Introduction

This exemplar discusses how research into television fandom was conducted, with specific focus on how fans reacted to the ending of favourite television programmes (see Williams, 2015). Since the research was focused on a range of different TV programmes, analysis of online postings offered a useful tool to access a broad range of respondents who were in different geographical locations and who were fans of different shows. The dataset details fan responses to the final episodes of favourite programmes Lost - an American drama series incorporating aspects of the supernatural and sci-fi which ran from 2004 to 2010 - and The West Wing - an American political drama series which ran from 1999 to 2006 - and includes postings from an online message board. The data are provided by Dr Rebecca Williams from the University of South Wales and are drawn from fieldwork studying television fandom. This dataset will be most useful for those interested in using online surveys and will show you how to think about analysing material in terms of how people discuss their fandom and identity.

Online Analysis of Web Postings

Audience and fan studies have long been interested in how people respond to media and cultural objects and how they make sense of them. Fan studies is especially concerned with studying the very close attachments that people have to favourite texts such as films, television shows or books, or to certain sports teams or celebrity figures. Fan studies seeks to move beyond the stereotypical idea of fans as obsessive which is often portrayed in the mass media and instead considers fandom as a normal and important part of people's everyday lives.

Online forums have long been the focus of audience and fan studies since they offer space for detailed discussion and for interpersonal relationships to develop between contributors (Hine, 2015; Kozinets, 2009). Such sites also offer the ability to archive and maintain older discussions for the future. They are useful since they offer the researcher the chance to view comments from audiences around the world and to access both positive and negative points of view. When the researcher is involved in an online space over a prolonged period of time this is often called online or virtual ethnography (Hine, 2000) or netnography (Kozinetes, 2009). However, the researcher faces decisions about which forums to research and why, as well as needing to limit their sample of postings since many online spaces are very popular and contain thousands of postings. There are also issues of ethics to discuss, since there are many debates over whether what people post online is private or public and how researchers can avoid harm to the people they may quote from (Booth and Davison, forthcoming; Ess, 2013).

Data Exemplar: Fan Responses to Television Endings

This dataset exemplar is drawn from a larger project on how fans react to the ending of their favourite television programmes and how this links to their sense of self-identity and their relationships with other fans. The data discussed here are provided by Dr Rebecca Williams and are drawn from research on a broad range of fans of television programmes. The aims of this research project were to explore how fans discussed a range of endings and transitions in their fandom of television programmes, including how they reacted when favourite characters left a series, when a programme finished or when favourite programmes were resurrected. This research was conducted because the researcher was interested in how television, as an important part of everyday life, is used to help people create and maintain their self-identities and relationships with other people as well as discovering what the impact may be if a favourite
programme is no longer available. The dataset contains postings from the online website *Television Without Pity*, which closed in 2014. The postings were from two online discussion threads which focused on the final episodes of two American TV programmes, *Lost* and *The West Wing*. The postings were collected for *The West Wing* after the series finished and the thread was closed in 2006, and for *Lost* in 2010. Once a show finished airing, the site closed all existing threads and archived them.

There were ethical considerations with collecting online postings. However, *Television Without Pity* (TWoP) had already been the site of previous research, with researchers arguing that the site was a public space. In his study, researcher Jonathan Gray argued that posters at the site were ‘aware of speaking potentially to thousands and already reasonably anonymous; and the performative nature of much TWoP commentary itself belies an awareness of (or even a desire for) a considerable audience’ (2005, p. 847). Such performativity, size and openness renders privacy at TWoP impossible and, as such, all postings made at this site can be considered to be in the public domain. In their discussion of fan research ethics, Kristina Busse and Karen Hellekson specifically mention *Television Without Pity* as an example of a site where more relaxed ethical rules can apply. They question: ‘What about fans who post in public forums, such as Television Without Pity…, that have a much different sort of community, with different, more open expectations of privacy? In these cases, a requirement for obtaining permission may be waived’ (Busse and Hellekson, 2012, p. 52). There are numerous ethical issues that are pertinent to fan studies research and all fan scholars must consider how they cite, name and reference online postings in their research. There is no one rule for researching fandom online. Instead, a policy is needed that is open enough to allow researchers access whilst protecting those who participate in online spaces (see Busse and Hellekson, 2012). In this case, posters’ names were removed (even if these were already pseudonyms) to make identifying them more difficult and all posts are identified only by posting the number and the name of the thread. Thus, the specificity of *Television Without Pity* has been considered in formulating the ethics approach for this research. Those seeking to use online data in their research are encouraged to reflect on the specific nature of the sites they choose and to consider whether a different approach is needed in sites that are less public or where more sensitive topics are being discussed (see also Ess, 2013).

---

**Analysis: Online Postings and TV Fan Identity**

How a researcher approaches their analysis depends on factors including their research question and their own focus and background. Dr Rebecca Williams has a communication, and media studies background. She explains how she would go about analysing such text.

In analysing online postings, we must also take into account the specific forum, message board or site under analysis. In this case, *Television Without Pity* was a space where people expressed both positive and negative fan reactions and provides opportunities for considering more positive and approving fan commentary alongside ‘antifandom’. As such, the site was considered to be a public space and the comments posted there to be public (see Busse and Hellekson, 2012, p. 52; see also Ess, 2013).

The researcher must also be careful to treat online postings as texts that are both performative and discursive rather than expressions of the ‘truth’ about fandoms or individuals – we must treat with caution what people say online. Online communication is mediated both by fans themselves and by the researcher, since it is the researcher who ultimately decides what to analyse and how, as well as how to present these communications in their finished research. Here, Rebecca tells us how we might begin to analyse data of this type.

When analysing online postings, researchers need first to think about how to identify key themes. For example, how many times does a similar point need to be mentioned or to occur within your sample of postings before it becomes significant? In the data provided, all twelve of the examples offer a sense of self-identity which is the key theme to be considered here. There are differences in how online fans are expressing this but we can conclude that, for each of them, the end of the
television series was significant.

In this dataset, several key themes relevant to television fandom and identity emerged including (i) the relationship between community and fan identity, (ii) a sense of mourning and saying goodbye, (iii) anger at disappointing endings, and the (iv) importance of fandom to individuals’ sense of self.

Another central theme in these postings to consider is the poster’s interaction with other fans. For example, both examples 3 and 4 indicate the importance of community to fans online, especially when programmes come to an end. The posts that state: ‘I had to say my own good-byes to the “West Wing” with a group of people who share my sadness at the end of this amazing show’ (Example 3) and ‘I felt compelled to post my first and final message now…Thanks for the great years, guys’ (Example 4) strongly suggest that some fans will miss talking about favourite programmes as much as they will miss watching them.

However, as analysts we can interrogate the data further. In the analysis of online texts researchers must also look for contradictions or begin to unpack comments in more depth. For example, the fans who were more negative initially seem to be expressing a lack of interest or emotional attachment to the ending of the programmes here. Their comments about the boring end of The West Wing (Example 7), being manipulated by writers (Example 8) or the writers of Lost making up the ending to the show (Examples 10 and 11) might at first glance seem to be irrelevant to research questions concerned with fandom and self-identity. However, in these examples we can see that sometimes even negative forms of identity can be important for fans; the act of rejecting or distancing oneself from a media text can also perform identity work. Here, these audience members can reject a programme and distance themselves from a show, discursively positioning themselves as critical and non-emotionally involved and suggesting that a programme is past its best period and deserves to end. This therefore provides the researcher with the opportunity to consider the discourses used when fans reject a specific ending, and the implications this has for their use of fan objects in fashioning self-identities and narratives.

Of course, looking for general themes that overlap online posts and act as central levers and ordering devices is important, but it is also important to consider aspects of the dataset that are isolated comments or postings, since these can reveal interesting, but less common, aspects of fan and audience discussion. For instance, Example 9 shows how there were debates over the finale not being specific enough to what Lost had stood for as a television series. In the accusation that the final storyline could have been applied to any long-running show, there is the suggestion of a generic and unimaginative conclusion to the series. For this fan, the finale had not been faithful enough in reflecting the show. For these fans, a series finale must be true to the narrative that they have committed to and must be specific to that show. A resolution that is too general or seems like it could be used to end another show is thus rejected. Here, there is the threat that the show itself is not ‘special’, that its narrative can be ended in a generic way, and that the time the fan dedicated to the show has been potentially wasted. A fan’s sense of identity and self can be threatened; there is the potential for feeling that one’s investment has been misplaced and that a series was not what the fan ‘thought it was’. Such broken narrative promises or perceived violations of a series’ established themes and ideologies can present a threat to fans’ narrative of the self by presenting the possibility that the fans’ understanding of a series was ‘wrong’ or that they have been misled by the producer’s intentions. When audiences are very attached to media objects, it is important for them to be able to trust in these and the people who produce them.

Overall, this dataset suggests that many fans draw on favourite media texts such as television programmes to help to form and develop their sense of self-identity and that they respond in different ways when these favourite objects come to an end. Although popular television programmes such as Lost and The West Wing attract diverse audiences, meaning there are often opposing viewpoints (some = negative, others = positive) and divergent ideas expressed, we can still conclude that identity in whichever way it is constructed is a central theme to fans posting about these programmes. Paying attention to more diverse or less common themes, we can also argue that it is important that fans can continue to trust a programme or its creators and that they feel that the time and effort they invested in it was worthwhile. Analysing online postings can be
challenging, since online material is often vast and difficult to synthesis. Researchers thus need to ensure that they have a way to collect and store their data as well as a clear sense of how to analyse it. This involves looking for common themes that emerge as well as being aware of anomalies or divergent views that can be identified. As with all data analysis, the researcher needs to keep their research questions in mind as they engage in this process.

Of course, any conclusions made in analysis will always be impacted upon by the researcher and their own position and subjective understanding. Many fan studies researchers have suggested allowing fans who are studied to be given drafts of their research papers in order to comment on this and to address places where they feel they may have been misquoted or misrepresented. This is easier when participants in other methods such as online surveys or questionnaires have been used and when the researcher has contact details for the participants. Such a process is more difficult when drawing on material from message boards or forums since people often leave these or are difficult to contact. In the case of the dataset presented here, in March 2014 the closure of both the site and the forums was announced, ending *Television Without Pity’s* crucial presence in online fandom. Clearly, as fan objects end so, too, do the spaces where fans can discuss them. When analysing data from online forums, researchers often adhere to the idea of ‘implied consent’ (Walther, 2002, p. 212) in spaces where people could not reasonably expect their words to be private. As with all ethical issues, however, a policy is needed that ‘remains open enough to accommodate different scenarios while protecting fannish spaces and individual fans – as well as a researchers’ code of ethics and academic rigour’ (Busse and Hellekson, 2012, pp. 41–42).

**Reflective Questions**

1. What ethical issues may be relevant to other forms of online research (e.g. online questionnaires or surveys)?
2. Using the extra data provided, what other aspects of self-identity can you identify?
3. Online sites move very fast and information can be moved, edited or deleted. What impact might this have on audience research?
4. What practical or ethical limits might you face in using analysis of online postings in your own research?
5. Analysing postings 13–20, what key themes emerge from the data?

**Further Reading**


