

# ‘Thanks, but it is more about interacting with fans for us’: Twitter Communication between BBC’s *Sherlock* and NBC’s *Hannibal* Fans and Producers

Lauren A. Ebanks, Shirley Beresford, and Martina Topić\*

Leeds Business School, Leeds Beckett University, Leeds, UK, LS1 3HB

\*Corresponding Author: [M.Topic@leedsbeckett.ac.uk](mailto:M.Topic@leedsbeckett.ac.uk)

This paper looked at online communication between producers of BBC’s show *Sherlock* and NBC’s show *Hannibal* with their fans. The main aim was to investigate engagement of producers with fans on social media and the use of accounts on social media, e.g. whether TV shows interact with fans through the use of the official network, a production company affiliated accounts or people involved with the show use their own accounts to communicate with fans. Kent and Taylor’s five features of dialogic public relations (Mutuality, Propinquity, Empathy, Risk

and Commitment) were used to analyse communication. The results show that two shows share many similarities but the main differences in approach to communication come from the business structure of two broadcasters, public versus commercial. Both shows also showed evidence of dialogic PR techniques, but BBC’s *Sherlock* also utilised elements of publicity.

*Keywords:* BBC, NBC, *Sherlock Holmes*, *Hannibal*, fandom, public relations

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**F**andom is not new, as the first fan communities began to form during the 1960s and the first series to attract such activity was *Star Trek* (Bury, 2016). Booth (2010) thus defined a fan as “a person who invests time and energy into thinking about or interacting with a media text: in other words, one who is enraptured by a particular extant media object” (p. 11). This definition separates the casual consumer of media from one who is so enraptured that they are compelled to participate in “fandom”, that is “specific social and cultural interactions and communities that have formed through the close interaction of committed groups of fans in a subcultural context” (Sandvoss, 2005, p. 5). However, as technology evolved so did the nature of fan-studies and ethnographic studies, such as Kozinets’ study of consumption in the X-files fandom (1997) and Jenkins’ (2016) study of fans who ‘spoil’, that reveals the content of the show prior to its original airing.

By the early 2000s, distinctive (also referred to as ‘cult’) television shows became more closely associated with their writer-producers often referred to as showrunners (Kompore, 2010), and the primary communication relationship was no longer fan to the television network, but instead fan to showrunner. Zubernis and Larsen’s (2012) study of fans of the TV show *Supernatural* was the first in depth-study to articulate the creation of ‘meaningful television’ by examining the idea of communication between fans and the series’ showrunners which led to significant fan influence on the show’s narrative as fans and producers interacted in both the digital and real-life spheres. However, where previously television was a “one-way street winding from producers to consumers, it has now become two-way” (Sela, 2002, n. p.) with the internet acting as an equaliser where any fan’s voice can theoretically be heard by the producer of the media they consume. Jenkins (2006) defines this multi-media spanning, digital environment as an example of convergence culture, “where old and new media collide, where grassroots and corporate media intersect, where the power of the new media producer and the power of the media consumer interact in unpredictable ways” (p. 2).

According to Ross (2012), the flow (and thus the influence) of content from producers to the audience is best seen as an indirect, multi-stepped process. This is particularly apparent within the sphere of digital communication. Television shows are a branded cultural product and all products can be marketed. The Internet has enabled consumers to organise digitally and create communities around their love for or dislike of a particular product whether it’s a type of washing detergent or a television show. This activity has several ramifications for television shows in particular. As well as allowing the TV show storyline to continue “off-air”, officially sanctioned Facebook, Twitter and other social media accounts allow consumers to engage with the producers of the media they admire in ways that could not have been previously imagined.

It is important to note that meta-fandom is not typical of fan-producer relationship and typically, “the interests of producers and consumers are not the same. Sometimes they overlap. Sometimes they conflict. The communities that on one level are the producer’s best allies on another level may be their worst enemies” (Jenkins, 2006, p. 58). If a media text is solely shaped by the influence of its most ardent fans the creator risks isolating more casual fans from the fan community at large. Therefore, media producers endeavour

to strike the right balance between encouraging fan enthusiasm/participation and protecting the artistic integrity of their original text. This new model of engagement requires a different approach to public relations and marketing. Fans are no longer marginal, they have become, “the central players in a courtship dance between consumers and marketers” (Jenkins, 2006, p. 73) and the creators are watching.

Creators of television show now actively monitor social media sites to see if their show is ‘trending and measure fan response. Public relations (PR) is concerned with managing communication between an organisation (producer) and its publics (consumers, or in our case fans), therefore it is important that communications professionals working in the field of entertainment public relations, specifically online television public relations, take advantage of social media and online communication as a way to build sustainable relationships. Nevertheless, since the engagement of fans on social media is also becoming a measurement of success of the programme itself (Kosterich & Napoli, 2016; Navar-Gill, 2017), then this has even more relevance for the PR industry and its online engagement with the public. As argued by Navar-Gill (2017), “creative workers and, through them, fans are pulled into broader industrial and commercial imperatives surrounding television texts. As writers and other creative figures embrace practices that serve the industrial institutions that employ them, they model ways for fans to become part of the same productive ecosystem” (p. 14-15).

This paper is examining the online public relations/communications practices of two television shows: BBC's *Sherlock* and NBC's *Hannibal* in an attempt to classify their online communications and relationship with fans. The paper accepts a recommendation from Moe, Poell and van Dijck (2015) and analyses two TV shows with reference to public versus commercial broadcasters and their social media engagement. This distinction is relevant because there is an assumption that commercial outlets will be more likely to engage with fans to keep ratings and income from advertising high. As opposed to that, public service broadcasters are funded with public funding and they do not rely on advertising income. While there are some European countries where public service broadcasters collect both subscription and advertising fees, in the case of BBC as the oldest public broadcaster in the world, this is not the case. BBC relies solely on public

funding and has no advertising. Therefore, comparing social media engagement between the UK's public broadcaster and US' commercial broadcaster seems relevant and timely.

## METHODS

This paper is an exploratory study that examines online communication between producers and consumers of two selected television shows in order to classify their online communication. In particular, we looked at the engagement of producers with fans on social media and the use of accounts on social media, e.g. whether TV shows interact with fans through the use of the official network, a production company affiliated accounts or people involved with the show use their own accounts to communicate with fans. As the research was concerned with online communications and primarily took place via the Internet, we felt that the most appropriate research methodology was netnography. Kozinets (1998) defines netnography as, “a written account resulting from fieldwork studying the cultures and communities that emerge from online computer-mediated, or Internet-based communications, where both the fieldwork and the textual account are methodologically informed by the traditions and techniques of cultural anthropology” (p. 366).

Kozinets' guidelines for netnographic fieldwork were used, i.e. we looked for online communities that are: a) relevant — to research focus and questions, b) active — with recent and regular communications c) interactive — with a flow of regular communication between participants d) substantial — having a critical mass of communicators and an energetic feel e) heterogeneous — they have a number of different participants and finally f) data rich — offering detailed and descriptive data (Kozinets, 2010).

The purpose of online monitoring was to address the following research questions,

- a) What types of news/information do fans and producers share via social networks?
- b) Do producers actively respond to or engage with fans on social media?
- c) Do producers engage with fans outside of social media?
- d) Are there differences between the communication styles of BBC and NBC?

The TV shows *Hannibal* and *Sherlock* were chosen as the focus of this study as they meet all of the above criteria. Additionally, as both *Hannibal* and *Sherlock* are fairly new

TV shows, having both aired three seasons/series at the time of writing, there is not a significant amount of academic research on these media texts and their fan-producer relationships. Therefore, this paper contributes to both fan studies in the wider field of cultural studies and, due to its focus on examining digital dialogue and communication, the field of online public relations. The two shows are ripe for comparison as they fall within the same genre of television: mystery/suspense, but take place in two very different geographic areas, the UK and the US, and are produced by companies with very different agendas, publicly funded broadcaster (BBC) vs. a for-profit television network (NBC).

Twitter was chosen as it is used widely in most professions as both self-promotion and information gathering tool and this makes it a valuable resource for qualitative analysis. Twitter was also chosen due to the instantaneous and public nature of this form of communication. After using the period of participant observation to identify official or officially sanctioned Twitter accounts associated with each television show we monitored their communication with fans during a specific period of peak activity within each fandom.

The tweets for each period were examined using a method of content analysis similar to Wohn and Na's (2011) study, titled "Tweeting About TV: Sharing television viewing experiences.. In this study, Wohn and Na (2011) conducted a content analysis of messages posted on Twitter during the airing of two particular television shows. For this analysis they used a model of Henri's model of interactivity, which consists of three steps: Communication of Information, Response to the information, A Second Response to the First Information (Henri, 1992, cited in Wohn & Na, 2011) and then categorised messages on Twitter as falling into three types: 1) messages sent to Twitter at-large; 2) messages directed to a specific user and 3) messages to a specific user that were reciprocated. We followed this method and once the tweets were categorised into three types, they were analysed according to Kent and Taylor's (2002) five features of dialogic public relations: Mutuality, Proximity, Empathy, Risk and Commitment. The tweets were analysed using a protocol that identified words, phrases and features of tweets that corresponded with Kent and Taylor's five features of dialogic communications and looked at holistically to determine whether online communication could be classified as dialogic public relations.

One of the benefits of social media is that it allows the TV show to continue off-air as fans can talk about the show anytime. This is also advantageous for producers as it allows them to communicate with fans in between series in order to deepen their investment in and anticipation for the next series.

*Sherlock* has active fandom while the show is on and off-air, but the conversation between producers and fans is more limited during periods when there are no new episodes of the show. As *Sherlock* averages two years between series, we chose to monitor Twitter during a specific time of peak activity within the BBC's *Sherlock* fandom. This period was the weekend of the first ever convention dedicated to BBC's *Sherlock*, Sherlocked the Event. The event was jointly organised by Hartswood Films, the Sherlockology team and Massive Events, a well-known organiser of Sci-Fi and fantasy conventions, and was promoted heavily via the Sherlockology website and Twitter accounts. Two hashtags were created to keep track of the conversations about event #SherlockedEvent and #Sherlocked.

The monitoring was done between April 24<sup>th</sup> and April 28<sup>th</sup>, the weekend off and the day immediately following, Sherlocked, the first ever BBC *Sherlock* themed fan convention. We monitored tweets about the convention that were sent to and from the following official and production associated accounts during that period that were about the convention:

- @MarkGatiss- Producer of BBC's *Sherlock*
- @SueVertue – Co-producer of BBC's *Sherlock*
- @Sherlockology- *Sherlock*-dedicated fan site and co-organiser of the convention
- @SherlockedEvent-The official account of the convention's organisers.

Thousands of tweets were directed to these accounts during that four-day period. It would have been prohibitive to attempt to examine such a large number of tweets so we chose to look at tweets sent by the accounts listed above and replies to these tweets. Retweets from other users were not analysed. Then we used the Twitter advanced search API to monitor and collect tweets to and from the above accounts over the course of four days and organised them by type of tweet: messages sent to Twitter at large, messages directed to a specific user, retweets and messages directed to a specific user that was reciprocated.

When it comes to NBC, all NBC shows have dedicated websites containing links to social media, full episodes, behind the scenes videos and other show-specific media and NBC *Hannibal's* approach to social media epitomizes the overall NBC strategy. In addition to the official NBC website- [www.nbc.com/hannibal](http://www.nbc.com/hannibal) and the official NBC Twitter- @NBCHannibal, and Tumblr- [Nbchannibal.tumblr.com](http://Nbchannibal.tumblr.com) accounts the production company and production staff of *Hannibal* maintain frequently updated social media accounts where they interact with fans and post-show-related content and updates. These accounts are:

- @DeLaurentiisCo – The official Twitter account for The DeLaurentiis Company
- [TheFannibalFeed.tumblr.com](http://TheFannibalFeed.tumblr.com) - The official DeLaurentiis Company Hannibal related blog
- @Hannibal Room- The official Twitter account for the writers of Hannibal
- @BryanFuller- The official Twitter account of Hannibal's showrunner Bryan Fuller
- @FeedingHannibal- Official Hannibal related the Twitter account of Janice Poon, food stylist for Hannibal
- [JanicePoonArt.blogspot.com](http://JanicePoonArt.blogspot.com)- The official blog of Janice Poon with a section entitled 'Feeding Hannibal' where she gives a behind the scenes look at the food styling for every Hannibal episode.

In addition, to Twitter analysis using participant observation period, we also conducted textual analysis of DVD commentary of episode three of season 1 of BBC's *Sherlock* and analysis of two after shows of *Hannibal*, one officially produced and one fan produced.

Finally, we also analysed DVDs with commentaries, in order to establish the influence of fans on the story and to what extent producers communicate and collaborate with fans when producing their favourite TV shows.

In addition, we wanted to establish whether producers communicate with fans outside of social media. The latter was relevant because as the analysis of Twitter activities will show, the BBC does not communicate closely with fans on social media; however, producers did communicate with fans by visiting them and pitching the show to them.

The analysis of DVD commentaries was conducted using qualitative content analysis, in which we looked at conversation as a whole, and then we used direct quotes to illustrate views of producers, and support our social media analysis.

**Table 1**  
Summary of Methods Used

BBC's <i>Sherlock</i>	NBC's <i>Hannibal</i>
<p><b>Participant Observation Period:</b> Six months: July 2014-December 2015</p> <p><b>Twitter Hashtag Monitoring Period:</b> The researchers monitored hashtags #Sherlocked and #Sherlockedevent between the 25 April and 28 April, 2014 during <i>Sherlocked</i>, the first ever <i>Sherlock</i> fan convention. The monitoring was done using the Twitter Advanced Search API.</p> <p><b>Textual analysis:</b> Analysis of DVD commentary of episode three of season 1.</p>	<p><b>Participant Observation Period:</b> Six months: July 2017 – December 2017</p> <p><b>Twitter Hashtag Monitoring Period:</b> The researchers monitored the DeLaurentiisCo Twitter account, the official Twitter account of <i>Hannibal</i>'s production company for a three-hour period on June 28, 2014 when #Fannibals were asked to tweet #LetHannibalLive get the TV show trending on Twitter. The monitoring was done via viewing and logging of the 'DeLaurentiisCo Twitter feed.</p> <p><b>Textual Analysis:</b> Analysis of two after shows: one officially produced and one fan produced.</p>

## RESULTS

### *BBC's Sherlock*

*BBC's Sherlock* is a modern take on the classic Sherlock Holmes stories written by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle during the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Doyle's *Sherlock* canon consists of four novels and 56 short stories, the majority of which are in the public domain. As a result of the availability of the source material for adaptation, there have been numerous interpretations of Sherlock and Watson in film, television and literature.

Sherlockians or Holmesians can be said to participate in what is known as the 'Great (or Grand) Game', which according to the Baker Street Wiki is the "practice of

expanding upon the original Sherlock Holmes stories by imagining a backstory, history or other information for Holmes and Watson...it treats Holmes and Watson as real people and uses aspects of the canonical stories combined with the history of the era of the tales' composition to construct fanciful biographies of the pair" (Baker Street Wiki, 2015, n. p.). BBC's *Sherlock* continues this tradition and is therefore distinct from other television shows, which can be said to be solely the intellectual property of their showrunners. In other words, no new author can own Sherlock.

Created by Steven Moffat and Mark Gatiss, both veterans of the popular BBC television series *Doctor Who*, this updated *Sherlock* arrived on the small screen on the 25<sup>th</sup> of July 2010 to great fanfare and acclaim. Since its inception, it has become a television phenomenon with the finale of its third series capturing the UK viewing audience of more than 8.8 million (Plunkett, 2014) up 1.5 million from the finale of its first series (Plunkett, 2010).

**BBC's Sherlock's Approach to Social Media.** Like his predecessors, the BBC's current incarnation of Sherlock Holmes relies on his wits and awareness of his surroundings to help him solve mysteries, but unlike the old Sherlock this one is tech-savvy and "no forms of know-how are now off-limits, or to be ultimately derided as valueless. Important forms of knowledge are all around, embedded in academia, astronomy, trashy TV – and fandom itself" (Hill, 2012, n. p.).

The BBC is the UK's publicly owned national broadcast network whose mission statement outlines its intention to, "enrich people's lives with programmes and services that inform, educate and entertain" (Bbc.co.uk, 2015, n. p.) and this mission statement extends to its social media where it attempts to be as, "useful, entertaining and engaging as possible" (Robertson, 2013, n. p.). To achieve this, the BBC has strict editorial guidelines outlining the strategy that BBC producers should use when communicating with fans online. These guidelines govern the use of the BBC brand, the tone of voice, level of engagement and friending and following people on Twitter and Facebook (Bbc.co.uk, 2015).

As the BBC is a publicly owned corporation, all of its policies and procedure documents are available for the public to review online. In addition to the standard show homepage on the BBC One, the channel that *Sherlock* airs on, website, *Sherlock* also has a

series of tie-in websites written from the perspective of several series characters. Its sole official social media presence (according to the website) is a Twitter account named ‘The Whip Hand’ created by Hartswood Films, the production company that made *Sherlock* (BBC, 2015). Unfortunately, these websites do not live up to the BBC’s social media mission statement as they have not been updated since the first series of the show and the Whip Hand Twitter account only posted 12 tweets before going silent.

However, the network BBC One has a dedicated Twitter account (@BBCOne) with tweets advertising all of the shows on its schedule, including *Sherlock*. Additionally, several other BBC One television shows have dedicated Twitter accounts, which are very active so one can infer that the decision to not create a dedicated account was made by the production company and the showrunners rather than the network.

Hartswood Films has a Twitter account, which is updated semi-regularly and shares information on all of the television shows that they produce. Although one of *Sherlock*’s producers, Mark Gatiss, is on Twitter, the showrunner (executive producer and lead writer) Steven Moffat deleted his account stating that he was too busy for it and “found it to be a distraction” (Sue Vertue, 2012; Twitter account). However, there was some speculation that he deleted his social media accounts because he was tired of being harassed by and responding to rabid *Dr Who* and *Sherlock* fans (Pantozzi, 2012). Sue Vertue, Mark’s wife and assistant producer of BBC’s *Sherlock*, sporadically tweets from her own account and talks about *Sherlock* and other shows Hartswood produces. Instead, the production company seems to have outsourced the primary responsibility for online PR and fan interaction to a group of four BBC’s *Sherlock* fans who run the website Sherlockology.

Sherlockology is a fan site that bills itself as the ‘Ultimate Guide for any BBC *Sherlock* fan.’ Since its start in 2011, it has become the go-to resource for *Sherlock* information as the unofficial-official website is sanctioned by the creators of the show and its production company. The website features a behind the scenes look at the making of *Sherlock* including all scene locations and links to buy clothes as seen on the characters. The website’s homepage features a quote from Sue Vertue thanking them for existing, “Thanks Team Sherlockology for all your dedication, hard work and sleepless nights in

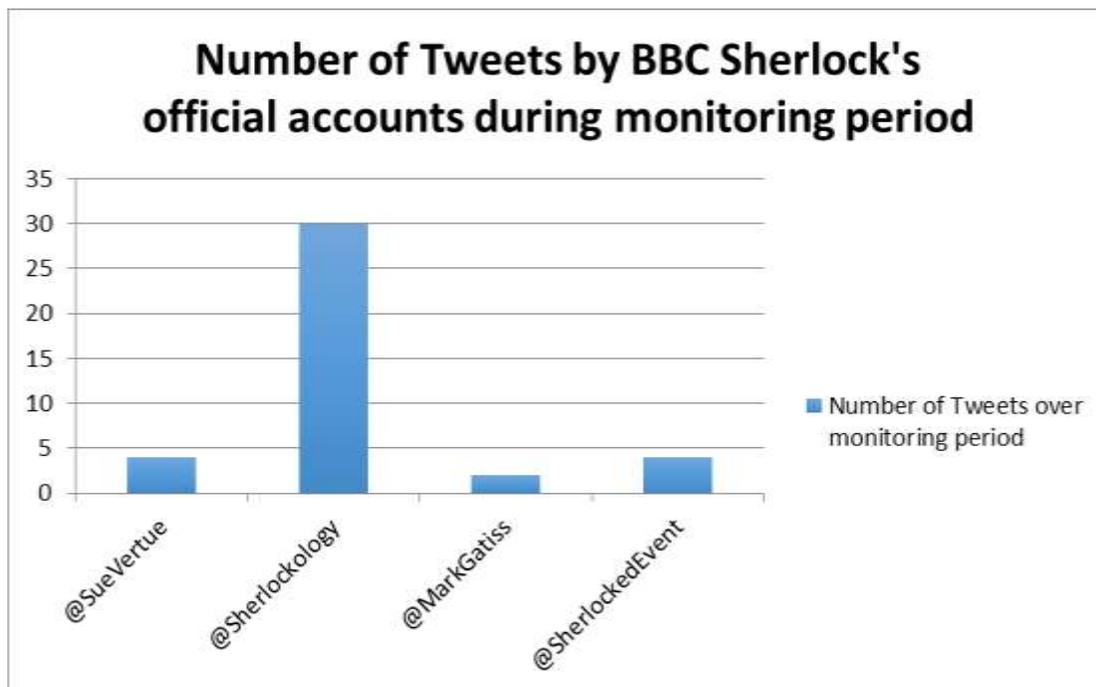
getting your website to this level of class, accuracy and information. Certainly takes a lot of heat off ME having to do it!" (www.sherlockology.com, 2015).

This outsourcing is mutually beneficial to the Hartswood Films and Sherlockology. Hartswood Films can use Sherlockology to funnel important information and stories with the unspoken caveat that they will keep quiet about other information and refrain from criticising the show in order to maintain their privileged access to information and stamp of semi-legitimacy. This mutual backscratching is a hallmark of entertainment PR and is an example of using the Press Agency Publicity model of PR as the information is distributed to a mass audience with no opportunity (via the forum or otherwise) for audience feedback (Grunig & Hunt, 1984).

**Twitter Analysis.** In this part, we are analysing Twitter communication. As emphasised in the methodology section, we have analysed all tweets sent from four selected accounts, and in the subsequent part, we are presenting our analysis, using some tweets as illustrative examples of our analysis.

**Table 2**

**Tweets by BBC Sherlock's official accounts during Sherlocked**



We collected a sample of 1500 tweets containing the search terms #sherlocked and #sherlockedevent that were the official hashtags of the event. Since the production company and producers individually sent each less than 30 tweets (table 2), this means that production company tweets accounted for less than 10% of the overall tweets during the monitoring period. This lack of tweets can be said to show a lack of commitment (in the dialogic sense) to interacting with fans. Some leeway can be given because the nature of conventions leads to active IRL participation with fans, but several other dedicated BBC's *Sherlock* fan groups including the *Baker Street Babes*, the web's only all-female Sherlock Holmes podcast, managed to send over 150 tweets, including replying to responses to their original tweets, over the course of the convention while also running a booth and hosting a panel at the event. For example, a tweet from and to @BakerSt.Babes demonstrates three characteristics of dialogic communication: mutuality, propinquity and empathy (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Tweet from and to @BakerSt.Babes

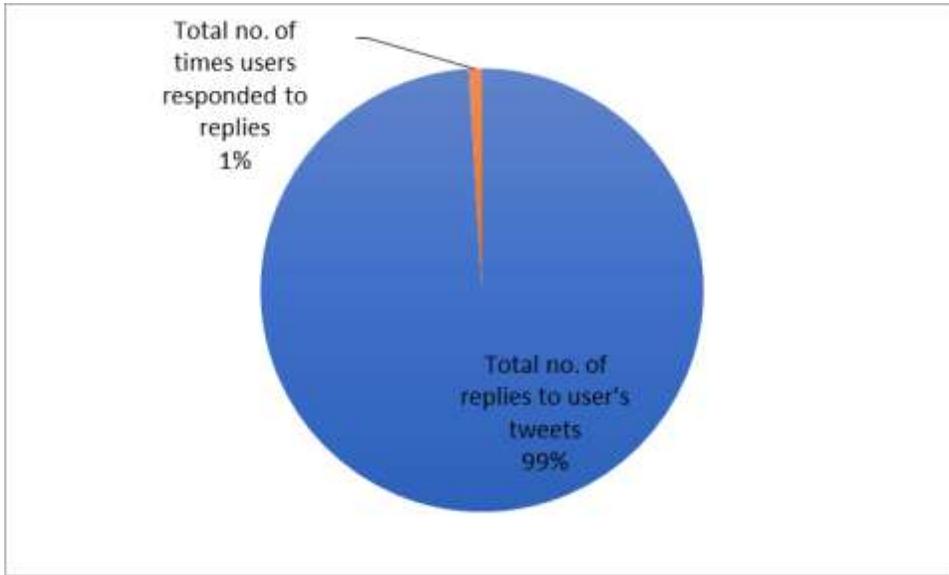


Figure 2. *Producer to Fan Communication*

Figure 2 shows the flow of communication during the monitoring period, although fans responded 620 times overall to the tweets, the users monitored only responded six times. This number shows a distinct lack of engagement with fans and thus a lack of propinquity and commitment. This lack of engagement with producers may cause fans to feel undervalued by the producers. As *Sherlock* can have several years in between new series it is important that fans remain engaged with the material even when the show is not on-air.

Table 3. Spread of dialogic features shown in tweets sampled

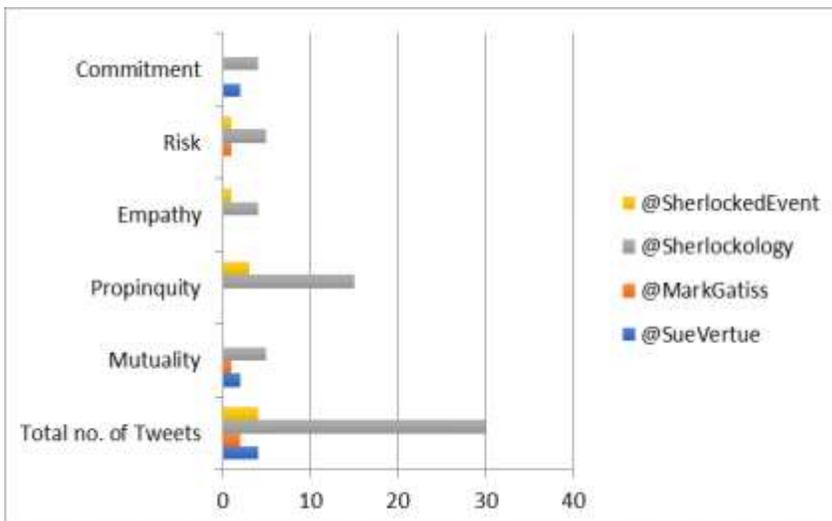
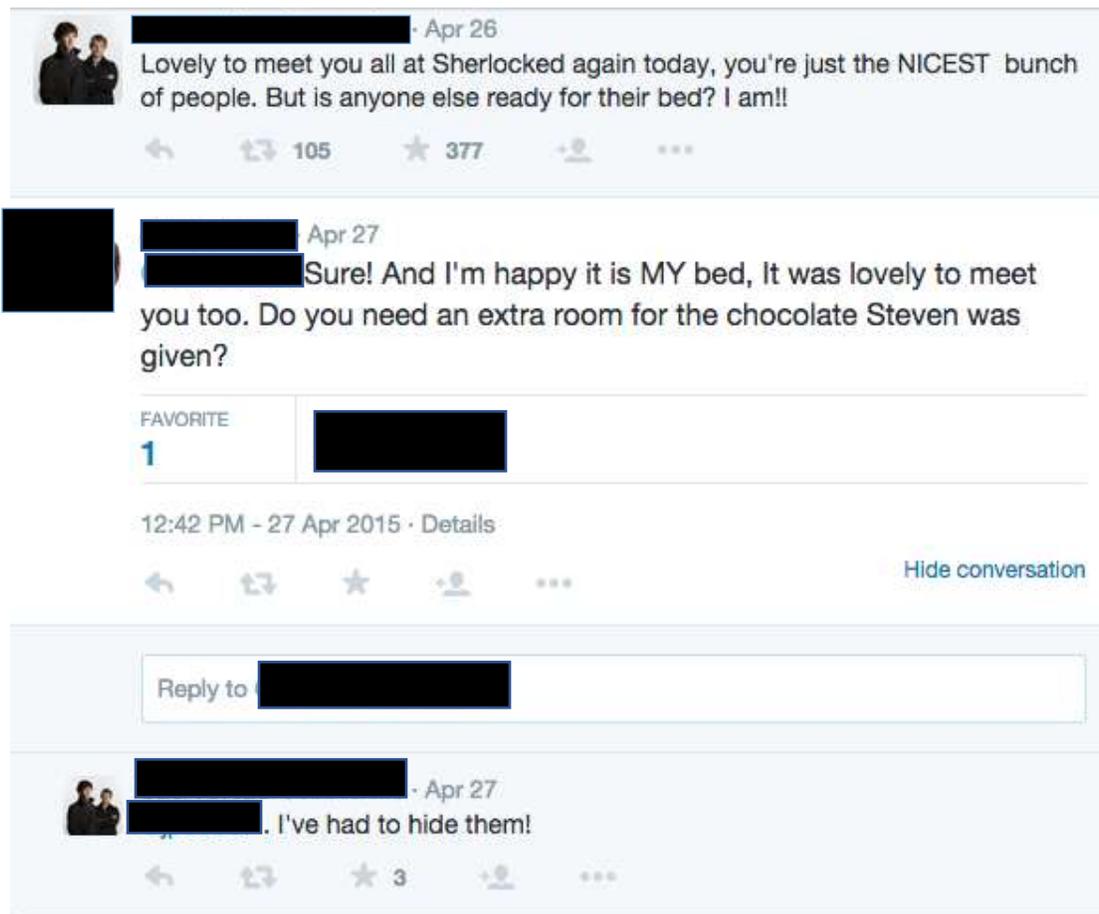
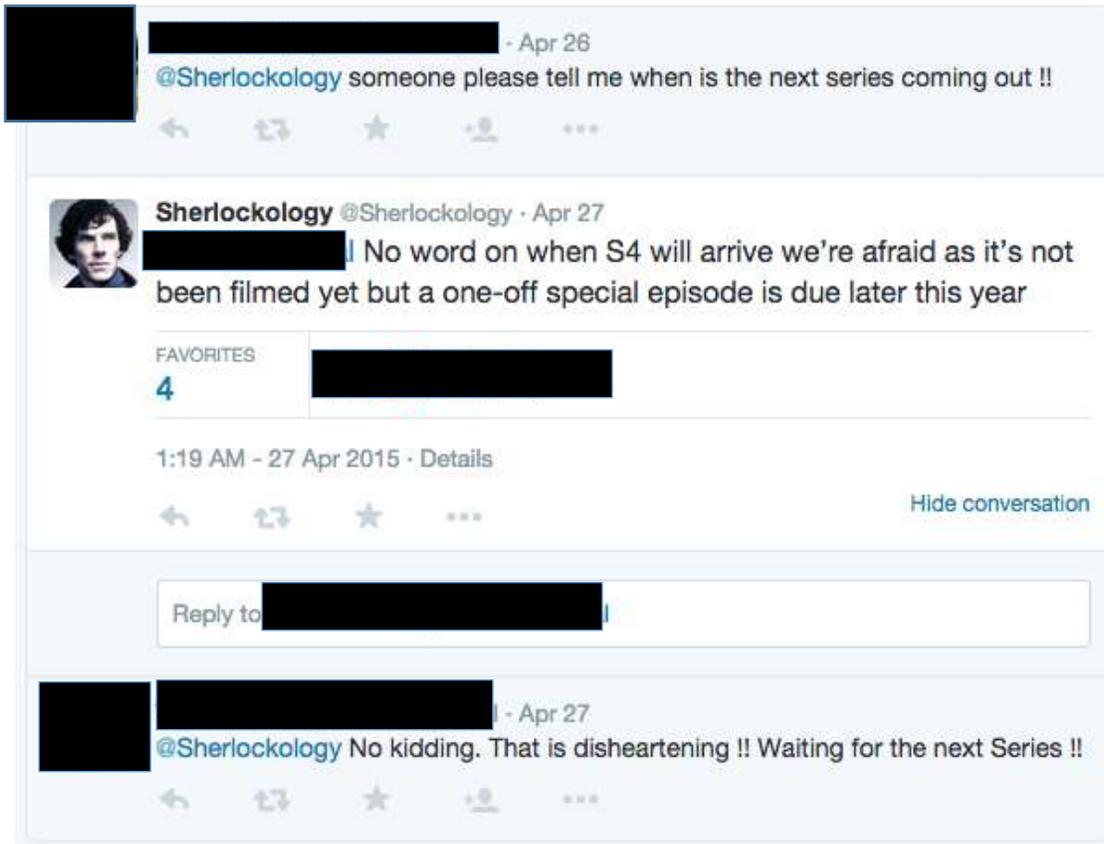


Table 3 shows the dialogic features represented in the tweets sampled. Some tweets contained multiple features of dialogic communication. The Sherlockology Twitter account was the only account with tweets that showed all features of dialogue. It can be argued that as the account also had the highest number of tweets, they would obviously represent a more varied spread of dialogic features. The dialogic feature that was demonstrated most frequently was Propinquity followed by Mutuality, Risk, Commitment and finally Empathy (Figure 3).



**Figure 3.** Tweet conversation between two fans showing Propinquity and Commitment

The Twitter conversation above demonstrates the ‘immediacy of presence’ that is a feature of Propinquity. The user and the audience are conversing in the same space, i.e. reflecting on a long day at the convention and Commitment is shown by the response of fan to the question.



**Figure 4.** Tweet conversation between @Sherlockology and a fan showing Mutuality and Empathy.

The Twitter conversation in Figure 4 shows Mutuality as it acknowledges that even though @Sherlockology has access to lots of otherwise privileged information about the show when it comes to knowing when the new season will premiere it is in the same position as every other *Sherlock* fan. The conversation also shows empathy through the use of ‘we’re afraid’, which is an apologetic phrase conveying sympathy.



Figure 5. Tweet conversation between @Sherlockology and a fan showing Risk

According to Kent and Taylor (2002), risk can be characterised by the vulnerability. In the conversation in Figure 5, Sherlockology is admitting that they do not know the answer to the question they are being asked. As they bill themselves as, ‘the ultimate resource for any BBC *Sherlock* fan’, fans will hold the assumption that the site is ‘all-knowing’, by being honest they are risking credibility. Conversely, the admission could potentially be seen by some to increase their credibility, as their willingness to admit a lack of knowledge could be seen as a symbol of authenticity.

In conclusion, the Twitter analysis shows that BBC *Sherlock*’s approach to public relations features elements of both publicity and dialogic communication. Unlike other BBC productions there did not seem to be explicitly agreed upon approach to online communication across accounts.

### NBC’s *Hannibal*

*NBC’s Hannibal* is a psychological thriller/horror television show based on characters appearing in *Red Dragon*, a novel by Thomas Harris, most notably the

character of Dr Hannibal Lecter, a forensic psychiatrist by day and a cannibalistic serial killer by night. Many of the characters on NBC's *Hannibal* have previously been featured in several film adaptations of Thomas Harris' novels including *Manhunter*, *Silence of the Lambs*, *Hannibal*, *Red Dragon* and *Hannibal Rising*.

This new iteration of *Hannibal* was developed for television by Bryan Fuller, known for writing and producing a number of critically acclaimed cult television shows including *Dead Like Me*, *Pushing Daisies* and *Heroes*. NBC's *Hannibal* premiered in 2013 to critical acclaim, but mediocre US viewing numbers of 4.36 million (TVbythenumbers, 2013). Viewership continued to decline throughout the first season with the final episode garnering 1.98 million viewers (TVbythenumbers, 2014), a decline of 2.38 million from the premiere. The show faced cancellation after the first season but was saved by fan-led social media campaigns targeting the show's ad sponsors with specific hashtags. An example of one of these campaigns was #UnleashtheFannibals, a play on US mobile-provider T-Mobile's #Unleash campaign (Boyd, 2014) which was designed to attract the attention of the mobile provider and encourage them to continue sponsoring ads during the show.

In the lead-up to the airing of the second season premiere NBC, DeLaurentiis and Co - the Production Company that made NBC's *Hannibal* and Amazon partnered to create a campaign entitled the '#13hourdevour' to encourage fans of the series to binge-watch all of the episodes via the Amazon Prime Instant Video streaming service (industry.shortyawards.com, 2015). *Hannibal* was renewed for a second and third season but was finally cancelled by NBC on June 22<sup>nd</sup> 2015 midway through its third season. The continual lack of viewers was cited as the reason for the cancellation (Wagmeister, 2015), but the production company continues to pitch the show to various networks and online video streaming platforms.

**NBC's *Hannibal*'s Approach to Social Media and Online Communication.** As a subsidiary of the Comcast Corporation, the largest broadcasting and Cable Company in the world, NBC Universal is a for-profit, US-based multimedia and Entertainment Company with a portfolio spanning television networks and production, film companies, theme parks and Internet-based businesses (NBC Universal, 2015). Their mission statement sets out their goals, "we are in the business to create and deliver content so

compelling it entertains, informs and shapes our world” (ibid, n. p.). This drive to create content that compels and connects drives NBC-Universal’s PR and Communication strategy for all of its shows. They do not just air television shows, they also seek to extend the experience online in ways that are immersive and drive viewer engagement with the show on and off-air (Rose, 2011, p. 169-184).

This strategy is predicated on the idea that television is not a static thing where someone produces and someone else watches it, but rather on a view that there is a process that happens when viewers engage with texts (Kompore, 2010, cited in Fiske, 1992). In other words, television is constructed by the meaning and interactions that take place as a result of the media.

The showrunner, production company and staff of *Hannibal* are known for being interactive with their fans online and use their social media accounts to promote the show, drive engagement in fan campaigns and advertise show merchandise for sale. Additionally, the production staff and actors frequently share interviews with trusted fan sites like [www.tattle-crime.com](http://www.tattle-crime.com) and partner with them for competitions and giveaways. The DeLaurentiis Company’s social media accounts are particularly active and seen as the hub for *Hannibal* news and information. This activity was rewarded with Bryan Fuller being named ‘favourite showrunner of 2014’ in the Carter Matt television awards, an online award that is voted on by fans (CarterMatt.com, 2014), and when the show was awarded the Ewmy, Entertainment Weekly’s annual version of the Emmy’s, he thanked the fans for their support (Entertainment Weekly’s EW.com, 2015)

**Twitter Analysis.** As the *Hannibals* are an active online fandom, there were many periods of ‘peak’ activity within the fandom (when the show was on and off-air) that could have been monitored. We chose to monitor fan-producer online communication *for* NBC’s *Hannibal* during the fan and production run a social media campaign to ‘Save Hannibal’ after it was announced that the series had been cancelled by NBC. The campaign hoped to let the show live on by garnering the attention of networks and streaming TV services by showcasing the size and strength of their worldwide fan base. Accordingly, the campaign consisted of fans and producers tweeting to and mentioning Amazon, FX Network and Hulu using the hashtag #LetHannibalLive. The campaign started at 9 pm EST on Sunday,

June 28<sup>th</sup> and continued on for the next week with surges of activity each night during the 9 pm EST hour, prime time viewing television hours in the US.

Even though other production accounts including @FeedingHannibal and @BryanFuller took part in the campaign, the @DeLaurentiisCo Twitter account was the epicentre of the production-fan interaction so we chose to monitor this account. We collected tweets sent by this account between 9 pm EST on Sunday, June 28<sup>th</sup> and 12 am EST on Monday, June 29<sup>th</sup> and replies to these tweets. Retweets from the account by other Twitter users were not analysed. As dialogue can be defined as the exchange of words (or text) by two or more persons we used this method of monitoring to enable the reader to easily track conversations.

We used the 'Tweets&Replies' tab of the @DeLaurentiisCo Twitter page to collect and record all the tweets sent during the three-hour monitoring period. Over the course of three hours, @DeLaurentiisCo sent 170 tweets, which included, retweets, replies and general tweets, averaging approximately one tweet per minute.

**Table 4. Dialogic Features Shown in Tweets Sampled**

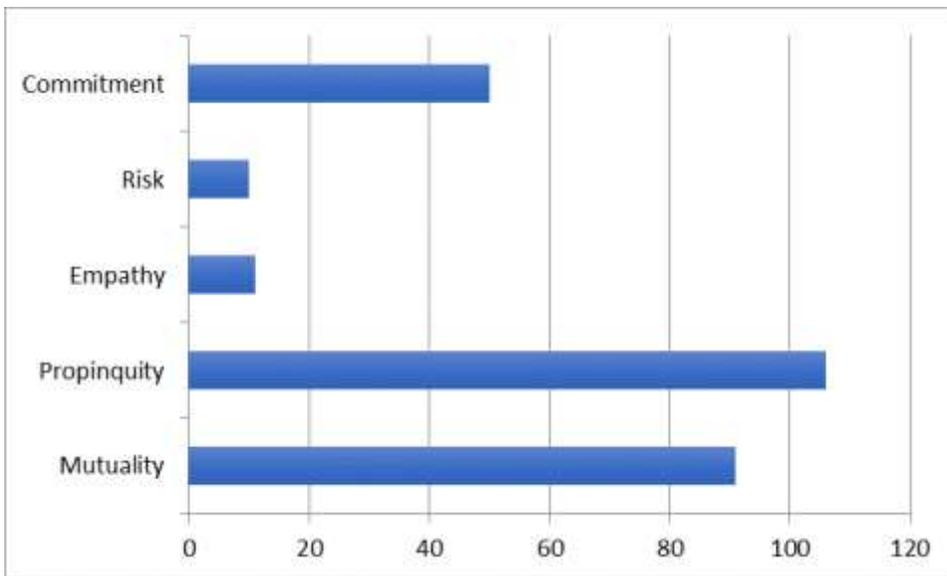


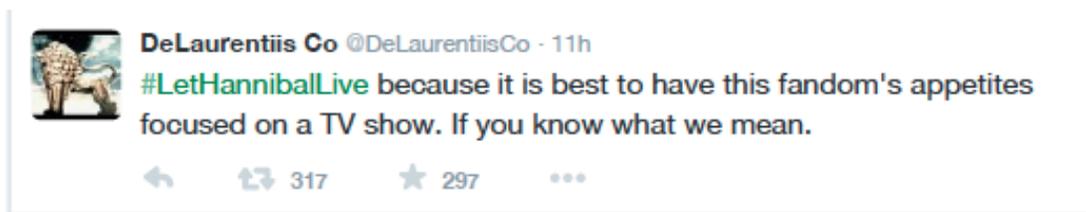
Table 4 shows the number of times that dialogic features were shown in the 170 tweets collected. Some tweets contained multiple features of dialogic communication. The dialogic feature that was demonstrated most frequently was propinquity and the feature that was demonstrated the least was a risk.

According to the Twitter monitoring tool Topsy, the hashtag #LetHannibalLive averaged 800 tweets per minute for the first hour of the campaign. This meant that @DeLaurentiisCo's pattern of tweeting illustrated the use of the dialogic feature of Commitment, defined by Kent and Taylor (2002) as comprising of three elements: genuineness/authenticity, commitment to the conversation and commitment to interpretation. By tweeting consistently throughout the monitoring period they showed commitment to conversation.



**Figure 6.** Tweet from @DeLaurentiisCo showcasing ‘genuineness/authenticity’

The tweet in Figure 6 shows genuineness/authenticity with its use of slang terms and its candid response to fan statements.



**Figure 7.** Tweet from @DeLaurentiisCo illustrating ‘commitment to interpretation’

The tweet in Figure 7 illustrates a commitment to interpretation which Kent and Taylor (2002) believe “necessitates interpretation and understanding by all” by joking that Fannibal passions could be stoked to emulate Hannibal Lecter’s actions if they had no show to focus on. According to Kent and Taylor (2002), Propinquity means that publics are consulted by the organisations in matters that influence them and publics are willing and able to articulate their demands to organisations. Propinquity consists of three features:

the immediacy of presence, temporal flow and engagement. The tweet in Figure 8 showcases all of these features:

- The immediacy of a presence—the tweet is communicating to fans and potential homes for the show in the present rather than after a decision for a new network has been made.
- Temporal flow: The tweet shows understanding of the past and present relationship with fans and has an eye towards their response in the future, should the show be picked up by another network or streaming video platform.
- Engagement: Shows engagement with an understanding of the community's feelings.



**Figure 8.** Tweet from @DeLaurentisCo showing all of the dialogic elements of Proximity

Mutuality was the second most frequent feature of dialogic communications found in the tweets. It refers to an acknowledgement that organisations and publics are inextricably tied together and is categorised by collaboration and the spirit of mutual equity (Kent & Taylor, 2002). It can be argued that the entire #LetHannibalLive Twitter campaign was in the spirit of mutuality because it acknowledged that the production company had just as much investment in the continuation of the show as the fans did and were a collaboration between fans and producers to achieve a specific goal. Like many fandoms, *Hannibal* has a large number of people who participate in ARGs as characters from the show. Unlike many fandoms, the producers of NBC's *Hannibal* interact with the role players, online.

The tweet in Figure 9 that was retweeted by @DeLaurentisCo during the monitoring period illustrates the Mutuality as described by Freddie Lounds. It shows her

assertion that production and fans see themselves as a family whose fates are inextricably tied together.



**Figure 9.** Tweet retweeted by @DeLaurentiisCo showcasing Mutuality

Empathy refers to the atmosphere of support and trust that must exist if the dialogue is to succeed. It is characterised by ‘supportiveness’, ‘a communal orientation’ and ‘confirmation or acknowledgement’ (Kent & Taylor, 2002). Although empathy was the second least feature of dialogic communication to be found in the tweets monitored, the tweets (see example in Figure 10) that were classed as ‘empathetic’ featured all three characteristics of dialogic empathy: Supportiveness, Communal Orientation and Confirmation of the value of others.



**Figure 10.** Responses to fan tweets showing Empathy

The risk was the least frequent feature of dialogic communication found in the tweets monitored. Kent and Taylor (2002) define the assumption of risk as characterised by three features in dialogic exchanges: vulnerability, emergent unanticipated consequences and recognition of strange otherness. Essentially, organisations need to be willing to acknowledge that individuals or groups who do not agree with their actions have a right to be heard and their views acknowledged. The Twitter conversation in Figure 11 is a great example of risk in a dialogic exchange.

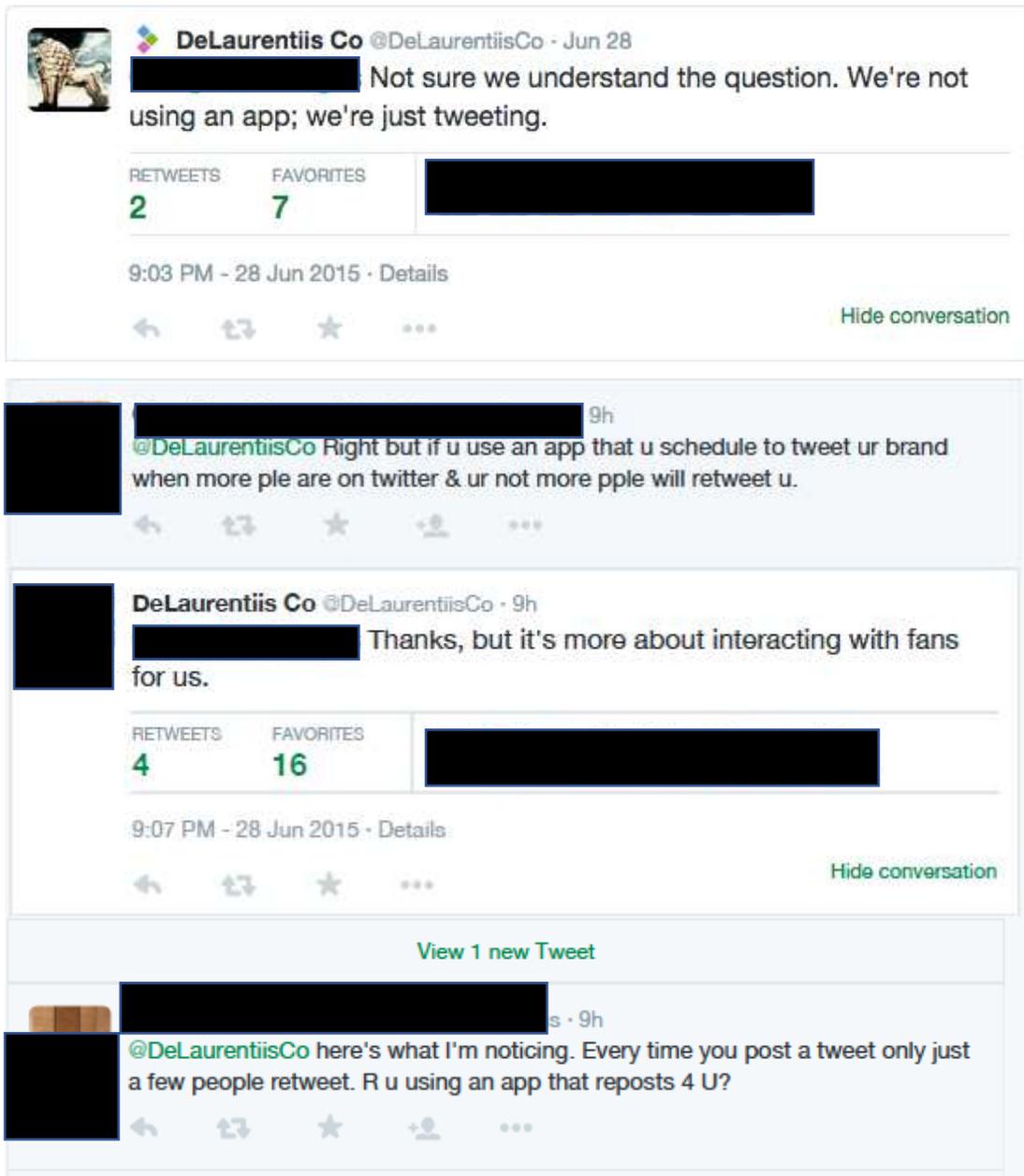


Figure 11. Twitter conversation-illustrating Risk

The monitoring showed that *Hannibal's* approach to online public relations is overall a dialogic one. They seem to have genuine conversations with and a genuine commitment to their fans.

### Analysis of DVD Commentary

**Sherlock.** As emphasised in the methodology section, we also looked at the episode of commentary for episode one of series three of BBC's *Sherlock*, *The Empty Hearse* in order to address research questions asking whether producers engage with fans outside of social media.

Steven Moffat has stated that he is not influenced by fan fiction or fan theories when he writes television shows (Dredge, 2014; Jones, 2014). Given the omnipresence of Sherlock and his (presumed) constant exposure to people who watch the show and discuss it online, it is difficult to believe that some outside influence would not find its way into his writing. However, in the commentary track for *The Empty Hearse*, which features Mark Gatiss, Steven Moffat, Sue Vertue and Una Stubbs, they debated the cliff-hanger of Sherlock's second season where Sherlock falls from a roof, some insight discloses a certain fan influence. Fans speculated how could Sherlock possibly survive the fall with theories ranging from the obvious to the ridiculous (Kerridge et al., 2013). At the beginning of the commentary track, Stephen Moffat and Mark Gatiss reflect on their surprise at the fan response to the finale of episode two by saying,

“When we did the Reichenback Fall we obviously anticipated there would be some interest in how Sherlock had not died. In the intervening two years, it became so vast an international talking point that we realised when we came to explain in the last thing we could do was just explain it.” (Gatiss et al., 2014)

Instead, the writers chose to showcase several theories via *The Empty Hearse Club*, a club of Sherlock fans dedicated to determining how Sherlock would have survived the fall. The club is led by Anderson, a former member of the Scotland Yard's forensics team who, “was always so cool, calm and collected and resentful and now he's become this freak who just hangs around” (Gatiss et al., 2014). Anderson and his club could be said to represent the

obsessive Sherlock fans theorising about how Sherlock could have survived in the two years between the end of series two and the start of series three. Many reviews of this episode theorised that BBC's *Sherlock* was being directly influenced by its superfans and cautioned that they risk isolating the more casual fan with their trolling and shout-outs (Lawson, 2014). The writers responded to these assertions in the following way,

Mark Gatiss: "I remember reading on the reviews, which said we'd obviously been combing the Internet for theories. We'd even put in the popular squash ball theory. I thought, "That's ours! That's how he did it! It's at the end of The Reichenbach Fall! That's how it happens!"

Steven Moffat: "One of the theories that I read that I loved was that he does just fall. It is actually technically possible to fall, to survive like that. He just does it... and spends two years getting put back together again!"

Much of the commentary reflects on why specific narrative choices were made including the decision to show Sherlock's parents for the first time, as they were absent from Sherlock's funeral in the previous episode. The writers considered this to be their first real departure from (Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's) canon:

Steven Moffat: "A lovely bit of plot housekeeping there, by the way. 'So that's why they weren't at the funeral.'

Mark Gatiss: "These questions do beg themselves" (Gatiss et al., 2014)

This admission is a nod to superfans that they will pick over each episode and log any inconsistencies. This could be taken as a hint that fans indirectly shape the narrative solely by virtue of their dedication to the show's accuracy. Perhaps the most notable admission of fan influence came mid-way through the episode when they reflected on their visit to the *Sherlock Holmes Society* some eight years prior to the airing of series one.

Steven Moffat: "Now, Mark Gatiss and I met outside (Westminster) Tube station once when Mark was on his way to address the Sherlock Holmes Society in the House of Commons and I was his date and Mark's subject was..."

Mark Gatiss: "Essentially the bulk of the speech was our pitch, really, what we'd come up with in the past few train journeys about the idea of bringing Sherlock Holmes up to date – with a few gags in – and we were very, very pleased at the response..."

Steven Moffat: And then we went back and I did the speech and that was the night before Reichenbach, and you would, as you say, assume this is the diehards (sic), the fundamentalists, but anything but. They were really into the idea of an update, seriously behind it.

Mark Gatiss: I think particularly with Sherlock Holmes fans, there have been so many versions that they actually always embrace a new thing. I think they're just very keen that it stays alive. It shocked us all how amazingly popular it's been but it's about keeping the whole flame alive (Gatiss et al., 2014).

**Hannibal.** In this section, as emphasised in the methodology section, we looked at the two after shows to address the research questions on potential communication between producers and fans outside of social media. We, therefore, looked at *Hannibal Postmortem* (a digital series, exclusive to NBC *Hannibal* website and YouTube channel that features exclusive interviews with production and cast), and *What the Flick: Movie and Television review* YouTube channel with almost 50 million views, which reviewed every episode of *Hannibal*. Bryan Fuller has appeared on the show several times. When it comes to *Postmortem* show we looked at *The Season Ahead* (a preview for the third season) and *The What the Flick's* review of season three, episode one (*Antipasti*).

The finale of the second series of *Hannibal* ended with a cliff-hanger as a massacre at Hannibal's house, which left the audience wondering who survived. The opening episode of season three continued the mystery as it focused on characters that the audience knew had survived. This issue was addressed in an interview with *What the Flick*,

Bryan Fuller: I thought it would be a fun tease and the goal really was just to pick up organically with the last people we saw...it kind of allows the audience to be in the character's point of view (Whattheflick, 2015).

Although Bryan Fuller has never explicitly stated that fans influence the show, the production seems acutely aware of fan practices (Lacson, 2013) and the statement above shows understanding of fan expectations. In addition, Fuller posted on his Twitter some hints several times, such as the episode on a man folded up into a giant heart, which Fuller posted in February 2015 as a teaser on Valentine's Day, while the original episode was aired in June 2015. However, it is worth noting that Fuller describes himself as a fan

of Thomas Harris and the characters he created, and he is re-creating his work already produced in several series and films by adding new stuff:

“One of the fun things about this season and breaking it for us is since we weren't doing the crime procedural we wanted each of these episodes to be a standalone movie in their own way. So if the first episode was our version of (the book) *The Talented Mr Ripley* then the second episode is our version (of the film) *Don't Look Now*.” (Whattheflick, 2015)

The statement above shows that similar information was shared with the fan media and the official media. This consistency of message and the willingness to share spoilers and insight with fans gives us an indication that the production sees fan communication as more help than a hindrance to their goals for the show. In addition, being a fan himself Fuller was a good candidate to appreciate fans and communicate with them.

## CONCLUSION

According to Kompare (2010), TV programmes have been responsible for gaining market share, and in order for a television show to succeed in online PR, the viewers need to trust that the people they are engaging with are authentic and real. With digital television, PR consumers are not buying a product, but rather buying into the vision of the television showrunner and production company. This section compares the approaches to online social media and public relations of BBC's *Sherlock* and NBC's *Hannibal* as outlined in the case studies above.

On the surface, BBC's *Sherlock* and NBC's *Hannibal* have many similarities. They both feature characters and stories adapted from another primary source. They are both genre shows geared toward creating 'cult' audiences and have attracted similarly large and invested worldwide audiences, with some overlap in fans as a result. Despite these similarities, these shows exist in very different spheres due to the nature of the channels they air on and the broadcasting culture in their countries. For example, the UK has a population of over 60 million people (Ons.gov.uk, 2015) and the US has a much larger population of over 321 million people (Census.gov, 2015). This disparity in population also leads to a disparity in viewing numbers. BBC's *Sherlock* is aired on BBC One, the BBC's flagship station, a channel that is watched by almost 75% of the British population on a

weekly basis (BBC Trust, 2014), despite competition from private broadcasters, like Channel 4, ITV and satellite providers. As BBC shows do not rely on advertising to keep them on the air there is much less risk of a show being cancelled solely due to a fall in viewing numbers. In comparison, NBC's share of the US network TV viewership fluctuates weekly (Kondoljy, 2015). Additionally, shows airing on NBC has to compete with a multitude of cable television channels for a share of viewers. As NBC relies on advertising to keep its shows on air and advertisers are more willing to sponsor shows where they can reach the largest audience possible, low viewing numbers can lead to cancellation.

BBC's *Sherlock* and NBC's *Hannibal* have very different approaches to social media. BBC's *Sherlock*'s strategy is not consistent across platforms and many of their online efforts were left languishing to be replaced by fan-led content. Producers are not consistent in their communication with fans, although when they do communicate they show some features of dialogic communication in their approach. Despite, or perhaps because of, the lengthy period of time in between seasons fans seem eager for any bit of information about the show's production and the producer's strategy seems to be to parcel out information in dribs and drabs in order to keep the interest afloat.

Conversely, NBC's *Hannibal*'s approach to social media is consistent across all platforms. They use a mix of officially produced and fan-led content to drive engagement while the show is on and off the air and are consistent in the messaging that they share with fan-outlets and via official news outlets. They communicate actively and there is evidence of a real and equitable relationship between the producers and fans of the series.

However, analysis of DVDs with commentaries revealed that producers do communicate with fans and ask for their opinion to raise support, and this was the case with both broadcasters. In other words, this finding shows it is not entirely clear to what extent fans influence programme, but they do have a certain influence. Future research should look into conducting interviews with film producers to capture communication with fans and their influence on the programme in more details.

Television is a branded cultural product and can thus be marketed, but it is no longer a stand-alone medium. Viewers increasingly watch, talk about and interact with television online. In order to manage these changes to the medium and deliver the media content needed to sustain across various delivery channels, PR has converged with the

previously separate fields of marketing, communications and business development/analysis. PR has become all-encompassing and focused on engaging with the public in a real and tangible way.

Both shows studied showed evidence of dialogic PR techniques, but *Sherlock* also utilised elements of publicity. This shows us that as the narrative of every television show is different, the approach that producers take to online PR must be different and tailored to the fan base they are trying to cultivate. In the case of BBC's *Sherlock*, limiting the producer's interaction with fans served as a strategic way of asserting their authorship over their characters and stories. In the case of *Hannibal*, the producer's active interaction with fans resulted in the renewal of the show over three seasons as opposed to cancellation after one season.

In order to craft a sustainable and successful online PR strategy, a television producer should first decide what their goal is for the communication including 1) Who they want to engage with 2) What their messaging strategy will be-Call to actions, creating shareable content etc. 3) How they intend to sustain this engagement-how often they will tweet, what types of tweets or which users they will reply to, etc. 4) How they will monitor this engagement? This can then, in turn, create a more engaged audience willing to campaign for the continuation of the show.

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### Online Connections

To follow these authors in social media:

Lauren A. Ebanks: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/laurenabrook/>

Martina Topić: @martina\_topic / <https://uk.linkedin.com/in/dr-martina-topi%C4%87-fhea-22b0155/> / [www.martinatopic.com](http://www.martinatopic.com)