codify, while simultaneously speaking to fan audiences on multiple levels that may not be apparent to casual viewers.

***Survivor* as Narratively Complex**

Seriality and narrative complexity become crucial attributes of *Survivor*. While they are unusual within the realm of reality television, these aspects of *Survivor* are interesting in the ways in which they conform to notions of scripted programming within TVIII. In keeping with Jason Mittell’s definition of narrative complexity, *Survivor* rejects the need for plot closure at the end of each episode; while we see contestant eliminations in each episode, these are simply stepping

stones on the path to the final episode, where the sole survivor is crowned (“Narrative Complexity” 32–33).⁸⁰ Where Mittell suggests that narratively complex drama can be distinguished from the seriality of soap opera by a focus on plot developments rather than a focus on relationships, I would argue that the complexity of *Survivor* can be found in between these two positions. Relationships in *Survivor* are certainly at the forefront, as it is the alliances and tribes which drive the narrative; however, a complex plot also runs through each season, hinging around the various possibilities that could play out with each immunity challenge and tribal council, and the complexities that have led to that point in the game. Although the series is edited to create a tightly structured, plot-driven narrative, Haralovich and Trosset point to what they describe as the “essential unpredictability” of the plot of *Survivor* (Haralovich and Trosset 76). This unpredictability adds to the narrative complexity of the series; viewers are aware of the fact that things may not play out the way one might expect from a scripted series, as there is always an element of chance, which in turn allows for yet another level of narrative complexity. *Survivor* may be heavily structured by the now familiar cycles of reward challenges, immunity challenges, and tribal councils, along with what Kavka and West have identified as the “diurnal cycle” which underpins the passing of time within the game (Kavka and West 146), but these overarching structures still allow for the individual strategies and machinations which lead to the complex and unpredictable narrative of *Survivor*. It is almost never made clear to audiences who will be eliminated prior to a tribal council; there is always a possibility that someone will shift their allegiances and vote a different way in order to better improve their own chances. In addition, the possibility of the use of an immunity idol is always a spectre, both for the contestants and for the audience, with the pause after Probst’s invitation to the contestants to play an idol if they have it always providing a moment of tension. The structure of tribal council,

⁸⁰ While ostensibly the sequence of contestant eliminations leading to a single winner may seem to mirror the narrative drive of *Idol*, *Survivor* differs as it is the votes of the contestants themselves which decide the elimination, thus making the ongoing internal political machinations of the group vitally important across the arc of the season.

with Probst leading a discussion of recent events with the contestants, can also lead to contestants misspeaking and giving away plans, as well as to last-ditch efforts for contestants to sway the vote. All of this leads to a complex layering of motivations and interactions which, combined with the air of unpredictability, imbues the final minutes of every episode with the intrigue of complexity. Moreover, narrative complexity can be bigger than any individual episode, keeping storylines and tribal machinations running across an entire season, as in complex drama series.

***Survivor* as Quality television**

Survivor provides an interesting model for understanding how notions of Quality television can be applied to programming that does not fit into the traditional definition of this concept, i.e. hour-long fictional dramas. While both narrative complexity and the Quality television label have been applied almost exclusively to a particular type of drama, the move to create reality programming which can also be understood as Quality television helps to strengthen the utility of the concept for understanding the shifts of TVIII. As discussed in previous chapters, different definitions of Quality television exist, most notably those espoused by Jane Feuer, Robert J Thompson, and Janet McCabe and Kim Akass (Feuer, Kerr, and Vahimagi; Thompson; McCabe and Akass). Despite the narrow view of Quality television put forward by Thompson, it is his definition that proves to be most useful, since it provides a list of possible elements that the category might draw on or demonstrate. Thompson's definition does not have to be applied exclusively to the intended canon of texts, but can be used for analysing all television. While Feuer's understanding of Quality can certainly be extended to encompass reality television, as shown by some of her recent work (Feuer), her insistence that the target demographic defines Quality creates a very different understanding of which texts might be encompassed by the concept.

Drawing on Thompson's definitions of Quality, we can see a number of these are directly applicable to *Survivor* (Thompson 13–16). Thompson suggests that Quality television can be identified by “not [being] regular TV” (13). From its inception, *Survivor* has never been regular television, providing something novel to American audiences, both by drawing on a format which was exceedingly new to American primetime, and by inviting the audience to focus more intensely when viewing than had been required by previous reality TV programmes and much previous primetime content, in order to gain more from the series. Another one of Thompson's criteria met by *Survivor* is the large ensemble cast present in this form of reality television, which requires audiences to track a very large number of interpersonal relationships that prove vital to the plot of *Survivor*. Usually starting with between 16 and 20 contestants, viewers need to monitor the internal politics of each tribe, be aware of alliances and potential betrayals, as well as think ahead to how these machinations might play out when the tribes eventually merge. This number of main “characters” is almost unheard of in fictional television, with the exception of soap operas.

Survivor: South Pacific gives a clear example of the size of *Survivor* casts, and how the series might manage their introductions and portrayals. The season opens with the immediate introduction of two contestants familiar to regular viewers of past seasons, the returning players Coach and Ozzy. These two characters are accompanied with footage of their previous performances, as well as their own personal opinions about where they went wrong, and what they might do to ‘redeem’ themselves with a second chance. Following this, new contestants are introduced and talk about themselves. At this stage, we are not even told their names, but we are provided with various personality attributes which might give us a way of remembering them. We meet characters who identify themselves in terms of their fandom of the series, their ancestry, their preparedness, their awareness of the game, and their connection to past contestants. When the opening credits subsequently roll, they include footage of each contestant, accompanied by

their name, but it is the contestants who have already shown some of their personality who stick with the viewer. Once all the contestants are gathered on the beach, and the returning players have arrived by helicopter, Jeff Probst begins to talk to them, but calls out the “woman in the front” and asks her to give her name. By making it clear that he also does not know the contestants’ names (although he could easily have learned them), Probst puts himself in the position of the viewer coming to grips with a large group of people for the first time. When he asks Cochran for his name, he first gives it as John, but then asks Probst to call him by his surname, Cochran, as for him that indicates that Probst sees him as one of the greats. Through this, his name is emphasised, and he becomes a character that will be remembered. All of these are strategies on the part of the producers and even contestants that help the viewer manage the large number of characters they are immediately faced with in the first episode. As the episode continues, the first challenge is purely focused on the returning players, emphasising their importance and their memorability. Once the tribes return to their camps, more personal attributes are established, as are their names, which aids in remembering them. By the time the contestants reach tribal council, key members of each tribe are identified by name, but many of the others are identifiable more by character tropes. Some contestants have not really been discussed at all, as they did not contribute much to the narrative of the first episode; these characters gradually get more screen time over the subsequent episodes.

Thompson includes memory as a crucial element of his definition of Quality television, referring to the introduction of seriality into primetime dramas. The rise of Quality dramas meant that viewers were expected to remember elements of episodes and seasons that had come before, not only to make sense of plot but also to understand the characters and their development. We can see how important this is to *Survivor*, as each episode in a season of *Survivor* requires a memory of the many discussions and machinations that have come before. Furthermore, as new contestants on the show come to it with a history of watching the series themselves, it adds an

additional level of remembering. Kavka has identified the way in which fans become a part of the game, being cast on the show and bringing with them their knowledge of the series (*Reality TV* 99). I would suggest that the great majority of fans, who are never cast on the series, equally bring their knowledge of the series to each new season, and apply it in their own attempts to guess where the season might go. Both contestants and audiences come to each new season of the series with an understanding of the basic components (hidden immunity idols, the merge between tribes, blindsides, double eliminations, the jury) and memory plays into how they interpret the game. The proof of the effect of memory can be seen in rewatching the first season of *Survivor* once one is already familiar with the series. Watching the contestants in the first season attempting to negotiate the game with no template and no understanding of the framework of the game or how it can be played demonstrates just how much of a factor memory is in subsequent seasons. Compared to later seasons, the votes seem to be very disparate, frequently seeing 4 or 5 people receiving at least one vote, with alliances considered to be 'not in the spirit of the game'. Even ten episodes in, Kelly still announces, "I didn't want to be part of the alliance, because I thought it was conniving and dirty and untrue to myself", whereas only a season or so later alliances have become completely commonplace, and accepted as an integral part of the game.

The producers then counteract the memory and knowledge of previous seasons that contestants bring by adding in additional elements (Redemption Island, early merges, more than two tribes) in order to keep the series innovative for both audiences and contestants. In addition, recent seasons have seen the return of previous contestants, an innovation in the format, which once again inspires the use of memory. Knowing how contestants have acted in previous seasons colours the way that both audiences and fellow contestants see them. This was most clearly visible in the "Heroes vs Villains" season, where past contestants were selected based on their behaviour in previous seasons, and audience reactions to them. By immediately being separated

into these binary categories, expectations of their behaviour were set, although some confounded these expectations to some extent.

The twenty-third season of *Survivor* is one which relies heavily on the notion of memory. The appearance of returning players certainly draws on memory of their previous seasons, not just for the audiences but also for the players. When the returning players are introduced, Cochran, identified as the 'super-fan', is immediately able to say how often each of the returning players has played, and demonstrates a detailed knowledge of their past exploits on the series throughout his time on the show. There are repeated references throughout the season to how things have worked for the returning contestants during their previous iterations. When Coach is telling Brandon that he needs to trust the people of his alliance, Brandon asks him how that has worked out for him in the past, showing awareness that Coach had been betrayed by his alliance in past seasons. Near the end of the season, Albert also draws strongly on the memory of previous seasons of *Survivor* that have featured Coach: "If you just follow Coach's traditional playbook, conventional wisdom would tell you, he'd be interested in maybe bringing Ozzy to the end, y'know, he always wants to say 'I've surrounded myself with the strongest player', and it's undeniable Ozzy has played the strongest game" ("S23E15 - Loyalties Will Be Broken").

Knowledge based on memory becomes integral to the series, as it impacts voting strategies of contestants, based on their own and their competitors' performances in previous seasons, rather than just their current experiences.

Jeff Probst's role as the site of institutional memory is consistently visible throughout this season. He is constantly making remarks which evoke the history of the game and encourage viewers and contestants to recall events from past seasons. Probst is able to comment on what has previously happened on *Survivor* and keeps track of excellent performances over time, such as a 'Survivor' record for most weight carried in a specific challenge ("S23E04 - Survivalism"). He is also able to

provide qualitative historical commentary, such as with the departure of Brandon, when Probst comments, “Brandon, 36 of the most emotional, wearing-it-on-your-sleeve days I’ve ever seen anybody go through out here” (“S23E15 - Loyalties Will Be Broken”). Unlike presenters on other reality shows, Probst’s longevity means that he is able to fit any incident in the game within the context of all preceding seasons, able to draw on his experience of 22 previous seasons of tribal councils and challenges, and provide contextualisation and critique of what has happened. This fills a dual role, providing an example of how both contestants and audiences can and should draw on existing knowledge in order to understand events, but also serving as commentator, narrator, guide and historian for those viewers who have not seen every episode of every season.

While Mark Burnett does not come from the “quality pedigree” which Thompson associates with Quality television programs, he has developed a role not dissimilar to that of Stephen Bochco, as alluded to by Thompson, i.e. having created a series that is seen as innovative and different. His role as executive producer is a lot more hands-on than might be expected for reality or even fictional programmes; as previously discussed, his insistence on putting himself through whatever challenges he wants to set the contestants creates a certain affect which becomes attached to his productions. This has the effect of making him at least appear much more in direct control of his series than would usually be expected from a reality series, in a similar role to the showrunners of fictional series that are often seen as fitting the traditional understanding of Quality. The image Burnett created through his earlier work is attached to subsequent productions. The title card which appears at the end of each episode of his series, announcing “Mark Burnett Productions” on a flaming background, has become synonymous with interesting reality television, with the flames harking back to the torches and fire that have become a symbol of life on *Survivor*. Fans expect each new Burnett production to demonstrate many of the attributes that I have discussed in relation to Quality, creating a level of self-perpetuation and an auteuristic branding that would not have been possible before TVIII.

Conclusion

This chapter has laid out the various key elements of *Survivor*, from its position within the naissance of second generation reality television, through to the shifts in economic structures on which the financial success of the series is based. At times, some connections have been apparent, but I believe it is in their mutual reliance that these key ideas exemplify what has truly solidified *Survivor's* position as an important series in the TVIII era. I argue that it is the interrelationship between these elements of textual production, economics, and reception and response – and the synergies between them – that has led to *Survivor* becoming an economic success and a cultural icon.

It is not too much of a generalisation to say that the driving force of the commercial television industry is economics. The commissioning and cancelling of series is almost entirely driven by ratings numbers, although it is worth noting that some networks in TVIII have begun to take a slightly more nuanced view of the various additional financial factors that might contribute towards that decision. But the television industry is a business, and for the greatest part must operate as such. Therefore, the ratings and ensuing economic success of *Survivor* is what has played most strongly into its continued presence on US television screens in the twenty-first century. However, as mentioned, it is not solely the “monolithic blocks of eyeballs” (Jenkins, *Convergence Culture* 66) provided by high ratings that have proved important to *Survivor's* success. *Survivor's* ability to capitalise on additional revenue streams such as product integration, DVD and syndication sales, and some merchandising has proven crucial to its ongoing financial success.

Technological shifts that have occurred during the run of the series have been approached by producers as advantages, rather than as obstacles. *Survivor's* willingness to embrace technological shifts has meant that consumers have been encouraged to play along, in ‘approved

ways', rather than in anarchic modes of their own choosing. Thus, where social media might have been seen as a distraction, a spoiler, or even an alternative to engaging with the series, the show has opted to encourage people to engage live on Twitter, which in turn means that audiences must be watching live to participate, a crucial factor for ratings. The clever use of one form of technology works to counter the shifts that have decreased the ratings of other programming during the period, such as time-shifting devices, online viewing, and downloading. The presentation of *Survivor* as replicating a 'live event' also works to counter these alternate viewing modes by rewarding live viewership and creating the feeling that something is lost if the viewer is not a member of the greater imagined community. However, the availability of simple digital recording technology and online streaming also allows for the heightened levels of narrative complexity, as fans who wish to follow the series on a more detailed level are able to watch and rewatch, to engage on a 'forensic' level, in the way that fans of *Lost* also did.

This form of reality television arose at a time when the economics of television were shifting dramatically. Part of the success of reality television for networks can be attributed to the economic shifts that it accompanied, some caused by the technological changes and others by the shifting television industry as a whole. *Survivor* has successfully walked the line between the inherent economic advantages provided by unscripted television, such as being able to build product integration into the diegesis, and the increased audience interest in depth of narrative. Reality television is not usually considered to be narratively complex, with popular discourse frequently describing it as mindless or inane. Demanding that the audience pay attention, in order to follow the twists and turns of the plot and the intricacies of the interpersonal relationships, means that the audience is focused on the programme content. This has a knock-on effect, generating a viewership that is likely to pay close attention to the on-screen content, and encouraging advertisers to put significant money into product placement and 'promotional consideration'. While on the one hand the encouragement to engage with the content 'live' has

reduced the loss of audience to other time-shifted forms, on the other hand the incorporation of advertising into the programme content has given advertisers confidence that their products are being seen by viewers on any platform, no matter whether the content is time-shifted.

The role of Mark Burnett as showrunner and executive producer has been crucial to the success of *Survivor*, and the way it is presented to the audience. Between Burnett and Probst, the audience has dual points of contact to an authorial and authoritative position. Burnett is known as the ‘puppet-master’, the person behind the scenes pulling the strings, controlling the game and trying to best both contestants and fans. Probst is the seeming co-conspirator with both producers and audiences, positioned as the model fan who provides the voice of history and commentary, as well as love and appreciation for the game and how it is played. Probst’s presence on social media further emphasises his dual role as fan and presenter, not only providing insight but also a point of contact with the production team. These two people serve to give fans points of focus, keeping them engaged with the series and offering a personal element in what can feel like an impersonal industry.

All of these factors, textual production, reception and response, and economics, combine to create a series that epitomises TVIII. The variety of available modes and platforms of reception creates a need for new economic models in order to maintain revenue streams. The encouragement for audiences to engage and respond requires figureheads who personify an otherwise faceless series. These figureheads create a series which is easy enough to enjoy on a superficial level, but which also contains significant complexity, strategy, memory, and depth of cast so as to maintain the interest of engaged fans. Technological shifts are taken into account by the series, in that they both create obstacles to the traditional industrial television structures, and provide the opportunities for novel solutions and the ability to intensify the engagement between series and audience. All these factors intertwine in ways that often complicate their

individual analysis. While a simultaneous analysis of all three may be a juggling act, with all three balls in the air at the same time, only in this way do the patterns that emerge delineate the shifting directions of the television industry in the period of TVIII.

The Future of Television

Television is dead, long live television.

TVIII, the era of plenty, the Post-Network Era; it doesn't matter which term you use, we can accept that the period has arrived, and we are currently experiencing it. All definitions of it manage to encapsulate the variety of experiences that exist around the production and consumption of television today. So, given that we have entered this period, and are firmly entrenched in it, what does that mean for television producers, distributors, viewers, and sponsors? I have elucidated a number of the shifts that have occurred, and the responses from all sides that these shifts have led to, but it is also important to look to the future, to think what shape the next stage might take, and what responses there might be to shifts that are coming, or might even be beginning to take effect. What is the future of television?

The Death of Television?

In the first ever issue of *Television and New Media*, released in 2000, Toby Miller published the provocatively titled "Hullo Television Studies, Bye-Bye Television?", in which he suggested that television has "had its day" (Miller, "Hullo Television Studies, Bye-Bye Television?" 5). An edited collection featuring many of the leading figures in Television studies, released in 2004, was titled *Television After TV: Essays on a Medium in Transition* (Spigel and Olsson). In 2009, Paddy Scannell and Elihu Katz edited a special edition of *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, entitled "The End of Television?: Its Impact on the World (So Far)" (Katz and Scannell). For nearly 15 years, academics have been decrying the last days of television, or at least its waning importance. Just as television studies is becoming settled as a discipline, is television becoming a part of history?

Despite the apocalyptic rhetoric of many of the titles, most of these reports are subsequently tempered with talk of transition. The dominant discourse is that television is shifting, and while many of the attributes that we generally associate with television may disappear, something which has many similarities will still be there to take its place, something which will either bear the tropes, or at least bear the name.

Popular journalism is also responsible for much of the moral panic which surrounds the appearance of a new media form, and the concerns around the disappearance of another. News headlines have long decried television as a media form slowly fading from both usage and currency. “It could take as little as five years for television as we know it... to enter its final death throes” (Edwards, “The Death of Television”). “The advent of wideband Internet access... might signal the death of television as we know it” (Ganos). And from late 2013, “The TV business is having its worst year ever” (Edwards, “TV Is Dying”). While these headlines are relatively apocalyptic, closer reading of them indicates an awareness of the shifts that I have laid out in this thesis: the declines in ratings that are being experienced almost universally, a shift towards multiplatform access of content, a level of time- and platform-shifting which can allow viewers to ‘cord-cut’, to eschew broadcast television altogether, in favour of accessing content via the internet. What is being described is not so much a death of television, but a shift in the economic models that surround the industry. It is the stability of these models over the preceding 50 years that has perhaps led to such hand-wringing over their current instability.

It is important to note that this sort of prognostication about the death of media forms upon the rise of another is not unusual, although we often have short memories for the previous panics, what Vincent Mosco refers to as historical amnesia (Mosco 117). As a people, we have equal tendencies to proclaim the potential of any new media form, and to decry the woeful effect it will

have on the media forms we have come to understand and appreciate. Similar claims have been made about the death of cinema and radio with the introduction of television, the death of newspapers with the introduction of radio, the death of the novel with the introduction of the cinema; 2000 years ago, Plato related a tale of Socrates bemoaning the introduction of the written word, and the effect that it would have on memory and wisdom. What we see with the introduction of new media is not the death of the former, but shifts in economic, textual, and audience models, as the previous media adapt to the new environment. Television is already beginning to adapt and explore the new possibilities.

The Future of Textual Production

The area of textual production is possibly the hardest for which to look to the future. Differing forms of television arise for one of two symbiotic reasons: the cost to produce, and the ability for networks to leverage viewership into revenue. While a cynical view, it accepts the reality that commercial television is always mired in its own industrial realities. However, these realities do not prevent producers and creatives taking artistic steps which further the narrative possibilities which television has to offer.

Television networks are becoming even more fragmented, with online streaming solutions, initially repositories for back catalogue television content, now also becoming producers of content. Hulu offered several original series, to modest interest, but it is Netflix that has proven to be a leader in this area, with high profile series such as *House of Cards* (2013), *Orange is the New Black* (2013), and the fourth season of cult comedy series *Arrested Development* (FOX 2003-06, Netflix 2013). These series have captured the interest of both critics and the popular press, winning several awards at the 2013 Emmy awards, and being discussed no differently from network series, despite the novel distribution method. All three of these series ‘dropped’ all their episodes at once, which is to say that a full season of the series was made available at once, as

opposed to the 'drip feed' method familiar to all previous serial television. The impact of this shift is not yet apparent; it is difficult to see how traditional broadcast media could shift toward a similar distribution plan. However, it does open up some narrative possibilities for series which are episodic, and which can be watched in any order in order to construct an individualised narrative.

One significant advantage held by online distribution of media is the lack of restrictions, both on content, and on structure. By not being bound by the commercial imperatives faced by mass broadcasting, nor by the governmental restrictions of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) or other relevant broadcasting or community standards and practices, online distribution networks are freer to explore content which pushes boundaries, but which might be more reflective of modern society as a whole. By not needing to adhere to the constraints of a 30 or 60 minute scheduling block, creatives are able to conform their story to the length required by the narrative, rather than padding or cutting in order to make time. This may, however, have its downsides as well. One common complaint about some episodes of season 4 of *Arrested Development* was that they seemed bloated, and to run longer than was necessary. There is a risk that writers, free from the constraints of the system with which they are familiar, may not be as discerning about the content that they choose to keep.

I do not ascribe to the belief that transmedia storytelling is a passing fad; nor do I believe that it is the future of television and will be how all our future stories are told. I do believe that it will be another string in the bow of storytellers, providing the opportunity for stories of more breadth to be told, and novel narratives to be explored. I believe the future success of transmedia storytelling lies in an awareness of the unique possibilities of each individual medium, highlighting the specific stories that could only be explored in a video game, in short episodic narratives such as webisodes, or in the particular layouts peculiar to comics or graphic novels.

Maintaining a coherent core text will also be a crucial element; transmedia engagement is likely to remain the purview of a small segment of the audience, those fans who are most engaged, and the core text still needs to be legible and entertaining to those who only engage casually.

The Future of Reception and Response

Web video has at times been suggested as the future of television. By this, people are usually describing more a model of YouTube, rather than a model of Netflix: a system with fewer gatekeepers, allowing people to create their own content, and simply providing a distribution portal. This method would not provide funding or commissioning options, but may be able to provide some limited revenue streams should the content be a success. The vision sees myriad content being produced, much of it by amateurs, and it existing within a meritocracy, with the best content being spread and curation occurring through social networks. Some people, such as Andrew Keen, view such a future as a dystopian wasteland, with true ‘experts’ being pushed to the side by the “noble amateur” (Keen). Others are far more open to the possibilities that might be available when some of the gatekeepers to the production and distribution of content are removed (Russo; Shand).

‘Connected viewing’ is an area that is beginning to see some more academic attention. By connected viewing, we refer to the idea that viewers are often connected to a network environment at the same time as they are watching television content. This is being discussed from multiple angles: industrially, it is of interest in terms of the way that it might be leveraged into new revenue streams, or at least to maintain existing revenue streams; for audience studies, it provides novel engagement methods, as well as opening up the potential for wider ethnographic research, due to the inherent visibility of some networked communications.

Social apps for television are becoming more common, in an attempt to recreate the imagined community which has previously surrounded television. The notion of second-screening, the practice of simultaneously using a second device, probably for some form of network connectivity, while watching content on another 'primary' screen, is becoming more common, and networks, audiences, and third parties are finding ways to leverage these additional points of contact. Ethan Tussey has laid out the sorts of applications which are becoming common within this space, but also identifies some of the ways in which they may be raising concerns (Tussey). In discussions with his students regarding their use of second screen social apps, many expressed issues with the synchronicity required by some apps (the need to watch content at the time of broadcast), the concerns with being spoiled during an episode, as well as the ways in which some apps published viewing habits to social media, not always a desirable outcome. In particular, these apps seem to be exclusionary to those who are choosing to engage with the content in a manner that is not through traditional broadcast scheduled services, a number that is growing, and paradoxically especially in the generation who are most likely to engage with second screening apps. These are issues which still need to be addressed by the creators of these apps.

As mentioned, second screening is becoming more and more common in television engagement, but not just solely for proprietary social apps. Scholars such as Mark Andrejevic and Ethan Tussey have begun to direct their attention to this practice, in order to better understand what the implications might be (Lee and Andrejevic; Tussey). I believe that television producers will also begin to utilise the potential offered by the knowledge that many viewers are engaging in a multi-screen environment. Producers are able to embed an inaudible digital code in their content which can trigger activity in a second screen app. This could be utilised by creatives, possibly just to provide information about the episode, about characters and actors etc, but could also be used in order to deepen a transmedia storytelling experience. This technology could provide access to webisodes, to fictional websites being browsed by characters, to key elements in an ARG, or even

to an equivalent of a director's commentary, providing additional behind-the-scenes material to those fans who are interested.

The Future of Television Economics

One of the greatest concerns which has faced the television industry in the past 20 years has been the declining mass audience, the continually dwindling of ratings for any individual show. While there are still many hours of television being watched, the fragmentation of the marketplace means that any given programme has fewer viewers to sell to advertisers, making it harder to charge the sort of prices that have been previously earned by top-rating series.

The decline of the mass audience, combined with the audience's technological ability to avoid watching advertisements, threatens the value of the thirty second interstitial advertisement which has been the stock in trade of television revenue for well over 50 years. As I showed with *Idol* and *Survivor*, techniques such as product placement have once again come to the fore, due to the inherent ability to reach every viewer engaging with the episode. However, product placement has limited earning possibilities; it is very unlikely that an advertiser will agree to pay again every time the episode airs in perpetuity. As such, this type of product placement is currently best suited to reality television, because of the fact that it is much less likely to air in syndication repeatedly.

However, there are technological means being developed which may allow for enhanced ongoing revenue from product placement in drama and comedy. Companies are developing the technology to digitally add products to reruns of older television content ("Advertisers Create Products from Thin Air"). The effect of this is that up-to-date advertising can be added to content repeatedly, earning further revenue for distributors, and ensuring that viewers are always seeing current and relevant advertising, as well as advertising that is actively earning for the distributor.

This creates an impetus to television producers to create a product which will perform well in syndication, due to the increased revenue possibilities that are now available.

Second screening may be a technique utilised by audiences for communication and information access, but it is also being put to use by advertisers. The additional screens being used can also become a second space for advertising, specifically advertising related to that being presented on the television screen. As I suggested, the inclusion of inaudible digital audio codes in television content can trigger specific content in external devices, and there is no reason that this content could not be advertising, or at the very least contain advertising. For instance, if you are watching the Ford Music Video in an episode of *Idol*, then your device could be primed and ready to show additional information about the model of Ford being displayed. In addition, performances on *Idol* could immediately trigger a device to encourage the user to pay to download the track to own it for themselves, creating a greater depth of immersion in the transmedia commercial offering of the television text.

Data-mining has become a further source of possible revenue for television distributors. Data-mining refers to the mass collection and utilisation of data facilitated by digital distribution, especially through sites which aggregate personal data, such as Facebook or Google. This data might be utilised in the way that Netflix does, to finetune the content which is offered to each individual user, based on their own personal tastes.⁸¹ However, it can also be utilised to market directly to individual users, based on their previous browsing history or online activity, as well as being combined to create Big Data, large swathes of data that is combined in order to track macro-level behaviour across communities. By making use of their online content provision services, distributors are beginning to recognise the potential that can be extracted from the data

⁸¹ Although the Netflix algorithms are proprietary, some reverse-engineering has shown the mix of human and algorithmic which has gone into creating Netflix's complex recommendation engine (Madrigal).

that they unwittingly collect. Of course, this can have ongoing privacy concerns for users, and over the coming years, this is going to be one of the many areas of tension that is investigated, commercially and politically.

The Future of Television

In the 1950s, television was seen as something ephemeral; you needed to be in front of the television at the right time, on the right night, in order to see your chosen content, otherwise it was gone, quite possibly forever. The vagaries of the scheduling system meant that you could never be certain of when a rerun would be, or if there even would be one, and there was no way to own the television content in any rewatchable form. The rise of the VCR, followed by the DVR and digital distribution have led to a feeling that television is archivable, controllable, manageable.

Netflix and similar online streaming archives also contribute to the idea that television is no longer ephemeral. There is a sense in some of the rhetoric around television streaming that anything is available, whatever, whenever, wherever. However, this is patently false; these sites are making decisions as to what content should be made available, and what content should not, with content gradually disappearing from these sites to make way for new content all the time. While this is not novel, if subscription video on demand is gradually becoming a dominant way for viewers to access back catalogue content, then the ephemerality is emphasised even more. If the owners of Netflix decide that it is no longer financially viable to offer *Buffy* on demand, and viewers have not chosen to invest in tangible versions of the content, then suddenly it is just as unavailable as it would have been had it aired in the 1950s.

These discussions also demonstrate a level of cultural imperialism which occurs through these discussions of “TV everywhere”.⁸² Much of the discourse suggests that all television is always available, but this elides the fact that much television is still seen as ephemeral. These concepts usually refer to primetime drama and comedy, when many other televisual formats, such as soap or the talk show, remain just as ephemeral. These texts are still regarded as culturally lower, even as Quality television becomes more legitimated. As such, much of the content which fills schedules for a great part of the 24 hour broadcast cycle is difficult if not impossible to subsequently locate.

The one source where some of this content remains still available is through piracy networks. Individuals are beginning to make some headway into personally releasing soap operas, talk shows, and lower budget reality series through these secondary networks, creating a collective archive of the television of the period. Clearly, this is not ideal for distributors, who do not earn anything through this utilisation of this content, but it possibly will mean a better record of the television of the period will exist for a longer period of time. However, it does serve a role for viewers, allowing them to create their own archives of content with which they have an emotional connection.

The Future of Television studies

With all these changes going on, the future of television studies is simultaneously vital and precarious. Television is still one of the most utilised entertainment media, and on the basis of usage alone is worthy of study. It is a medium that has developed strongly, telling interesting and novel stories in ways which could not be told in any other medium. However, it is also a discipline that is being forced to reenvision some of its core tenets, such as Raymond Williams’ notion of

⁸² TV Everywhere is actually a name for a product available in North America, but here I am using it to describe the concept of television which is available on demand, when and where the viewer wishes.

flow, and some of important concepts that have surrounded broadcast, distribution and reception.

One problematic area which may face television studies in the coming years is actually a resurgence of a problem that has repeatedly had to be addressed; what is the television text? If producers have the ability to digitally alter the television text in subsequent airings, to change the brand of content in the background, and even in the foreground, it must have an effect on the televisual aesthetics of any given shot. When the text is malleable and changeable, how does a scholar address a text as stable and consistent? Does the television text shift when it is variable and inconsistent?

Accessibility of content can also be a problem for television scholars as we move back towards an era of television ephemerality. It may only be in subsequent years that we realise the importance that a particular text may have had, the impact of it on the programming which has followed. If this text falls into the ephemera of television, then it can be difficult to access more than fragments of the series. Although there is the feeling that we now have access to any of the content we want, we may once again find ourselves in a similar situation to those who are trying to study the television of the 1950s, reverting to using scripts, anecdotal evidence, short clips that have survived, and memories of what we have seen. The ephemerality of television looks set to remain.

Television is constantly in a state of transition, as it always has been. As viewing habits change, distributors shift their angles in order to maintain their revenues. As distributors shift their angles, creatives are able to explore the new possibilities, telling different stories in new ways. As new stories are told in novel ways, audiences find their own ways in which to engage with them. These shifts all impact on each other; it is very difficult to know how each group will respond to

the changes that face them. However, it is becoming more apparent that, in order to have a full understanding of the things that occur in the television industry, we need to have an understanding of each of these components; even if only one is the object of our study, paying some attention to the effect of these surrounding factors is becoming even more crucial. Of course, there are other factors which also come into play: geography, technological dispersion, policy and politics, to name a few. However, for much of commercial television in TVIII, it is the vital factors of textual production, reception and response, and economics which form a triumvirate for shaping the television industry, its texts, and its viewers.

Television is dead, long live television.

TV-ography

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Angel. Prod. Joss Whedon. WB. 1999. Television

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Arrested Development. Exec Prod. Brian Grazer. FOX. 2003. Television.

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Charmed. Exec Prod. Aaron Spelling. WB. 1998. Television

Cops. Exec Prod. John Langley. FOX. 1989. Television

CSI: Crime Scene Investigation. Exec Prod. Carol Mendelsohn. CBS. 2000. Television

Dawson's Creek. Exec Prod. Kevin Williamson. WB. 1998. Television

Dr Horrible's Sing-Along Blog. Exec Prod. Joss Whedon. Online Distribution. 2008. Television.

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Felicity. Exec Prod. JJ Abrams. WB. 1998. Television.

FlashForward. Exec Prod. Brannon Braga. ABC. 2009. Television.

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Orange is the New Black. Exec Prod. Jenji Kohan. Netflix. 2013. Television.

Party of Five. Creat. Christopher Keyser, Amy Lippman. FOX. 1994. Television.

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Popstars. Exec Prod. Jonathan Downling. TV2. 1999. Television.

Popular. Exec Prod. Ryan Murphy. WB. 1999. Television.

Roswell. Exec Prod. Jason Katims. WB. 1999. Television.

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