#Fringe, Audiences, and Fan Labor:
Twitter Activism to Save a TV Show From Cancellation

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This article describes how TV fans make strategic use of Twitter as a tool for activism to launch "Save Our Show" campaigns and highlights a shift toward a collaborative relationship between fan activists and producers in the context of these campaigns, shaped by deep transformations in the media ecosystem and viewing measurement techniques. Based on participant observation and qualitative content analysis, I explore the case of the Twitter campaign led by a fandom dedicated to FOX's science fiction television series *Fringe* (2008–13). In my examination, I argue that fans' expert understanding of Twitter's affordances and the audience measurement market are crucial for a series to achieve renewal. In parallel, I suggest that the power negotiation between fans and networks can be substituted by a direct cooperation that indirectly might benefit both creators' labor for the show and advertisers' investments. However, despite this scenario where fans enjoy a better position to influence networks' decisions, their labor on social media may be yet another device for self-commodification and exploitation.

Keywords: fan activism, social media, fan labor, television, Twitter

The acceleration of technological development since the creation of the World Wide Web in 1989 has dramatically changed how relationships between consumers and producers or distributors of different types of goods and services are understood. There has been an empowerment of consumers, who, thanks to the expansion of social media in recent years, now have more tools at their disposal to become more visible and ensure their comments, opinions, and requests reach the interested parties without intermediaries.

As representatives of a specific type of consumer, TV series fans have a long history of activism, and their claims are largely motivated by networks' decisions to cancel those shows—that constitute the fans' object of fandom—due to low ratings (Brower, 1992; Coppa, 2006; Jenkins, 1992). Classic examples of "Save Our Show" campaigns include *Star Trek* (NBC, 1966–69), *Cagney & Lacey* (CBS, 1982–88), *Hill Street Blues* (NBC, 1981–87), *Beauty & the Beast* (CBS, 1987–90), and *Twin Peaks* (ABC, 1990–91). These well-organized campaigns used the basic modus operandi of mass-mailed letters and telegrams, phone calls to the network and studio headquarters, and word of mouth. Fans sought to influence the executives' judgment so that their favorite series would be kept on the air (Sabal, 1992).

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Today the aim remains the same, but the methods have changed and the balance of power has shifted. An increasingly convergent and participatory media ecosystem (Jenkins, 2006) has affected the way Save Our Show campaigns are conceived and implemented. Television fans now make strategic use of social media to protest show cancellation. However, these fans may not necessarily conduct renewal campaigns from positions that confront networks. As Milner (2010) notes, "the 'textual poachers' reality of the past (Jenkins, 1992) is shifting under increased digital connectivity, and increased communication between media producers and fans" (p. 723).

This article contributes to the debate around fan activism and fan–producer relations by focusing on the way fans make the most of Twitter's affordances to organize successful Save Our Show campaigns; the shifts in audience measurement; and the changing relationship among fans, creators, and networks. I delve into the renewal campaign for the science fiction series *Fringe* (FOX, 2008–13) deployed on Twitter by the fan organization Fringenuity. This illustrates a collaborative scenario where networks and fans, far from embodying the antagonistic positions of the past, establish channels of collaboration for a common cause. However, at the same time, this collaborative scenario raises concerns about labor exploitation. Therefore, I will review the two main theoretical foundations of this work: media transformations and the evolution of viewing measurement techniques that have affected both the development of Save Our Show campaigns and fan–producer interactions. Using a methodology based on participant observation and qualitative content analysis, I analyze the Fringenuity's campaign in light of this theoretical framework. I then introduce Fringenuity as a unique case to study fan activism and provide a brief history of the different campaigns executed within the *Fringe* fandom.

Surviving the "Friday Night Death Slot" Twice in a Row

Fringenuity presents a unique case that sets *Fringe* apart from other online fandoms in general, and from other experiences in Save Our Show activism in particular. First, Fringenuity's highly strategic understanding of both the affordances of Twitter and Nielsen's audience measurement system resulted in two unprecedented tie-in actions by a fandom located on Twitter at the time: the production of exclusive hashtags not directly related to the series' title and the sharing of detailed instructions to make those hashtags trend during the show's live broadcast. In fact, the prosperity of Fringenuity's plan soon extended to other communities formed around series in danger of cancellation. For example, the campaign #SixSeasonsAndaMovie for the sitcom *Community* (2009–15)—initiated during the show's third season—based its online strategy on the unique hashtags model[1] developed by Fringenuity.[2] Second, the diplomatic attitude of the initiative leaders toward the network, and FOX's later involvement in Fringenuity's Twitter events to make *Fringe* trend, are indicative of a shift in the relationship between fan activists and networks in the context of renewal campaigns. Historically, these have been filled with tension between both parties, but in this case, cooperation and mutual recognition prevailed.

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[1] http://www.reddit.com/r/community/comments/11qlfq/darkest401_rallying_cry_final_reminder_of_details/

[2] Although NBC eventually canceled *Community* in May 2014—after two consecutive renewals powered by a dedicated fan base—the on-demand streaming service Yahoo! Screen ensured the production of the much-desired sixth season, which began airing in spring 2015.

Fringenuity's campaign was the second major effort undertaken by fans to save their beloved series. *Fringe* is a science fiction series created by J. J. Abrams (*Alias*, *Lost*), Alex Kurtzman (*Sleepy Hollow*), and Roberto Orci (*Sleepy Hollow*). The creators focus the plot on a special division of the FBI investigating a plethora of supernatural events related to so-called fringe science. In November 2010, while the third season was airing, the *Fringe* community was given its first major warning with the announcement of a change in the series programming. FOX rescheduled *Fringe* from the stellar time slot of Thursdays at 9 p.m. to the inferior time slot of Fridays at 9 p.m., popularly known as the "Friday Night Death Slot" in American television, and which generally signals imminent cancellation for programs with low performance ratings.

Installed in its new schedule from January 2011, *Fringe* ratings kept dropping and the series kept beating its own records of low ratings.[3] Given this bleak outlook, fans launched an initiative called The Fringe Movement, which had the support of specialized media critics—who had always praised the complexity of the series' narrative and the characters displayed in the scripts of the series—and the *Fringe* production team and cast, headed by actor Joshua Jackson (Clarke Stuart, 2011). Jackson and *Fringe*'s showrunners, Joel Wyman and Jeff Pinkner, often joined these conversations from their own Twitter accounts, thereby creating a direct channel of communication between fans and the creative team. These conversations mainly comprised firsthand updates on the series' renewal status and constant calls to American viewers to tune into FOX's *Fringe* on Friday nights, and to participate using FOX's official hashtag #Fringe. Fans dubbed this campaign "Fringe Friday." Finally, on March 24, 2011, Wyman tweeted *Fringe*'s renewal for a fourth season, thanking the fandom for their support.

In November 2011, during the fourth-season hiatus, The Fringe Movement was practically disbanded after their leaders had ceased participation in the fandom, and ratings were still low in the Friday Night Death Slot. Given the clear lack of leadership and direction, U.S. female fans aimeeinchains, birdandbear, and fringeship, veterans of the previous initiative that enjoyed some recognition within the community, decided to join forces to relaunch *Fringe*'s renewal campaign through Twitter (aimeeinchains, 2013; birdandbear, personal communication, February 3, 2015). In this way, the fan blog owned by birdandbear (Morethanoneofeverything.net, http://www.morethanoneofeverything.net) became the hub of a new movement called "Fringenuity: Action at a Distance" (http://twitter.com/fringenuity), which was determined to keep encouraging viewers to tune into *Fringe* and help improve its ratings. Despite the rapid dissolution of The Fringe Movement's leadership, the former members who reunited to create Fringenuity were able to restore and expand the structure of the first initiative in a short time due to their rich cultural and fan social capital. The team spent weeks preparing the new strategy for the new episodes' return after the hiatus, scheduled for January 13, 2012. It mainly consisted of creating exclusive Twitter hashtags for the airing of each episode and spreading a protocol to enter the platform's trending topics list. Finally, the call to action for the first of a total of 28 events on Twitter was posted on January

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[3] For example, the broadcast of the 15th episode of the third season, "Subject 13," on February 25, 2011, resulted in a total viewership of 4.02 million and a new minimum rating at the time of 1.5/5 in the demographic group aged 18 to 49 years (Gorman, 2011).

7.[4] The next section discusses how the *Fringe* fandom is not unique in using Twitter to support a television show, regardless of its ratings.

How Media and Audience Measurement Shifts Have Influenced
Save Our Show Activism and Fan–Producer Relations

At the peak of the broadcasting era, dominated by the one-to-many paradigm and few actors either producing or distributing content, fan cultures flourished in the margins of the mainstream, disregarded by prevailing sociocultural discourses (Bacon-Smith, 1992; Jenkins, 1992). Thus, it is not surprising that in the United States, fans were invisible to a television audience measurement system that has been under Nielsen Media Research's monopoly since the 1950s. Each member of selected households, the so-called Nielsen families, would fill out, by hand, diaries that reflected their viewing choices and weekly schedule among the offering of the Big 3 networks—ABC, NBC, and CBS. However, in 1987, Nielsen introduced the first version of the device that would redefine audience measurement: the People Meter. Distributed to a sample of 5,000 households at the time,[5] the impact for U.S. networks was immense because they were able to access overnight rating results instead of waiting until the traditional sweeps rating periods—four weeks during November, February, and May—to collect updated information from handwritten diaries.

Among the general consequences resulting from People Meters since their implementation in the national audience measurement market—and later extension to local markets in 2004—we can highlight a more competitive television market that shortened the time dedicated to ponder the fate of struggling shows and advertisers ultimately embracing demographic data for their own decision making. This resulted in a prioritization of the 18 to 49 age segment; the shows that gathered more viewership in the young segment become more valuable for advertisers in the long term than those more appealing to older audiences (Webster, Phalen, & Lichty, 2005). In this environment, fans and network executives constituted completely separate entities with limited opportunities for dialogue that would often clash over poor-rated shows on the verge of cancellation, emphasizing fans' disadvantaged and marginalized position. Nevertheless, decades before it was commonplace to own a personal computer with Internet access, fans managed to mobilize around conventions and events, or through calls to action published in fanzines giving specific instructions on whom to call or send letters to, or even how to write requests (Jenkins, 1992). The campaigns to save *Star Trek*, *Cagney & Lacey*, and *Beauty & the Beast* relied on these methods in a scenario where network executives and creators had very limited access to fans' opinions.

This situation of invisibility took a 180-degree turn with the spread of the Internet in the mid-1990s—an event that would profoundly change fandom's forms of production and interaction (Busse & Hellekson, 2006). Fans, now gathered around discussion forums, blogs, and specialized websites—such as fan fiction archives—found a more effective and permanent way to contact one another and share an inexhaustible source of information. Fans also found a cost-effective channel to make their campaigns and

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[4] For this study, I consider only 14 events during the fourth season.

[5] Today Nielsen families comprise 35,000 households in the United States (Doe, 2016).

opinions more visible to "the powers that be" (the network executives) and "the guiding spirit" (the creators and writers; Jenkins, 2013) as both figures were increasingly present online. For executives, access to these online conversations, either held on official or unofficial sites, meant "having a focus group right at your fingertips" (Sloane, 2004, cited in Scardaville, 2005, p. 885). However, these changes had a deeper impact on creators and writers as the ability to interact with fans online and have an engaged fan base began to be seen as a truly valuable asset to increase the chances of keeping a show on the air and fulfilling their creative vision. Such goals have always clashed with networks' economic and ratings-based logic, but they tended to align with fan interests. As Jenkins (2013) accounts in relation to *Star Trek*'s creator Gene Rodenberry's influence in the *trekkie* fandom, creative team endorsements of fan initiatives is not a new concept. Nonetheless, regular online interaction with fans means the ultimate conversion of the creative team into "one of us," a "guiding spirit" (Jenkins, 2013, p. 54) that defends the show at the executives' offices, uniting with the fandom who campaign outside of them.

This mind-set was, however, not coincidental. An increasing fragmentation in the television market—characterized by the emergence of brand-new networks, cable television, video on demand, and the rise of new media—played a part in the transition from the broadcasting model to one of *narrowcasting*. Narrowcasting is based on highly loyal and fragmented niche audiences that, in addition to consuming media content and artifacts, can produce and distribute their own (Jenkins, 2006). For some authors (Fuchs, 2011; Terranova, 2000), this digitally produced content entails a new form of mostly unpaid labor, to which fandom is certainly no stranger. Fans as prosumers and advocates constitute a workforce fueled by affection for media texts (Busse, 2015; De Kosnik, 2013; Milner, 2009; Stanfill & Condis, 2014). Any neglect of this workforce further compromises the professional media position in a market where the increased number of players already hinders efforts to keep audiences captive. This is why fans began to move from the outside to be positioned at the center of media industries' strategies (Gray, Sandvoss, & Harrington, 2007; Jenkins, 2006), gradually becoming a commodity (Hills, 2015; Stork, 2014). As Milner (2009) aptly points out in his study of the *Fallout* fan community:

> Fans work for the text. This is true whether they labor in support of or opposition to producer-sanctioned goals. Indeed, it seems that fan culture would not exist without fan labor, and producers would be not so interested in fan culture if its proper management and appropriation did not have viable financial consequences for them. (p. 494)

Among the fandom campaigns that came to fruition in this period of transition, we must highlight *Farscape* (Sci-Fi, 1999–2003), *Firefly* (FOX, 2002–3), *Veronica Mars* (UPN, The CW, 2004–7), *Friday Night Lights* (NBC, Audience Network, 2006–11), *Roswell* (The WB, UPN, 1999–2001), *Jericho* (CBS, 2006–8), and *Chuck* (NBC, 2007–12). In particular, the experience of the latter three caught the attention of media outlets due to the imaginative methods used by fans to pressure executives, complemented by the usual intense promotion on television forums, websites, and blogs. Reproducing an initiative deployed by *Twin Peaks* followers,[6] The WB's *Roswell* fandom sent in thousands of Tabasco sauce bottles—the series' alien characters' favorite condiment—while *Jericho* fans filled CBS offices with about 20 tons of peanuts in

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[6] In addition to 10,000 letters, *Twin Peaks* fans sent to ABC a log, a plastic hand, several boxes of doughnuts, and chess pieces—all objects belonging to the series' storyworld (Savage, 2014).

addition to letters. By causing these mail inconveniences for the networks, fans sought to make executives realize the audience commitment to those shows.

The strategies to renew *Chuck* were more sophisticated in comparison, laying the groundwork for "a new style of campaign that focused its attention outside the network" (Savage, 2014, para. 2). As a consequence, *Chuck* fans' activism was devoid of the hostile connotations of the *Roswell* and *Jericho* campaigns, therefore setting an immediate precedent for this study on *Fringe* fandom. The actions of the fandoms of *Roswell* and *Jericho* were focused on capturing executives' attention. However, *Chuck* targeted perhaps the most crucial piece in the chain of decision makers: advertisers. Advertisers were normally uninvited guests at Save Our Show campaign debates, despite their power and proximity to the network executives. At a time when digital video recorders (DVRs) and online streaming joined the increasing list of alternative methods of watching, television audiences constituted a clearly hyperfragmented mosaic where advertisers and sponsors still operated by the rules of traditional, live television. That is, because DVR allows viewers to skip commercials, advertisers paid no attention to the Nielsen ratings pertaining to forms of viewing where commercials might not have been seen. Networks, following advertisers' logic, did not include DVR data in their reports to advertisers. According to Savage (2014), this circumstance forced Save Our Show campaigns "to rethink their strategies in selling audience size" (para. 13). Thus, with the cooperation of the creative team, but without monetary reward, *Chuck* fans launched an organized action to buy Subway's $5 footlong sandwich in spring 2009. It was the show's most significant sponsor, on whose flagship product screenwriters had structured the plot of an entire episode.[7] Revenues from the sales of this sandwich guaranteed the production of a third season, but beyond the favorable results, the campaign was a renewed demonstration of the fandom's intelligence and skills:

> The idea was simple: demonstrate to both the network and the sponsor that there was not only an audience for the show but also an audience that was paying attention to the advertising for the show and supporting those sponsors. This would leverage the power of the audience: in addition to fan viewers, the sponsors would also work to persuade the network to renew the show on the fans' behalf. By focusing on *Chuck* as a business transaction, fans used their knowledge of the television industry to garner support for their goals. (Savage, 2014, para. 25)

The fact that *Chuck*'s fandom is perceived as a keen and savvy media planner that officiously sells viewership to advertisers illustrates, once again, how fans draw on their cultural and social capital to carry out labor that can directly benefit the networks and creators in charge of the shows they love.

During the second half of the 2000s, the emergence of social media opened the door for the migration of television fandoms toward these platforms, allowing fans to enhance their exposure and have a greater influence on the way they promote and vouch for their favorite shows (Bury, Greenwood, & Jones, 2013). The *Fringe* campaigns cannot be understood without taking into account this process, and, indeed, *Fringe*'s most active fan base was located in Twitter (Clarke Stuart, 2011). Similar to the experiences of other fandoms such as for *Glee* (Wood & Baughman, 2012) and for *Scandal* (Everett,

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[7] The episode was titled "Chuck Versus the First Kill" (2.20).

2015), fans from around the world appropriated the habit of live-tweeting. Fans would watch television and discuss the experience simultaneously on a second screen—a computer or a cell phone—making use of Twitter-specific features—140-character tweets, hashtags, retweets, following and unfollowing people, adding pictures and footage—which can be seen as a materialization of the platform's affordances as a social network site. In this sense, Bucher and Helmond (2017) distinguish between two dimensions of affordances: on the one hand, a "more concrete feature-oriented low-level" (p. 17); and on the other hand, a high level consisting of the dynamics facilitated by devices, platforms, and media. In regard to this high level, boyd (2011) refers to social network sites facilitating four types of affordances: persistence (every message is recorded and archived), replicability (content can be replicated), scalability (great visibility of content), and searchability (content can be searched). All of these affordances can be found on Twitter, and they "showcase salient issues that participants most regularly contend with when engaging in these environments" (p. 40). Similar to the *Chuck* fandom, the *Fringe* fan practices were rooted in utilizing replicability and scalability, but they ultimately differed in how these affordances were brought about at the feature-oriented level. While the *Chuck* campaign showed a *basic* fan activist approach to Twitter with a simple strategy that consisted of mentioning NBC's account (@nbc) along with the hashtags #savechuck or #chuck, it was not until January 2012 when the *Fringe* fandom executed the first *methodical* fan activist approach on the platform. Here, Twitter's replicability and scalability were exploited in a highly strategic manner by creating unique hashtags—as opposed to using the same hashtag every time—and providing technical expertise through a detailed Twitter protocol that helped fans to coordinate efforts and increase their efficiency.

Parallel to its fan activist applications, engaging in Twitter is distinctive of the social TV phenomenon (Proulx & Shepatin, 2012) that has caught industry players' attention, further blurring the lines that separate producers and fans:

> Television shows and networks have increasingly incorporated social media into their programming, for example by promoting the use of Twitter hashtags to channel user interaction with televised content and by showing a selection of incoming hashtagged tweets during live shows; by establishing dedicated Facebook fan pages and Twitter accounts for shows, presenters, or even fictional characters; or by providing their own bespoke social networks and apps. (Association of Internet Researchers, 2014, p. 1)

As social media facilitates audience engagement with TV and fosters a more active audience (Jenkins, 2006), measuring this engagement and dealing with "the explosion of raw and customized data on audience behavior" (Woodford, Goldsmith, & Bruns, 2015, p. 141) derived from television and social media integration, have become key topics for researchers and industry players. Specifically, there is a need for understanding how much social media shapes audience ratings (Moe, Poell, & van Dijck, 2016). In Twitter's case, for example, this need includes a focus on studying a possible correlation between the most tweeted and most watched shows given the platform's input in reinforcing live viewing so that "it requires the gathering of a social media community on the same platform at the same time" and "makes viewers less likely to use time shifting technologies" (Harrington, Highfield, & Bruns, 2013, p. 407). Consequently, this may increase viewers' exposure to commercials (Midha, 2014).

In December 2012, months after the Fringenuity campaign had come to an end, Nielsen and Twitter announced a partnership to create the Nielsen Twitter TV Rating—a new system for the analysis of social TV audiences that would be released to the U.S. market the following year (Nielsen, 2012). The system measures the "unique audience": the estimated number of Twitter users exposed to a tweet related to a show and the demographics of said users. However, for Woodford et al. (2015), this measurement is far from satisfactory because it does not include the different contexts in which shows air. For instance, it equates shows regardless of the type of broadcaster—national network or cable—genre, programming schedule, and time slot. Likewise, "it ignored the number of tweets posted by user," and "it fails to differentiate between . . . broad but shallow engagement by a larger number of moderately committed viewers . . . and deep but narrow engagement by a dedicated niche audience of fans" (p. 151).

At a superficial level it can be said that social media enables a locale for democratizing fan–producer interactions as both parties share a common ground that exposes networks to fans' claims and provides fans with the means to swiftly mobilize and, at the very least, make their messages viral and reach nonfan audiences to gain traction. This is not to say, though, that social media has erased the latent power negotiation between fans and networks, and between fans and creators, over shows. Besides protesting show cancellation, confronting questionable creative decisions linked to social matters—such as the positive representation of racial and sexual minorities in the media—continues to be a significant part of fan activism. This can be seen, for instance, in the publicized social media campaign against *The 100*'s writers' decision to kill off an LGBT character (Ryan, 2016).

In the case of Save Our Show campaigns, the emergence of social media can add extra layers of complexity to the already manifold scenarios of fan activism. For example:

- The traditional power negotiation between fans and networks can be replaced by a direct cooperation that indirectly might benefit, on the one hand, creators' labor for the show and, on the other hand, advertisers' investments.
- Fan activists' labor on social media may be yet another device for fan commodification and exploitation in this amicable landscape, and yet, at the same time, fans have never enjoyed a better basis for trying to influence networks' final decisions on shows.

Method

To study how fans used Twitter as an activist tool to execute Save Our Show campaigns and the shifting relationship between fans and producers, I relied on the ethnographic method of participant observation, widely applied in the fan studies field, and the qualitative content analysis of online materials such as blog posts and fan art.

As a *Fringe* fan, I was already up to date with the series' chronic struggle with ratings by following other fans' Twitter accounts and regularly visiting fan blogs and forums. This activity allowed me to participate as any other fan supporter in both The Fringe Movement and Fringenuity's campaigns between January 2011 and May 2012. I became familiar with Fringenuity's Twitter events and the guidelines posted on Morethanoneofeverything.net by applying them while live tweeting. At the same

time, I examined the content of the instructions as well as other campaign-related articles and art featured on the site.

My hybrid positioning as an *aca-fan*—that is, an academic or scholar researching a fandom who is also a part of that fandom (Jenkins, 1992)—was convenient for a faster and broader understanding of the routines and codes of Fringenuity. However, there was a concern that such reflexivity might affect the interpretation of the actions and events that I was observing and the scientific relevance of the case study itself. Once the renewal was achieved, I took the necessary critical distance and time to evaluate my own experience and so diminish the implementation of an overly emotional or celebratory approach that could lead to biased and inaccurate assumptions (Silverman, 2006)—the ever-present risk in the work of an aca-fan (Cristofari & Guitton, 2016; Hills, 2002).

Nonetheless, seeing other fandoms making use of Fringenuity's methods and Nielsen launching a system to measure social TV audiences in 2012 provided reasons to review Fringenuity's experience and adopt a more direct approach to collect in-depth data related to the organization of the Twitter events. I set out to contact the campaign leaders. Birdandbear, aimeeinchains, and fringeship could be identified as such since they were the only members posting on Morethanoneofeverything.net. So, after reaching birdandbear through her Twitter handle in February 2015, I conducted an interview via e-mail with birdandbear, based primarily on a questionnaire of 16 open questions and a follow-up conversation.[8]

Analysis

Once the data were collected, I structured the analysis around the two main aspects that defined Fringenuity's plan to renew *Fringe*, and that can be considered characteristic of this kind of Save Our Show activism: fans' methodical use of Twitter affordances and the intricacies of fan–producer collaborative relationships when confronted with the issue of fan labor.

Twitter, a Strategic Tool for Fan Activism

"There are ways in which we legion of Non-Nielsens can let them know we're here, we're watching, and most importantly, we're paying attention to the paid advertising that keeps our shows afloat," notes birdandbear (2011, para. 4).

> We're breaking new ground: To my knowledge, no fandom has ever done anything quite so cohesive before—they never had the tools. Fringe has been the beneficiary of some very unique circumstances; the show needed support at a time when social media was really coming into its own, and for the first time ever, fans without Nielsen boxes had quantifiable ways to show that we're watching too. Faced with ratings that would have been a show's death knell a few years ago, FOX chose to use Fringe as a testing ground

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[8] Ideally I wanted to interview the three leaders, but aimeeinchain's death in 2013 and fringeship's retreat from fandom made it possible to contact only birdandbear.

for a boatload of new data: namely DVR and other alternative viewing habits, and the growing influence of social buzz. (birdandbear, 2012, para. 1)

Both excerpts from informative entries posted on Morethanoneofeverything.net summarize the strategy that lies beneath Fringenuity's campaign: to overcome the limitations offered by Nielsen's People Meters. These limitations, as explained above, are related to the emergence of DVR and online streaming that have contributed to dramatic audience fragmentation. At the same time, it is no coincidence that these alternative ways of viewing, liberated from the constraints of a live broadcast, have become genre fan favorites. Shows such as *Fringe* and *Lost* harbor complex narratives that are easier to understand after a second or third viewing; they are stories that demand viewers' attention and encourage rewatching. These features fuel the emergence of an online forensic fandom (Mittell, 2009) that dissects each episode frame by frame with clinical precision, looking for hidden messages and clues about future plots within the narrative.

Fringenuity's Twitter campaign was therefore focused on making the underground audience—with a high degree of engagement with TV programs—visible to FOX and its sponsors. The underground audience is not usually taken into account during decision-making processes and is not represented by the Nielsen standard. As birdandbear explains, besides saving *Fringe*, the goal was to pass the message onto other genre shows on the brink of cancellation:

Genre television is a chronically endangered species and one of our goals was to try and start that conversation, to get networks looking at a show's social buzz as opposed to just its ratings. We hoped that if a network could measure the cult status of a show while it was still on the air, it might help keep other bubble shows alive based on the loyalty and engagement of their audience. (birdandbear, personal communication, February 3, 2015)

The Fringenuity team, like other fan organizations devoted to preventing the cancellation of their favorite shows, exhibits a broad understanding of the factors involved in measuring U.S. television audiences. The process of learning these media competences occurs in parallel to fans' dedication in watching their favorite TV shows. In other words, fans' intense relationship with their object of fandom fosters their own media literacy and the acquisition of other useful skills. And, when put into practice, this whole set of competences can be translated into useful tools for online-based forms of activism (Lopez, 2011).

Getting *Fringe* renewed for a fifth season required Fringenuity to gain some of the skills associated with a community manager's position.[9] As frequent Twitter users, the leaders of the organization were aware of the advertising possibilities offered by the platform, but were unaware of the operating logic behind its trending topics and hashtags, the key features behind the affordance of scalability. For this reason, they conducted a self-learning process to find a hashtag that would uniquely identify the online activity related to *Fringe* and, at the same time, be considered as relevant content by Twitter:

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[9] No campaign leader holds a media job.

> We learned about hashtags and what makes them trend. We learned that #Fringe, or #SaveFringe would never trend because of their constant usage, and that topics trend when they spring up suddenly and are used by a lot of different people, whereas a few people tweeting a hashtag over and over can't make it trend no matter their level of enthusiasm. We needed a spike in usage if we wanted a shot at trending. (birdandbear, personal communication, February 3, 2015)

> Trends are identified through a combination of novelty, and number and location of participants: 1000 people in Texas sending 100 tweets an hour containing a tag that's used all the time are *less likely to trend* than 1000 people all over the world sending 10 tweets an hour on a topic that's never been seen before. (birdandbear, 2012, para. 7)

The team met through Skype every weekend. After discussing that week's episode, the members analyzed the trailer of the next week's episode for elements they could add to the hashtag to be used during its broadcast on Friday. The goal was to create a label that was attractive to fans but also captured the interest of viewers outside the fandom to increase the hashtags' exposure and reach.[10] Hashtags such as #CrossTheLine, #BeABetterMan, and #LoveIsTheAnswer reflect the optimism that characterized the *Fringe* fandom. The initiative focused on tags that were inspirational for the general public, who, by clicking on one, would find a stream of tweets about the series. Fringenuity also intended to set a different tone from previous renewal campaigns, emphasizing the strong bond among *Fringe* fans:

> We felt that "Save Our Show" campaigns often do more harm than good because of the desperation of their tone, and negativity toward the network or the Nielsen system would diminish the spirit of the message we were trying to send. Instead we focused on fandom as family and people responded wholeheartedly. Part of the reason the campaigns worked so well was because we always had something to celebrate; even if we'd been unable to help Fringe, we still had each other, and the way the show had drawn us together into a tightly knit, caring, global community. Wherever we were able, we chose hashtags that reflected the strength of that community and its desire to see the world through a brighter lens. (birdandbear, personal communication, February 3, 2015)

Fringenuity kept no performance records of its first event on Twitter, which used the hashtag #CrossTheLine. Although the first event's results can be deemed as modest compared with later ones, the hashtags reached the top three in the list of worldwide and U.S. trending topics on Friday night. This is a feat that is especially remarkable considering AMC's show *The Walking Dead* appeared in the first position as a promoted (paid) hashtag.[11] Collected through the TwitterReach tool, the events would experience a striking rise with #BeABetterMan, the hashtag used in the sixth week of the campaign, which gathered an impressive 23.4 million impressions and 8.2 million unique users (see Table 1). The reason behind this

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[10] *Reach* represents the total number of unique Twitter users that received tweets about a specific search term, and *exposure* is the total number of times tweets about the search term were received by users. Each received tweet is called an *impression*.

[11] http://morethanoneofeverything.net/2012/02/15/breakingout-breakthroughs-campaign-report/

spike can be found in #BeABetterMan trending worldwide for several hours after the episode aired in the U.S. West Coast, a situation favored by the different time zones among the United States, Canada, France, and Spain—countries where the hashtag was popular.[12]

Table 1. Fringenuity Hashtags During* Fringe*'s Season 4.

Hashtag	Exposure[a]	Reach[b]	Episode
#CrossTheLine	—	—	"Back to Where You've Never Been" (4.08), January 13, 2012
#EnemyofMyEnemy	4.7	633,967	"Enemy of My Enemy" (4.09), January 20, 2012
#ObserveItLive	4.0	498,506	"Forced Perspective" (4.10), January 27, 2012
#TakeTheLead	4.9	846,255	"Making Angels" (4.11), February 3, 2012
##BreakingOut	4.4	765,141	"Welcome to Westfield" (4.12), February 10, 2012
#BeABetterMan	23.4	8.2 million	"A Better Human Being" (4.13), February 17, 2012
#LoveIsTheAnswer	12.2	3.9 million	"The End of All Things" (4.14), February 24, 2012
#WhereYouBelong	26.8	11.4 million	"A Short Story About Love" (4.15), March 23, 2012
#ChangeYourWorld	30.0	13.9 million	"Nothing As It Seems" (4.16), March 30, 2012
#FaceYourself	11.5	3.5 million	"Everything in Its Right Place" (4.17), April 6, 2012
#AcrossTheUniverse	14.5	5.8 million	"The Consultant" (4.18), April 13, 2012
#FightTheFuture	13.1	3.3 million	"Letters of Transit" (4.19), April 20, 2012
#WorldsApart	12.5	3.2 million	"Worlds Apart" (4.20), April 27, 2012
#DarkestBeforeDawn	13.4	2.6 million	"Brave New World Part I" (4.21), May 4, 2012

Source. Author's elaboration based on birdandbear (2012, personal communication, February 3, 2015).
[a]Millions of impressions.
[b]Number of unique users.

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[12] http://morethanoneofeverything.net/2012/02/21/trending-beabetterman-a-phenomenal-outcome/

Fringenuity needed not only to promote events through Twitter or popular fan blogs within the community such as FringeTelevision (http://www.fringetelevision.com), but to make the strategy intelligible and transferable to other fans wishing to join the initiative. The team occasionally posted entries on Morethanoneofeverything.net explaining the reasons behind the need for an organized fandom, or information about the growing impact of social networks in television consumption.[13] But it was in the entries introducing the new hashtag for Friday night's event where the overall campaign strategy was detailed.

Posted four days before the airing of each episode, along with its corresponding hashtag, the "Twitter Event Protocol" (see Figure 1) is a simple compendium of instructions common to all events. On the one hand, they encapsulate the knowledge acquired by the Fringenuity team during the brainstorming of the initiative; on the other hand, they break down each of the steps that are part of the general slogan of *Fringe*'s renewal campaign: "Watching Live + Social Media + Thanking Sponsors + Sharing The Love = Season Five" (aimeeinchains, 2012b).

Following the example of *Chuck*'s renewal campaign, Fringenuity leaders made a point of supporting *Fringe*'s advertisers, discarding hostile tactics and opting for a more collaborative and television-market-integrated activist approach. Twitter events were complemented with specific actions in the former TV social network GetGlue to reinforce the message of support for sponsors and, above all, to state that *Fringe* fans were paying attention to the products advertised during the show's airing. Fringe Television joined these efforts to be recognized by advertisers by posting a list of the sponsors of each episode with links to their Twitter and Facebook accounts for fans to send words of gratitude for having chosen *Fringe* to air their commercials or do product placement.[14]

In conjunction with the publication of the protocols on Morenthanoneofeverything.net, Fringenuity designed a series of fan art every week (see Figure 2) inspired by the hashtags to use as avatars or profile pictures on Twitter during the events. One of the team members, Nikolai3d, created a Web application[15] to store all the avatars designed during the campaign and to enable users to add them to their profile with a single click (birdandbear, personal communication, February 3, 2015). At the same time, the initiative encouraged others to create and share their own promotional material, mostly icons and videos, such as "FRINGE February 17—Be a Better Man" by the Spanish fan sujeto13,[16] which helped to spread the word of events in other languages and on other platforms.

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[13] http://morethanoneofeverything.net/2012/04/05/social-fringe-fans-shaping-the-future-of-television-viewing-marketing-and-interaction/

[14] http://www.fringetelevision.com/2011/11/commercials-from-fringe-episode_18.html

[15] http://observer-n3.com/FSRR/unified_icon_matrix/index.php

[16] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P8wszikh0s8

TWITTER EVENT PROTOCOL

1) Don't use #ChangeYourWorld before the designated time: 1 HOUR before Fringe airs.

The event will take place 1 hour before Fringe airs – 8pm EST. As these events become larger, we are gaining more new Fringies in the effort. Gently remind others that use the tag before the event to wait until the right time, and tell them that using the tag too much beforehand will lessen trending impact. This happened when Fringe fans tried to trend #WhereIsPeterBishop for the season four premiere. The # had been used all summer long, was not anything new on the Twitter radar, so it did not trend.

Trending happens with terms that are relatively new, and many people tweet about them at the same time. *(This was also shown in the case with #WikiLeaks. Terms break out onto the scene, but as they are used, trending becomes more difficult.)*

Be nice! We want everyone to feel welcome.

2) One # term per Tweet. Use only #ChangeYourWorld

3) Lots of people tweeting matters more than the number of tweets. Tell everyone Fringie about the event. There is strength in numbers – remember that the more unique tweeters we have, the more likely we are to trend, and for a longer duration of time. Send your tweets out fast but remember to pace yourself.

We know we can hit worldwide trending now so sustained tweeting matters too. Trending can be a distraction but we need you to keep those wonderful tweets coming.

4) Those with lots of followers help out a lot! Alternate accounts with few followers do not have as much "influence" towards trending. But tweets from accounts like @JWFringe (Joel Wyman, executive producer) and @VancityJax (Joshua Jackson, actor) make a big impact.

5) We want to pique the interest of non-Fringe fans. Try to construct a list of thoughtful and informative tweets before the event. These can be copied and pasted for easy tweets. Use some witty Fringe sayings, link some of the official promo videos, make statements about how to change the world, or how Fringe has inspired you to change. Cool tweets are more likely to earn re-tweets, and this immensely helps trending.

6) We can discuss aspects of the show in our tweets. TRY to include the word FRINGE (with no #) in your tweet if possible. Talk about the characters and the actors.

7) Private accounts must have their locked status removed, as the tweets from locked accounts do not count toward the trend tally.

8) Retweets are the easiest way to help out the trending effort. Just search for the hashtag, and retweet the ones that are interesting to you. If you know how to use a Twitter application suite like TweetDeck or HootSuite, this is made even easier.

9) Remember, the second phase of the social media plan is equally important. Using @Getglue to promote Fringe and the show's advertisers.

We are asking that Fringe fans try and make their first tweet of the night a check-in to GetGlue that is a thank you to sponsor, @NissanLeaf. An example:

Thanks @NissanLeaf for sponsoring Fringe! #ChangeYourWorld by driving an eco-friendly Leaf!

Figure 1. "Twitter Event Protocol" for the hashtag
#ChangeYourWorld (aimeeinchains, 2012c).

**Figure 2. #BeABetterMan avatar featuring the Peter Bishop character,
by @cheribot. Source: Morethanoneofeverything.net**

        The participation of fans around the world in creating videos and images to reinforce the campaign's deployment on Twitter is an example of the fast reception Fringenuity's plan received among the show's overseas fandom. This international support is directly tied to the emergence of social media and its capacity to bring together dispersed audiences around the same topic of discussion. In addition, the Fringenuity community's strong sense of togetherness allowed it to obtain support from other fan blogs and Twitter accounts about the series in other countries. Such is the case of @FringeGermany (Germany), @Fringe__UK, @FringeUKIreland (United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland), @SerieFringeBR (Brazil), and @Fringespain and @ZonaFringe (Spain), and others.

Fan–Producer Interactions and the Thin Line of Fan Labor

        Until *Fringe*'s return after a month-long hiatus on March 23, 2012, with the broadcast of the episode "A Short Story About Love" (4.15), FOX had been using the standard hashtag #Fringe—the same one that the fandom had rejected after considering it ineffective for their goal to trend on Twitter. During the hiatus, FOX representatives contacted Fringenuity to communicate their intention to use the hashtag #WhereYouBelong on screen (fringeship, 2012). Specialized media such as *TV Guide* reported the agreement, calling it "a nod of appreciation" (Holbrook, 2012, para. 2) to *Fringe* fans' efforts in their viral

campaigns, implying the network's close following of the campaign. The results of the experiment (see Table 1) encouraged FOX to continue using Fringenuity's hashtags until the end of Season 4.

FOX's official support materialized through the figure of Ari Margolis, who was in direct communication with the Fringenuity team. The creative director had been following the campaigns in a personal capacity as any other *Fringe* fan since the first event, #CrossTheLine (aimeeinchains, 2012a). As a courtesy to the network, Fringenuity allowed Margolis to choose the week's hashtag from a list of four or five possibilities that were provided for him by the campaign team after its online meeting (birdandbear, personal communication, February 3, 2015).

> Despite the official support and Margolis's role as a "guiding spirit," the relationship between the network and the fans was noted for its unilateral nature because Fringenuity had no other contact with the network beyond its interaction with Margolis. FOX's decision to use fan-created hashtags was an unprecedented collaboration between a television network and a fandom. This move demonstrates the breakdown of barriers between producers and consumers so characteristic of the contemporary media ecosystem. However, none of the three leaders received any material compensation beyond a piece of amber from the set and an exclusive DVD screener for the series finale "The Boy Must Live" (5.13): "That [the piece of amber and the screener] was our only perk and it was entirely unexpected, but cool as hell and very much appreciated" (birdandbear, personal communication, February 3, 2015).

The absence of a financial reward highlights the extent to which fans may consciously work for free while trying to save the shows they love. In this sense, Milner's (2009) argument about fans seeing their uncompensated labor as a "foregone conclusion" or "business of usual" (p. 499) is useful in a context where no benefit whatsoever was anticipated by the fans, as noted by birdandbear's comment above. Motivated only by their loyalty to the text as a brand, Fringenuity worked for *Fringe*'s longevity on air and a self-perceived ability to influence the television measurement market as ultimate goals. The enthusiasm for demonstrating, through data, the existence of alternatives to measure engagement was equally shared by the members of the team, and so Fringenuity posted several entries on Morenthanoneofeverything.net to encourage fans with the premise of "making history" (aimeeinchains, 2013; birdandbear, 2011). In such posts, it is apparent how fans' labor and willing self-commodification are beyond any monetary gain, or perks, and closer to immaterial reward (Milner, 2009).

Unlike other doomed Save Our Show campaigns of the past, *Fringe*'s fandom endeavors were rewarded when, on March 26, 2012, Joel Wyman announced on Twitter the series' renewal for a fifth and final season that would begin airing in the fall.[17] With the mission already accomplished, FOX and Fringenuity continued with the Twitter events over the last 13 episodes as a way to celebrate *Fringe*. However, the initiative never received any economic compensation that confirmed its pioneering work in recognizing viewers who did not belong to the "Nielsen families," emphasizing once again the immaterial motives that steered Fringenuity's actions in the first place:

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[17] https://twitter.com/jwfringe/status/195650701416869889

When Nielsen announced their new social media tracking program it was hard *not* to take it as a kind of vindication. Whether or not our activities had any direct bearing on that move (and Nielsen would never admit to it if they did), it still bore out things we'd been trying to say all along: that there are more ways to measure the engagement of today's TV audience than through a system devised more than half a century ago. (birdandbear, personal communication, February 3, 2015)

Discussion

The case of the fan initiative Fringenuity: Action at a Distance is a clear example of the potential of social media for the development and implementation of fan activist projects in the transmedia context. On the one hand, social media increases the campaigns' reach and, on the other hand, provides leaders with accessible and affordable tools for spreading their messages through a variety of media. As we have seen, Twitter affordances have proven cost-effective in amplifying fan voices when used *methodically.* However, it would be naive to think that FOX's approach to *Fringe* activist fans could have materialized without the obvious impact of Twitter on television consumption, resulting in an increase in the effectiveness of commercials (Midha, 2014).

In-depth knowledge of the television market rules enabled Fringenuity to develop the skills needed to detect shifts in the structure of the market—such as the rise of social TV—and to mobilize other fans in order to make those transformations visible to audiences unaware of the possibilities. The peculiarity of Fringenuity's approach lies, however, in the simultaneous use of Twitter as both a tool for and an object of activism. The organization used the platform to spread a self-referential message that defends the value of the social network as a reliable indicator to measure the actual engagement of television audiences being sold to advertisers by networks. These indicators move beyond an outdated system, based on measuring massive audiences that, in reality, have been—and continue to be—fragmented by the multiplication of consumption alternatives through more services and platforms.

The unusual fan–producer partnership between Fringenuity and FOX and the advantages this bore for creators and advertisers (i.e., guaranteeing more time to implement the writers' vision and exposing audiences to commercials) describe an increasingly interdependent landscape where fans have renegotiated their share in the power structure and have achieved a more decisive position in terms of influence capacity. However, from a critical point of view, it could be argued that this improvement does not come without caveats. For instance, successfully positioning a network show's brand online, like Fringenuity did, involved fans carrying out unpaid or free labor as a "necessary evil" to fulfill its goal. According to Stork (2014), "the strategic exploitation of fan activities as labor . . . portends a marketing strategy that promotes 'the colonization of consumer/producer agency by markets' (Deuze, 2009, p. 148)" (para. 38). Granted, this is an issue where a simple answer does not exist, as fans' own perceptions about their labor and agency tend to be, as some scholars have argued, deeply rooted in immaterial motives. But, paradoxically, when some individual fans become aware of the materialistic implications of their labor, they still choose self-commodification over profit, albeit often at their fan peers' expense (e.g., pulled-to-publish fan fiction as seen in Jones, 2014). This deepens the intricacies of fan labor, not just between fans and industry players but also within fan communities, and presents a challenging scenario for fan scholarship in years to come.

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