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# THE **POPULAR CULTURE STUDIES JOURNAL**

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# THE **POPULAR CULTURE STUDIES** JOURNAL

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## CONTENTS

**Editorial: All Me...All the Time** 1  
Bob Batchelor

## ARTICLES

**Relational Aggression on Film: An Intersectional Analysis of Mean Girls** 5

Michaela D. E. Meyer, Linda M. Waldron, and Danielle M. Stern

**No Face: Implied Author and Masculine Construct in the Fiction of Junot Díaz** 35

Josef Benson

***Frankenstein* Performed: The Monster Who Will Not Die** 65

Jeanne Tiehen

**Discipline and Policing: HBO's *The Wire* as a Critique of Modern American Culture** 87

Morgan Shipley and Jack Taylor

**Performing Ordinary: Politicians, Celebrity, & the Politics of Representation on Entertainment Talk** 109

Sue Collins

**Communication Deficiencies Provide Incongruities for Humor: The Asperger's-like Case of *The Big Bang Theory's* Sheldon Cooper** 140

Karen McGrath

**Influence of Popular Television Programming on Students' Perception about Course Selection, Major, and Career** 172

Kristy Tucciarone

**Partisan Pop Cultural Awareness: Disclosing the Metaphoric Rhetoric of the “Culture Wars”** 193  
Jeremy V. Adolphson

**‘Social’ TV: *Pretty Little Liars*, Casual Fandom, Celebrity Instagramming, and Media Life** 215  
Cory Barker

## **INTERVIEW**

***The Popular Culture Studies Journal* Interview with GEORGE EDWARD CHENEY** 243

## **BOOK REVIEWS**

**THE STUART HALL FORUM** 256  
Stuart Hall: Relevance and Remembrance  
Jennifer C. Dunn

Considering Hall and Reconsidering Foundations of the Popular  
“Notes On Deconstructing ‘The Popular’”  
Jules Wight

Still Getting Us a Little Further Down the Road  
“The Narrative Construction of Reality: An Interview with Stuart Hall”  
Linda Baughman

Reviewing and Reflecting: *Representations*  
Adam W. Tyma

***THE POPULAR CULTURE STUDIES JOURNAL* BOOK REVIEWS** 274  
Introductions  
Jennifer C. Dunn

*Where the Aunts Are: Family, Feminism & Kinship in Popular Culture*  
Rachel E. Silverman

*Love and Money: Queers, Class, and Cultural Production*  
Vanessa Campagna

*Pranksters: Making Mischief in the Modern World*  
Aaron Barlow

*Renegade Hero or Faux Rogue: The Secret Traditionalism of  
Television Bad Boys*  
Bob Batchelor

*Cable Guys: Television and Masculinities in the 21st Century*  
CarrieLynn D. Reinhard

*Motorsports and American Culture: From Demolition Derbies to  
NASCAR*  
Norma Jones

*Words Will Break Cement: The Passion of Pussy Riot*  
Adam Perry

*Feeling Mediated: A History of Media Technology and Emotion in  
America*  
William Kist

*Screening the Undead: Vampires and Zombies in Film and Television*  
Jesse Kavadlo

*My Lunches with Orson: Conversations between Henry Jaglom and  
Orson  
Welles*  
L. Lelaine Bonine

*Twitter: Social Communication in the Twitter Age. Digital Media and  
Society Series*  
La Royce Batchelor

*The United States of Paranoia*  
Ted Remington

*The Daily You: How the New Advertising Industry is Defining Your  
Identity and Your Worth*  
Janelle Applequist

*The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*  
Chrys Egan and John Egan

**ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS**

**323**

## ‘Social’ TV: *Pretty Little Liars*, Casual Fandom, Celebrity Instagramming, and Media Life

CORY BARKER

In early March 2013, the teen soap *Pretty Little Liars* (2010-present) graced the cover of *Entertainment Weekly*, accompanied by the headline “*Pretty Little Phenom*.” The that article, Stransky describes the impressive social media profile of the four-year-old series: “It may sound like a teen trifle, but ABC Family’s *Pretty Little Liars* and its stars are changing how the TV industry measures success—one tweet, keek, and status update at a time.” Just a few weeks later, after the series’ season three finale, digital analytic company SocialGuide found that Twitter activity surrounding the episode was the highest in television history. An ABC Family press release celebrating this prototypical twenty-first century honor noted:

[The finale] became the #1 ‘most social’ series episode on record during its airtime according to SocialGuide, and the first series episode to amass over 1 million Total airtime Tweets in TV history, accounting for one-third of all Twitter activity in the hour (1,099, 815; 32.7 share). Including the hours leading up to and following, it generated close to 1.6 million tweets overall. (ABC Family, “ABC Family’s ‘*Pretty Little Liars*’”)

*Liars*’ social media presence is so large and influential that when ABC Family decided to produce a spin-off series, that news announcement was not made with a traditional press release or via interviews in the trade press. Instead, ABC Family planted a series of “clues” across popular

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social networks (such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and Pinterest) and their release strategy resulted in 369 million social “impressions” (ABC Family, “ABC Family’s Exclusive Social Media”).

These types of social media reports reflect new forms of popularity for contemporary television programs in which audience activity is more easily visible and sorted into data points. Similarly, the growing importance of Twitter engagement to the media is another example of the kind of active spectatorship recognized by scholars more than two decades ago. However, while social media and other digital technologies make it easier for today’s engaged audiences to establish global fan communities and produce their own content, they also allow “less active” fans to participate more casually in ongoing conversations about a given program. Using the television series, *Pretty Little Liars* as a case study, I argue that fan studies scholarship must make room for considerations of the kind of casual fandom that Twitter and other contemporary social networks encourage. Focusing on fan discourses on Twitter, Tumblr, and Facebook, I detail how much of the reported activity surrounding *Pretty Little Liars* is brief, conversational, and less politically engaged than the sorts of fan engagement typically celebrated by scholars. Later, I describe the ways content produced by ABC Family’s promotional department and the series’ stars often mirror fan material, thus creating a larger *Liars* media experience in which industry, stars, and audiences come together. Methodologically, I draw from fan studies’ emphasis on active audiences and the complex interactions between audiences and the media industries, but signal how Mark Deuze’s construction of media life helps describe underrepresented fan experiences.

*Pretty Little Liars* provides an instructive case study in one formation of contemporary fan behavior. Although many fan communities create expansive fan texts, raise thousands of dollars for charity, or bring their favorite series back from the dead, most fan communities—and more importantly, most individual fans—do not have that level of influence.

Similarly, many fan-industry or fan-star exchanges in a new media environment raise crucial questions about industry power and fan agency, but generally, those questions are not on the minds of tweeting fans or Instagramming actors. Thus, the intent of this essay is not to ignore examples of impressive fan action or political concerns regarding industry involvement in new media spaces. Instead, highlighting different experiences elucidates how media brings these different factions together.

### From Fandom to a Media Life

Fan activity has long been on the mind of scholars across multiple disciplines. The influence of cultural studies helped to deconstruct stereotypes about fans and the presumed inequalities between media industries and audiences. In his seminal research on *Star Trek* fans, Henry Jenkins helped alter the perception of fandom, moving them away from problematic descriptions that Joli Jenson refers to as “pathological.” Jenkins’ work inspired others to dig deeper into fan communities, their use of technology, and their various—sometimes-contentious—relationships with industries. Much work has detailed the supremely dedicated or “cult” fans. Though definitions of cult fandom vary, these fans are often framed in opposition against “ordinary,” viewers and identified as “excessive” (Gwenllian-Jones), “faithful” (Felschow) or “devoted” (Eco). Additionally, these fans are further separated from the “ordinary” because they “drill, practice, and master” (Eco) and establish “deep emotional involvement” (Hills, 73) with beloved texts.

One of the most-discussed catalysts for increased and more visible fan activity is new media. Identifying fans as “early adopters” of technology, Jenkins claims that thanks to technological advances, contemporary consumers have learned how “to bring the flow of media more fully under their control” (18). In expanding Pierre Levy’s theorizations of collective intelligence, Jenkins suggests that the Internet allows fan communities to

easily share information and/or work to solve any inner-fandom dilemma (136-140). Of course, new technologies have made it easier for media producers to develop new projects and target the necessary audience segments, further complicating the relationships between fans and industries. Jenkins and Deuze refer to these complications as “contradictory pulls and tugs,” explaining that media “creat[es] close, more rewarding relations” as well as “conflict[ing]...constant negotiations of power” between consumers and producers (6-7). Others raise useful concerns about industry forces taking advantage of active consumers’ labor for financial or promotional gain (Terranova, cited in Jenkins and Deuze; Murray) or invading consumer privacy (Chamberlin).

Although very little scholarship is shortsighted enough to claim that modern technology fully empowers consumers or conversely argue that it results in unchecked industrial power, the focus is often on exceptional case studies of fan activity or fan repression. What tend to be missing, and what I intend to highlight in this essay, are explorations of more muted fan activity and more neutral fan-industry relationships. Thus, I argue that a big chunk of fan interactions (and interactions with industry forces and stars) on social media represent a media experience that is simultaneously engaged and participatory but also casual and individualized. Activities that might have once been perceived as “excessive” or “devoted”—seeking out fellow fans, searching for information about a program or its stars—are easier and more common than ever. For example, using social media, fans can communicate directly to producers, to executives, and to stars, while those groups also engage in the same ways: directors tweet, stars post photos of their dogs on Instagram, and members of the promotions department operate Tumblrs. There are a multitude of interactions, most of them far from revolutionary, happening at numerous levels and access points.

Still, how do we conceptualize the casual media experience? Ien Ang’s research into fans of *Dallas* provides a nice starting point. Ang examines

the diverse, enigmatic pleasure viewers received from *Dallas*, interrogating the conceptualization of "mere entertainment" and how viewers integrated the series into their everyday lives. She explains:

It is clear that there is not just one 'reason' for the pleasure of *Dallas*, which applies for everyone; each has his or her own more or less unique relationship to the program. What appeals to us in such a television serial is connected with our individual life histories, with the social situation we are in. (26)

Citing work by Jean-Marie Piemme, Ang describes how most television series invite viewers to participate with stories and characters that are easily weaved into the daily experience (29).

Similarly, Hills developed the concept of "just in time fandom," where "The practices of fandom have become increasingly enmeshed with the rhythms and temporalities of broadcasting, so that fans now go online to discuss new episodes immediately after...or even during ad-breaks" (140-141). For the contemporary media consumer, this is even truer. Social media allow viewers to engage in conversations about a series, and sustaining the experience during commercials and after the episodes are over. Also, the television shows, themselves, expand past the weekly episodes, into web-only deleted scenes, transmedia stories, podcasts, fashion blogs, and much more. A series' fictional world can be regularly part of viewers' typical media experience, even for those who do not emphatically seek out additional material.

Deuze's concept of the all-encompassing media life is perhaps the most way to consider the contemporary viewer experience. The media life perspective emphasizes that "Media benchmark our experience of the world, and how we make sense of our role in it" and asks us to accept the idea that we "do not live *with*, but *in*, media" (original emphasis) (xi; xiii). In a media life, we spend most of our time with media without giving it a second thought; we consume, we produce, and we experience life with

media. That is what contemporary fans do; the life of a fan is a media life. Describing fan activity and fandom as excessive, or referring to it as cult-like, suggests that we should be separate from media and we can—or perhaps should—find a world outside of media, suggests that we can eventually learn to control media, and assumes that whoever controls the media has the power. Deuze argues, “we keep convincing ourselves and others that elements of our life in media are either good or bad for us, failing to witness what is already taking place. In other words: people experience the ongoing mediation and mediatization of their lives, but seem to remain blind to its profound potential” (257). Conceiving of fandom as a fundamental and everyday part of media life helps us better understand that individual expressions of fandom can be as important or fascinating as industry-altering moments, and that fans interact with different factions in a more casual fashion.

Deuze and Kathryn Thompson argue that once-excessive fan actions are now normal and that affective engagement with a text “may or may not result in the creation of a separate media text;” engagement happens in multiple ways. Fandom requires individuals to develop core media competencies that they separate into two categories: technical competencies and conceptual competencies. Technical competencies are “specialized, procedural knowledges” that allow fans to produce and distribute their own media objects and access group discourses. Meanwhile, conceptual competencies are “largely interpersonal and interpretive, rather than procedural” driven by an ability to comprehend fan processes like altering textual meaning and contributing to a community’s interpretations and discourses. Deuze and Thompson conclude that these competencies help fans be the prototypical adopters of a media life.

I would take these assertions further. Active fan communities might have been the first to embrace a media life, but now, many more people have these competencies. People who would not consider themselves

diehard fans also post about media on Facebook or Twitter. Young stars, having grown up in a world where media is a fundamental part of their lives, consistently inform fans with status updates and behind-the-scenes photos. Media industries extend stories on official web sites or share additional content on Tumblr and Pinterest. Following Deuze and Thompson's term, most everyone is competent—consuming, producing, sharing, and interacting. These sprawling media experiences commonly develop around ongoing television series, and recent shifts in television viewing practices have further collapsed the boundaries between the groups.

### Industry Change and *Pretty Little Liars*

After years of trying to ignore and overcome technological innovation challenging its business models, television networks have embraced the Internet and social media. For example, networks now put Twitter hashtags at the bottom of the screen to encourage audience engagement and craft press releases celebrating high volumes of tweets, Facebook posts, and other “social” activity. Ang describes how watching *Dallas* became “first and foremost a practice.... which has much of the nature of a habit: it is directly available, casual, and free” (84). Although access to cable television and an Internet connection are not freely available to everyone, they are indeed even more readily available than in the *Dallas* era. The practice of watching television is now regularly paired with the practice of using social media. For example, recent reports on viewer activity suggest that using social media during television viewing is growing more popular by the year. In a March 2013 *Wired* article on shifting viewing practices notes, Vanderbilt writes that “a full 40 percent of Twitter’s traffic during peak usage is about television.” Also, an August 2012 study by Ericsson reports that 62 percent of viewers use social media while watching, which is an 18 percent increase from the previous year

(Bergman). While some reports offer contradicting data, it is clear that viewers see multiple and simultaneous forms of media fundamental to their experience. Deuze argues, “The key to the success of a media artifact in people’s lives lies in its ability to be lifelike... This discovery of sociability as the basis of media in people’s lives runs throughout the history of media artifacts” (54-55). Social media allow viewers to interact with one another, as well as with industry representatives and stars. Thus, it is a perfect example of media “extending the communication and conversation capabilities of their users” (Deuze 55).

One series with substantial fan-industry-star engagement swirling around it is *Pretty Little Liars*. The teen thriller is a catalyst in the shifting ways fans, industry forces, and stars interact through media. By all the traditional measures, *Pretty Little Liars* is a success. The series averages around 3 million viewers and does especially well with viewers (particularly women) in the coveted 18-49 and 18-34 demographics (Bibel). *Liars* is still growing in popularity. The third season pulled in its most consistent viewership with women, helping the series become ABC Family’s most-watched original ever. As a result, *Pretty Little Liars* has been renewed through 2015 and ABC Family has also recently announced a spinoff (Andreeva).

Solid ratings, longevity, and spinoff potential make *Pretty Little Liars* a traditional success, yet it is the series’ social media engagement that is most impressive—and most representative of how fans, industry, and stars engage in today’s media life. *Entertainment Weekly* referred to the series’ social media presence as a “colossal digital footprint” (Stransky). As of early August 2013, that footprint includes over 11.2 million likes on Facebook, over 1.6 million followers on Twitter, over 2 million check-ins on GetGlue, over 7,300 followers on Pinterest, hundreds of thousands views on YouTube, and a Tumblr of indeterminate popularity.<sup>1</sup> This data only includes official accounts operated by ABC Family, which are rarely as popular as the unofficial fan-run spaces. A Google search for “*Pretty*

*Little Liars* Tumblr” returns more than 6.6 million results; fan Tumblrs such as *F\*ck Yeah Pretty Little Liars* and *Pretty Little Secrets Hints* appear in the results before ABC Family’s official Tumblr. Similar fan-produced content populates Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and Pinterest. The cast and crew of *Pretty Little Liars* are also part of the large digital footprint. The four stars have a combined 5.5 million Twitter followers and 5 million Instagram followers. Their social media content is sometimes related to their work. More commonly, however, Lucy Hale, Ashley Benson, Shay Mitchell, and Troian Bellisario provide snippets into their “real” lives: out at dinner with friends, in the makeup chair obsessing over shoes, working on their nascent music or movie careers, and cuddling up with pets.

This social media activity allows *Pretty Little Liars* to top rankings that consolidate engagement into clear data points. For example, the research company Trendrr ranks “social media activity related to specific television shows (mentions, likes, check-ins) across Twitter, Facebook, GetGlue and Viggie.” *Pretty Little Liars* consistently appears on this list, typically garnering at least 600,000 moments of social media activity per week. The season three finale reached a record-breaking 2.1 million moments of activity, the most ever for one episode of television (Al-Greene). The series is similarly popular in the rankings provided by check-in platform GetGlue, wherein it regularly appears in the top 10 most active cable series (Kondolojoy). In 2012, SocialGuide named it the fifth “most social” of the year (Stransky). ABC Family President Michael Riley called *Pretty Little Liars* the channel’s “brand-defining” and “demo-defining” series and noted that the upcoming spinoff will “become another ‘must-tweet-TV’ series” (ABC Family, “ABC Family’s Exclusive Social Media”). Still, *Pretty Little Liars*’ social media achievements are less about grand or subversive fan action; they are defined by casual engagement.



Like most contemporary popular culture texts, *Pretty Little Liars* inspires fans to act in a number of different ways. *Liars* fans create their own fan fiction, slash fiction, artwork, and videos. Although *Pretty Little Liars* fans benefit from newer forms of media production technology, resulting in annotated screen captures and GIF photosets on Tumblr, their fan productions, while representative of longstanding ideas of active fandom, are not exceptional examples. Instead, these are typical—though not worthless—expressions of fandom. Nevertheless, certain *Pretty Little Liars* fan products on Tumblr are worth noting in more detail.

Two of the more notable *Pretty Little Liars* Tumblrs are the narrative-focused *Pretty Little Secrets Hints* and the fan confession-focused *Confess Little Liars*. *Pretty Little Secrets Hints* provides illustrated screen captures, bits of dialogue, reader submissions, and anything else that might help the fans discover who is behind *Pretty Little Liars*' latest mysteries. For example, a March 31, 2013 entry features a screen capture from the series' season three finale that draws attention to a few characters looking off-screen, seemingly at someone across a cemetery. The photo's illustrations suggest that this unseen character is the deadly stalker and villain A. The post's author describes how this photo helps describe certain characters' actions:

Submitted by our amazing follower James: Who are Spencer and Garrett watching at Ali's funeral? So we all have seen the episode where Ali says the girls remember more than they think about "that night" and once told Spence that when she's "gone" the answers would be in her diaries so maybe she told one of them something and one of them helped her out of the ground that night.. we know what drinking did to Em so who knows.. also Spencer was the one outside so maybe it was her who helped her out and Spence recently said "who cares what *HAPPENS to alison*" when she first found out toby helped mona.

Another recent *Pretty Little Secrets Hints* post features a submitted discussion point from user A Kiss Before Lying, who writes: "I know a lot of people are saying Aria has a split personality...And i have to agree! She's a vegan right? Then why did she order a cheeseburger in the pilot?" The Tumblr's operator responds to this thought with "Oooo we didn't even notice this! Good pick up!" (2013). The majority of *Pretty Little Secrets Hints* follows this pattern: simple reader thoughts and theories, with commentary from those in charge of the Tumblr. Here *Pretty Little Liars* fans, empowered by their media access, are able to share important information and work together to decode the series' complex mysteries, embodying collective intelligence (Jenkins 138-140). Steven Jones and Jason Mittell argue that certain texts (*Lost*, *Twin Peaks*, *Battlestar Galactica*) promote a mode of engagement known as "forensic fandom" that encourages "research, collaboration, analysis, and interpretation." Most descriptions of this active forensic fandom refer to series with science fiction, fantasy, or supernatural elements, yet *Pretty Little Liars*, a teen soap/mystery inspires similar interpretation and collaboration. Despite the series' generic backdrop, *Pretty Little Liars* fans find enough intrigue within the narrative that they "drill" downward and share their discoveries with fellow forensic fans (Eco). Furthermore, this drilling is representative of Deuze and Thompson's technical and conceptual competencies. To provide and analyze these clues, fans must understand the series' narrative and community interpretations and need the minor skills to grab, edit, or reproduce content that serves as evidence.

Still, this fan activity, while productive, is relatively mild. Though some of the theories include photographic and annotated evidence, the majority of it comes in short sentence form, such as free-ranging observations. This does not subvert any political meanings, nor does it impact the narrative of *Pretty Little Liars*. Instead, it helps fans organize their thoughts about the narrative, and perhaps reinforces the bonds of the fan community. Leah Lievoruw and Sonia Livingstone argue that media

are infrastructures of everyday life, incorporating “the artifacts or devices used to communicate or convey information, the activities and practices in which people engage to communicate or share information, and the social arrangements or organizational forms that develop around those devices and practices” (23). *Pretty Little Secrets Hints* (and all of Tumblr) provide space where fans communicate and share ideas after each new episode or whenever something comes to mind. Based on the sheer number of *Pretty Little Liars*-related Tumblrs, the platform is clearly a large part of fans’ media life.

Whereas *Pretty Little Secrets Hints* features fans working together to crack the series’ narrative, *Confess Little Liars* provides a space for fans to share anonymous admissions about the series, characters, relationships, the cast, and themselves. These admissions range from those that are very critical of the series’ creative direction (“[Executive Producer] Marlene King does not know how to write an episode without death or catastrophe.” “The whole janitor thing is so far-fetched, it’s insane.”) to the more personal (“If you’re not gay for at least one of the PLL girls, you don’t belong in this fandom.” “This show gives me an unrealistic image of high school.”). Confessions are superimposed on relevant show images with muted colors so that the text (written in white against a black box) stands out more. These images are another example of fan-produced content, but *Confess Little Liars* also reflects how crucial *Pretty Little Liars* is to these particular fans’ experiences (Tumblr 2013). Michael Apter argues that our emotional responses to mediated sensations permit us to work through emotions like fear, horror, grief, and delight in a mostly safe environment.

Meanwhile, John Bargh, Katelyn McKenna, and Grainne Fitzsimmons claim that “compared to face-to-face interactions, people are better able to present, and have accepted by others, aspects of their true or inner selves over the Internet” (45). Thus, Tumblr allows fans to work through a number of feelings, some very personal. The variety of posts here show that *Liars* fans view the series as an important part of their daily life, one

that can allow them to work through certain emotional experiences; yet, it also reflects fans' ability to be critical when necessary. One form of media (the series) inspires fans to post, while another (Tumblr) assists them in discussing various experiences. Furthermore, Deuze suggests in a media life, we are aware of "our own private and personal experiences while at the same time living through an involvement with distinct others" (174-175). Submissions to *Confess Little Liars* are publically available yet hidden under the protection of anonymity, making it a safe space to admit personal tidbits, though users are aware that it is a shared space.

Both *Confess Little Liars* and *Pretty Little Secrets Hints* reinforce that for many fans, the *Pretty Little Liars* experience does not end with the week's live episode—maybe it does not even *begin* with the episode. The activity here shows that *Pretty Little Liars* fans have the technical and conceptual competencies to survive a media life and reflects how experience of the series regularly manifests in media. Again, these practices are relatively ordinary; this is how casual fans experience television in a media life. Even still, *Confess Little Liars* and *Pretty Little Secrets Hints* are more dynamic than most fan interaction with *Pretty Little Liars*. These Tumblrs clearly offer communal bonds, but most users engage with the platform on a much more individual level.

One search of series-related tags on Tumblr returns photosets, GIFs, and clips of favorite characters, stars, couples, clothes, etc. These posts are regularly tagged and therefore appear in the search field, but the majority of them seemingly do not intend to engage in a larger or coherent conversation. Returned results on April 20, 2013 offered a number of photos from star Ashley Benson's time at the Coachella music festival, GIFs of popular couple Aria and Ezra, and graphics displaying character names. Few of these posts feature text, and when they do, it is usually brief ("adorable outfit," "love her," or "they are all different"). The series is also very popular on Twitter and Facebook, and the majority of conversations on these social media platforms are similarly casual. A

cursory search of the primary *Pretty Little Liars* hashtag on Twitter (“#PLL”) returns tweets such as “I miss Hanna and Mona’s friendship <3,” “Why can’t I have their wardrobe,” “I miss pretty little liars so freakin bad #mylife,” and “CAN I JUST SAY I SHIP CALEB AND HANNA SO HARD.”<sup>2</sup> Similarly, representative posts including or on the series’ official Facebook from April 20, 2013 account include “can’t wait for june 11<sup>th</sup> :),” “when is pll coming back?,” “I love this show super much,” and “52 days!”

On Pinterest, fan activity is unsurprisingly built around photo sharing. *Pretty Little Liars* fans “pin” (share) the same combination of promotional and behind-the-scenes photos supplied by the industry and the more personal photos shared by the cast on other networks like Instagram. However, they also share content that fits more closely within the Pinterest brand: Make-up tips (“Get This Look – Aria Inspired Makeup”), cake recipes, home design, fingernail art, and fashion advice, all inspired by the series’ characters and world. Pinterest allows users to like and “repin” individual offerings, but there is very little discussion surrounding that activity. Like most contemporary social networks, individual users implicitly participate in a larger community with things like tags and easy search functions. Nevertheless, most of their pins are to personal boards, saved because of an individual interest in or affection for the series.

These tweets, pins, and Facebook posts, like the Tumblr content, do not reach the level of activity as in the production and discussion *Confess Little Liars* and *Pretty Little Secrets Hints*. They display media competency as discussed by Deuze and Thompson, yet fan affection or interest does not result in detailed scene breakdowns or elaborate YouTube videos. This is how a great deal of fandom manifests in 2013. In his consideration of the purpose of “all the status updates, shout-outs, blurbs, tweets, texts, clips, and snippets of information” we exchange, Deuze cites Vincent Miller’s idea of “ascendant phatic media culture,” or “small communicative gestures that are distinctly social, but are not

intended to transmit substantial information” (232). Miller argues that this communication is not meaningless; it instead helps establish a community based on recognition, intimacy, and sociability (395). This perspective is useful in thinking about casual fandom.

Following Miller, I would argue that these micro moments of fandom are crucial to the individual fan experience and in the establishment of fan communities. Most fans of *Pretty Little Liars* are going to engage with the series, stars, and other fans on major social media platforms such as Tumblr, Twitter, and Facebook, so that they are not necessarily going to be tucked away in password-protected forums. In her conceptualization of the “social supernet,” Judith Donath writes, “Perhaps the basic pleasure that social network sites provide is endless novelty in the flow of new people and new information, and the knowledge that someone is paying attention to you.” Whereas many posts do not directly engage other fans, the assumption in using tags on Tumblr and Twitter, or posting on the Facebook page, is that others will see it. They both embody the routine and individual fan experience and still implicitly reinforce the bonds of the larger community.

Of course, this is a very small snapshot of *Pretty Little Liars* fan activity. The fans are also active on check-in services such as GetGlue, as well as more established spaces like Live Journal, YouTube, and more. As one of the “most social” series on television, *Pretty Little Liars* fans interact with it all over the Internet and social media. Still, these various examples underscore that in contemporary media life, fandom manifests in a number of different ways. Though a number of fans do produce their own content and explicitly display core technical and conceptual competencies, a good chunk of fan expression and engagement does not involve the production of new materials or require any advanced skills. In a media life, most fans have easy access to devices, platforms, and communities that allow them to express fandom however—and whenever—they want. The media life

perspective moves past the idea that industrial forces define individual relationships with media.

In a discussion of media archives, Deuze argues, “Considering the fact that the vast majority of people’s time online (in media) is spent at social networks like Facebook, the many variations of recording, storing and publishing one’s life are not only a mainstream pursuit, but altogether more vast and powerful than any top-down registry or archive of citizens or consumers can be” (88). Just as individuals control their Internet archives, they play an active role in what they like, re-blog, re-tweet, or share online. Relatedly, Jenkins (2006) claims that, “Each of us constructs our own personal mythology from bits and fragments of information extracted from the media flow and transformed into resources through which we make sense of our everyday lives” (4). Activity, however minor, on Twitter and Tumblr is especially useful for fans and their relationship with media. However, it is also important to remember that fans are not the only ones contributing to the *Pretty Little Liars* media experience; so too are various industrial forces and the series’ stars. In the last portion of the essay, I will detail some of the ways in which other groups participate in this media experience, beginning with the industry.

### Industry and Star Activity

Much like fans, the media content provided by various industry representatives online ranges from detailed to relatively ordinary. As I did in the previous section, I will describe examples of industry content that reflect different levels of complexity. One of the big things the contemporary media industries emphasize is transmedia storytelling, which according to Jenkins “unfold across multiple media platforms, which each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole” (98). In 2012, ABC Family commissioned the creation of a *Pretty Little Liars* web series, *Pretty Dirty Secrets*. Clocking in at two minutes

each, the eight episodes were meant to bridge the time between the mid-season finale in summer 2012 and the Halloween special (Ng). Although it is impossible to know how popular *Pretty Dirty Secrets* was, it is likely that the small number of fans who did watch the web series also responded to it like they do to the televised series: by posting on Tumblr, Twitter, and Facebook.

However, following my analysis of casual fan activity, I am more interested in exploring some of the low-key industry content online. There are a number of industry-created additions to the *Pretty Little Liars* media experience, many of them clearly in existence to meet already-occurring fan activity. ABC Family operates “official” accounts on all the major social media platforms—Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, Instagram, Pinterest, etc.—and provide content that purposefully emulate casual fan products. For example, the official *Pretty Little Liars* Tumblr features a similar combination of photosets, GIFs, and exclamations about the narrative and characters. April 2013 updates include a glamor shot of the lead cast with the short caption “FREAKING OUT AGAIN!! Take a look at another BTS photo of the PLLs at a recent shoot!” a small quote from one of the characters, episodic stills with notes like “Are you looking forward to more Mona when *Pretty Little Liars* returns?” and on-set photos of the series’ stars goofing around. The same content is reproduced on the Facebook page and Twitter account: many photos (official promotional and behind-the-scenes variety), links to articles about the series, and simple polls and questions for the fans to vote on and answer. With the tonal and stylistic emphasis on capitalization and multiple exclamation points, and the general emphasis on captioned GIFs and episode quotes, this all recalls fan content. Importantly, *Pretty Little Liars*’ social media accounts also share or link to content produced by fans.

It is easy to view this content as just industry promotion interjected into the fan community. ABC Family executives surely hope that even a random Facebook post from a friend might convince someone new to tune



in. Conversely, Gillian Doyle (2010) argues that “the processes of change” in production and distribution do not happen until the industry feels “threatened” by consumer activity (431). Thus, perhaps ABC Family moved into Tumblr because of fan activity already happening there. If the channel did not aggregate promotional videos or behind-the-scenes photos on Tumblr, fans would post them on personal accounts anyway. As a result, it is likely that ABC Family acquired the technical and conceptual competencies that fans previously developed, and in certain cases, were using against the industry. However, more interesting is how clearly this industry-provided content resembles typical daily fan activity. Although there are valuable discussions to have about the power dynamics at play when industry promotion echoes fan content, most fans are not concerned about those dynamics when they access Tumblr or Twitter. When a fan logs onto their dashboards and feeds, the content provided by ABC Family falls right into the stream alongside fan content.

For fans, industry content is pretty well integrated into their daily experiences. However, this move has consequences for the industry as well. Although the multiple *Pretty Little Liars* social media accounts are likely operated by different ABC Family employees, the series’ existence mirrors an individual fans’ media experience. *Pretty Little Liars* now exists in countless versions of itself online, each similar to the other (Deuze). Through social media, it participates in Miller’s ascendant phatic media culture, offering little gestures of content that aim to engage in conversation (and promotion). These multiple *Pretty Little Liars* accounts also allow both the series and its fans to construct and reconstruct an ongoing archive of materials. Deuze argues that personal media archives are complicated when we allow other groups access it, and though ABC Family does not offer open-source access to its official accounts, it provides materials on Tumblr, Twitter, Facebook, et al. with the assumption that fans will repurpose it, constantly altering the larger *Pretty Little Liars* archive (93). This is only some of the industry activity online.

It might have been created to catch up to fan activity, or to promote in new spaces, but industry operates like fans in popular media spaces. Though costly, much of the activity is ordinary: short updates, photosets, and link-sharing. As a result, industry content contributes to the larger media experience in similar ways to fans; content from the groups blends, being shared and reproduced by both. There is another group that engages with both fans and the industry, further adding to the media experience: the stars.

Social media does not just allow fans to engage with one another, or with the industry; it also provides a space where they can access their favorite stars. The cast of *Pretty Little Liars* is especially active on social media. Unsurprisingly, the star-produced content in these spaces ranges from more recognizable promotion to the innocuous and personal. Hale, Benson, Bellisario, and Mitchell occasionally tweet or post photos related to *Pretty Little Liars*. For example, on March 26, 2013, Hale retweeted the official ABC Family account's announcement about the series' fifth season renewal and the *Ravenswood* spinoff; sometime later, Mitchell informed followers about a costume designer's promotional visit to a Macy's location in Maryland. Additionally, the cast regularly provide photos and updates during their downtime on-set, which is, of course, also a form of promotion. Nevertheless, most of the stars' activity represents, or is at least meant to represent, their off-screen lives. Among the renewal and spinoff news, spring 2013 Hale tweet topics include Easter, her ignorance about the Harlem Shake, and news about the unicorn shirt she purchased at Urban Outfitters. Similarly, Benson's Instagram account features some photos of her and fellow cast members on-set between shots, but those photos are intermixed with her out with friends, posing with her coffee, and "selfies" (close up pictures of herself) featuring fake glasses and silly facial expressions. Benson showed her support for marriage equality in similar manner to what many people did in March of

2013: by posting the recognizable equal sign in the red box, along with the hashtag “#marriageequality.”

These posts and updates rarely include information that anyone would consider socially or politically relevant. Yet, what is most important is that the posts on the social media accounts of the *Pretty Little Liars* cast are very similar to those of fans their age, only Hale, Benson, Bellisario, and Mitchell attend more glamorous parties, or drink more expensive coffee, or take selfies while driving in newer cars. All under 30 years old, the stars appear generally relatable to fans, and other than Bellisario (who told *Entertainment Weekly* that she started her social media accounts to try to stop fake accounts misrepresenting her) they all seem comfortable with sharing details of their personal lives to anyone with access to Wi-Fi (Stransky). Here again, the content flowing into the *Pretty Little Liars* media experience is small and centered on daily life. The stars might live more glamorously, but that point remains. In her examination of television and Internet web series performer Felicia Day’s star identity, Liz Ellcessor argues:

[T]he Internet facilitates a wide range and large volumes of discourses that work to build a star text, but the success of that star text relies on precisely the intimacy and authenticity considered so central to television celebrity. In fact, Internet celebrity is founded even more firmly on illusions of intimacy, expressed not so much in terms of television’s regularity as through perceived access to private, backstage behavior. Internet-based fame depends on the authenticity of a star’s self-representation and on the notion of intimacy, experienced through the possibility of interaction rather than through simple familiarity. (51)

The stars regularly foster both authenticity and intimacy with their activity on social media. They provide intimate snapshots of their lives and reinforce that despite their fame, they still enjoy hanging out with family

or discovering Internet memes after they have already become passé. The stars do not reply to many of their fans' tweets or Instagram comments, resulting in feeds that sometimes look like streams of advertising for their series, films, records, and photo shoots and embodying what Alice Marwick refers to as "creative promoters" (56). However, the *possibility* that they will respond to a fan, or at worst, retweet a glowing comment remains.

This social media activity effectively reflects that the cast is not that different from the series' fans: young and interested in documenting large portions of their lives, no matter the banality of those moments. Information about the star's personal lives is not necessarily relevant to the series, but this activity—and fan interest in it—reinforces how the cast and the fans experience everything in media. Even though the stars would theoretically like some level of privacy, they also willingly provide inside looks into their lives. They could do this to present a level of authenticity or to bring fans into another space in which they can promote their work, but the stars' social media activity reflects how fundamental media are to their lives. Speaking of a willingness to share information on social media, Mary Gray describes the relationship between surveillance technologies and recent generations: "While many members of earlier generations may find this level of self-disclosure and showcasing a tad creepy, remember: this is the nannycam generation. These students have been closely monitored and on display since they were in diapers. Is their comfort with online exposition (or exhibitionism) so surprising?" (74). The cast's activity signals that their desires to participate in media and share brief insights of their day-to-day, despite the scrutiny of fans or tabloid culture, are ingrained into their lives.

For fans, interest in the personal lives of the cast can deepen their interest in the series; more often than not, the two interests intertwine. In her work on Dallas fans, Ang describes how the series often create the "illusion" that there is little distance between the actors and their

characters. She claims: “Being able to imagine the characters as ‘real’ people thus forms a necessary precondition for the involvement of viewers and is an anchor for pleasure of *Dallas*” (30). With actors willing to share their private lives with fans on social media and willing to mix those private moments with promotion for the series, the conflation of actor/character is even more pronounced. Popular fan Tumblrs feature just as many, if not more, photos of the actors out of character as it does screen shots from episodes, suggesting that the series and the star images are equally as important to the *Pretty Little Liars* fan experience. The series portrays a world where characters are constantly using media to avoid falling under the surveillance of A, or doing some surveying of their own. The series makes technology and surveillance seem like a tool of good and evil, but it also expresses that in a media life, surveillance is inevitable.

Although A’s continual torment of the girls represents the traditional panoptic ideal suggested by Jeremy Bentham, the *Pretty Little Liars* media experience is defined by omniopticism, where everyone exists in a mutual state of surveillance (Jensen 380). Ang argues that entertainment press helped viewers think they knew “everything” about *Dallas*, putting them in a “powerful, omniscient position” (75). This is even truer today, and for all groups of people. Fans, industry forces, and stars can all trace one another’s casual actions across official and unofficial productions and platforms. Star content is often repurposed by the fans and the industry, further reinforcing the lack of the boundaries between the groups.

## Conclusion

In this essay, I have attempted to show how much of contemporary fan activity is quite ordinary. Although media allows more and more people to identify as fans and engage with other fans, the industry, and stars, very little of regular fan engagement is as expansive and politically subversive as the case studies provided by most fan studies work. Additionally,

despite typical conceptualizations of fan-industry or fan-star interactions, much of the engagement between these different groups is similarly innocuous. More importantly, on social media platforms, industry and star content regularly mirrors fan content, and as a result, all of this casual content flows together in one large media experience. Of course, I have left politics aside, but more work should be done to detail the power dynamics at play in these casual interactions. For example, in the case of *Pretty Little Liars*, what considerations should we make for gender and the industry's mirroring of a certain kind of gendered fandom? Embracing the existence of these routine interactions and the media life perspective allows us to move past longstanding dichotomies; hopefully, it can also help us further complicate the casual fan experience.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> These numbers are always changing, but see: [www.facebook.com/prettylittleliars](http://www.facebook.com/prettylittleliars);  
[www.twitter.com/abcfpll](http://www.twitter.com/abcfpll); <http://prettylittleliars-onabcfamily.tumblr.com/>;  
<http://pinterest.com/abcfpll/>; [http://getglue.com/tv\\_shows/pretty\\_little\\_liars](http://getglue.com/tv_shows/pretty_little_liars).

<sup>2</sup> Select tweets from: <https://twitter.com/PLLGlee1/status/325713605939064832>;  
[https://twitter.com/savage\\_py\\_78/status/325712793678532608](https://twitter.com/savage_py_78/status/325712793678532608);  
[https://twitter.com/Natalie\\_lam13/status/325712277493907458](https://twitter.com/Natalie_lam13/status/325712277493907458);  
[https://twitter.com/SamsJam\\_/status/325712913987952640](https://twitter.com/SamsJam_/status/325712913987952640).

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