

Title

Regeneration of a Brand: Audience Response to the Television Revival of ‘Doctor Who’

Introduction

The BBC television series *Doctor Who* ran in its original form from 1963 until 1989. In its ‘wilderness years’ off the air (1990-2004) the show retained a loyal fanbase, and the 2005 revival’s head writer, Russell T. Davies, is himself a fan of the original show.

Despite its recent success, by 1989 *Doctor Who* was suffering from low ratings and had become a byword for cheapness, bad acting and poor special effects. This paper examines the activities of fans in keeping the concept of the show alive during its ‘wilderness years’, and looks at how fans appropriated and developed aspects of the original text, using Henry Jenkins’ notion of ‘textual poaching’. It builds on Matt Hills’ work on fan cultures to analyse fan responses to the initial announcement of the series’ revival, and uses online fan communities to examine fan discourse around the return of the series and reactions to the first new episode. And it seeks to untangle some of the complex power struggles that have been waged around the various versions of the show within the broadcaster-text-audience relationship.

Methodology and Evidence

The bulk of the evidence base for the study was the use of postings at the Doctor Who Forum, an online discussion site (Doctor Who Forum 2008). Such online fora “could be considered as a form of public space” (Hills 2002, p.172) being open to observation by unseen lurkers who need not declare themselves or participate, as forum users understand their postings as being for public consumption. Hills warns though about the ‘transparency fallacy’; forums do not offer transparent access to fans, and cyberspace ethnography does not offer a window on the programme’s offline, socially atomised fandom.

Evidence is also taken from the letters page of the official *Doctor Who Magazine*, although it should be remembered that such material is filtered by the editorial processes of this (BBC-approved) publication. So the evidence used does not give transparent access to fan behaviour; rather it is “a process through which the ‘audience’ can be approached as a mediated product or performance itself” (Hills 2002, p.177); all the texts examined are, to some extent, performative.

Fan Production in The Wilderness Years

“One of my favourite things about the *Doctor Who* world is that when it went off the air, the thousands of fans didn’t let it die there” (Russell T. Davies, quoted in behind-the-scenes show *Doctor Who Confidential 1*).

Doctor Who originally ran from 1963 to 1989 with an uneven range of official merchandise including annuals, LPs, toys, and comics. *Doctor Who* fandom had been active since the early 1970s, publishing photocopied fanzines containing reviews,

features and writing fan fiction, organising conventions, and producing amateur audio dramas based on the series (for more on these activities, see Cornell 1997). Most of the activities in what John Fiske (1992) calls a shadow cultural economy were tolerated by the BBC, but few of them were officially licenced, nor were they originally intended to make any profit for the fans who produced them. Jenkins (1992) has proposed 'textual poaching' as a model of empowerment for fandom, wherein fans resist meanings inscribed in cultural texts by producers, furthermore taking characters and situations from commercially produced cultural texts to create their own versions. Other critics (such as Gwenllian Jones 2003) have argued that this sense of empowerment is illusory. The power relations between fans and text in no way change the 'official' relationship between text and broadcaster. However, the absence of new *Doctor Who* television episodes from 1990 onwards provided an opportunity for fans to become more involved in the production of auxiliary texts. I argue that the 'official' nature of these particular texts did bestow on these fan-producers some degree of agency within the text-producer-consumer relationship.

These texts included New Adventures novels and 'Big Finish' audio CDs featuring the original actors. Crucially, these were *continuations* of, rather than parallel offshoots from, the parent text (Smith 2007), marking a fundamental shift in the text-producer-consumer relationship. Abercrombie and Longhurst's (1998) 'continuum' of audience experiences has 'consumer' at one end and 'petty producer' at the other. Petty producers convert their fandom into a full-time occupation; they "produce material professionally which can then be marketed back to their own fan culture" (Hills 2002, p.29). But more than that, with the programme off the air, no production office overseeing merchandise and the BBC apparently uninterested in the integrity of

Doctor Who, the New Adventures were *canonical*. No longer a ‘powerless elite’ (Tulloch and Jenkins 1995) with lots of knowledge and no agency, fans were creating the official version of the show.

Revival

So what happened when the show came back to television? As early as 1999, *Radio Times* was discussing “the rumour that Russell T Davies, *Doctor Who* fan and creator of the controversial Channel 4 series *Queer as Folk*, had been involved in developing a new *Doctor Who* TV series” (Anon 1999, p.32). In September 2003, the BBC announced the official return of *Doctor Who* as a BBC1 television drama (Daily Telegraph 2003). Understandably, the letters page of *Doctor Who Magazine* was abuzz. Initial fan reactions were positive, with the ‘traditional’ Saturday night BBC1 slot and the involvement of acknowledged fan Russell T. Davies offering reassurance of the BBC’s commitment to the quality of the revival: “Fantastic news... A new series, BBC1, Saturday nights, Russell T. Davies... Good luck to all those involved in the production” (Hayes 2003); “[Russell’s] shows *Bob and Rose* and *The Second Coming* were two of the bravest mainstream productions I have seen. *Doctor Who* is in a safe pair of hands” (Van-der Heiden 2003). Crucial to the power relationship between fans and text was the inscription of fanhood in Davies. Davies had converted his fan cultural capital into institutional power through his television writing career. Now that agency was to result in a fan taking control of *Doctor Who*.

Some writers showed a high degree of self-reflexivity as they satirically performed the role of the fatalistic fan: “It’s coming back! It’s coming baaaaccek! ... bet it’ll be

rubbish” (de Faw 2003). This awareness of the hypercritical nature of fandom fed into the magazine’s articles. *Doctor Who Magazine* carried the spoof headline “Fans Excited At Opportunity to Hate Something New”, showing protesters carrying placards reading ‘Season 27? Not in my name’ and ‘RTD must go now!’ (Anon 2003, p.33).

However, once the initial euphoria had worn off, doubts started to emerge. Over a year before the new series aired, one letter writer complained:

with all the hype of the return of the show, I for one am not impressed. These days, I’m used to the excellence of *Buffy* and *Stargate* and I just don’t see the BBC delivering that calibre of show – or even the excellence of the Hinchcliffe years...
(Shore 2004)

Indeed the magazine was forced to publish an editorial appealing for calm. The editor said:

The new production office at BBC Wales has already been deluged by letters from concerned fans, worrying about this rumour, or that piece of continuity, or determined to explain fully about their own unified theory of ‘canon’ lest Mr Davies should get it ‘wrong’ in his scripts. There has even been talk of setting up petitions so that the new team will be ‘forced’ to go along with the casting that one group of fans deems ‘right’. Please guys, can we just not do this?
(Hickman 2004)

After so long wishing for the return of *Doctor Who* on television, why were some fans so against the new version before even seeing it? Fans’ resistant reading of texts can “become a source of collective identity and mutual support, but... resistant reading cannot... have an impact on the ways people outside of the group think” (Jenkins

1995 p.264). After sixteen years of being the primary makers of meaning within *Doctor Who*, fans were about to have that agency taken from them. The explicitly fan-friendly canon of New Adventures and Big Finish had a highly limited circulation and was unknown to the general audience. *Doctor Who* as a commercial text was still the property of the BBC. Fans' fears that 'their' version of *Doctor Who* might be effaced by Davies' 'official' version for a mass audience informed their response to the revival. Some fan discourses around the announcement of the programme's return demonstrated a highly developed sense of understanding this reaction, and of the more extreme elements of fandom:

I cannot believe (well, I can actually) that 'fans' are already dictating to the new production team what the show should or should not consist of! I always knew this would be the largest problem the show would face on its return, the 'fans' who... are having to deal with the fact that our 'baby' is back in the hands of TV executives.

(Gilbert 2004)

For a long time I have felt that really, deep down a lot of us haven't particularly wanted the show to come back. That way, it was our little secret; our toy which nobody else could damage when they played with it.

(Edmunds, 2004)

This fan self-reflexivity emerged as a theme in the research.

Fan Discourses Around Authenticity: The New Tardis

One of the strengths of classic *Doctor Who* was that, despite cast changes and the introduction of new opponents, the format remained relatively stable, in part due to the "continuing characters and repeated narrative forms such as the quest or the journey" (Bignell 2007, p.49) which enabled the programme's longevity. This

stability also rested in part on two factors which reassured viewers that it was the same show: the theme music, and the Tardis time machine. These elements were among those which most exercised fans on the Doctor Who Forum when discussing the new series. One of the first concrete pieces of evidence that the show was actually in production was the publication online of (fans') photos of the Tardis on location. "It's good to see the old girl again, isn't it?" (Emsworth 2004); "Excellent. Seeing the TARDIS prop with a production crew milling around really brings it home : it's coming back!" (Star 2004); "More than anything else, seeing that beloved blue box says 'this is Doctor Who and it's coming back...'" (darkpowers 2004).

Furedi (2002) has identified certain patterns in the discourses through which new inventions are absorbed into culture: an initial announcement full of optimism for the invention's potential; a storm of panic stories about the risks of the new invention; and over time, a balanced approach emerges, pointing out the probable benefits and putting the risks into context. A similar pattern emerges in fan discourse around the new Tardis: "Oh dear. They've got the TARDIS wrong. It looks silly- windows out of proportion" (emtiem 2004); "It seems to be *squatter* than usual ... wider ..." (Tullberg 2004). This is countered by responses which draw on fan cultural capital to contextualise the new prop against the ones in the original series, as well as pointing out their status *as props*: "It's not as if there was one consistant Tardis from 1963-1989 [...] It's a rectangular blue object with Police Public Call Box written on it, and a light on top" (Cooper 2004); "I totally agree, ive always thought BBC tardis prop was smaller than the original London Police boxes" (JTBomb 2004).

In an awareness of how fandom is perceived by non-fans, another poster seeks to establish a consensus which the group can perform for outsiders (Hills 2002), as well as pointing out the ways in which fan judgements of quality differ from those of non-fans:

Just look at it from a general perspective. It's blue, it's tall, it says Police Box. It's a Police Box. it's the TARDIS. This is just the sort of silly talk which leads the public - the show's most important audience, remember - to walk away and shake their heads in despair. Let's keep this sort of fan madness under wraps please (and out of the public domain!)

(PMount 2004)

Fans projected their anxieties about the new series onto the symbol of the Tardis prop, in the form of exercising their fan cultural capital and making cognitive criticisms about the authenticity of the design. However, other fans applied criteria from outwith fandom, pointing out that the props seen previously in the series were not accurate, and bringing a self-reflexive sense of perspective to the discussion by reminding posters of the programme's status as television, of the fact that fan judgements of quality are not those used by the general audience (McKee 2001), and of the effect of such discussions on public perceptions of fans. This self-reflexivity establishes a consensus, as a stable discursive resource for public circulation.

Sound Affects

Doctor Who's revival was the catalyst for high emotion in many fans (Grossberg 1992). As already noted, the Tardis was central to fans' expectations for the new series, and contains a strong affective power over fan perceptions. For example, on seeing the first pictures of the Tardis prop on location in Wales, a fan wrote: "Brought a lump to my throat... such a fanboy sometimes!" (Robbie 2004).

Almost as important as the physical prop, the original Tardis sound effect was seen as a key element assuring the ‘authenticity’ of the new series: “Yes, the TARDIS Sound FX really hit it home that Doctor Who was back!” (Alan-WK 2005); “The dematerialisation sound effect was brilliant!” (Ronaldhino 2005); “That was the beautiful thing about it, it was the same sound effect. It really felt like we were welcoming an old friend home” (TJ Campbell 2005).

The importance of the Tardis sound is acknowledged by the producers on the *Rose* DVD commentary:

Julie Gardner: ... as someone who didn’t really grow up on *Doctor Who*, it was very important to you two that we were very faithful...

Russell T. Davies: I remember at one point... Paul shifted it up a key ... we were like ‘what the hell have you done?’ Sacrilege!

Phil Collinson: It can sound like it did when William Hartnell flew it!
(*Rose* commentary 2005)

This dialogue clearly inscribes Davies and Collinson as fans who “grew up on *Doctor Who*”, sharing the same affective priorities as fans watching the episode (and listening to the commentary). Unlike the physical Tardis prop, the sound effect was not updated, and therefore posed no challenge to authenticity for fans: in addition, it provided a clear affective link to the Ur-text of the very first episode from 1963.

Some fans understood their affective response on two levels: one at the level of emotional involvement in the narrative, and another at a kind of pride in the power of their cult object to inspire that involvement and generate that affect.

I cried several times during series 1... and each time, it was on two levels - first the story itself would make me well up, then the realisation that this old TV show that I love so dearly was doing so well and was written so powerfully as to have this effect on me made it even worse.

(Blumenthal, M. 2006)

This created an exponential effect, in which the awareness of the emotion inspired more emotion: “It's Doctor Who! And it's moving! And I'm crying! How moving is that! Now I'm crying even more! And it's Doctor Who! Oh my God!” (dannysquid 2006).

Doctor Who As A Media Event

The research brought up some interesting details about viewing context and viewing practices. Dayan and Katz (1992) have proposed the idea of media events – the live televising of official ceremonies which embody a society's values, whereby audiences confirm their endorsement of those values and perform their consensus by participating in (i.e. viewing) the event. Some fans treated the first 2005 episode, *Rose*, as a media event.

A pirate copy of *Rose* was leaked onto the internet several weeks before transmission. For many fans, the possibility of viewing it before its broadcast transmission opened up a dilemma: watch immediately, or wait for the ‘official’ transmission date? Waiting for the official transmission helped fans perform their phatic link to the

centre (in this case, the plans of the BBC and the production team). For some, the chance voluntarily to delay this event added to the pleasure of anticipation.

I turned down the chance to see "Rose" last Sunday when a journalist friend of mine rang me to say she had preview [...] another friend phoned to say he'd managed to download it from the internet ... Again, I declined [...] I want this to be a WONDERFUL event, not some little secret to be watched over a PC monitor and be "enjoyed" alone as if it were a guilty pleasure

(Nidus 2005)

The Dayan and Katz model includes the idea of festive viewing, whereby the media event transforms the site of reception and audiences gather with ceremonial food and drink. Fans used similar strategies to watch *Rose*: "On the 26th, I have invited a few friends round (some with only a fleeting interest in the show), everyone is bringing a "buffet" item, and I'll be getting a couple of bottles of champagne" (Nidus 2005).

Not only British fans constructed festive viewing out of the show's transmission:

For the American debut on the SciFi channel of Doctor Who ... Ive rounded up at least 10 - 15 of my friends to come over, have some drinks and watch the new show. 2/3rds of these have never seen DW before at all.

(MarcusPrime 2006)

The production team used statements in *Doctor Who Magazine* to assure fans that the new series would respect the show's traditions, but specifically that it was aimed at a mass audience. "We want *Doctor Who* to appeal to the broadest audience possible – we won't be making this for the fans alone" (producer Phil Collinson, quoted in Anon 2004). So fans constructed *Rose* as a media event, not so much to perform their consensus to the diegesis of the show, but to conform to the producers' injunction that

the show needed big ratings to succeed. The phatic link to the centre proposed by Dayan and Katz was to *Doctor Who* as a successful television programme; the consensus being performed was, in this case, intended to support the producers' desire for strong ratings. Fans were aware of the need for the new series to succeed with a wide audience, and for some, this was an opportunity to proselytise and boost ratings:

Conclusion

This paper has explored the complex and ambiguous power relations between audience, producers and text and shown how *Doctor Who* fans exhibit a strong sense of ownership of the show and a strong affective, emotional response to its components which informs issues of authenticity in the revival. Fans use television as the focus for social formation and viewing rituals. Fans construct communities, and show a strong reflexivity in defining themselves as members of those communities. *Doctor Who* fans exhibit a keen awareness of their fandom and a high degree of conscious performance is deployed in their fan identity. Most importantly perhaps in the age of DVD recorders and iPlayer, it shows how the audience still uses official transmission times as a temporal site for ceremonial viewing.

It is also clear that the text of the programme itself so inspired elements of its audience that they turned their fandom into cultural capital of real worth. Despite the established view of fans as a 'powerless elite', a small subset of fans has converted its fandom into real agency over the text and conditions of production and distribution by entering the television industry which first inspired their creativity. In a display of the

'passive' audience influencing the medium, these individuals have developed from being consumers to being producers of that which they once consumed. Television has created its next generation of creative producers, out of its own audiences.

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