

Departamento de Sociologia

“Everyone in the realm has a voice”: *Game of Thrones*, Twitter and
Television Fan Engagement

Pol Felten

Dissertação submetida como requisito parcial para obtenção do grau de

Mestre em Comunicação, Cultura e Tecnologias da Informação

Orientadora:

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Mestre Jorge Samuel Pinto Vieira,
Investigador do CIES, Professor Externo Convidado

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Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I'd like to express my thanks to Jorge Vieira for his continuous support, insights, suggestions and occasional article recommendations that helped set this dissertation on its current path.

But I also need to thank Catarina Inverno without whose help with Excel magic my vast 1.3 million tweet-strong Twitter archives would have lacked in structure, making data extraction as unconquerable as a giant Westerosi wall of ice.

Abstract

With the broad adoption of Twitter and other social networks, the concept of social TV has sought to explain emerging viewing behaviours of active audiences to use social media alongside television to connect with like-minded fans and discuss televised content online. TV programmes on their part took the opportunity to engage fans in these online spaces to drive live viewing. This dissertation will examine how fan engagement practices are leveraged by the HBO series *Game of Thrones* on Twitter, raising the fundamental question of the nature of interaction between television professionals and viewers and whether Twitter indeed is the catalyst for discussion and open exchange the service likes to portray itself as. For this specific case study we combined both qualitative and quantitative methods and applied them to collected Twitter data, mainly focusing on a content analysis of transcribed tweets sent by the official *Game of Thrones* Twitter account between May 2014 and April 2015. Based on the results of this analysis, we argue that in the case of *Game of Thrones* meaningful exchange and engagement is kept at a minimum and Twitter's potential is not fully exploited, but rather used as another one-to-many communication channel for promotion alongside others. For future research the question is raised whether other television programmes operate equally and whether Twitter as a medium might not be suited for extended discussion.

Keywords: Twitter; Television; Social TV; Social Media; Audience Engagement; Fans; Participation

Resumo

Com a adoção generalizada do Twitter e de outras redes sociais, o conceito de Televisão Social veio explicar comportamentos de visualização de audiências ativas que utilizam as redes sociais, juntamente com a televisão, para que se faça uma ligação entre fãs com o mesmo tipo de gostos e discutam o conteúdo televisivo *online*. Os programas de televisão, por seu lado, retiram partido desta tendência e aproveitam a oportunidade de agarrar os fãs nos espaços *online* disponíveis, que proporcionam uma visualização em direto do programa de televisão. Esta dissertação vai analisar a forma como o compromisso dos fãs aumenta na série *Guerra dos Tronos*, da HBO, através do Twitter, levantando a questão fundamental da natureza da interação entre os profissionais de televisão e os telespectadores e a forma como o Twitter pode ser catalisador de discussão e partilha aberta, tal como o serviço gosta de se intitular. Para este estudo de caso específico combinámos ambos os métodos de análise qualitativa e quantitativa e aplicámos os mesmos aos dados recolhidos através do Twitter, focando a atenção, principalmente, na análise de conteúdo dos *tweets* transcritos que foram enviados pela conta oficial do Twitter da *Guerra dos Tronos* entre Maio 2014 e Abril 2015. Baseados nos resultados desta análise, argumentamos que, no caso da *Guerra dos Tronos*, o impacto da partilha e o compromisso é mínimo e o potencial do Twitter não é explorado ao máximo, mas sim utilizado como um canal de comunicação e promoção de *um-para-muitos*. Para investigação futura, a questão prende-se com a forma similar como outros programas de televisão operam e até que ponto é que o Twitter, como meio de comunicação, pode não ser adequado a discussões prolongadas.

Palavras-chave: Twitter; Televisão; Televisão Social; Redes Sociais; Compromisso da audiência; Fãs; Participação

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1. INTRODUCTION

The rise of social networks in recent years had an impact beyond the internet, affecting and changing other media and their reception as well. In the case of television, studies show that it has become a common practice especially for young audiences to use social media alongside TV (TVTechnology 2012) and 50% of Twitter users reporting they discuss shows on the microblogging site (Proulx & Shepatin, 2012: 13). With terms such as *social TV* used as a buzzword, shedding light on how television professionals employ social media to engage viewers seems a worth-wile endeavour.

This dissertation aims at analysing how Twitter is employed by the HBO show *Game of Thrones* which is regularly described as building an “unparalleled level of social media buzz” (Taylor, 2015), therefore seeming like an adequate example of current trends in this particular area. Watched by a broad, global audience spanning demographics, *Game of Thrones* offers itself to such an approach, especially as being produced by HBO, a niche pay channel depending on viewer subscriptions rather than advertising, therefore benefitting more from direct contact with viewers and word-of-mouth recommendations than other television networks (Hibberd, 2015a). We chose Twitter over other social networks as object of our study because of the open nature of Twitter, allowing for deeper insights into tweets, users and their behaviour compared to other networks, i.e. the “large majority of Facebook profiles [...] set as private and therefore bound by the interconnections of Facebook friends only” (Proulx & Shepatin, 2012: 12), not providing the large scale insights necessary for scientific research.

Despite the interconnection of Twitter and television having entered into the focus of communication sciences, most research has centred around reality television formats or other shows built around audience involvement (Benton & Hill, 2012; Deller, 2011; Harrington, Highfield & Bruns, 2013; Hill & Benton, 2012; Ross, 2013; Wohn & Na, 2011), field research on scripted drama television shows’ use of Twitter being rather scarce. We aim at providing a contribution to closing this gap. To achieve this goal, the dissertation will make use of scientific literature about the topic, relating this with quantitative research and qualitative content analysis using primary data specifically collected from both the official *Game of Thrones* Twitter account and users of the site. Our goal is to analyse how an official television show account, such as @GameOfThrones (shortened to @GoT throughout the dissertation), interacts with fans and viewers via Twitter using fan engagement strategies. Special focus will lie on questions of how and whether such engagement practices benefit the television show, and whether this exchange on Twitter can add value to tweeting audiences’ viewing behaviours. The dissertation will not only look at official tweets of @GoT, but also at regular users’ interaction with said account. In doing so, @GoT’s own statement from 19th May 2014 that “[e]veryone in the realm has a voice” will be put to the test to see whether @GoT really is providing fans a space to voice their views of the series and whether these voices are heard and answered, or ignored. The research is guided by a number of initial research questions, allowing for an ample overview and analysis of the intensified connection between television and online social viewing practices.

RQ1: Which strategies is the official Game of Thrones Twitter account using to connect with viewers—if at all—and bind them to the show’s brand? How does the show benefit from such engagement?

RQ2: How does @GoT incorporate social TV practices and are fans reacting to such attempts at increasing engagement?

RQ3: What type of exchanges occur with Game of Thrones’ audiences? Is @GoT targeting a specific type of audience on Twitter?

Hypotheses — resulting from an initial study of the subject and literature review without having been proven or disproven as of yet — about the subject will also be tested:

H1: @GoT is encouraging its followers to actively participate in discussions about recent episodes to increase media ‘buzz’. Fans thus become active members in spreading the word about the show and followers are a commodity in the competitive television market.

H2: Twitter is central to HBO’s marketing strategy, this especially considering the channel’s reliance on international broadcasts to generate revenue.

H3: @GoT will be most active around broadcast dates, using the interim period between season’s to engage more informally with fans, providing them with updates on the series’ production.

A general issue with Twitter engagement is that while there are certain best practices and observations that help to outline and recommend a functioning viewer engagement strategy, there is not yet a no generally applicable template for innovative and guaranteed engagement practices as Proulx and Shepatin keep reminding readers (Proulx & Shepatin, 2012: 147). We hope to partially contribute with this research to provide further insights into such working practices, if there are any.

Looking at HBO’s particular subscription-based business model, its drive to keep a stable subscribership and appeal directly to audiences, it seems evident why directly engaging audiences online would become part of their social media strategy. Involving audiences in promotional efforts and relying on individual viewers to “spread the word” about a programme requires active participation on behalf of said audiences. Instead of being mere receivers, audience members have to be actively involved in meaning-making processes, contribute to discussions and engage with media messages. This coincides with a turnaround in the perception of audiences in scholarly literature that has proven audiences are not made up of passive consumers, but of active *prosumers*, not mere receivers of messages, but catalysts of talk and buzz. The next chapter will explore previous research insights into audience participation, before looking more in-depth at how the acknowledgment that audiences are active has become the basic building block for the idea of fanadvertising and social TV.

2. ACTIVE AUDIENCES AND PARTICIPATION

2.1. THE CONCEPT OF PARTICIPATION

Audiences have long been thought of as passive consumers of media content. It is only in more recent research that this notion has changed and audiences as a whole, as well as individual members of an audience group have been described as active agents involved in media processes. Some researchers even go as far as to see that audiences, by definition, are active as they can't be thought without the *activity* of viewing in the first place (Schimpach, 2011: 63). Contrary to what Schimpach calls "spectatorship" (Schimpach, 2011:69), solitarily watching a film or show without interacting with other during the viewing process, "viewing" as a larger process does not just involve the watching of content, but also the subsequent exchanges about said content with other audience members. Viewing isn't an isolated act, but a set of processes involving interaction, therefore always involving active participation of audiences to a degree that viewers and text couldn't be thought without the other (Schimpach, 2011: 69-70). But with the arrival of new media and the internet, active audiences don't just "view" content any longer, rather they have proceeded to directly "*using, interacting, and searching*" (Schimpach, 2011: 77) with and for content, leading researchers to define audiences as more active than ever. At the same time, through social media the "micro dimension" of audiences, made up of smaller communities and "aggregates of individuals" (Carpentier, 2011b: 194), has gained importance as individuals become visible and directly targetable, contrary to the macro dimension present in traditional broadcast media aimed at audiences as a mass.

Carpentier distinguishes between audience interaction and participation: by interaction he understands any activity related to interpretation of and overall engagement with media texts. Participation, however, describes either non-professionals within an audience producing media output and content, as well as using media to take part in public spheres (Carpentier, 2011b: 192-194). Consumers that are merely present, i.e. lurkers on social networks, but do not partake in socio-communicative processes might have access to content but do not engage further with it. Interaction, as a second step, involves (co-)production, interpretation, discussion of and provision of feedback about content, as well as consuming media as part of a group. Participation, finally, strictly only applies to processes in which users leverage power in decisions about content, often within the context of media organisations (Carpentier, 2011a: 28-31). For Carpentier there's a clear hierarchy between the concepts, participation requiring access and interaction without being equated with one another.

In relation to the object of this study, we will mainly be dealing with audience interaction as discussions on Twitter are rather interpretative of the main body of *Game of Thrones*' text, while truly participative forms of engagement rather take place on other platforms that are less constraining in content type and message size, such as Twitter's 140-character limit. Nevertheless, as we will see in the second part of this dissertation, @GoT is also asking followers for deeper participation, but is directing fans to other platforms for such purposes, particularly in the case of the *Game of Thrones Compendium*. Still, Twitter commentary can also be described as a form of user-generated content, even if basic in nature, according to Carpentier who explicitly mentions "Text-Based Collaboration Formats; Sites Allowing Feedback [...] [and] Social Network Sites" (Carpentier, 2011b: 198) as UGC

practices, based on a threefold definition of UGC as “(semi-)public distribution”, “creative effort” and with creation taking place “outside of professional routines and practises [...] without the expectation of profit and remuneration” (Carpentier, 2011b: 198).

Audience participation mustn't be limited to elaborate user-generated content though, i.e. fan-made videos, musical tributes, etc. On the contrary, it's important to keep in mind that participation occurs on a broad spectrum on which commentary, as for example on Twitter, “evaluating, appraising, critiquing, and recirculating content” (Green & Jenkins, 2011: 111) must be considered equally as valuable, without classifying different types of user-generated content on different hierarchy levels. Especially for media production companies the spreading of content by members of the audience can become a valuable promotional asset, a point repeatedly raised in Jenkins's, Ford's and Green's seminal work on *Spreadable Media* (Jenkins, Ford & Green, 2013), which we will address later in regard to fanadvertising. In a participatory environment such as the internet, barriers between producers and consumers, broadcasters and the audience are broken down, resulting in audience members consuming content in one moment, while in the next actively participating in spreading information and knowledge about that content (Nyiró, Csordás & Horváth, 2011: 118). Jenkins even goes as far as stating that empowered audiences have come to expect participation in culture and demand the right to do so, with the result that producers who fail to accept this will “face declining goodwill and diminished revenues” (Jenkins, 2006: 24).

As to the motivation of why audience members like to participate in online exchanges, Carpentier mentions “participating in the conversation [as] its own reward” (Carpentier, 2011b: 201). We'd argue that especially on Twitter another strong motivation for such participation can be the gratification of seeing one's tweet favoured or retweeted by other users—a view shared by Sundar and Limperos (2013: 514)—some users possibly even directly aiming for this kind of recognition with particularly original and witty tweets. Responses to and interactions with such tweets would strongly engage these users. An important part of audience participation is sociability. For Schimpach, the social aspects of “viewing” have been inherent to the process since cinemas or nickelodeons first appeared in the late 19th, early 20th century—what he refers to as “sociable publics” (Schimpach, 2011: 65)—and remained part of it even with the multiplication of screens and more individualised viewing practices: Audiences, while not always watching media texts jointly in a geographically defined space, never ceased to discuss what they saw with others to make sense of what they saw, televised or screened content always remaining a social lubricant (Schimpach, 2011: 65-69). The recent emergence of social networks didn't grant this quality to television or cinema and didn't renew their role as talking points, but they might have elevated discussions to a new scale, made them globally visible and letting audiences interact with each other across geographically confined spaces. But because public exchanges on social networks about people's viewing habits and processes have become so visible, they've offered an opportunity to content producers, advertisers and researchers to gain new insights into audiences. It seems logical that these distinct groups have latched onto this opportunity.

2.2. CRITICISM OF THE CONCEPT

While online audience participation and user-generated content is majoritarily described as positive,

granting far more agency to consumers, there are nevertheless also critical tones in scholarly research. This criticism directly attacks the credo “that being active is always best for the audience” (Carpentier, 2011b: 192) as a trap in thinking. Such optimistic views ignore, according to critics, negative implications of participation. One of the most radical critics of especially Jenkins’ concept of participatory culture is Christian Fuchs. Fuchs agrees that corporations can greatly benefit from user participation, but in a true Marxist line of thought he strongly rejects communication studies’ general perception of participatory culture as empowering. Instead, Fuchs believes that corporations only allow for participation as free, unpaid labour capable of reducing production costs in a capitalist logic (Fuchs, 2014). He raises the important argument that the internet and social networks are, to a large extent, controlled by companies interested in profit, ready to gladly exploit and commodify users’ actions and data to accumulate more profit, therefore not being truly participatory in the original political definition of participation (Fuchs, 2014: 57). While there certainly is an imbalance between corporate and user power and while one can certainly find examples where users are actually exploited by corporations¹, we’d argue that Fuchs’s view is extremely dichotomous, ignoring cases in which corporations are actively trying to quell user-generated content seen as copyright infringements, as well as ignoring that many fans take great pleasure and gratification from participative practices which can be a reward of its own, not requiring remuneration (De Kosnik, 2013). Fuchs, on the other hand, would argue that “the fact that [users] love these activities does not make them less exploited. [...] Exploitation is measured as the degree of unpaid labour from which companies benefit at the expense of labour. If exploitation does not feel like exploitation, then this does not mean that it does not exist” (Fuchs, 2014: 64). Or in the words of Søren Mørk Petersen, “practices [...] can be participatory, exploitative and create pleasure for its users at the same time” (Petersen, 2008). Highlighting the negative aspects of participation, Petersen coined the term “loser-generated content” for any content resulting from the exploitation of free user labour that in the end only benefits a company’s capitalist interests. According to Petersen, corporations like Google that specialise in providing tools to share user-generated content, benefit at the same time from the “reterritorialisation” of that content, moving it from a free UGC context into a profit-oriented one as they retain the rights to the content uploaded to their platforms (Petersen, 2008). If we move this argumentation to Twitter and *Game of Thrones*, then *Game of Thrones* is exploiting the users who are promoting the series for free, while Twitter is benefitting from the user data and increased traffic which augment Twitter’s advertising value.

A second strain of criticism raised by Carpentier aims at the trend to equate audiences and producers in that “we are often led to believe that all audiences of participatory media are active participants, and that passive consumption is either absent or regrettable” (Carpentier, 2011b: 200) which has been shown not to be the case, especially in the case of lurkers² who follow online

¹ HBO and *Game of Thrones* might be accused by some of such exploitative practices in the case of the *Game of Thrones Compendium*, an official book project that fans can contribute entries to, which we’ll turn back to later in the analysis. Cf.: http://hbob2b.vo.llnwd.net/u/mr_twitter/December2014/GOTCompendiumAnnounceFinal.pdf. Retrieved: February 17th, 2015.

² Carpentier (2011b) notes that the term “lurker” itself already is negatively connoted, seen as behaviour inferior to active participation. We will keep employing the term throughout this dissertation as it has been widely adopted when referring to such behaviour online, but are not implying a judgment of value in its use.

exchanges within a community without actively participating in them. These lurkers are members of the audience, but are not producing content of their own, lacking (at least in these specific online environments) of an active dimension. These lurkers actually constitute the vast majority of internet users, as it is estimated that only 1% of users are actively producing content, while 10% interact through providing commentary, and 89% mere observers of active users (Couldry, 2011: 213). Citing the example of Sweden, “one of the world’s most advanced information societies” (Fuchs, 2014: 61), Fuchs refers to Olle Findahl’s 2012 *Swedes and the Internet* study to show that only small minorities of the overall populations are active online content creators. In the 2014 version, Findahl finds that while 40% of Swedish internet read blogs, only 8% write blog posts occasionally, and even less, 1%, do so daily, online creativity and activity thus being largely overstated. As for Twitter, 23% of users visit Twitter, with 11% tweeting occasionally, and a mere 2% doing so daily (Findahl, 2014: 28).

Here, it needs to be noted though that Jenkins and Green admit themselves that a world in which the totality of audiences become active producers doesn’t and may never exist (Green & Jenkins, 2011: 111). Yet, they argue that previous studies often focus mainly on adults, whereas 64% of internet-using American teenagers have already produced content online and 39% are circulating such content beyond close social links they know in person, with clear trends indicating a move toward ever more active participation (Jenkins, Ford & Green, 2013: 155). Still, a participation divide (Hargittai & Walejko, 2008) or gap has become especially apparent among young users in Western societies where access to the internet isn’t the defining factor of digital inequality any longer, having been replaced by the ability and skill to participate online. A study conducted among 1,060 University of Illinois students by Hargittai and Walejko found that contrary to their hypothesis, neither gender, nor race or ethnicity affect levels of online participation which can instead be traced back to differences in digital and new media literacy, related to the socioeconomic background of young internet users (Hargittai & Walejko, 2008). “Students who have at least one parent with a graduate degree are significantly more likely to create content, either online or offline, than others” (Hargittai & Walejko, 2008: 252), showing that offline social inequalities are carried over to the internet. Often, the focus on participation also forgets that the biggest media texts are still produced by large corporations, not by individual users, and that traditional media keep playing a significant role in the everyday lives of the majority of populations (Carpentier, 2011b: 206). We’d argue that conversation on Twitter about television shows or other media texts are bringing both sides of the medallion together, as the impetus for participation is still based in a traditional media property—in our case *Game of Thrones*—but which uses the audience’s desire to engage and participate online to further spread its content.

Despite the criticism of the strong focus of recent research on participation, the media industries have come to acknowledge the importance consumers play and are now even driving that process (Jenkins, 2006: 8). They have realised that this participative power can be harnessed for their own benefit, an aspect we will look at in greater detail in the following chapter dedicated to the concept of “fanadvertising”.

3. FANADVERTISING AND SPREADABILITY

3.1. FANS AS AGENTS OF PROMOTION

“E-word of mouth and online consumer recommendation systems form a part of user-generated content as well” (Nyirő, Csordás & Horváth, 2011: 128). Some fans are “constantly” sharing their experiences of products and companies with others without commercial motives, therefore word-of-mouth being trusted more as valid recommendation than direct and open advertisements. Advertisements are considered especially invasive and irritating online with 41% of American internet users between 18-29 years of age—the most sought after demographic for advertisers—using ad-blockers in their browser (Hern, 2014). Television adverts don’t fare much better; the vast majority of households are skipping over those on shows recorded with DVRs (Jenkins, 2006: 66). But at the same time, internet users are creating and sharing promotional content themselves, contributing to promotional efforts of companies and helping them to create value (Nyirő, Csordás & Horváth, 2011: 112-113), showing that this form of user-generated advertising is widely accepted and practiced online. Under fanadvertising, Ramos, Lozano and Hernández-Santaolalla understand

“fan creations, which independent of their type of support, can function as advertising tool for the original reference text [...] [in this case] a television series, either through evangelisation of other recipients or by creating content directly related to this and enhancing the brand image of the series”³ (Ramos, Lozano & Hernández-Santaolalla, 2012: 1221).

In what has been labelled as “hybridisation of genres”⁴ (Ramos, Lozano & Hernández-Santaolalla, 2012: 1213), advertisement, entertainment and information have merged together and have at times become indistinctive. Are Twitter users posting about their favourite television show advertising the show to others, merely providing information on the show and their personal viewing habits, or are they acting within a larger entertainment context? This blurring of the lines between genres has paved the way for fanadvertising as fans of a brand are playing their part in advertising it, often without being aware so themselves, while the receivers of those fan-produced messages are not interpreting them as purely promotional either. Loyal fans even want to share information about their favourite media texts with others to establish their own fandom, showcase inside knowledge and innovative tastes, as well as satisfy their own desire for “participation and implication with the original text”⁵ (Ramos, Lozano & Hernández-Santaolalla, 2012: 1215). The desire to enjoy and share televised content and experiences with others instead of consuming it alone is omnipresent.

As such, fans have become key components in promoting a series to their contacts; similar to evangelists, “[a]s if it were a religion, the fan will try by all means to spread his message among his contacts [...] feeling the necessity to convince his most intimate circle of the importance of the

³ Personal translation of the original Spanish: “creaciones fans que, independientemente de su tipo o soporte, pueden funcionar como herramienta publicitaria para el texto original de referencia [...] herramienta promocional para una serie de televisión, ya sea mediante la evangelización de otros receptores o mediante la creación de contenido directamente relacionada con esta y que potencia la imagen de marca de la serie.”

⁴ Personal translation of the original Spanish: “hibridación de géneros”.

⁵ Personal translation of the original Spanish: “un mayor deseo de participación e implicación con el texto original.”

television series”⁶ (Ramos, Lozano & Hernández-Santaolalla, 2012: 1218). Participants in a 2014 study by Romana Andò stated that they are intrigued by high social network buzz about programmes and more likely to turn in for the show, whereas negative comments might not necessarily influence their decision to watch a programme they were initially interested in (Andò, 2014: 168). Judging by this, reliance upon fanadvertising provides television producers with a win-win situation as high volume of buzz can lead more viewers to tune in without running the risk of negative opinions scaring people off. Jenkins, on the other hand, argues somewhat differently. In his opinion, fan communities can easily disband if a text isn’t meeting their expectations any longer or turn against it. Therefore interests of consumers and producers don’t overlap, former allies can become a producer’s “worst enemies” (Jenkins, 2006: 58). Only if producers listen to fans, “inspirational consumers” that function as advocates of a brand, can they keep their core audience who encourages others to consume a given product (Jenkins, 2006: 72-73). Therefore, for fanadvertising to work, producers have to engage with their audience and consider their worries, even if this means letting go of some control over creative processes. In the more recent publication, *Spreadable Media*, Jenkins seems to have taken a more nuanced view, saying that participants feel a greater investment in the content they help popularise, making them “less likely to try to overturn something which has given them greater stakes in the outcome.” (Jenkins, Ford & Green, 2013: 163).

Fanadvertising in various shapes works especially well for entertainment products, such as TV series, around which a dedicated community feeling sympathy towards the product has already formed, eager to “recruit” new followers of the cause. Without such a fan community, any attempt to start a campaign relying on fanadvertising is destined to fail. (Lozano-Delmar, Hernández-Santaolalla & Ramos, 2013: 354). As viewers identifying themselves with a cultural product are much more likely to engage in word-of-mouth promotion of said product, television executives have discovered the potential lying within fandom, aiming early advertising campaigns at exactly those segments of their audience in the hope they will participate in spreading their message, maybe even remixing it to gain further authenticity within fannish circles that can help reinforcing the image of a programme as cult show that even less engaged audiences have to see (Ramos, Lozano & Hernández-Santaolalla, 2012: 1220). While not all forms of fanadvertising are instigated by corporate content producers, i.e. television companies,—many cases actually occur spontaneously—often such behaviour is intentionally guided by corporations hoping to achieve viral spread of their content promotion through social networks that only seems spontaneous (Ramos, Lozano & Hernández-Santaolalla, 2012: 1219). Even though Jenkins, Ford and Green (2013) dismiss the notion of virality, claiming it reduces the agency of involved users, they nevertheless acknowledge that content creators can specifically design media texts to make them more likely to be circulated online (Jenkins, Ford & Green, 2013: 196). Convinced that in the modern media sphere only spreadable content can blossom, Jenkins, Ford and Green strongly recommend that producers provide easily quotable and sharable material for fans to appropriate as fannish appropriations “are generating audiences through heightening popular

⁶ Personal translation of the original Spanish: “Como si de una religión se tratara, el fan intentará por todos los medios propagar su mensaje dentro de su red de contactos [...] el fan siente la necesidad de convencer de la importancia de la serie de televisión entre su círculo más íntimo”.

awareness of the programs being quoted and, more importantly, sustaining audiences through fueling ongoing conversations.” (Jenkins, Ford & Green, 2013: 188)

Although they don't explicitly call it fanadvertising, part of Jenkins's and Green's concept of spreadability aims at explaining the same logics: “audiences play an active role in “spreading” content: their choices, their investments, and their actions determine what gets valued” (Green & Jenkins, 2011: 116),

“grassroots intermediaries become advocates for brands and evangelists for content. By grassroots intermediaries, we mean unauthorized and self-appointed parties who actively shape the flow of messages within their community, often becoming strong advocates for brands, performers, and franchises.” (Green & Jenkins, 2011: 117).

The spreading aspect of fan behaviour has been described as providing indirect economic value through endorsements, sharing and recommendation. *Indirect* because they “nurtur[e] and creat[e] new audiences and markets [...] who will contribute to [...] direct sources” (Stribling, 2013) of economic value, which in the realm of audio-visual media is constituted by acts of watching or listening to content, as well as purchasing copies of the content or merchandise. But loyalty is also created indirectly. People that have invested a lot of time into a media property, i.e. by interacting with it on Twitter, contributing to fan forums, recommending it to friends, creating video remixes etc., are more likely to follow it towards its end even in case of perceived quality loss, because they have created an emotional bond with that property and would lose the time and dedication invested when choosing to abandon the property and divert their energy to a new series (Petersen, 2008).

Judging by interviews with HBO officials and producers of *Game of Thrones*, they seem to understand the value of having loyal viewers ready to spread information about the show and thus grow its audience (Hibberd, 2015a). For such a model of fanadvertising or spreadability to work, Green and Jenkins identified several necessary characteristics: fans need to be motivated and their efforts to spread information facilitated as audiences often feel greater involvement towards content they “discovered” and promoted themselves. Content needs to be found in various places where the audience can get into contact with it. Next, “spreadability depends on creating a *diversified experience* as brands enter into the spaces where people already live and interact.” (Green & Jenkins, 2011: 117) Social networks are central for the spreading of content as they empower audiences to share said content on larger scales. The authors also note how spreadability works as a “push model” that brings content to other members of a community without them having to seek it out, thus increasing its credibility as it has been recommended by someone we know or who knows our interests, making it less intrusive than regular advertising.

This contributes to the next point, the fact that economic exchanges become hard to tell apart from non-economic ones and often overlap—the afore-mentioned hybridisation of genres. And finally, content that is compelling enough will be shared by a multitude of people engaged with it over any available channels. (Green & Jenkins, 2011: 116-118). If *Game of Thrones* has characteristics of spreadability, then HBO would miss a severe opportunity to further promote the show if they weren't appealing to audiences' desire to tell others about the show and share content related to it. With regard to this dissertation's topic of viewer engagement via Twitter, the question that evidently poses itself

here is whether and how the network manages to do so on their Twitter presence. Do they incite fans to advertise the show on their behalf and do they offer additional material worth spreading?

3.2. HOW FANADVERTISING WORKS

For companies, having fans contribute to advertising efforts can be highly beneficial: Fans experience a sense of ownership of the content, strengthening their bond and loyalty to it, “while the company gains as well through improved satisfaction, increased loyalty, awareness, engagement or through potential cost effectiveness” (Nyiró, Csordás & Horváth, 2011: 119). Studies have shown that one of the main reasons for people’s consumption of certain products is “the recommendation of friends and family members that we totally trust” (Lozano-Delmar, Hernández-Santaolalla & Ramos, 2013: 352), which can be extended to recommendations of other fans fulfilling the role of experienced friends online and thus having “more power than any advertising action” (Lozano-Delmar, Hernández-Santaolalla & Ramos, 2013: 352). “Social impressions are often received as an explicit endorsement from a friend, colleague, celebrity, or industry leader and are therefore the ones that influence us the most” (Proulx & Shepatin, 2012: 28).

Besides the increased credibility when hearing about an interesting new programme from a person we trust, compared to a traditional advertisement, fanadvertising also has the advantage for corporations that they are relatively inexpensive (Nyiró, Csordás & Horváth, 2011: 119). A well-designed, but cost-efficient social media presence can reach a large number of potential new viewers through social sharing and the ensuing snowball effect, what Jenkins, Ford and Green call “spread[ing] media content beyond its initial point of distribution” (Jenkins, Ford & Green, 2013: 149). And especially for television producers, with declining viewership for broadcast television, it can be crucial for the success of a show to reach audiences who won’t see on-air promotions because they aren’t tuning in to television normally (Ramos-Serrano & Lozano-Delmar, 2011: 423). These audiences can be reached online in social networks like Twitter that they are frequenting already anyway. Once SNS users have been reached, ongoing community management is crucial, as they desire regular—but not too frequent—updates to keep their interest up, but also prefer a personal tone instead of the feeling that they are talking to a faceless TV network only using them as another outlet to dump promotional material onto (Proulx & Shepatin, 2012: 149). Furthermore, sales numbers of television programming guides are dropping world wide and social media are increasingly becoming an alternative to scheduling viewing habits that can now be based on what people you trust online tell you to watch. Equally, SNS users will notice when certain shows “trend” on Twitter due to thousands of other users talking about them and become more likely to check up on what all the online buzz is actually about; social media have become a trusted source for content discovery (Proulx & Shepatin, 2012: 43-53). Hence, television companies want to generate such trending topics by uniting users around specific hashtags created for the show.

Fanadvertising can be an important factor in creating hype around a new entertainment product. The aim of hype is that as many people as possible hear about a product and it provides them with reasons why to watch the series, in the case of television, thus creating meaning and guidelines of how to interpret a text before even having seen it. In short, hype is supposed to frame and tell consumers

what to expect and stir up excitement for it (Gray, 2008: 33-34). Someone hearing from *Game of Thrones* fans what a compelling series with high production values it is, that the characters are well written and the world believable, will be more likely to interpret the series along those lines, reducing the chances of being disappointed if those arguments are fulfilled. Therefore, if the show's promotion highlights these elements, generating a hype spread by fans that it can actually live up to, then new viewers are more likely to continue watching as they are getting the content they were anticipating, the content hype was built around. Such framing texts around a product have been called "epitexts"; operating loose from the original text, as in the case of reviews or public responses, but still contributing to guiding future interpretations and newcomers' entry to the text (Gray, 2008: 37-38). An official Twitter account could guide the direction fanadvertising is taking in order not to clash with the brand image hype wants to convey. On the other hand, television networks rely on early hype and buzz to perceive whether or not a show is striking a chord for their audience, evaluating the reactions to the hype and adapting if it fails to catch on, e.g. delaying the premiere or implement last minute changes to the show (Gray, 2008: 35). Here, fan reactions tell producers how a product is actually perceived versus how their own marketing efforts want it to be perceived. According to Powers, the modern media system relies heavily on hype to build anticipation before the release of new content, and though initial publicity is created by media institutions themselves, they depend on audiences to debate the element surrounded by hype. Fans and consumers are needed to amplify the hype for it to reach a critical mass. (Powers, 2012: 861-863) But as with any buzz, one hype can quickly be replaced with another one around new content, the new thing everyone is talking about and forgetting about the previously hyped item. Therefore, it is paramount for media institutions to keep hype around their property up, to maintain it "fresh" and interesting (Powers, 2012: 865), a point at which we'd argue an official Twitter account could come in to keep slowly dripping out new bits of information and news that keep fans interested and engaged, to keep the buzz and hype burning and being spread while no new episodes of a show are being aired. De Kosnik (2013) describes the same idea without referring to the term "hype" when observing that "by continually supplying fresh commentary, videos, news, stories, and art", fans are helping to sustain awareness of a text and prevent it from falling into obsolescence, especially in hiatus periods.

Because of the important role fanadvertising plays in accruing a media property's value, fans partaking in such promotional activities can be understood as "commodity and labor" (Jenkins, Ford & Green, 2013: 129) for media corporations. This is where Christian Fuchs, again, surfaces as ardent critic of fanadvertising. In his eyes, "media companies sell the audience as a commodity to advertisers" (Fuchs, 2014: 107). Not only does he see users exploited by being sold to advertisers as target audiences—the more users on a platform resulting in higher advertising rates—but he also again argues that fans generating content that advertises a corporation's product are exploited as free labour and, worse, the surplus value they produce "is appropriated and turned into profit by corporations without paying wages" (Fuchs, 2014: 107), thereby reducing corporation's "investment costs and labour costs, jobs are destroyed, and consumers who work for free are extremely exploited" (Fuchs, 2014: 107). At the same time, there's also a pitfall for corporations engaged in fanadvertising. Nyiró, Csordás and Horváth caution corporations to rely too heavily on fanadvertising and the opinions of the most active users as they might otherwise lose sight of what the entirety of their audience thinks,

because “the active audience does not necessarily represent their whole consumer audience.” (Nyiró, Csordás & Horváth, 2011: 133)

3.3. INCENTIVISING FANADVERTISING

Now, the question remains how users and consumers can be lead to advertise a brand, a product or a television show favourably. This is where, according to Nyiró, Csordás and Horváth, constructive engagement comes into play. Instead of using an authoritarian voice to push an opinion or view onto users, brands that negotiate, cooperate and favour open exchange with their followers are more successful in generating favourable word-of-mouth as the users feel valued, taken seriously and involved in processes. Through this engagement they are more likely to share positive aspects of the brand with others, whereas should negative elements appear, they are less likely to be spread by engaged users as they want to avoid giving off the impression to their social circle of having misplaced their trust in the brand or made a bad judgment call (Nyiró, Csordás & Horváth, 2011: 115-116). This is also why engagement strategies work best for products that already have a positive image while they won't catch for corporations perceived negatively. According to the authors, participatory processes aimed at user engagement can increase brand value and loyalty (Nyiró, Csordás & Horváth, 2011: 116). User motivations to contribute to and spread content can be “immediate reward (e.g. access to extra services), social rewards (being part of community of common interest), reputation, self-expression or altruism” (Nyiró, Csordás & Horváth, 2011: 119). By playing on these motivations, organisations can entice engaged users to actively participate in the advertising process. And to make engaged users feel like they are part of a bigger process, highlighting media coverage of not only the brand, but also the consumers' involvement in it can further increase audience participation (Nyiró, Csordás & Horváth, 2011: 133-134). Television series that manage to generate a direct conversation with their viewers and get them to participate in a community can hope to transform “clients into followers, into ‘fans’ of [the] brand” (Ramos-Serrano & Lozano-Delmar, 2011: 423), loyalists who take pleasure in spreading the word to others. For television shows such loyal viewers are indispensable as they are continuing to watch a series over time and across season hiatuses, thus maintaining interest (Ramos-Serrano & Lozano-Delmar, 2011: 424-429).

Well-designed fanadvertising campaigns via social media have been proven to work. “A survey of 13,280 *American Idol* viewers, conducted through the official FOX Web site, found that the majority of fans discovered the series on the basis of word-of-mouth and watched it regularly because other people they knew were also watching it” (Jenkins, 2006: 82). In 2011, a Nielsen study analysing how social media buzz connects to an increase in ratings concluded that an increase in buzz especially around premiere episodes did indeed reflect upon ratings: The study found that “a 9 percent increase in buzz a few weeks prior to a show's premiere equates to a 1 percent ratings point increase. For midseason episodes and finales, an online conversation lift of 14 percent is needed to accomplish a similar ratings increase.” (Proulx & Shepatin, 2012: 120). Despite these positive results, the Senior Vice President of Consumer Insights and Analytics of the Nielsen ratings agency, Radha Subramanyam, begs for caution that not every

“rating point and everything that happens in television comes as a result of a friend referral or something that happened in social media [...] there are obviously relationships [...] but they aren’t simple relationships. Relationships vary quite significantly by age, in some cases by gender—and they vary a lot by the type of content” (Proulx & Shepatin, 2012: 119)

with reality TV competition formats being one type of content for which friend referrals work astoundingly well. But with most shows nowadays trying to create online buzz to attract viewers, channels are compelled to provide the most engaging and spreadable online content for fans as “[t]he more people engage on TV’s backchannel, the higher the chances others online will discover and tune in, out of curiosity, to the programming getting the lion’s share of buzz” (Proulx & Shepatin, 2012: 127). Obviously, any programme wants to get this lion’s share. This increasing entanglement of television and social media has come to be known as “social TV”.

4. SOCIAL TV

4.1. DEFINITION

Goggin provides us with a concise definition of social TV:

“social television refers to the way in which recommendations, commentary, links, feedback, file sharing, friendship groups, micro blogging, status updates, and the various apparatuses of social media actually provide the connective tissue and the content for television [...] Social television is that irruption of the great plenitude of television possibilities across many platforms where users really do become producers” (Goggin, 2011: 134).

According to Goggin, the concept of social television is intricately linked to the appearance of smartphones—he specifically calls it the “iPhone moment”, the release of the iPhone in 2007—which allowed audiences to easily watch a programme on TV while at the same time using their smartphone as a second screen alongside the television set to comment on what they were seeing and chat with others interested in the programme without having to clumsily use a laptop on their lap (Goggin, 2011: 137).

“Features in social TV include remote talking or chatting while watching a television program, content-aware lists that show what your friends are watching, sharing and recommendation of video material based on social network statistics and trends, and easy accessible Twitter streams associated with a particular program.” (García-Avilés, 2012: 431)

This coincides with Proulx’s and Shepatin’s definition of social TV which they see as “the convergence of television and social media” (Proulx & Shepatin, 2012: ix), the use of social media as a backchannel to television having led to a “renaissance of live broadcasts” (Proulx & Shepatin, 2012: 3). On the next few pages, as well as the analysis in the second part, we will abide by this definition and particularly explore the aspect of “remote talking or chatting” as well as sharing and recommending content on Twitter to understand the social TV aspects of *Game of Thrones*.

What differentiates social TV from previous forms of television viewing is that audiences don’t just expect broadcast content from their television set—or whatever other device they are using to access TV content—, instead longing for an “expanded text” that is accessed and created on different devices besides the television set (Andò, 2014: 162), parts of the text created by audience members themselves. Through actively exchanging “opinions and comments while at the same time experiencing new forms of live event co-viewing” (Andò, 2014: 162), individual audience members feel part of a wider community, replacing the individualisation of television viewing since the multiplication of screens. For these interactions and exchanges to work, social TV requires a second screen enabling interactions and exchanges with other users and content during and after broadcasts (Andò, 2014: 163).

4.2. TELEVISION PROGRAMMES AND SOCIALITY

Different kinds of television shows engender different forms of sociality. While sports events and reality television are often used as an occasion to gather around a television and socialise around them, allowing for plenty of opportunities for interaction during the broadcast due to much redundant

content and pauses, other shows invite a different form of social interaction. Specifically plot-heavy drama series where important and relevant dialogue drives the plot are rather encouraging discussions after the broadcast, once developments have fully unfolded, than during when audiences are captivated by the story (Ducheneaut et al., 2008: 140). And while Ducheneaut et al.'s observations were made in live settings in which viewers were physically present, similar observations could probably be made for Twitter interaction as well, a point we will specifically look at during our tweet analysis in the second part. In 2011, the American television magazine TV Guide conducted a survey among 1,586 users of its website specifically about their social TV habits. The survey found that a majority of Twitter users take to the site to discuss shows before and after they air, 62% and 69% respectively, while 47% do so during the broadcast. And interestingly enough, according to respondents, eight out of the ten most talked about shows online are drama series, with only one comedy series and one reality TV format figuring on the list (TV Guide News, 2011). This goes to show that social TV works for drama programmes as well, that reality formats aren't the only genre drawing online crowds and benefitting from the connection of television and social media.

What all forms of social TV, be they based in reality television or drama series, have in common is that they "intend to reinforce users' loyalty, facilitating a fluid conversation with users" (García-Avilés, 2012: 433). In the case of reality television formats, Enli speaks of "media-centric" engagement strategies designed around a specific medium, i.e. phones to text live shows, with the goal of engaging audiences beyond the mere content of the show by involving them in the show itself via direct prompts to take part in influencing its outcome. By getting viewers invested in such manners they are more likely to keep tuning in to support their favourite candidate in a contest or provide direct feedback in a political talk show: the participative element is central to the show which couldn't operate without audience involvement (Enli, 2008: 106-111). Dramas and other scripted shows obviously can't engage audiences in the same manner⁷, nevertheless they can also incite participation with the programme and benefit from a highly engaged and dedicated fan base. And already, one third of Twitter users are using the site to post about content related to television, making Twitter "a key driver of social TV interaction" (Bredl et al., 2014: 202), showing that audiences are ready and willing to make their opinions about programmes heard. But there are also differences on the level of involvement depending on audience demographics. Studies conducted on the acceptance and adoption of social TV practices, i.e. the interaction with content and other users around televised productions, show that generational differences exist. Among Italian viewers, 25-34 year olds watch the most live television, the same age group that is also getting most of their information about television shows from social networking sites through recommendations from other users. And it's also a quarter of the 25-34 year olds in the study, as well as 18.2% of the 16-24 year olds, that visit SNS simultaneously to watching TV, the numbers dropping for older population segments who are less used to multi-tasking and multi-screening behaviours, despite similar penetration of mobile devices in all of the compared

⁷ Nevertheless, the CBS crime series *Hawaii Five-0* explored such fan engagement by letting viewers vote on the identity of the killer during an episode of the third season in 2013, with different endings being shown on the American east and west coast. For the fourth season, the producers let fans decide in advance on various aspects of an episode, i.e. plot points, locations, outfits of characters, music to be included and episode title. This shows that viewer decisions influencing the outcome of an episode don't just work for reality TV formats.

demographics. And while it has often been argued that the use of several screens at the same time might reduce the focus given to either one of them, Andò concludes that these new ways of watching television are, on the contrary, improving the level of engagement with televised content for audience members recurring to such practices (Andò, 2014: 166-170). In an American context, Proulx and Shepatin report on a Forrester Research study of 3,000 adult Americans which found that 48% of them are using computers while watching TV to get additional information about the programme. Among social network users, commenting on TV programmes appears to be one of the most popular activities, with 50% of Twitter and 35% of Facebook users stating that they discuss the shows they watch (Proulx & Shepatin, 2012: 10-13). A 2010 Nielsen study reported 60% of Americans using the internet while watching television, another Nielsen study in 2011 found that 86% of 13-64 year old Americans are using mobile devices simultaneous to broadcasts with 24% of them looking up content related to the broadcast. About one third (30%) of the time tablet users spend using their device is done in front of the TV, representing the situation tablets are used the most in, with use in bed coming second at 21% of the time (Proulx & Shepatin, 2012: 84-87).

4.3. ENGAGING AUDIENCES ON TELEVISION BACKCHANNELS

As for the combination of Twitter and TV, Harrington, Highfield and Bruns state that the microblogging site complements television as a broadcasting medium, working as a backchannel to live television used alongside it. And not only does Twitter sustain such sociability, it also makes it widely visible, a point that is of particular interest both to audience studies and ratings companies wanting an insight into viewer opinions (Harrington, Highfield & Bruns, 2013: 405-406). But the visibility of the interactions can also be one of the reasons why television audiences enjoy using Twitter alongside TV as social media are “amplif[y]ing] the feeling of being connected and part of something bigger when watching television.” (Proulx & Shepatin, 2012: 14)

Despite the recent popularity of social TV as a buzzword, the concept of audience participation in television programmes is not a new development of its own. Already before the days of the internet, certain television programmes allowed for viewers to call in or write letters that were included on air. Discussions about programmes and recommendations to friends and colleagues have existed as long as television (Proulx & Shepatin, 2012: 10). A study conducted in 1995, before the internet had arisen as mass medium, found that one of the most important factors for watching television was television’s function as “social grease [...] a pleasure in talking about a shared television experience with others” (Lee & Lee, 1995: 9) and reporting on a study conducted in 1989, Lee and Lee mention television programmes as “most popular topics of conversation for both men and women” (Lee & Lee, 1995: 14). But with mobile smartphones, the internet and social media, participation in and interaction with televised content has reached a new scale and a medium like Twitter allows individual to recommend shows not only to their immediate social circle but to a theoretically unlimited audience, with discussions taking place instantly at the time of airing or straight after (Harrington, Highfield & Bruns, 2014: 405-406). Nowadays, in an age where TV shows are discussed globally online, with new episodes becoming available to a worldwide audience immediately after their initial airing in one location—legally or illicitly—“no TV show, cultural product, or brand can live on the margin of the

Internet” (Ramos-Serrano & Lozano-Delmar, 2011: 422). They have to engage with their fans online if they want to remain relevant and have a chance in shaping a discussion as their audience is already doing so with or without their involvement or approval. In a sense, social TV is a perfect example of what Jenkins understand under media convergence, an alteration of “the relationship between existing technologies [...] and audiences”, an alteration of “the logic by which media industries operate and by which media consumers process news and entertainment” (Jenkins, 2006: 15-16), changing the way media is produced and consumed. Several technologies, television and the internet, more specifically social networking sites, are used alongside each other and combined, creating a new consumer experience focused around media consumption “as a networked practice” (Jenkins, 2006: 244).

It is important to mention here that the concept of social TV is not universally acclaimed within the television industry, but is also faced with criticism. Especially for immersive formats such as scripted dramas, ABC’s VP of Digital Media, Rick Mandler, sees asking viewers to interact with something other than the programme they’re watching as pulling them out of the world of the narrative and requiring them to re-engage with the series again afters which is connected with quite some effort as “let[ting] go of a narrative to engage with something that’s in the real-world and then pick the narrative thread back up again is asking a lot from a television viewer” (Proulx & Shepatin, 2012: 93). Proponents of this view argue that social TV experiences should occur not during broadcasts, but before or after to keep viewers engaged with the programme.

A truly engaging social TV experience can employ what Jenkins has called “cultural activators”—a term he borrowed from Pierre Lévy—both within a programme itself and in the content surrounding it, that give audiences a strong incentive to interact, talk about the programme and spread the word to others. “These narrative and promotional strategies tap into social dynamics among fans [...] provid[ing] fans with the resources they need to talk about the program [...] fuel[ing] constant conversation among viewers” (Jenkins, Ford & Green, 2013: 136). Research came to the conclusion that people are particularly eager to participate in Twitter discourse when there are incentives to do so present on screen, i.e. through the displaying of show-related hashtags, which Twitter’s own analysts have found can increase the amount of online conversation about the show between 2 to 10 times (Proulx & Shepatin, 2012: 17)—a broad number, but nevertheless showing that viewers react to such prompts. More than just on screen prompts to interact, cultural activators represent compelling content. Proulx and Shepatin identified that content comes first, that without good, resonant content there can’t be engagement (Proulx & Shepatin, 2012: 92) With all the recent enthusiasm over social TV and its potential to further engage audiences with programmes and invigorate the live event character of television, one mustn’t forget that “[s]ocial media cannot and will not save a bad show [...] But social media has a powerful amplification effect in the presence of resonant content” (Proulx & Shepatin, 2012: 6), adding that “[a]n audience’s anchor always starts with resonant content. While the second screen experience may be compelling, it is, after all, still just the *second* screen” (Proulx & Shepatin, 2012: 92).

With its critical acclaim, *Game of Thrones* can certainly be considered as “resonant content”, therefore offering itself for analysis of its backchannel strategies. But then again, Jenkins, Ford & Green warn of the fallacy of thought that good content spreads automatically. They suggest that there’s also an aspect of public identity-building contained in the act of sharing, that people share content to

establish or define themselves and their tastes in a social circle, therefore content can be approved as good and interesting without being shared because it wouldn't convey the image a person wants to convey of themselves and their tastes, directly linked to the social status enjoyed within a community. The authors caution that many consciously taken decisions and motivations define what is being shared, the quality of the content alone not being the defining factor, but one factor among many others. Still they hold up the belief that if content isn't engaging in the first place, its likelihood to be spreadable decreases (Jenkins, Ford & Green, 2013: 198-200).

General consensus exists, however, that social TV's engagement strategies can greatly benefit involved corporations. According to Andò, television companies' push towards multi-screen experiences is directly connected to using the screens beside the television to push additional content to viewers to increase "the touch points with the content and obtaining more goals in terms of consumer loyalty [...] the audience can be pushed to build a more intense and bidirectional relationship" (Andò, 2014: 170). In the case of a successful series like *Game of Thrones*, social TV practices don't only benefit the television channel and the fans, but also Twitter which can highlight its role in connecting fans to producers, empowering both, and profiting of the heightened exposure it gets⁸. A non-negligible factor of social TV, especially in times when producers are afraid of losing paying viewers due to online piracy, has been identified as the re-valorisation of shared live viewing as first time airings have the added bonus of a large social media community joining in commenting the broadcast as it is being broadcast, adding value and pleasure to watching a programme without using time-shifting technology such as DVRs, online streaming platforms or even torrent downloads of a show (Harrington, Highfield & Bruns, 2013: 407). Jenkins, Ford and Green state that "shows now encourage real-time tweeting, based on a burgeoning industry logic that these conversations are creating a stronger incentive for audiences to watch the shows 'in real time' (even if only to avoid 'spoilers')" (Jenkins, Ford & Green, 2013: 142).

Proulx and Shepatin on the other hand report that increases in live viewership after Twitter was promoted as official backchannel to a show are hard to prove, working for some programmes but not for others (Proulx & Shepatin, 2012: 20). However, when relying on Twitter integration as a measure to reduce piracy, we would argue that the contrary could be the case, especially in regions where a programme isn't aired synchronously, but at a (much) later time. While viewers in such regions still take pleasure from discussing the show online, they also want to avoid the risk of getting new developments spoiled on Twitter or message boards before seeing a new episode themselves, therefore resorting to piracy to catch up on new episodes as soon as possible after the original airing. Thus it comes with no surprise that in 2014 HBO decided to air the fourth season of *Game of Thrones* simultaneously with the US premiere of episodes on Sky Atlantic for British audiences (The Guardian, 2014). A move expanded on with the decision to air 2015's fifth season simultaneously in 170 different countries on various television channels and via their new standalone HBOGo app made available in selected regions outside of the US (Hibberd, 2015b).

⁸ A similar practice was observed during the first season of *American Idol* which cooperated with AT&T to promote text messaging in the US where this form of communication hadn't taken off yet in the same way as it had in Europe and Asia (Jenkins, 2006: 59).

According to Jenkins, it is with the rise of the internet that spoilers became an issue, as for the first time ever, differences in time zones have become apparent (Jenkins, 2006: 30), with international fans wanting to “sync their viewing schedule with international online discussion about shows” (Jenkins, Ford & Green, 2013: 113). Benton and Hill evaluated Twitter messages about casting show *The Voice* and report that consumption of live television has increased again after an initial trend towards recording new episodes and watching them later, an effect they trace back to fear of getting spoiled (Benton & Hill, 2012: 2). When comparing social media discussion about the show, they found that there is considerably less social media buzz about *The Voice* on the American west coast compared to the east coast where the show airs earlier, the outcome of voting already having been spoiled to west coast Twitter users who are then less interested in further discussing the show they consider old news (Benton & Hill, 2012: 12-14). The degrees in which premature revelation of major plot points through spoilers after consulting external information can reduce the intention of people to go see a film or television show has also been studied by Tsang and Yan (Tsang & Yan, 2009). They observed that spoilers affect film-seeing intentions particularly negatively for films heavily relying on plot twists—in *Game of Thrones* the unexpected deaths of popular protagonists fall into this plot twist category—as the fact of having the outcome explained beforehand reduces viewers’ enjoyment. For media to avoid losing viewers due to revealed spoilers, their promotional efforts should highlight other qualities of the property and avoid any hints that there might be a twist towards the end; instead of using a film’s or series’ plot as focal point in advertising, efforts should be directed more at the overall experience of seeing the production. Tsang’s and Yan’s study conducted with audiences on this spoiler effect proved that the revelation of spoilers reduced participants’ intentions to go see a film whose engaging plot was heavily advertised, but remained stable when the film was promoted as a cinematic experience with little detail on actual content, proving that “the negative impact of spoilers can be controlled” (Tsang & Yan, 2009: 708). It remains to be seen if the @GoT Twitter account is trying to control spoiler impact to keep interest level up, or whether they take the risk of spoiling followers in order to drive immediate, live consumption.

5. TELEVISION RATINGS IN THE INTERNET AGE

Traditionally, marketing strategies and ratings have tried to define successful programmes by “what’s easiest to count” (Jenkins, Ford & Green, 2013: 176): the number of viewers watching a show. When looking at social TV, the value of a show can be judged by the amount of social interaction generated around it, be it *direct* sociability during the show or *indirect* about previously seen programmes, similarly to how you would discuss an episode with friends on your couch while it airs or the day after with co-workers at the office water cooler (Ducheneaut et al., 2008: 136). Especially for HBO or other subscription channels whose shows’ success doesn’t have to be measured in viewer numbers defining ad prices and connected revenue, ratings and value based on social interaction and discussion around the programme have become a viable alternative to traditional TV ratings. Rather than merely measuring exposure to content, a more sustainable approach is to measure investment in and emotional impact of a brand or content via the many ways consumers share and interact with it across multiple platforms (Jenkins, 2006: 68-69). Therefore it can come only with little surprise that the CEO of Time Warner, HBO’s parent company, as well as David Petrarca, one of the series’ writers and directors, stated in 2013 that the label of “most pirated” show for *Game of Thrones* was potentially better than an Emmy as this stands as firm example of the series’ “cultural buzz” that could eventually lead to more penetration and raise awareness of the show (Lobato & Thomas, 2015: 156). In the same way that pirated copies of episodes can lead to increased buzz which has become a new popularity metric, engagement with viewers and exposure on social networks can also be used as a way to measure television content’s success and popularity, especially in “today’s volatile, fragmenting media industries, where conventional measures of success such as TV ratings have lost their grip on fast-moving audience behaviour” (Lobato & Thomas, 2015: 157). When Lobato and Thomas are noticing the increasing prevalence of “informal metrics” for audience and popularity measurement, this can certainly be expanded to overall online buzz about TV programmes—even though HBO is in the particularly privileged position of having a business model that doesn’t rely entirely on viewership, but more so on “postbroadcast” home video sales “creating a strong market tail” (Lobato & Thomas, 2015: 169).

Researchers keep arguing that the old methods of measuring audiences via ratings are unreliable and imprecise, whereas new methods like the evaluation of online discussions surrounding a programme have proven to give qualitative feedback about audience perceptions, instead of just quantitatively measuring audience size.

“[Q]ualitative analysis of key themes and topics of discussion over the course of the show, provides important feedback about the strengths and weaknesses of a program, well beyond what may be identified through the inherently artificial device of audience interviews and focus groups.” (Harrington, Highfield & Bruns, 2013: 406)

Within the US, the Nielsen ratings function as standard to measure how many households are watching a given programme, used by television networks to evaluate a programme’s performance and the price they can ask for advertisements. With social networks, another dimension can be used to measure the popularity of a show, the so-called social rating. At the moment, these social ratings have not replaced the traditional rating system but are offered by Nielsen—who publishes weekly Twitter

TV ratings on their NielsenSocial website—as an addition to them (Proulx & Shepatin, 2012: 113-117). There are examples in which the social rating of a show managed to save it from cancellation, as in the case of ABC's *Castle* which wasn't a huge success but proved to be very strong online, showing the executives that there was a vocal audience and that the show could become successful over time, a belief that has proven to be true with *Castle* being one of ABC's most popular shows, currently in its seventh season (Proulx & Shepatin, 2012: 116).

Especially with cult programmes, illicit international viewing practices make up a considerable amount of a show's viewership, but these viewers aren't captured in current audience measurement methods despite of the important role they play in generating awareness for such content. Instead of recognising how these audience members work as grassroots promoters of content that attract new viewers and grow a show's fan base, their numbers and role in accruing value for a show fall out of the grid in traditional audience measurement (Jenkins, Ford & Green, 2013: 114-115). Jenkins, Ford and Green therefore advocate a paradigm shift towards engagement-based models to describe a show's audience which recognises that the labour of "the audience as a collective of active agents [...] may generate alternative forms of market value" (Jenkins, Ford & Green, 2013: 116), valuing how fans spread content. They describe the value loyal fans create as follows:

"In viewers' everyday activities, they contribute to the cultural value (sentimental, symbolic) of media products by passing along content and making material valuable within their social networks. Each new viewer that these practices draw to the program could, in theory, translate into greater economic value (exchange) for media companies and advertisers." (Jenkins, Ford & Green, 2013: 123)

For researchers, data on ratings can additionally be used "to understand certain aspects of media institutions and how they approach their audiences" (Napoli, 2011: 287). Especially data on audience engagement can provide useful insights here, more so than mere quantitative data. Napoli raises an interesting point in regard to audience behaviour reflected through ratings as the way audiences are depicted change with the way they themselves and their behaviour is measured, leading to the question whether supposedly new audience behaviour is actually a new development or whether such behaviour previously existed but wasn't measurable in traditional ratings systems or different behaviour is visualised via different measurement methods (Napoli, 2011: 289-291).

In the current age of convergence, audiences are watching televised content not only on their television set upon broadcast, but also at later times via recordings, online streams in content libraries, downloads etc., therefore traditional ratings focusing on exposure and viewership of live broadcasts can't encompass the full and total audiences of a given programme any longer. Here as well, Napoli argues in favour of other measurement methods focused more on engagement and audience appreciation that are better suited to represent how audiences value a given programme beyond the mere number who tune in (Napoli, 2011: 297-298).

6. ANALYSIS

The following pages will be dedicated to shedding light on the practices and strategies employed by the official *Game of Thrones* Twitter account to engage and interact with fans and followers and analysing how such behaviour contributes to enhancing viewers' television experience. For our analysis of the tweeting behaviour of @GoT and their interactions with fans, we rely on two different datasets. For insights into the activity of @GoT, we manually collected and transcribed the entirety of tweets sent by @GoT between 1st May 2014 and 30th April 2015, including retweets of and replies to other users and their accounts⁹. This resulted in the collection of a total 2,299 tweets sent over the course of a year, of which 1,063 were original tweets by @GoT, 887 retweets of various users, and 349 direct replies to others. The account had sent 19,590 tweets overall since joining Twitter in August 2010, our sample therefore representing 11.7% of the total tweeting activity since @GoT's inception. From these numbers we can already tell that in the account's history, there were years with more activity than the one observed. Only 35 of @GoT's original tweets did not contain a hashtag, 155 different hashtags used, expanding a tweet's initial reach and visibility beyond an account's direct audience, allowing users that don't follow the account but track discussions about the show on Twitter to see the tweets and engage with them as well (Suh et al., 2010: 6). Tweets displaying hashtags therefore usually lead to more engagement (Benton & Hill, 2012: 11).

A content analysis was conducted on both the tweets which were coded according to the type of content, the type of tweet—original tweet, retweet of / reply to HBO, cast, fan and verified accounts—and whether a given tweet constituted an interaction with fans. It is important to state here that a single tweet could be coded into several content categories¹⁰. Additionally, tweets were coded for belonging to a Twitter campaign or not, with reference to the specific campaign, as we deemed campaigns an effective means to generate a large amount of follower response and an efficient engagement tool to raise online hype and buzz to advertise specific aspects¹¹.

Our combined approach of qualitative content analysis with quantitative data follows Bredl et al.'s suggestions to employ "interpretative content analysis" (Bredl et al., 2014: 205-206) where increases in the quantity of tweets are to be examined based on their content to find explanations for changes in volume. The chosen duration for the collection allowed us to observe overall activity of @GoT over the course of a year, including the interim period between the fourth and fifth season of the series, enabling us to observe differences during the end of a season, hiatus period, lead up to a new season and the new season's initial episodes. It further allowed us to see whether changes and updates of

⁹ If not specifically mentioned otherwise, the dates and times given in the analysis of tweets correspond to Central European Summer Time in which the tweets were collected.

¹⁰ As an example, a tweet like the one sent on 9th February 2015 at 23:40 CEST "*I'm not going to stop the wheel, I'm going to break the wheel.*" #GoTSeason5 premieres 4/12 at 9PM. <https://vine.co/v/OUdpxgH022> #GameofThrones" was coded as containing a *quote*, an *airtime reminder*, a *preview* in the form of a *vine* focusing on a *single character*, and being related to the *premiere* of the *upcoming season*—the case of this tweet met the criteria of 7 content categories.

¹¹ An example of such a campaign could be #FreeTyrion, asking followers to tweet reasons why they thought a central character imprisoned in the previous night's episode deserved to be freed using the hashtag.

previously employed strategies and levels of interaction with followers were observable from season to season. Having chosen such a broad timeframe, we believe our collection to be quite representative of @GoT's overall Twitter behaviour. Nevertheless, as the coding was conducted by one individual person—the author of this dissertation—without cross-checking by independent third party coders, the sample is likely to contain a small margin of error due to subjective interpretation that could have been mitigated and adjusted by triangulation with said independent coders.

A second supportive dataset, was created using the online service *Tweetarchivist*. It allowed us to archive the totality of tweets sent from 1st to 30th April 2015 that used the hashtags #GameOfThrones, #GoT and the keywords “Game of Thrones”¹², which resulted in archives with over 1.3 million tweets, written by 639,883 unique international users, corresponding to 8.9% of the 7.2 million average American viewers (Acuna & Renfro, 2015) of the first 3 episodes. The keyword archive was compiled in addition to the hashtags as only 10.1% of tweets on Twitter actually employ hashtags (Suh et al., 2010: 6). Due to archives’ volume, this dataset was used merely for quantitative analysis of the tweet flux over time. The timeframe was chosen to contain Twitter activity from before the start of season 5 on 12th April 2015, as well as the activity during the first three weeks of broadcast period, to not only scout for differences in activity during and pre-broadcast, but also make up for a possible momentary irregular increase of tweets during the expected hype around the premiere episode. The service ended up proving problematic with a bug leading to the corruption of the last file in each of the three archives¹³ and not covering the entirety of activity in highly busy periods which we’ll expand on in chapter 6.4 where the archive data was intended to be implemented. Bruns and Stieglitz encountered similar problems in their overview of Twitter research methodologies stating that “researchers need to accept a (small) margin of error in their data captures, and treat the resulting data-sets as close approximations of the total amount of hashtag activity, but not as entirely exhaustive representations”, especially due to complications with “independent verification of data fidelity” (Bruns & Stieglitz, 2013: 93). But because these errors appeared on a larger scale than expected, we decided to rely less on the archives than originally planned.

6.1. QUANTIFYING FAN ENGAGEMENT

Before shedding light on @GoT's engagement strategies, we were faced with the issue of how to measure and quantify engagement. Twitter has a section on their media website dedicated to scripted television shows, providing account managers with hints and best practices to increase engagement. These recommended strategies provide us with an overview on fan engagement on Twitter. For

¹² With no hashtags displayed in on-screen prompts in the series or promotional videos, we had to overcome the issue of deciding which hashtag to choose, the specific hashtags used for each episode not revealed in advance, only used in @GoT tweets shortly before broadcasts. We settled on collecting tweets with the widely used hashtags #GameOfThrones and #GoT, as well as the keywords “Game of Thrones”, assuming those would be used most broadly.

¹³ tweetarchivist.com is only able to save 50,000 tweets in a single Excel file, creating multiple consecutive files for archives spanning more than this number. In our case we ended up with 3 archives consisting of 3, 9 and 14 readable Excel files each.

Twitter, a high number of retweets is indicative of an engaging tweet: Compared to the action of favouriting tweets—showing the original sender that their tweet is well-received—retweeting relays a specific message to one’s own followers, being a form of endorsement for engaging tweets¹⁴. Albeit this view is debatable—several researchers argue against using simple metrics like the number of Facebook likes, Twitter followers or retweets to identify intensity of fan involvement, preferring to look at the progression of fan activity over time (Harrington, Highfield & Bruns, 2013; Stribling, 2013; Wohn & Na, 2011)—Twitter keeps basing their findings on engagement intensity on the retweet rate of tweets.

By equalling the level of engagement of a tweet with the times it’s been retweeted, Twitter found that for television show accounts, including a quote from the show generally increases the retweet rate—and thus the engagement—by 53%, meaning that if a post from said account is normally retweeted 100 times, the inclusion of a quote increases this average to 153 retweets. The inclusion of videos increased retweets by 48%, photos by 46% and hashtags by 39%.¹⁵ If we accept these metrics of Twitter, then looking at the content of 1,063 original tweets sent by @GoT should provide us with their most engaging tweets. Unfortunately, Twitter’s findings for retweet rates couldn’t be confirmed in the case of @GoT whose tweets were retweeted 713.7 times on average. The feature used by far the most were hashtags, 1,026 original tweets containing at least one (ø721.8 RTs, 1.1% increase of retweet rate above the average level), followed by the 433 tweets containing photos (ø955.1 RTs, 33.8% increase), next are 313 tweets containing a quote (ø740.6 RTs, 3.8% increase)—oftentimes the quote is included on top of a photo—and finally, 192 tweets shared videos (ø701.2 RTs, 1.8% decrease), 36 of which were *vines*, short 6-second-clips. It isn’t clear however how Twitter’s media team categorised tweets with fitting on more than one category, i.e. tweets including a photo and hashtag simultaneously, and as all our tweets were given more than one content label, the strong deviation from Twitter’s findings might also be due to this, the retweet rate being affected by other elements of the Twitter and not just the photo, video or hashtag etc. in it.

Unfortunately these metrics are rather meaningless on their own and when looking at the most popular @GoT tweets, judging by their number of retweets, Twitter’s own findings are not reflected. Rather, they seem to point in a different direction. In our case, we’d argue that the features of the tweet itself don’t affect retweetability, but the context the tweet is posted in and the emotions it stimulates. For this we looked at the 50 most retweeted original tweets¹⁶ of @GoT. These tweets were coded separately for the one feature that seemingly made them stand out and resonate with fans. With 27,622 retweets, ahead of the runner-up with 14,543 retweets, the most popular tweet by far dates to 9th January 2015 and contains the announcement of the airing date of the season 5 premiere. The 15 most popular tweets are all merely counting down to this premiere. Overall, 25 of the 50 most popular tweets are related to the season 5 premiere: 21 are counting down to it, 3 contain teaser videos for it, and one is about how *Game of Thrones* is trending on Twitter after the airing date of the premiere was

¹⁴ Cf. <https://blog.twitter.com/2014/what-fuels-a-tweets-engagement>. Retrieved: 24th May 2015.

¹⁵ Cf. <https://blog.twitter.com/2014/what-fuels-a-tweets-engagement>. Retrieved: 24th May 2015.

¹⁶ We left out retweets by @GoT as the ones figuring on this list were originally posted by actors in the series, political institutions, and corporations, already benefitting from a large audience of their own which @GoT only help amplify.

announced. Among the rest, 9 tweets contain quotes from an episode, 4 other tweets reference a season 4 episode and the remaining tweets are news about engagement campaigns for season 5 (3), award nomination announcements (3), clips from an episode (1), behind-the-scenes videos (1), announcements of new merchandise (1), congratulations on an actor's birthday (1) and a photo of a main character (1). Judging from the most popular tweets, followers of @GoT seem to like tweets counting down to season 5. But when looking at the retweet rate of other tweets including countdowns to episodes, it becomes obvious that these countdowns alone don't drive engagement. Tweets counting down to season 5 received 2696.2 retweets on average (277.8% increase above the average), while the average retweet rate for countdowns to any other episode was only 662.7 (7.1% decrease). Countdown tweets are a little less popular than tweets in general, while countdown tweets to season 5 are vastly more popular. In this case, it was rather the excitement due to the long wait for the new season leading users to retweet. Furthermore, if we define engaging tweets as those driving conversation (Rybalko & Seltzer, 337) and with a propensity for spreadability (Jenkins, Ford & Green, 2013: 204), countdowns on their own can't be very engaging at all.

Merely retweeting content is a rather shallow form of engagement. The focus on retweets and favouriting rates seems appealing at first because it's easily quantifiable, but audiences don't have to be very active in doing so. We would therefore prefer to introduce a distinction between simple forms of engagement and more meaningful ones that lead to a real exchange with fans and followers, inciting them to produce content of their own and creatively spread the word about the brand. This is where the idea of *dialogic communication* comes into play. Based on a 2010 study on companies' engagement of stakeholders on Twitter (Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010), we opted for a similar approach to expose @GoT's Twitter strategy. Rybalko and Seltzer define "healthy relationships" between companies and consumers as based on open communication, dialogue and exchange of ideas and opinions. For such dialogue to take place, organisations have to open up channels that facilitate dialogic communication, a concept borrowed and adapted from Kent's and Taylor's work on *dialogic public relations theory* that sought to analyse companies' use of websites to reach out to their audience. In short, Kent and Taylor propose five principles that allow to build dialogue and relationships with an audience: *establishment of a dialogic loop* allowing users to voice concerns and ask questions that the organisation can respond to, *providing useful information* that serves users added value, *generation of return visits* via changing and updated content, *intuitive navigation* of the site, and, finally, *conservation of visits* by driving people to your own website instead of others' (Kent & Taylor, 1998: 326-331). Although Kent and Taylor published their theory on dialogic relationships in a pre-Web 2.0 era, Rybalko and Seltzer have shown that Twitter is especially capable of engaging your audience in dialogic communication due to its propensity for interactivity (Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010: 337). Just as Rybalko and Seltzer, we are omitting the *intuitive navigation* principle from our criteria as all users on Twitter are using the same interface (Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010: 337) and are leaving out *generation of return visits* too as for Twitter in general, users receive updates from the users they follow, returns to the site built into its core design.

Starting off with *useful information*, Rybalko and Seltzer include in this whether tweets are signed (Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010: 337). In the case of @GoT, the identity of the account managers remain hidden and tweets are not individually signed, already leading to the perception that a "faceless public

relations department or corporate entity” (Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010: 339) is tweeting and not an individual needed for true *interpersonal* communication. We then proceeded to code tweets for containing additional information on recently aired episodes, characters, actors or other behind-the-scenes information¹⁷. Of the 1,063 original tweets, 215 tweets / 20.23% contain such information, 119 of the 887 retweets (13.42%) did so, and only 13 of 349 replies (3.72%) fit this criteria. To calculate *conservation of visits*, we again follow Rybalko and Seltzer who see regular updates as conservation of visits—which @GoT did throughout the year—and consider an organisation’s website and other social networking profiles as part of their extended internet presence, “thus links to [...] the company’s social networking sites, and the company’s [website] should be considered part of *conservation of visitors*” (Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010: 33). Tweets linking to *Game of Thrones* websites (i.e. the show’s viewer’s guide or making-of website), but also HBO sites, as well as tweets containing @mentions taking users to another HBO Twitter profile are considered to conserve visits¹⁸. 254 original tweets (23.89%), 68 retweets (7.67%) and 28 replies (8.02%) fit this profile. Finally, we’re looking at the *establishment of a dialogic loop*, the direct exchange and conversation with users that we see as central for meaningful engagement. Here, Rybalko and Seltzer dichotomously rate corporate Twitter accounts as either responsive or not depending on whether they received an answer to a previously tweeted question within two weeks. The author of this dissertation did tweet four questions to @GoT in early March 2015 while the series was on hiatus and four more each week in April 2015 before and after the show returned to be aired. As expected, none of these questions were answered, disappearing in the massive stream of tweets direct at @GoT—more on this in the final section. Nevertheless, @GoT does respond to and directly interact with other Twitter users, both fans and verified users¹⁹, so we settled on a different approach to measure said dialogic loop: measuring the overall replies to and retweets of fans’ tweets. Over the course of the year, @GoT sent a total of 887 retweets (38.58% of total tweet volume) and 349 replies (15.18% of tweet volume). 365 of the retweets were originally posted by fans (15.88% of total tweet volume, 41.15% of retweets), while 299 tweets replied directly to fans (13.01% of total tweet volume, 85.67% of replies). Just as in Rybalko and Seltzer’s study, tweets establishing a dialogic loop were predominant compared to the other features. At the same time, overall more tweets conserving visits were sent than tweets providing followers with additional information that would be part of a discussion. Especially interesting in this context is that although one fifth of tweets contained additional information, there’s barely any such information in replies where it would be expected if actual dialogue and responses to queries were the reason behind the replying process. Again, we can observe that exchange with fans is taking place, but it seems as though this exchange is quite shallow. Interaction is happening, but from these metrics it’s hard to judge entirely how far this interaction goes. As stated by researchers such as Stribling, when looking at the intensity of interaction with fans to define whether their contributions are being valued, it is

¹⁷ Using the coding keywords “Additional Info”, “Behind-the-scenes” and “News”.

¹⁸ Using the coding keywords “GoT Link”, “HBO Link” and “HBO @mention”.

¹⁹ We are aware that verified users, apart from other promotional accounts, magazines and media outlets, can also be (celebrity) fans of the series. But as there might often be a self-promotional aspect to their interaction on Twitter instead of mere fannish desire to reach out to the object of fandom, we decided to only treat non-verified accounts as fans.

essential to track interaction and its quality over time to observe possible changes in it, instead of merely working with a fixed value at a given point in time (Stribling, 2013), especially because a high volume of tweets alone does not necessarily increase engagement which is also driven by the tweets' content (Suh et al., 2010: 8).

Out of the 7 types of content with a high degree of spreadability that drive “deep engagement” proposed by Jenkins, Ford and Green (2013: 204-219), the *Game of Thrones* Twitter content meets 2 categories, namely “mystery” and “timely controversy”. In November 2014 users could sign up for #TheSight, a campaign designed to promote the 5th season by sending direct messages to subscribers on Twitter with short film clips teasing upcoming events that could only be watched once. Although criticised for not meeting its full potential, the short preview clips presented out of context left much to the fans' imagination and had the potential to drive discussion due to the “fascination of getting to the bottom” (Jenkins, Ford & Green, 2013: 213) of things. Controversy on the other hand is a major part of *Game of Thrones*' appeal, viewers being constantly confronted with the fact that main characters can meet an early demise, emphasised in the #BeautifulDeath campaign, and with certain scenes on the show—i.e. the rape of a protagonist in season 5—leading to controversial debate on social media about how far a TV series should be allowed to go, sparking “intense disagreement” (Jenkins, Ford and Green, 2013: 213). But also in other aspects @GoT meets spreadability criteria. The strong focus on multimedial tweets—84.7% of original tweets containing videos, photos or GIFs—provide quotable content that is “[a]vailable when and where audiences want it”, “portable” and “grabbable”. Twitter's constant newsfeed allows for “a steady stream of material”. @GoT's content is “relevant to multiple audiences” (Jenkins, Ford and Green, 2013: 197-198) as well: dedicated fans' desire for deep information is satisfied with links to videos of the showrunners providing episode interpretations and explaining character motivations, while photos after each episode recapping favourite character moments might suffice for more casual viewers.

Having established that a certain extent of @GoT's tweets meet engagement criteria, we will now proceed to look at how the direct exchange with users looks in detail to identify the nature of @GoT's engagement and exchange with users, as questioned in RQ3.

6.2. THE NATURE OF EXCHANGE WITH VIEWERS

As with Twitter's own statements concerning the measurement of engagement and conversation based on retweets, a 2014 study by Bredl et al. considered the practice of retweeting itself as “establishing conversation” (Bredl et al., 2014: 198). We'd like to disagree with this point of view, positioning ourselves with Suh et al.'s findings which provide a range of social motivations for retweeting others, the establishment of conversation not being one of them (Suh et al., 2010: 1-2). Instead, Suh et al. describe retweeting only as “a form of information diffusion since the original tweet is propagated to a new set of audiences” (Suh et al, 2010: 1), not connected to engagement at all. Rather than looking at retweets, we coded tweets for fan interaction. Overall, 940 tweets were coded for fan interaction, 365 (38.8%) of them were retweets of messages from fans, but only 296 of those tweets received a reply from @GoT in return. As retweets on their own only pass along the information contained in the tweet to thirds, relaying the message without engaging with it, we'd argue that actual conversation only took

place in those 296 cases where replies were sent. And even then, only 98 replies were actually informally commenting on the fan's tweet, the others were formulaic in nature, either thanking the fans for their support or merely acknowledging the tweet had been read. These formulaic responses don't work well on social media as users are looking for "content experiences that naturally integrate with the backchannel's tone, tenor, and timing" (Proulx & Shepatin, 2012: 31), there's "a need for authenticity" (Sundar & Limperos, 2013: 521), with users preferring accounts using the same voice they'd employ in day-to-day interactions as well. Only when a retweeted fan was replied to could actual conversation take place, closing the feedback loop to the retweet's original author.

A 2011 study sought to analyse Twitter, looking for both independent tweets and interactive discussions. According to the authors' strict criteria, interactivity is only present when information is communicated, responded to and given a second response (Wohn & Na, 2011), in which case not even all of our 296 cases of actual discussion would be seen as interactive. Replies might certainly engage the individual users receiving the answer, but for an account's followership as a whole, they are only little engaging as replies are only visible on one's own feed when following both the sender and recipient of the message. This is reflected in the fraction of retweets and favourites replies receive in comparison with normally visible tweets. The little use of replies, only making up 15.18% of the total tweets sent by @GoT, can therefore also be explained by these low engagement levels for the overall audience in relation to the invested time and effort: For an engaging reply, fan tweets have to be read, interesting ones selected and individual, personalised replies written to directly and meaningfully engage one single user, while a normal tweet reaches a lot more people, even if it is less engaging for the individual members of its audience. When looking at it as a numbers game, the practice of establishing dialogue with individual users via replies loses out over less time-consuming standardised replies and tweet to the general audience. From an engagement perspective though, we'd argue that dialogic replies can go a long way towards making individual fans feel valued and taken seriously. For Twitter, it has been shown that users draw gratification from "convey[ing] others' reception of their postings" (Sundar & Limperos, 2013: 514) and have come to expect "media interfaces to be responsive to their actions" with "interactivity assur[ing] intense engagement with content" (Sundar & Limperos, 2013: 515), the chance to interact with and "get feedback from stars" (Proulx & Shepatin, 2012: 14) and verified accounts driving people to return to the medium. Replies satisfy both of these expectations, demonstrating that @GoT reads a user's tweets and responds to them, while the reply itself can be retweeted to one's own followers to convey to them that one's own tweet was seen by such a large account which can be of additional importance for one's reputation on the site. By failing to fulfil some of these user expectations via individual engagement and interaction, @GoT is passing on a unique opportunity for connection Twitter as a medium offers.

But Twitter allows for another type of direct interaction with other users, besides replies, retweets and @mentions. In an adaptation of direct replies, the site lets users directly comment on a given tweet by typing their response into a text field beneath the selected tweet. This feature is used by @GoT fans as well, the show's tweets accumulating around 40 of such direct comments per message. In no instance did @GoT reply in their turn to one these comments, this feature therefore not figuring in our analysis. Nevertheless, because the comments are visible to anyone selecting a given tweet—compared to usual replies by fans that are only visible when one is following both the sender and

recipient of the message as mentioned above—we couldn't help but make an interesting observation here: Whereas the only opinions @GoT retweets are positive (83) and neutral (12) ones, negative opinions and views are very present and visible in the comments beneath tweets. One example that especially stands out dates to 6th January 2015 @GoT announced that two episodes of last year's season were going to be shown in select IMAX cinemas, international fans were using the comments to express their hope that this campaign would be expanded beyond the US, voicing concern that such special events keep being limited to North America. Proper consideration of and responses to these comments could have provided @GoT with an opportunity to explain their US-only policies and possibly offering international screenings of the IMAX episodes if fan demand was big enough. Such behaviour would have worked as a testimony that the opinion of their fans is valued. Equally, on 9th December 2014 when @GoT announced the creation of the *Game of Thrones Compendium*, a book which fans could provide various contributions for that are then going to be selected by a jury to be included or not. The vast majority of comments to this announcement voiced frustration that only fans from the US, UK, Canada and Brazil could contribute while the show has a global fan base. But there was also much concern about user exploitation as the finished book was going to be sold with the selected contributors only receiving a free copy but no part of the profits. One user voiced his anger by proclaiming “@GoT Another fan-exploiting cash cow ... We do the work, you profit.”, the same criticism of reliance on free fan labour and user-generated content labelled as opportunity for audience participation that has been evoked several times in the first part of this dissertation. Similar observations could also be made for the many tweets promoting merchandise, even though here positive voices outweighed the negative ones. There's no official reaction to the criticism, but these opinions were also not removed. This serves as a perfect example that fans are critical of their object of fandom, not blindly approving of anything offered to them, reflective of their own actions. At the same time, it also shows that initiatives designed to potentially lead to strong fan engagement can also disengage large segments of a property's fan base if they don't approve of the measure. Again, generally applicable engagement formulas are hard to establish, engagement having to be judged case-by-case, as normally initiatives such as the *Game of Thrones Compendium* would rank as highly engaging as they launch discussion, accept fans as content creators and legitimise user-generated content for a large property that would often be expected to be highly protective of its copyrights.

A singular incident that stands out from the mass of other interactions occurred on 15th December 2014 (16th December CEST) when over a short period of time @GoT was replying in succession to several users facing the same problem: When a new short clip as part of the #TheSight campaign was supposed to be released, the corresponding website didn't function properly and users were tweeting their contempt. In this case, @GoT actually responded to fan criticism: A first reply sent to @WatchersOTWall, a popular fan-curated website containing *Game of Thrones* news, episode recaps, podcasts and a forum, explained that @GoT were aware of the issue and looking into it to provide the content. Several other users complained as well, 14 of which @GoT replied to, each time using the exact same response: “@[username] A raven will bring you a new vision soon. Thank you for keeping watch”. Again the direct engagement with users via replies is formulaic and standardised, instead of using personalised responses in an authentic voice. As only the Twitter account of the fan website received a more detailed tweet, it can be assumed that @GoT's account manager is aware of the reach

such fansites have and as *Watchers on the Wall* were reporting on the unfolding of the #TheSight campaign, letting them know that the issue was known and being worked on, would reach more people than directly replying to a multitude of complaining Twitter users. *Watchers on the Wall* released an article that same day about issues with #TheSight, linking to @GoT's reply with the explanation. In the comments under the article, fans are complaining about *Game of Thrones*' "terrible marketing job"²⁰, several users voicing frustration that none of the people responsible are answering their messages that the #TheSight website isn't working properly. In this case, direct and open dialogue with the fans would have served the series more than selective communication with a single opinion leader and "representative" of fandom as a whole.

When looking at the style of tweets in general, they are rather formulaic, following repeating structures, and if there is interaction with followers, it also follows a repeating pattern. This becomes especially obvious ahead of new episodes being aired when @GoT sends several tweets counting down to the broadcast, interspersed with retweets of fans citing their excitement to see the new episode. Some of these tweets expressing the fans' anticipation are replied to according to a defined structure: The fan is thanked for telling their followers about the episode ("Thanks for rallying the realm, House X"), the episode's airtime is brought up again with an HBO @mention promoting the TV channel's brand as a whole, and the fan is told to prepare snacks for watching the episode using an in-universe reference ("Get your Dornish wine/Arbor Gold/lemon cakes ready!"), often accompanied by an animated GIF of a character drinking wine or eating food. A single tweet like this might appear to the fan being replied to as informal and engaging, feeling valued that @GoT is directly interacting with them, but when looking at these tweets on a larger scale, witnessing the repetitive pattern, the informality and individuality is lost, becoming a mere tool to draw viewers in. Despite the repetitive, formulaic pattern, the strategy of individual engagement can prove effective as replies don't appear in the general Twitter feed, but are only directly seen by the person receiving them, any other user having to manually select displaying replies alongside normal tweets on @GoT's profile. It is only when seen in bulk with the formulaic nature exposed that tweets lose this appeal. They work on an individual level but don't provide much large-scale engagement for the followership as a whole. Therefore, we might want to distinguish between attempts at individual user engagement and engagement for the entirety of followers.

Having mentioned UGC above, it needs to be noted that @GoT shows a very open attitude to such content. Not only is a project such as the *Game of Thrones Compendium* based upon the notion of users contributing its content, but there are multiple occasions when @GoT actively promotes and encourages that concept on Twitter, highlighting the creativity of users. A recurring one is the case of #BeautifulDeath, a hashtag under which @GoT shares a picture of a central death from the most recent episode designed by fan and illustrator Robert M. Ball who made a name of himself creating adaptations of film posters and television series in minimalist designs. On 18th April 2015, www.beautifuldeath.com was created and propagated by @GoT as a place where fans could see all of Ball's previous creations, as well as submit their own designs of their favourite deaths on the show. In another instance, on 19th April, a fan running a small bakery in New York was retweeted for their

²⁰ <http://watchersonthewall.com/visions-game-thrones-season-5-debut/#more-21956>. Retrieved: 3rd June, 2015.

photo of a *Game of Thrones* cake in the shape of the series' iconic iron throne. This case is particularly interesting as the bakery's cake is clearly designed for commercial purposes, to be sold, and cannot be seen as a non-for-profit creation like so much other user-generated content, therefore residing in a grey area of possible copyright infringement. At other times, during conventions and for Halloween—when @GoT specifically advertised the hashtag #GoTHalloween—photos of fans in home-made costumes representing their favourite characters were retweeted by the official account. And in the case of the *Compendium*, Zack Luye, an author working for the fan-curated website watchersonthewall.com, was named one of the judges deciding on what entries to include in the final book, a fan officially acknowledged as an authority on *Game of Thrones*. @GoT seems to be aware that acknowledging fans' contributions and dedication towards the show are an important factor in its success and popularity, that user-generated content can be a powerful tool in spreading word-of-mouth about the series. By acknowledging these contributions, fans are being valued and credited with part of the show's success (Jenkins, Ford & Green, 2013: 204). It is therefore only legitimate to raise the question why @GoT isn't engaging more with its fans and followers in other areas.

Certainly the most intense form of exchange with followers and fan engagement are the organised Q&As with series cast members when season 5 is on air and with musicians that contributed to the so-called *Game of Thrones MixTape* presented at SXSW during the hiatus. These Q&As are not just that deeply engaging because they allow for actual dialogue and exchange between fans and people involved with the franchise, but also because in the course of the Q&As new information, often from behind-the-scenes on the film set, is made available to fans, an aspect that is both cited by Twitter's television department as engaging content²¹, as well as by independent researchers (Jenkins, Ford & Green, 2013: 197). At the same time, due to the increase in tweet volume, these Q&As succeed in creating buzz and visibility for the series on Twitter, advertising the new season, a central goal of HBO's strategy on Twitter as we'll discuss in the upcoming chapter. Q&As are possibly the one aspect of @GoT's fan engagement that underwent the biggest evolution: Three Q&As took place with three different cast members while season 4 was still ongoing²², but only little engagement was created on Twitter for this as fans were directed to the HBO Connect website where they could submit questions to be pre-selected for the live interview, with @GoT only advertising the Q&A to their followers on Twitter, but conducting it off-site. The next Q&A took place during the SXSW festival on 10th March 2015 with Scott Ian, a musician who contributed songs to the *Game of Thrones MixTape* unveiled at the event. Lasting only 20 minutes, the Q&A was rather short and @GoT tweeted questions at Ian without mentioning the fans who came up with them. With the start of season 5, the Q&As develop their full engaging potential: On 28th April (27th April EDT), Nathalie Emmanuel, a central cast member, joined a Twitter Q&A, this time @GoT pre-selected fan questions as well as questions that were asked while the Q&A was ongoing, showcasing a certain spontaneity and allowing for participation by fans that didn't see earlier tweets advertising the Q&A. Equally, fan questions were retweeted by @GoT at Emmanuel and her answers were in turn retweeted back to the followers of @GoT, the account thus functioning as relay between the two participants, fully involving fans in the

²¹ <https://media.twitter.com/best-practice/tweeting-behind-the-scenes-content-tv>. Retrieved: 3rd June, 2015.

²² Another one took place live on 27th July at the *Game of Thrones* panel at San Diego Comic Con for fans present in the room with @GoT only reporting on it, but not allowing for only questions.

process. Only two days later, another Q&A with actor Iwan Rheon was organised, announced only a little over an hour before its start. Rheon answered 34 questions in 46 minutes—compared to Emmanuel’s 11 in 30 minutes—many answers being retweeted mere seconds after the questions were posted. @GoT functioned as relay once more, and Rheon’s answers were a lot more informal and humorous than Emmanuel’s whose seemed to be more in line with corporate PR, Rheon therefore also receiving slightly more retweets per answer on average (ø42.4 RTs vs. ø38.6 RTs). Still, both actors succeeded in using a far more authentic voice than @GoT in the majority of their tweets. By having the actors tweet the answers themselves, followers of the actors were also made aware of the Q&A and guided to the @GoT account, yet another time further increasing initial reach. These Q&As seem to have proven successful as @GoT continued to organise such sessions the weeks following our observation in the days after new episodes aired, turning them into a regular feature of @GoT’s Twitter presence.

Despite all of these examples of engaging interaction with fans, direct and spontaneous exchange that could lead to deeper and regular engagement with fans in general is very limited outside of these organised campaigns and events encouraging fans to tweet and participate. In the next chapter we will look in detail at the strategy used by @GoT and their use of campaigns to reach out to users.

6.3. @GAMEOFTHRONES’S TWITTER STRATEGY

To analyse the strategy employed by @GoT on Twitter and to answer RQ1, we visualised the collected information in a graph (cf. Figure 6.3.1 & Appendix I.1) portraying the volume of tweets per week during the observed 12-month-period, supported by a second graph displaying the Twitter activity per day for the on air periods (cf. Figure 6.3.2).

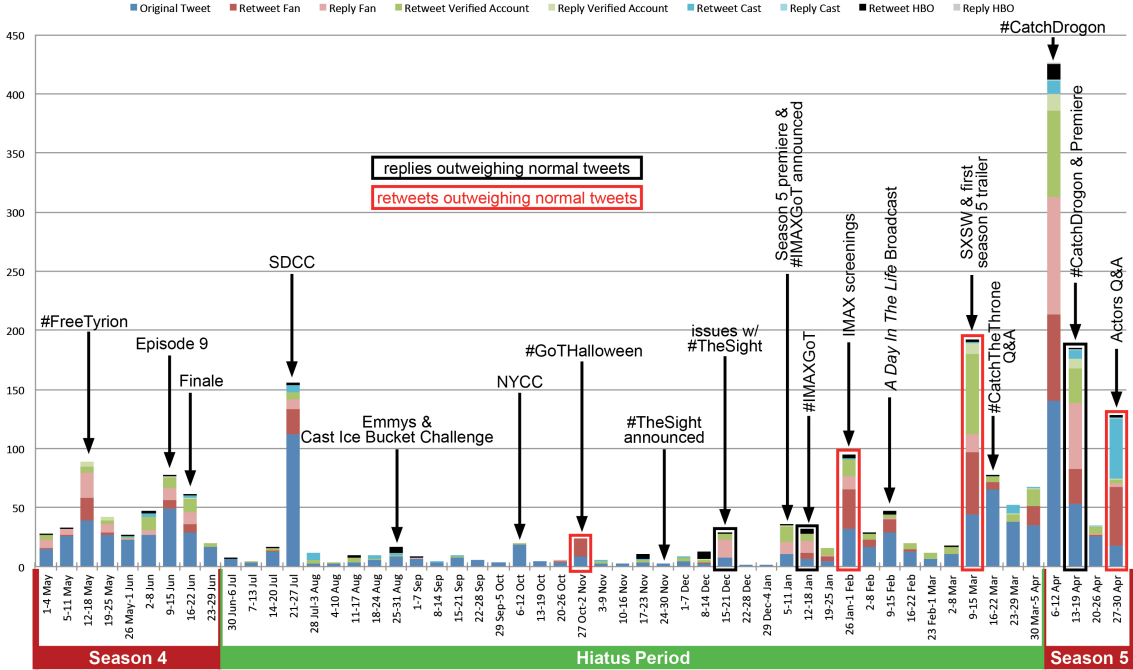


Figure 6.3.1: @GameOfThrones’ Tweets per Week

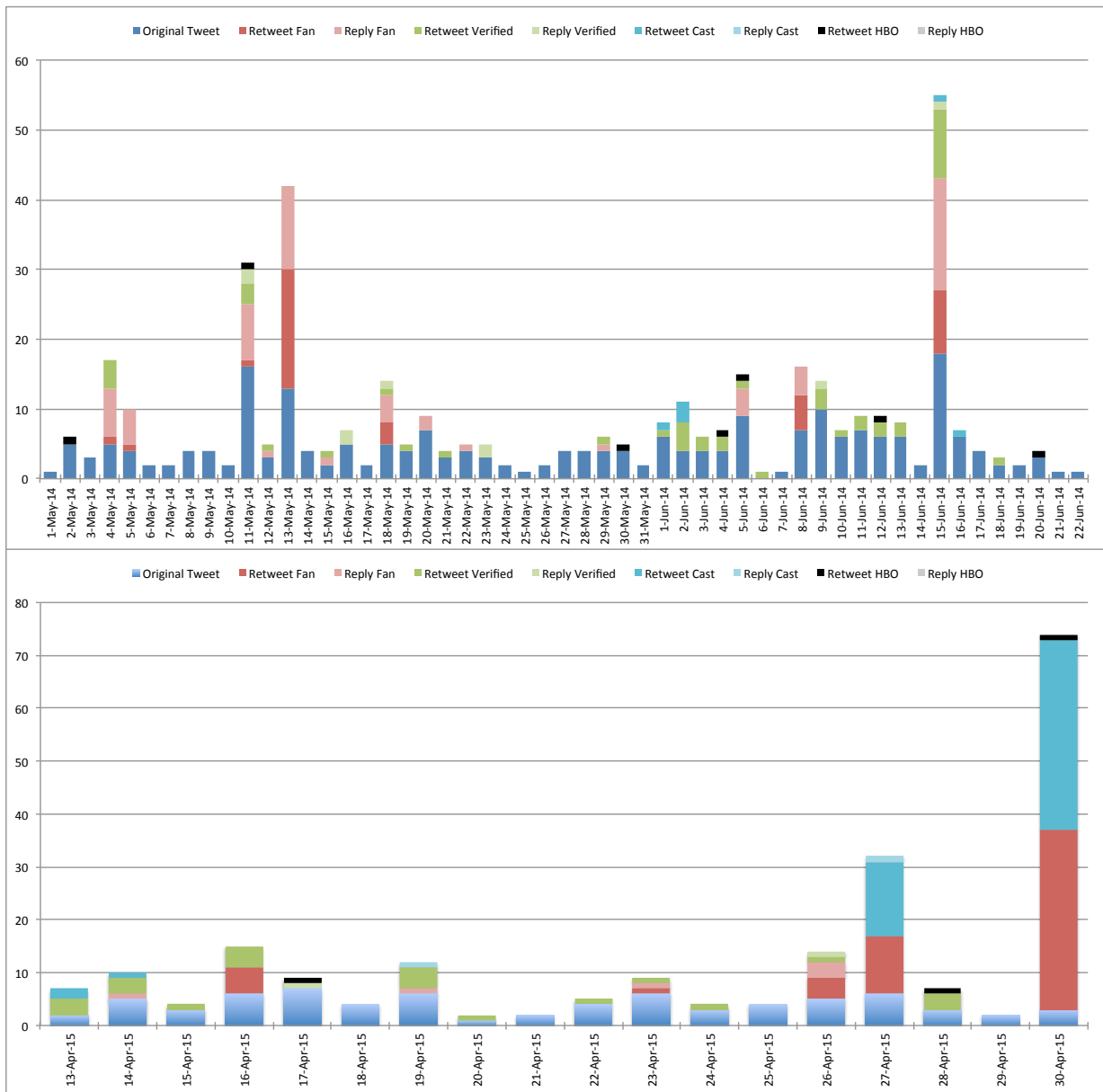


Figure 6.3.2: @GameOfThrones' Tweets during Seasons 4 & 5 (EDT)

A few activity peaks clearly stand out from the rest of the overall activity, with activity during season 5 being the highest, but driven less by tweets about recent episodes than for season 4 where the three peaks are directly due to episode-related tweets, the week of 12th-18th May showing most activity as the #FreeTyrion campaign asked fans to tweet why they thought a central character imprisoned on a recent episode should be released. This picture is different early in season 5 where activity is mainly driven by the #CatchDrogon campaign to advertise the series' return to television, and two Q&As with actors during the last observed week. For the hiatus period we can see that activity is quite low, with @GoT sending a mere 27.5 tweets per week on average for the majority of the time, with the volume slightly increasing in early January 2015 to advertise the new season. What is particularly interesting is that out of the 11 identified activity peaks, 6 relate back to offline events that the account was reporting on, confirming the findings of previous research that offline events are a main factor and drive behind online activity on Twitter (Jansen et al., 2009: 2182; Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010: 338). Not only are these events advertised on Twitter, they also provide account owners with ample content to tweet about. The other spikes go back to the 2014 Emmy Awards and retweets of cast members'

contribution to the viral ALS ice bucket challenge the week of 25th-31st August, higher traffic of fan costume photo retweets around Halloween, the afore-mentioned high volume of fan complaints due to problems with #TheSight, traffic related to the airing of the *A Day in the Life* special on 9th February, and finally traffic pushed by another Q&A at the occasion of SXSW. But the graph also shows that engaging initiatives such as #TheSight and its speculative drive don't necessarily reflect in increased activity on the part of the initiative's initiator as the week of 24th-30th November when #TheSight was launched by @GoT stands as the third least active week with only 3 tweets, not really building upon the previews' engagement potential²³. Four of the spikes are characterised by high interactivity due to fan retweets outweighing the amount of original tweets of @GoT. Interestingly enough all four occasions had their own hashtag and were driven by direct addresses to fans and calls-to-action to tweet photos or questions. In the case of #GoTHalloween, @GoT retweeted photos of the best fan-made costumes that viewers created for the day. For #IMAXGoT retweets of fannish expressions of excitement to see the series in IMAX and photos of costumes worn for the occasion dominate. During SXSW retweets consist mainly of fan portraits generated of festival visitors using an interactive installation on site. And finally, activity around #AskGoT Q&As surged with users tweeting their questions at actors that were retweeted as part of the online interview. Three of these rather interactive spikes occur relatively close to the season 5 premiere, their purpose thus being clear as driving only buzz that can get people interested in tuning in for the series' return. This especially as social network users tend to "rate content chosen or favored by other users as being more worthy than that offered by professional[s]" (Sundar & Limperos, 2013: 514), thus many retweets of fans' views conveying something truly deserving attention. #GoTHalloween on the other hand can probably be considered an appreciation of most dedicated fans.

When looking at the distribution of tweets while the series is on television, we adjusted the tweets for Eastern Daylight Time as the 6-hour-deviation from Central European Summer Time the tweets were collected in would distort the results, with tweets sent shortly before episodes aired at 9pm EDT in the original American context falling onto the following day in CEST. The obtained results are little surprising. For season 5, daily Twitter traffic is relatively low, peaking on 12th, 19th and 26th April, days new episodes were broadcast, as well as 27th and 30th April when Q&As with actors are held. The activity on 12th April alone was as high as of the following days combined, but this again is due to the high tweet volume around #CatchDrogon and other additional tweets in the lead-up to the premiere. The same pattern appears for the end of season for, spikes visible for 4th, 11th and 18th May as well as 1st, 8th and 15th June, the days episodes first aired. The peaks on 13th May, 2nd and 9th June can also be explained as episode-related activity with 13th May seeing the #FreeTyrion campaign, while the activity on 2nd and 9th June is certainly due to the previous days' episode containing heavily discussed unexpected developments: the particularly gruesome death of a recently introduced fan-favourite character, as well as a pivotal battle spanning an entire episode. The activity bar on 15th June towers above the others as the season finale was especially promoted with retweets of fan and celebrity

²³ Fans noted this as well, criticising the #TheSight campaign in general for its half-heartedness, frustrating content and many difficulties with content delivery. Cf.: <http://watchersonthewall.com/game-of-thrones-social-media-team-welknew-people-were-going-to-be-pretty-angry/>. Retrieved: 6th June 2015.

preparations for finale viewing parties, as well as a high number of formulaic replies to fans. It should be noted that immediately after the finale, activity drops back to a normal level, with no visible attempts to further discuss and expand on the events of the episode or recapitulate the season as a whole. Other than that, activity in on air weeks is driven by episodes and their promotion, the highest volume of tweets sent on the day and the hours leading up to an episode itself to raise awareness for the broadcast and get as many viewers as possible to tune in, reinforced by the hourly airtime reminders and countdowns before new episode broadcasts. Proulx and Shepatin observed the same for most live television using “more tweeting early on to help compel the highest possible rating.” (Proulx & Shepatin, 2012: 118). This is only partially reflected in the archives of collected tweets by users (cf. Figure 6.3.3).

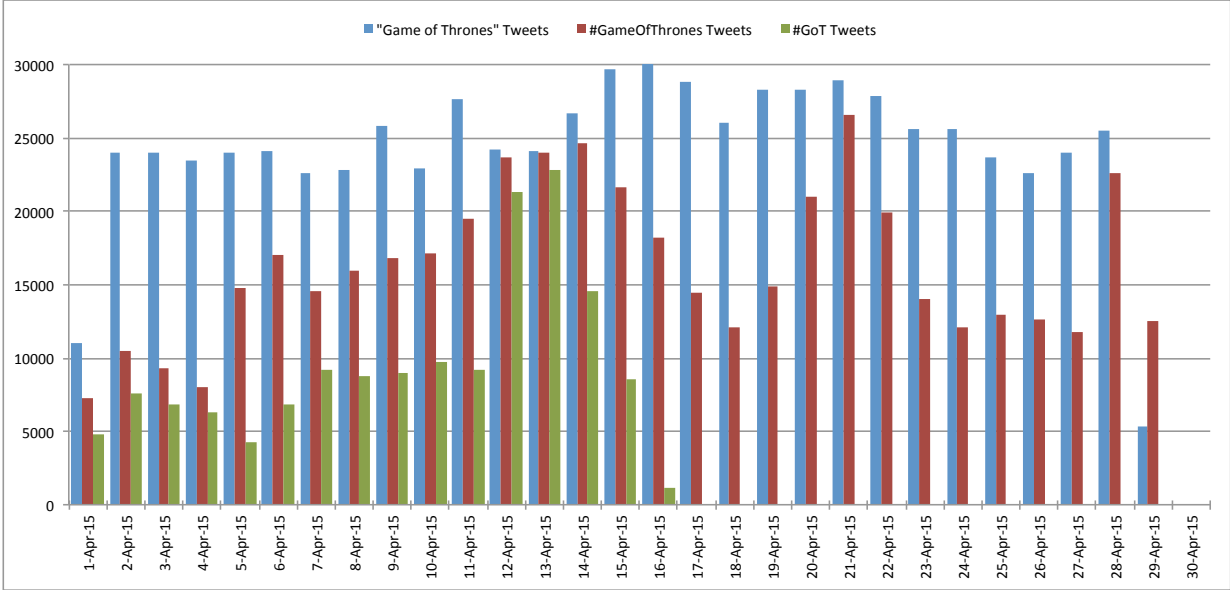


Figure 6.3.3: User Tweets per Day

Tweets referring to *Game of Thrones* in general remain relatively stable throughout April, without real peaks in relation to episodes. Tweets using #GameOfThrones peak on the days the first and second episode were released, as well as the two days following these new episodes, but interest seems to decline again after the third episode was shown. This corresponds with the ratings of season 5 that dropped after the premiere, reaching a first low with episode 3 (Acuna & Renfro, 2015). Nielsen’s social ratings for the most discussed television shows online for the weeks of 6th-12th, 13th-19th, 20th-26th and 27th April-3rd May corroborate this decline with *Game of Thrones* ranking second “most social” show for the first two weeks, but dropping to fifth and fourth place respectively the following weeks, with unique tweets falling from an initial 265,000 to only 77,000 per week²⁴ (cf. Appendix I.2). As for tweets with #GoT, we are missing the data after 15th April as mentioned earlier, but here a peak for episode 1 and the day after can be observed as well.

²⁴ Nielsen lists the following measurement procedure: “Unique Authors and Tweets are a measure of relevant U.S. Twitter activity from three hours before through three hours after broadcast, local time. Reach metrics (Unique Audience and Impressions) measure the audience of relevant Tweets ascribed to a program from when the Tweets are sent until the end of the broadcast day at 5am.” cf.: <http://www.nielsensocial.com/nielsentwittertvratings/weekly/>. Retrieved: 26th June, 2015.

Roughly, @GoT's activity can be broken down into two distinct parts, both in regard to overall activity and content of tweets: 1) activity while the show is on air and 2) activity during the hiatus period. As was expected, the overall activity vastly decreases during the 9-month-break in between seasons, while proportionally the type of sent tweets' content remains roughly the same. Some content, however, is affected by hiatus or on air periods. The most obvious difference here in tweets related to specific episodes (cf. Figure 6.3.4) that are the dominant category of tweets sent while *Game of Thrones* is on air but barely appear while on hiatus. This comes as no surprise as there are just no episodes to discuss or relate to while the show is on break.

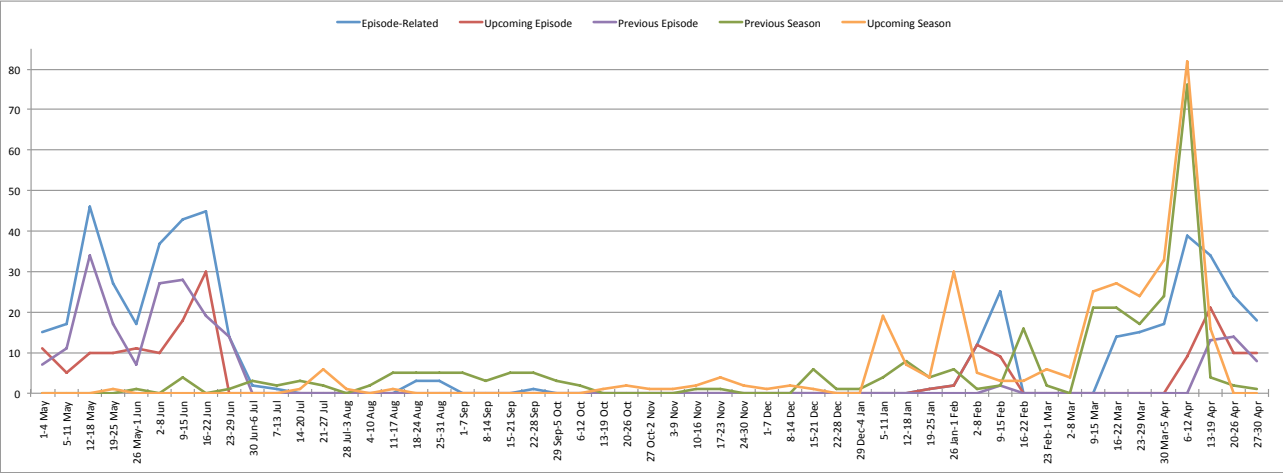


Figure 6.3.4: Evolution of Episode-Related Tweets per Week

For season 4's on air period, reaching from 1st May-29th June 2014 when including the week after the season finale aired, 61.4% of tweets are episode-related (261 out of 425). For season 5, 6th-30th April 2015 when including the week before the season premiere, 14.9% of tweets are episode-related (115 out of 774). However, as the #CatchDrogon campaign the day before the premiere creates an irregular spike of activity, we cleared the data of those tweets, episode-related tweets now making up 24.7% of the total (101 out of 409). During the hiatus period, only 8.7% tweets are episode-related (96 out of 1100), mostly during reruns prior to season 5. This trend becomes even clearer when only looking at original @GoT tweets: For season 4 we are left with 78.2% episode-related tweets (197 out of 252), for season 5 with 34.2% (81 out of 237), respectively 51.7% when cleared from #CatchDrogon (73 out of 141), and 13.6% episode-related tweets for the hiatus period (78 out of 574).

Tweets related to episodes are predominant while the series is running, but are relatively insignificant in hiatus periods. But what is interesting here is that when looking at the graph for tweets about the previous and upcoming seasons respectively, at exactly the middle of our observed period, at the start of week 25 from 13th-19th October, tweets relating to the previous season cease to appear, being entirely replaced by tweets about the upcoming season, gaining of real importance the first week of January at the announcement of the season 5 premiere date. Season 4 tweets spike again around 17th February with the season's home video release. Both types end up almost equalling out again throughout March 2015 when HBO broadcast an entire previous season each Sunday until the season 5 premiere, accompanied by the #MonthOfGoT campaign on Twitter, asking followers to tweet their favourite moments from those seasons. Equally interesting are tweets about upcoming episodes: They spike just before the season 4 finale, only appear in the hiatus in the case of 10 tweets advertising the

Game of Thrones: A Day in The Life special in February, and with another spike the week before the season 5 premiere, normalising themselves at about 10 tweets per week again afterwards. From this we can deduce that @GoT actively uses Twitter to advertise these pivotal moments in the series' run, premieres and finales traditionally ranking quite high in a season's ratings.

But while tweets directly relating to specific episodes and seasons of the TV show drop significantly in the hiatus period, the opposite can be observed for tweets promoting merchandise and other products that are somehow connected to the series (cf. Figure 6.3.5). Only making up 0.04% of tweets during season 4 and 0.13% while season 5 is on, they amount to 32.6% of total tweets for the hiatus. Remaining relatively steady most of the hiatus, they clearly spike during San Diego and New York Comic Cons, and SXSW, advertising buying tickets for *Game of Thrones* in IMAX and promoting the home video release of season 4.

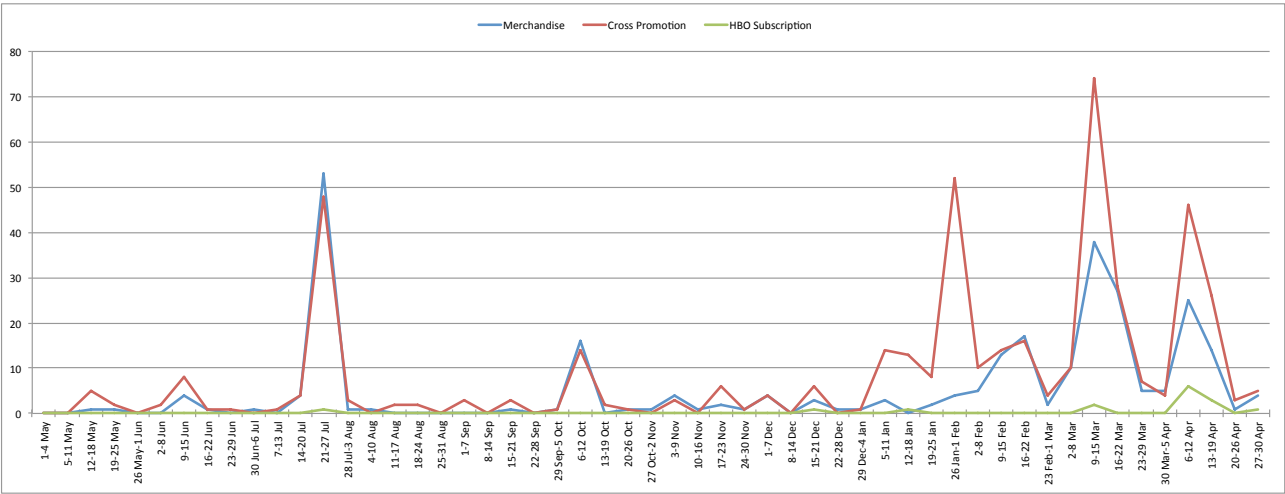


Figure 6.3.5: Evolution of Cross Promotional Tweets per Week

Another spike occurs for #CatchDrogon when each celebrity tweet contains a photo with a Drogon figurine that we counted towards promoting merchandise. Conventions attract many highly dedicated fans looking for paraphernalia of their object of fandom that can be found at merchandise booths at conventions, therefore announcements of new merch items and convention exclusives dominating these periods. It is therefore evident that @GoT wants to establish its own products as top-of-mind merchandise for fans. Instead of the TV series, merchandise becomes the main promoted product during the hiatus. Equally, @GoT is advertising HBO subscriptions while leading up to season 5. Even though only an almost insignificant 15 tweets promoting such subscriptions are sent, 12 occur at times when users might be particularly interested to purchase one. 1 is posted after the premiere date of the fifth season is revealed, 2 at the reruns' start, and 9 in the week before the premiere and just after the first episode aired when interest in the show is likely at its peak—the number of #GoT and #GameOfThrones tweets in our archive reach their apex the day before and of the premiere itself.

Contrary to our expectations, the number of tweets containing media pieces on the series, as well as additional information, and behind-the-scenes details in particular, remains stable throughout the year, with only a little increase in links to media pieces during the hiatus (cf. Figure 6.3.6). This constant tweeting of additional information is clever as in a representative 2012 survey of 1,000 American television viewers, 43% of respondents stated that getting more information on a show was the reason

they use social media alongside TV (TVTechnology 2012). But with regard to findings that alongside fan productions, highlighting media reports of a property “help[s] sustain awareness of, and interest in, mass-media texts by continually supplying fresh commentary, videos, news stories, and art, thereby fighting off the texts’ obsolescence [...] in these interim, or hiatus, periods” (De Kosnik, 2013), we hypothesised that media reports and behind-the-scenes information would play an even larger role in the interim period. Instead of using the opportunity for continuous updates from the film set and the ongoing production of the upcoming series, behind-the-scenes news only spike at a single point in time: the broadcast *A Day in the Life* in February 2015.

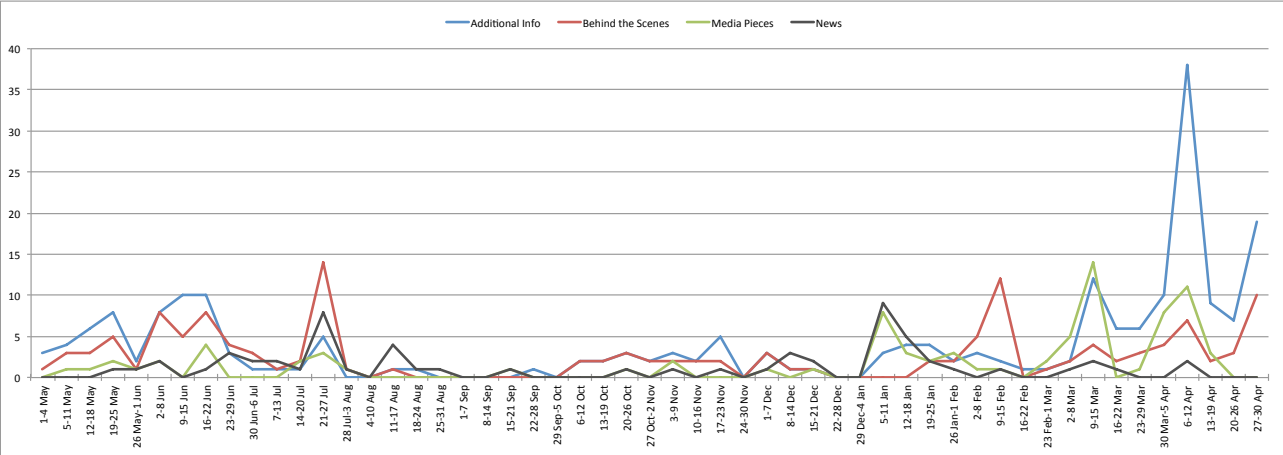


Figure 6.3.6: Evolution of Additional Information and News-related Tweets per Week

On the other hand, tweets with news about the series keep being posted regularly throughout the hiatus, even though only making up 4.7% of overall tweets in that time. But while the series is on air, news tweets fall into complete insignificance, constituting 1.9% and 0.2% of tweets for seasons 4 and 5 respectively. This observation helps to support our argument that @GoT's interim activity in general can be seen as combating its obsolescence by keeping the flame of interest burning, a constant flow of news helping to keep *Game of Thrones* a topic of interest. As for media pieces, it is equally possible that fewer content is published about *Game of Thrones* during the hiatus as currently running shows are more relevant and therefore more talked about by the media, @GoT thus simply having fewer pieces to refer to and retweet.

Another interesting observation is to be made for campaign tweets as they are an important part in @GoT's strategy (cf. Figure 6.3.7). They are used a little less during season 4, 15.3% of the tweets being campaign tweets, mainly for #FreeTyrion, possibly explainable by the fact that by the period we observed, the season had already passed its halfway mark and interested viewers were already watching, therefore the binding of Twitter traffic to generate awareness wasn't necessary any longer. Their importance increases in the hiatus with 26.4% of tweets being part of campaigns and different campaigns being used relatively regularly across the interim period. With season 5, they rise to 68.7%, largely due to the #CatchDrogon campaign, but even by leaving those tweets out of the equation, 42.5% of the remainder of the tweets still form part of campaigns. We witness a build-up of campaign tweets the closer it gets to the start of season five, the clear intention here being to create hype for the upcoming season, getting *Game of Thrones*-related hashtags into Twitter trending topics to achieve maximum online awareness for the series' return. Especially casual viewers that are no die-hard fans

are reminded of the series' return via this engineered online hype that is supposed to impressively showcase *Game of Thrones*' current pop-cultural importance and establish it as *the* must-see show of the television season that everyone is talking about. Using this strategy, viewers are kept interested, and the show remains a topic of discussion until new content is provided on television. These campaigns thus work as “bridge content” designed to “keep the TV show top-of-mind and buzzed about [...] energiz[ing] its viewers, help[ing] spread the word, and aim[ing] to increase program tune-in as a result” (Proulx & Shepatin, 2012: 137). In short existing hype around the series is continuously fanned, while new hype momentum is slowly built up towards the new season by sharing highly spreadable trailers, set photos, articles and interviews with actors.

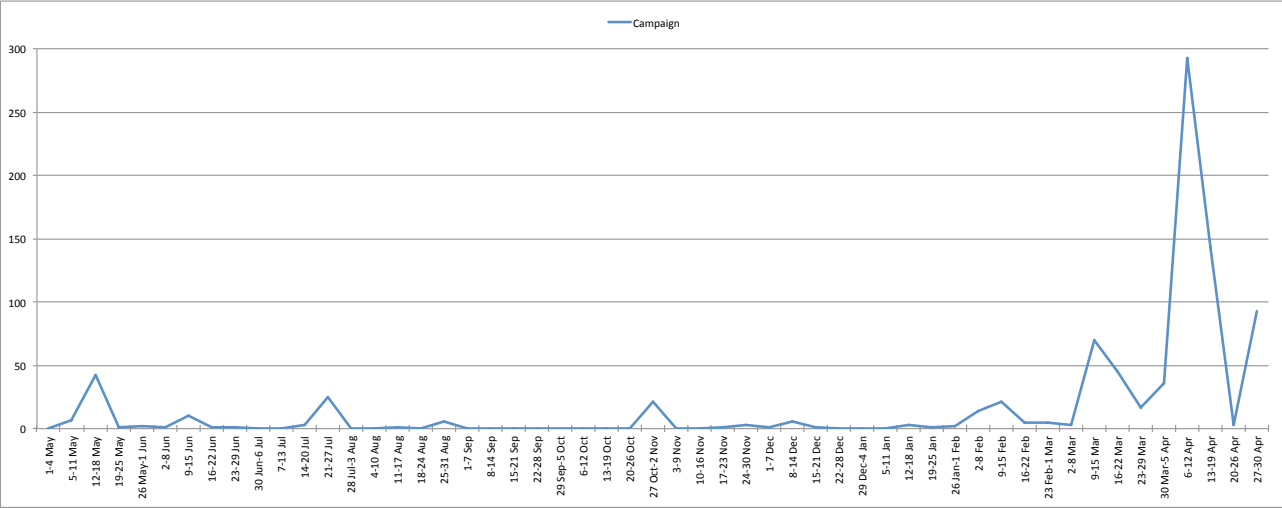


Figure 6.3.7: Evolution of Campaign Tweets per Week

The vast increase of verified account retweets prior to the season 5 premiere also helps this build-up of hype, as the display of “prominent celebrity users act[ing] as [...] opinion leaders, alerting the wider ‘public’ to particular news stories and links of interest” (Deller, 2011: 220), approving of the series also contributes towards establishing *Game of Thrones* as a cult show, almost creating a sort of peer pressure to see it. This tactic of using fan and celebrity retweets to create hype meets Gray’s understanding of brands using fans’ own excitement to stir up hype and guiding the latter by pre-selecting messages that don’t clash with corporate ideas how a product should be seen (Gray, 2008: 37-38). As described by Powers, user participation is essential to amplify hype initially launched by organisations (Powers, 2012: 863). Campaigns while the show is on air, i.e. the #FreeTyrion or the #BeautifulDeath campaign, are rather short lived and don’t receive many official input from @GoT, whereas a hiatus campaign such as #gotquotes asking fans to post their favourite quotes from previous seasons span almost the entire hiatus period with continuous updates and retweets of fans’ submissions. A clear indication that these campaigns are intended to stir up hype is the sudden surge in tweets and retweets containing fan interaction around the #CatchDrogon campaign the day before the premiere of season 5.

An indication for the amount of buzz and hype #CatchDrogon carried is the fact that the campaign was launched on 12th April 2015 at 11:00 EDT and an hour later, at 12:12 EDT, @GoT officially announced that #CatchDrogon was trending on Twitter in the US, clearly succeeding in building up hype, visibility and anticipation for the season 5 premiere a couple of hours later. The entire campaign

only lasted 10 hours, until 21:00 EDT on 13th April 2015, but in these 10 hours 94 original tweets relating to the campaign were sent, amounting to 8.5% of the total original tweets sent over the course of the observed year and the single most tweets in a day for that entire period. Equally, with 59 fan retweets, 16.2% of total fan retweets occurred in the same period and with 145 replies to fans, 48.5% of all replies to fans took place in these 10 hours. Equally, 6,660 unique original tweets and 1,004 unique retweets in our 3 tweet archives made use of the #CatchDrogon hashtag. Just due to these numbers, the #CatchDrogon campaign stands out from the rest of @GoT activity and highlights its importance to generate buzz in advance of the new season. This is further highlighted by the amount of HBO staff, 15-20 people, responsible for replying and interacting with fans joining the campaign (Diaz, 2015), also explaining why the rate of interaction was so much higher during this event than on normal days, as dedicated personnel was available to directly engage with followers.

The idea behind the #CatchDrogon “social hunt”²⁵ is that Twitter post a photo or GIF of food to lure in Drogon, an escaped dragon in the series. When their food is approved of by the dragon, @GoT replies to that user that Drogon has landed, with the user in turn having to interact with that reply in a specified amount of time in order for @GoT to acknowledge that they had managed to catch the dragon²⁶. The 36 users who successfully caught Drogon received a parcel with exclusive merchandise via post a couple of days later, Nyirő’s, Csordás’s and Horváth’s “immediate reward” (2011: 119) motivating users to participate. But the chance to win these exclusive prizes isn’t the only motivation for fans to participate in the event, some users also express their excitement at having been retweeted by or received a reply from @GoT, even if they weren’t fast enough to win—replies from @GoT satisfying their drive for reputation raises in the community (Nyirő, Csordás & Horváth, 2011: 119). Such a campaign in the form of an interactive game can be considered as highly engaging on a large scale as many users follow the call-to-action, while equally engaging on an individual user level as the game’s mechanism itself required interaction with individual users who took part and submitted “offerings” in the form of photo tweets. Besides “normal” fans, cast members and other celebrities were also tweeting contributions towards the game with photos of themselves holding a toy Drogon, further increasing buzz by making the followers of these celebrity accounts aware of the game and the upcoming premiere, even if they weren’t fans of the series. These celebrity tweets aren’t a coincidence, but a concerted effort on the part of HBO to increase the event’s visibility (Diaz, 2015), similar previous campaigns reaching out to cast members and celebrity fans to “create seed content during downtime” (Diaz, 2013) to keep the campaign relevant on the Twittersphere. In this example, celebrity users are used as catalysts and potentiators of discussion. When asked about the reasoning behind such social campaigns, HBO’s vice president of digital and social media, Sabrina Caluori,

²⁵ <http://vast-media.com/game-of-thrones-catch-drogon/>. Retrieved: 3rd June 2015.

²⁶ The social game was designed by advertising agency 360i, who already cooperated with *Game of Thrones* the previous year for a similar campaign called #RoastJoffrey in which Twitter users were asked to tweet witty insults about Joffrey Baratheon, one of the series’ most disliked characters. #RoastJoffrey won several advertising awards for social marketing and use of Twitter, including being nominated for a prestigious Cannes Lion in the “Use of Audience” category, proving that @GoT does understand how to engage its audience to create buzz and design promotional campaigns around audience participation. Cf.: <http://www.360i.com/work/roastjoffrey/>. Retrieved: 3rd June 2015.

stated that they look “for ways to engage fans in the off-season [...] [using] unique ways that weren’t tied to the plotline that could continue to make noise with our fans” as *Game of Thrones* had become “HBO’s most-social show ever, with the highest volume of Twitter conversation of any of the network’s programs” (Diaz, 2013) while on the air. HBO stated that these social events are central to their marketing efforts for a new season, built especially to make use of their audience’s creativity (Diaz, 2015). As we’ve established already in the previous chapter, @GoT is aware that active audiences create user-generated content, encouraging this behaviour instead of trying to prevent it.

Meanwhile, a last aspect of @GoT’s engagement strategy is one that is hardly quantifiable via Twitter as it is focused on what we’d like to refer to as “offline engagement”. This interaction with fans is based around conventions and other offline events that are advertised via Twitter, with their own hashtags and hype built around them, mainly during the hiatus period. The biggest examples of this certainly are the San Diego Comic Con, the SXSW festival, and the IMAX screening of season 4 episodes. At these events fans had the opportunity to meet cast members, catch sneak peaks of the coming season, take part in activities and games designed especially for these events etc. It comes as no surprise then that fan interaction as well as fan retweets spike around the dates of these events (cf. Figures 6.3.8&6.3.9), showing that such offline engagement trickles back onto Twitter where in turn it doesn’t only attract attention and hype for the particular event, but also for the series as a whole, making it a topic around which discussion is taking place online. Offline fans can get in touch with the object of their fandom, in turn generating online buzz for the franchise—*Game of Thrones* is clearly utilising and harnessing the full power and reach of fanadvertising in these instances.

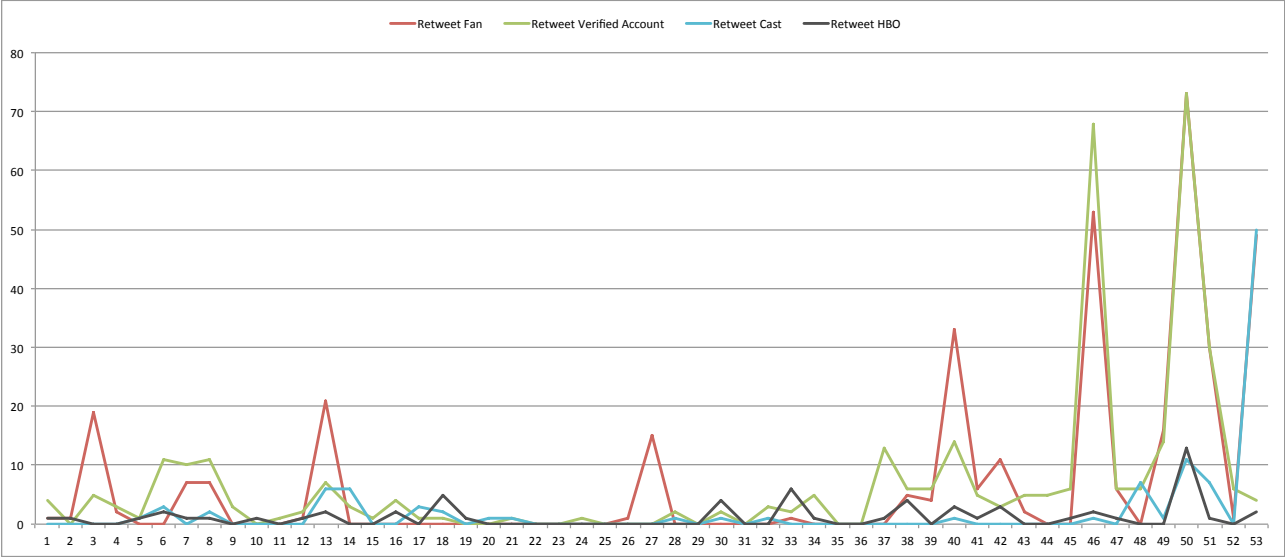


Figure 6.3.8: Evolution of Retweets per Week

Facing the criticism raised early on in this dissertation that fanadvertising can quickly breach the line between engagement and exploitation, one case of such offline engagement and cross promotion in particular in which fans are clearly used as advertising commodity might fall into this category. On 16th April @GoT launched the #RideOfThrones campaign in cooperation with the vehicle-for-hire company Uber by outfitting a few rickshaws in New York City with an iron throne replica from the series that users could track and call on the Uber app to hitch a ride on the throne. Users were also asked to tweet their best photos while sitting on these rickshaws. Uber benefitted from this exposure

by attracting new customers tempted to use the service because of their fandom, while the fans’ tweeting about the campaign increased online buzz not just about the series, but also for Uber whose logo was prominently displayed on these throne-rickshaws. In reverse, this marketing gag also gave *Game of Thrones* visibility in an offline environment as their logo and throne were carried all over New York City, with this visibility simultaneously reverberating back online. We see this as a form of hybrid advertising between on- and offline campaigns, using fanadvertising principles to spread the word about both involved brands online via photos, videos, tweets and a specifically created hashtag, increasing the initial reach way beyond just the New York area. On the other hand, the online announcement on Twitter made people aware of the offline campaign in the first place. But as the fans’ free spreading of both brands’ awareness online is central to the campaign, we are in territory very close to Fuchs’s (2014) idea of fan exploitation as they are made brand ambassadors for both products even if only interested in one.

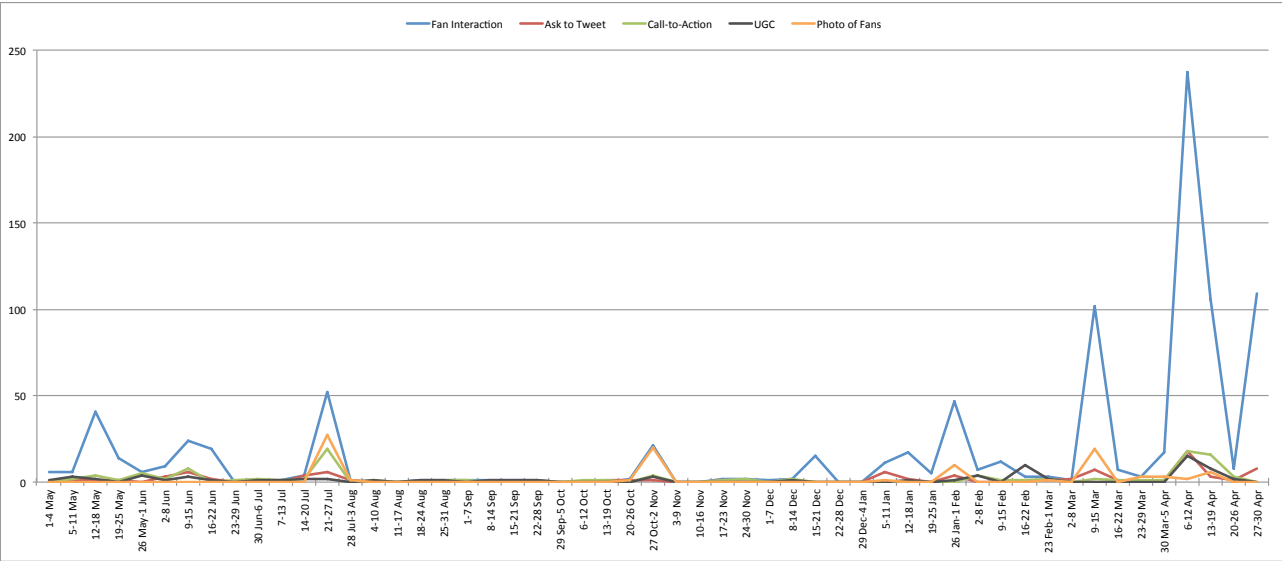


Figure 6.3.9: Evolution of Tweets Interacting with and Addressing Fans per Week

We identify one issue with activity and engagement focused on the period just before the start of a new season. All the hype and buzz is created at one singular moment, whereas there were plenty of opportunities to build it up slower and thus create more meaningful and lasting engagement instead of unloading it all at once. On a fast-paced medium, one hype can quickly be replaced with another for competing content, forcing franchises to create sustainable and enduring hype over time, not easily replaceable by the newest fad (Powers, 2012: 865). As the interim period almost is a dry spell activity-wise, longer-lasting campaigns instead of punctual ones would allow for more exchange and direct engagement of viewers. @GoT’s hyping process has a few shortcomings in this area that deserve to be mentioned individually, with a suggestion given on how engagement with could have been prolonged. On 30th January, over the span of only 16 minutes—from 23:29-23:47 CEST—@GoT released 18 preview photos for season 5. Judging by the number of retweets of these photos, interest in the ones posted last decreased, being retweeted less. The release of exclusive photos is a proven and tested engagement strategy as “fans engage the most with exclusive or original content” (Proulx & Shepatin, 2012: 140), but this engagement could have been extended. As the season 5 premiere date was already announced two weeks prior to the photo release, a slow pouring out of these photos over these 14 days

with only one or two photos a day would have created longer-lasting discussion and speculation around the photos and their meaning for plot developments, instead of a single overload of information at once.

Another example is the *A Day in the Life* special and the corresponding live tweeting, as well as the same practice during the reruns of previous seasons in March 2015. While live tweeting on its own is a compelling way to engage fans and turn an otherwise normal broadcast into an event for fans to assemble around according to Twitter's television department²⁷, it is questionable whether @GoT's live-tweeting of *A Day in the Life* succeeded in doing so. By only tweeting quotes that viewers had just seen seconds before on television, no added value was provided to viewers that consulted Twitter alongside the broadcast, whereas added value on a backchannel is central to providing "new pleasures" (Harrington, Highfield & Bruns, 2013: 407) that engage viewers using it during live broadcasts. Simply asking viewers for their opinion of the *A Day in the Life* special, what they were most excited for in the upcoming season, or other questions that would have involved the audience and could have initiated a discussion on Twitter in the aftermath would have provided an opportunity for further engagement, unlocking Twitter's potential in using a "follow-on discussion [...] to maintain a show's momentum [...] [and] sustain a community of enthusiasts" (Harrington, Highfield & Bruns, 2013: 407) by facilitating interaction. It is of course possible that such a discussion took place without being engineered by @GoT, but even then this could have been highlighted by retweeting popular and resonating tweets from it. Instead of live-tweeting these quotes, they could have been spread over the following week and dragged out engagement with the programme as well. Added background information from the production, about how a specific scene was designed or where the challenges in creating the episode laid would have made these live tweets more intriguing, truly providing a second screen social TV experience. We will return to the question whether @GoT's tweets function as an example of social television in the final section.

6.4. *GAME OF THRONES* AS SOCIAL TV?

In an attempt to answer RQ2, especially with regard to social TV understood as "remote talking or chatting while watching a television program" (García-Avilés, 2012: 431), using the definition of "television's backchannel" as "the real-time chat that is happening within social media channels *during* the time that episode is broadcast" (Proulx & Shepatin, 2012: 11), a last aspect of @GoT's Twitter behaviour in need of mentioning is that their activity on Twitter ceases entirely the moment a new episode airs for the first time, only resuming on average 16.2 hours after the last tweet was sent.

Unlike the common conception of Twitter being used as backchannel parallel to live broadcasts, @GoT rather seems to take to Twitter as a sidetrack to television, reaching out to followers and providing them with information while the show isn't on air. The last tweet sent before episodes aired always follows the exact same formula, tweeting "QUIET IN THE REALM" in capital letters, followed by a reminder that the episode was about to air, directly asking followers to watch, and the demand to "silence your ravens". Considering how @GoT frequently uses in-universe terms—using

²⁷ <https://media.twitter.com/best-practice/live-tweet-the-premiere-of-an-episode-or-show>. Retrieved: 6th June, 2015.

“ravens”²⁸ to refer to tweets, “sending ravens” for the act of tweeting, or using “the realm” to address the entirety of their followers—the account does not only cease its own Twitter activity during broadcasts, but is also directly asking its followers to abandon Twitter for the duration of the episode, giving their undivided attention to what they are seeing on their television screen. This behaviour is the exact opposite of how social television, the combination of Twitter and live broadcasts, is generally assumed to work. *Game of Thrones* isn’t using Twitter as a second screen alongside the main screen episodes are watched on, but is rather switching between different primary screens. Whatever device is used to watch the show on functions as primary screen with Twitter being unused during broadcasts. When there’s no new content for this primary screen, the focus moves back to Twitter to provide commentary and insights into certain aspects of the most recent episode. Followers are driven towards the television show, but a reverse drive doesn’t occur, there are no incentives to get television audiences to connect to Twitter.

Interestingly enough, on the 9th February 2015, HBO aired *Game of Thrones: A Day in the Life*, a behind-the-scenes special covering 24 hours of the show’s production on location in three different countries. While the special aired, @GoT was sending out 9 live tweets highlighting certain scenes shown in the half-hour special, interspersed with 6 retweets of fan reactions expressing their excitement of what they had just seen and what they were expecting of the upcoming season. While this live tweeting “experiment” still did not provide followers with additional information—the 9 original tweets sent over the course of half an hour only contained quotes of what had previously been said in the special and very short videos of a couple of seconds of the locations that had also been featured in the special—and with fans being merely retweeted instead of pushing for meaningful interaction with them, the occasion nevertheless showed that the people behind @GoT clearly understand how Twitter can be used *alongside* the television broadcast, especially in regard to the retweets showcasing fan reactions. It is therefore hard to understand why the same follower engagement tools and interactions are not employed or expanded on during broadcasts of regular episodes.

One possible explanation is that @GoT is actively trying to avoid spoiling a large part of their audience: The “Quiet in the realm” tweets are posted the moment episodes air in the US and Canada, whereas the same episode only airs the day after for the majority of non-North American audiences—with the exception of mid-night broadcasts that are repeated at their respective country’s primetime the evening after. Any tweet that could enhance a North American viewer’s experience through additional information would at the same time spoil international viewers about the same episode’s plot. By asking their followers to remain quiet as well, they are trying to keep spoilers from spreading on Twitter. Specials such as *A Day in the Life* don’t have a plot, lacking spoilsable content, allowing to be openly tweeted about without the risk of bearing the ill-will of viewers in other time zones. It is questionable though that this strategy bears fruit on a fast-paced medium such as Twitter. Does this self-imposed abstention from tweeting reflect in fans? Are they taking these calls to cease tweeting

²⁸ In the world of Westeros that *Game of Thrones* is set in, ravens are used to send messages across large distances, similar to how carrier pigeons were used in real-world medieval times, hence the use as metaphor for tweeting, the modern-day equivalent of relaying messages across large distances.

during the broadcast to heart, or isn't their behaviour affected? We can answer this question by looking at the overall Twitter traffic generated around the previously mentioned hashtags and keywords we monitored (cf. Appendix I.3). In the case of our tweet collection, traffic is the highest on days new episodes aired, leading us to conclude that Twitter users do in fact like to tweet about episodes and discuss the show online. A more detailed look at the evolution of Twitter activity in the hour before, during and after an episode is broadcast would provide us with clearer data on whether episodes are a topic of discussion while being broadcast or only afterwards when viewer attention isn't solely focused on their television screen. Unfortunately the collection service we used only provided us with partial data on this, failing to cover the entirety of these 3 crucial hours, with long periods of time missing in these hourly datasets. With only 20 minutes of each of the hours before, during and after broadcast collected, we can assume that roughly 65% of the data on activity in these periods of time is missing. Nevertheless, the fact that so much data is missing during broadcasts can already lead to an interesting assumption: Bruns and Stieglitz describe that Twitter's search API is somewhat limited and fails to capture the entirety of data streams exceeding certain volumes (Bruns & Stieglitz, 2013: 93). As the remainder of our captures are more complete, we can assume that activity and the volume of tweets for the time surrounding an episode was higher than usual, the capture therefore partially failing. Thus, with some caution, we can expect that users do indeed tweet the most during broadcasts, not following @GoT's call to cease tweeting. A look at the data that was actually collected showed that for this 3-hour-period activity remains stable, with only very little increase after broadcasts—this *after* period having been described as the “social” part of social TV” when “random sporadic conversations [take place]—whether they be on Twitter or on Facebook or around the watercooler at work.” (Proulx & Shepatin, 2012: 50-51), with surveys showing that of “users who talk on Twitter, 62 percent [...] engage before the show airs, 69 percent after, and 47 percent during.” (TV Guide, 2011)

Yet, we'd argue that this is a point to consider for further research with more elaborate datasets as we can't be certain of the representativeness of our results due to incomplete data. But it serves as an indication that indeed users continue tweeting during broadcasts, producing potential spoilers, while embracing *Game of Thrones* as a source for online discussion that would be well served by social TV services that @GoT currently is failing to provide. While to a certain point it is understandable that the show's official Twitter account doesn't want to spoil a considerable part of their audience, the idea that spoilers won't spread is illusory²⁹. Still, for TV shows' Twitter presences enhancing part of their audience's experience without spoiling it for the rest remains a delicate balancing act. In the case of a plot-heavy show such as *Game of Thrones*, the scales are tipped in favour of not ruining the experience for any of their viewers, even if this means that others also won't benefit from coordinated Twitter efforts on behalf of the show during broadcast. Instead, @GoT dishes out bits of background information over the course of the week in between broadcasts. But if we follow the tenet that the use of mobile devices is a building block for social television, “mobile support[ing] radically new kinds of media engagement” (Goggin, 2011: 137), “mobile device[s] serving as a ‘second screen’” (Bredl et al.,

²⁹ The author of this dissertation has learnt to not frequent social networks until having seen the most recent episode, and certainly other fans outside North America use the same approach, reducing the chance for massive backlash in case @GoT actually provided a live social TV experience. But to prove this, hard data on general Twitter usage with regard to spoilers is needed, data that could be gained in a subsequent large-scale survey.

2014: 201) for audience interaction and conversation, with only “the increasing rate of mobile and ubiquitous usage [...] [enabling tweeting] during the show” (Bredl et al., 2014: 202), then users tweeting about *Game of Thrones* are certainly ready to do so, as 45.97% of the total 1,314,721 tweets in our archives sent by users were sent using a mobile device, possibly even more as 24.10% of tweets couldn’t be assigned to a platform without a doubt. By adopting deeper social TV practices, @GoT would successfully engage these users meaningfully.

7. SYNTHESIS AND CONCLUSION

While the various campaigns launched by @GoT engage the show's entire base of followers, providing them with reasons to tweet and creating a visible online buzz through trending topics on Twitter, drawing more people into the show, direct interaction with individual users remains rather low compared to the series' total online followership. As @GoT's most interactive feature, actor Q&As have been established as a regular strategy to interact with fans, allowing for direct contact with participating actors. Yet, when comparing these instances of fan interaction to @GoT's overall Twitter activity, it becomes clear that they rather represent the exception than the rule. One possible explanation for this is the sheer size of the *Game of Thrones* Twitter community. As of 1st May 2015, @GoT was following a total of 41,923 other users, whose tweets are displayed on @GoT's Twitter feed, while 2,482,833 people were following @GoT. According to Twitter's own information, verified accounts such as @GoT can enable filters for their feed in order for them to display all tweets, only tweets from other verified accounts, or just tweets with @mentions of their own account³⁰. The archives we compiled alone contained 40,765 unique @mentions of @GoT, so even with the filter for mentions enabled, the account is still have been bombarded by an unmanageable amount of tweets. We deem it impossible to meaningfully interact with such a number of messages, explaining why @GoT only sporadically engages directly with a few users at certain times.

From the author of this dissertation's own experience, tweets sent with a hashtag belonging to a large trending discussion get considerably less impressions by other users than tweets using a hashtag belonging to a smaller topic. Despite the potentially smaller audience, these last tweets are less likely to disappear in Twitter's ongoing stream of consciousness, therefore more likely to be seen by other users. If the same holds true on a larger scale for the thousands of tweets @GoT has to sieve through, deep and meaningful engagement with followers is all but impossible. Previous studies came to similar conclusions that "just because Twitter affords greater interactivity [...] does not mean that it necessarily is more interactive [...] research suggest[ing] that most tweets are ignored" (Humphreys et al., 2013: 426). The potential for interaction is present on Twitter, but this is rarely lived up to as messages are lost amidst the site's general cacophony, inspiring little spontaneous interaction on @GoT's part.

Going back to this dissertation's title, Twitter does enable "everyone in the realm to have a voice", opinions can be exchanged and episodes discussed, but for the vast majority of these tweets, @GoT is not listening to these voices or providing a platform for direct conversation based around episodes. With a few exceptions, *Game of Thrones* is mainly using Twitter as yet another one-to-many communication channel in the same way they'd use traditional media to send their promotional messages without fully exploiting Twitter's potential for interactivity. This isn't to say though that this has to be the case for any interaction with television show accounts on Twitter. It might very well be that for a programme with a smaller audience direct contact and interaction with followers is feasible. Therefore future studies on a larger scale comparing differently sized shows with each other would certainly prove insightful as to when a critical mass of followers has been reached rendering

³⁰ Cf. <https://support.twitter.com/articles/119135-faqs-about-verified-accounts>. Retrieved: 24th May, 2015.

meaningful interaction unlikely. In brief, @GoT doesn't fully take advantage of the interactive possibilities of the medium, corroborating previous findings that television stations often merely employ social media as one-way communication tools to provide information without interaction (Greer & Ferguson, 2011: 203). In this they follow many other organisations whose Twitter presences are "primarily [...] convey[ing] one-way messages [...] [r]ather than capitalizing on the interactive nature and dialogic capabilities of the social media service [...] sharing information instead of relationship building" (Waters & Jamal, 2011: 323). Waters's and Jamal's observation that organisational Twitter accounts generally demonstrate "an unwillingness to answer questions or respond to others' comments" (Waters & Jamal, 2011: 323) holds true for @GoT for the most part as well, in only one instance did @GoT directly face and reply to complaints. It is possible though that the interactivity of Twitter as a medium is overstated in general as Wohn & Na found that less than 4% of tweets posted around broadcasts are interactive in nature (Wohn & Na, 2011). A complete collection and analysis of user data going beyond our own approach could help establishing similar conclusions for *Game of Thrones*. But one might also raise the question if the lack of true dialogue and exchange is inherent to Twitter's design, allowing for millions of users to voice their opinion, but providing little assistance to prevent these inputs from drowning in the vast sea of other messages.

In general, it was clear who @GoT mainly addressed, relating back to RQ3: The account centrally focuses on both dedicated fans and casual viewers, using Rybalko's and Seltzer's model of exclusion based on the information provided (Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010: 337). The information provided is of use only to fans and viewers in the general public, business insiders and media professionals are better served with the official HBO PR Twitter account whose press releases are merely retweeted by @GoT. "Potential employees" or "internal publics" (Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010: 340) aren't targeted with a single tweet we collected. Answering RQ2, part of *Game of Thrones* fans do react to engagement initiatives, as proven by the high participation in campaigns such as #CatchDrogon in which 6,660 tweets were directly sent at @GoT, amounting to 16.3% of the tweets directed straight at the official account. The motivation between these campaigns has been identified as increasing hype and awareness in an "attention economy [...] where brand constantly compete for the attention of potential customers" (Jansen et al., 2009: 2170).

This also confirms our first hypothesis that discussions are engineered to create buzz, actively involving fans in promotional processes. This reflects Jenkins's, Ford's and Green's model of spreadability that actively involves fans in the appraisal and circulation of content (Jenkins, Ford & Green, 2013: 176), @GoT relying on a "socially distributed model of public relations, in which individuals with little recognized stake in an organization initiate and fulfill public relations responsibilities through online interactivity" (Smith, 2010: 333), the reliance on fans to spread content, create hype and online buzz a central element in their promotional strategy as combined, audiences—here @GoT's nearly 2.5 million followers—have "unparalleled reach and access to information" (Smith, 2010: 334). Fans are actively involved in these processes, their value going beyond merely providing static data about the franchise's popularity. Nevertheless, it shouldn't be forgotten that any active inclusion of fans isn't done for the sake of inclusion alone, any social media effort of television shows "courting fans" is always done with the intention of "expanding revenue streams and profiting from those relationships." (Jenkins, Ford & Green, 2013: 140). What @GoT

doesn't do is contributing to the "liveness" and event character of new episodes (Deller, 2011: 224) by driving live tweeting during broadcasts and thus establishing a virtual co-viewing experience within a community. Online co-viewing takes place on Twitter, but isn't engineered by @GoT. To drive such live experiences, broadcasters can implement official hashtags for episodes to unite discussion around (Deller, 2011: 226), a practice @GoT uses by tagging 21.73% of original tweets with episode specific hashtags, but by not displaying these hashtags on television during broadcasts they won't succeed in attracting viewers to online exchanges that don't follow their account. Research has shown that on-screen prompts to tweet by overlaying an episode-specific hashtag on broadcasts "amplif[ies] [...] social impressions within the television backchannel" (Proulx & Shepatin, 2012: 28-29) and "increase[s] the brand's Twitter followers." (Proulx & Shepatin, 2012: 25), with 64% of American television viewers reporting having noticed such on screen prompts (TVTechnology, 2012). Additionally, as a drama series set in a medieval fantasy setting, *Game of Thrones* isn't able to organically include references to Twitter and hashtags in the world of the series itself

We encountered several limitations in our research: *Game of Thrones* has accounts on other networks as well, i.e. Facebook, therefore the focus on Twitter here does not provide a complete picture of the series' general use of major social networks to reach out to fans. Especially as the global Facebook userbase outnumbers the one on Twitter about eight times (Proulx & Shepatin, 2012: 13), meaning that there a potentially more people on other networks to engage with. As mentioned above, this dissertation can't claim to be representative of television shows' incorporation of Twitter as whole, as "some TV programs could be more engaging than others" (Benton & Hill, 2012: 12), *Game of Thrones* definitely having the advantage of possessing engaging source material and content, not needing to rely as much on Twitter to engage viewers. Other series with less organically engaging source content might employ more interactive strategies on Twitter to capture viewers' attention. Furthermore, the first four episodes of *Game of Thrones*' fifth season leaked onto the internet in advance of the season's premiere, it is possible that this reduced the number of live viewers which possibly affected the number of people tweeting live on the episodes' regular air dates we observed. Further comparative research in this area is recommended.

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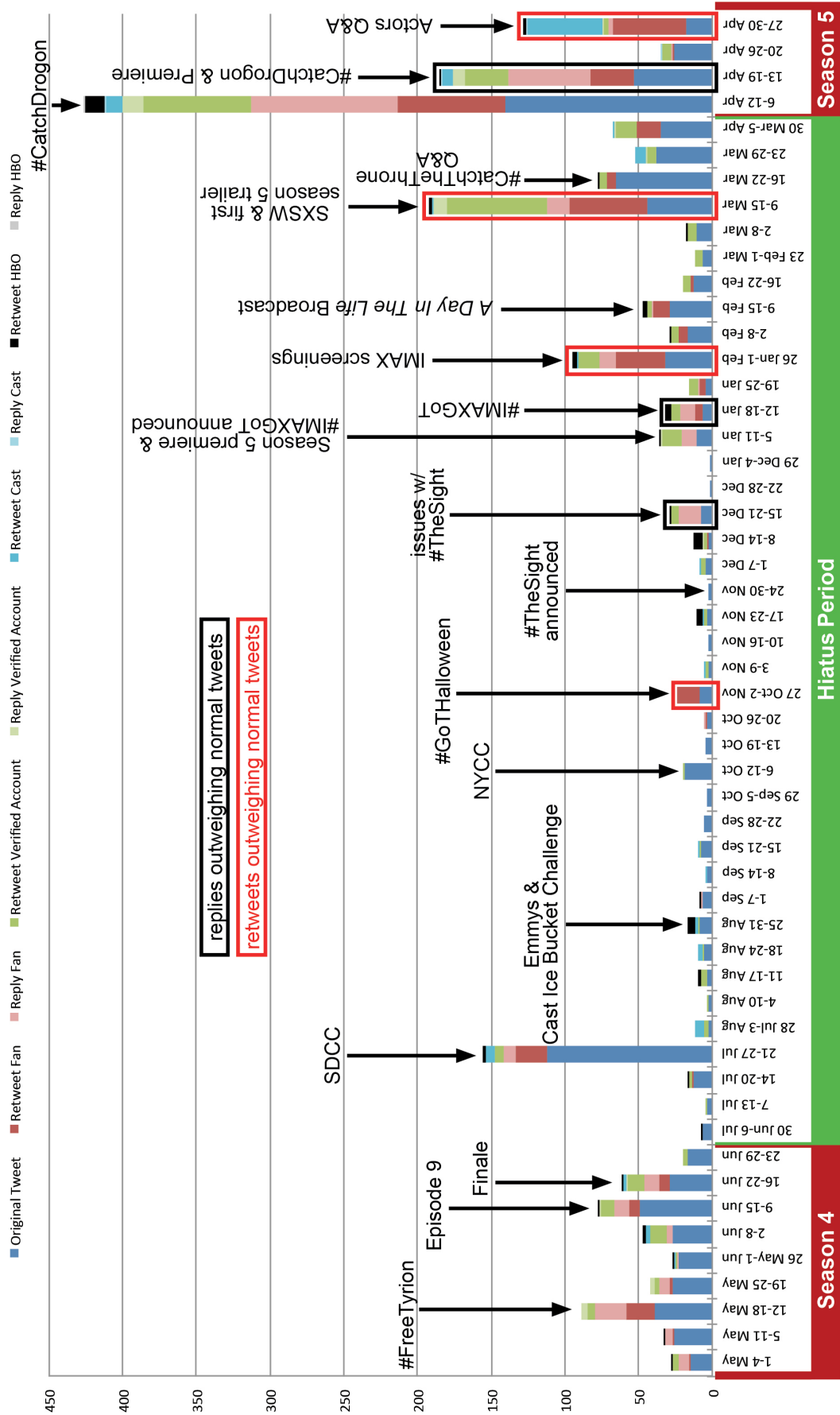
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I. APPENDICES

I.1. @GAMEOFTHRONES' TWEETS PER WEEK



I.2. NIELSEN SOCIAL RATINGS

RANK	NETWORK(S)	PROGRAM	DATE	UNIQUE AUDIENCE (000)	IMPRESSIONS (000)	UNIQUE AUTHORS (000)	TWEETS (000)
10	NIELSEN TWITTER TV RATINGS (4/06 - 4/12) Weekly Top Ten Series and Specials						
2	HBO* HBO Latino	Game of Thrones	4/12/15	5,976	30,042	147	265
10	NIELSEN TWITTER TV RATINGS (4/13 - 4/19) Weekly Top Ten Series and Specials						
2	HBO* HBO Latino	Game of Thrones	4/19/15	2,763	8,833	45	89
10	NIELSEN TWITTER TV RATINGS (4/20 - 4/26) Weekly Top Ten Series and Specials						
5	HBO* HBO Latino	Game of Thrones	4/26/15	2,652	9,283	38	80
10	NIELSEN TWITTER TV RATINGS (4/27 - 5/03) Weekly Top Ten Series and Specials						
4	HBO* HBO Latino	Game of Thrones	5/03/15	2,470	9,294	38	77

II. ACADEMIC CURRICULUM

<p>Pol Felten 17, Cité Pierre Braun L-8366 Hagen Luxembourg e-Mail: polfelten@gmail.com</p>
<p>2000-2007: Lycée Michel Rodange Luxembourg, Luxembourg (Luxembourg) General Certificate of Secondary Education - Advanced Level (Diplôme de fin d'études secondaires), Modern Languages section</p>
<p>2007-2010: University of Luxembourg, Walferdange (Luxembourg) Bachelor of Arts in European Cultures</p>
<p>2009-2010: Freie Universität Berlin (Free University of Berlin), Berlin (Germany) Erasmus as part of Bachelor Programme in European Cultures</p>
<p>2013-2015: ISCTE-IUL (Lisbon University Institute), Lisbon (Portugal) Master's Programme in Communication, Culture and Information Technologies</p>