

# “We deserve better”

## Tumblr Fandoms and the Fan Activists’ Fight for Better Representation of Queer Characters on TV

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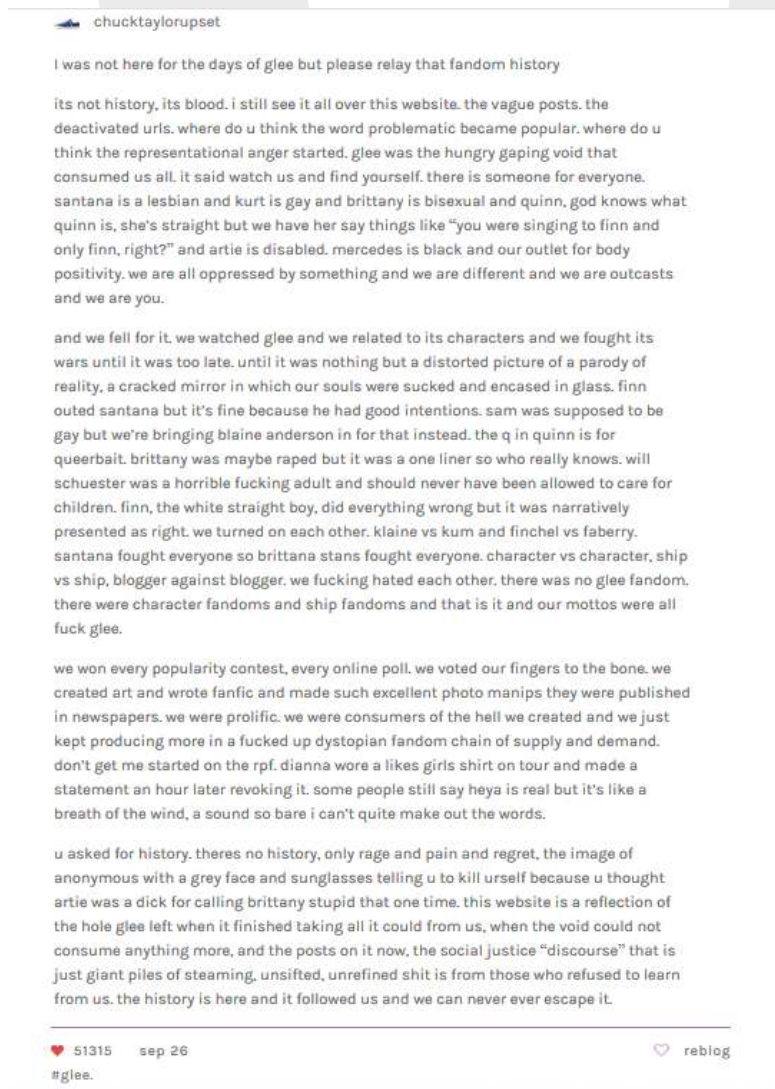


Fig. 1 TwelveClara.tumblr.com, published October 12 2017, 51315 reblogs

In this widely shared blog post, Tumblr user TwelveClara passionately describes what they consider to be a foundation of “Tumblr history”. Their depiction of activity around the show *Glee*<sup>1</sup> underlines several topics that I will be looking at in this article: issues of representation, fan engagement, fan community, user-generated content, and the discourse of fans as they voice their disappointment over a show they used to love.

This article builds on a rich interdisciplinary body of works, engaging with film and media studies at large, and in particular with fan studies and queer studies. I will explore the topic of queer representation on TV and the fan activity surrounding it, adopting the specific angle of media management. Following the works of many fan studies scholars, this paper aims to present fans not as the sheepish masses, passive worshippers, or obsessive pubescent girls they often are portrayed to be (Grossberg 1992) but as active agents in the media landscape. Previous research on fans and fandoms has often focused on sociological depictions of these groups, sometimes approaching extensive audience studies (see Bennett and Booth 2016, Duffett 2013, as mentioned in Grey, Sandvoss, and Harrington 2017). Even though the results of these ethnographic approaches have provided extremely valuable insights toward understanding fans and their activities, they also have tended to treat fans as a phenomenon almost separate from the industry. In so doing, they have overlooked important aspects of their current role in the lives of media products. This paper adopts a media management focus and looks at fans as dynamic elements of an evolving media ecology. As film and media scholars, thinking about media management involves shifting our attention from the moving images themselves, often considered the final object of the production process, to the object’s life post-release. Most importantly, looking at media management brings our attention to how individuals are influenced, how lives are impacted by the media industry and its products, but also how, in turn, individuals can manage the media. As such, participatory and user-generated content are becoming key areas of research for both the industry and the discipline (Deuze and Steward 2011; Küng 2007). I argue that the questions not only of fans and their relationship to the industry, but also of the representation of minorities on screen are becoming major issues for the industry, on multiple levels—from casting to harmful narrative tropes or stereotypes on screen. Moreover, a media management approach to fan mobilization online also encourages a renewed look on the issue of fan labor. Indeed, as I place my study in the context of representation and queer politics online, free fan labour has become a more complex issue than the creative activity of content production, encompassing the marketing, public relations and enhancement of a TV show’s public image.

Focusing on the fandoms surrounding the TV shows *The 100*<sup>2</sup> and *Sherlock*<sup>3</sup>, I will address the following research questions: how do communities created through critical engagement with TV shows in turn act on the media? How does fan content participate in greater politically charged demands for better LGBT+ representations? How do TV industries and producers integrate the revindications of these fan communities as increasingly vocal actors in this media landscape? Is fan labor always beneficial to the media industry and how? BBC’s *Sherlock*, a contemporary adaptation of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s classic, quickly became a phenomenon after its release, with a global following leading to adaptations of the concept in the United States and in Japan. CW’s *The 100* is an American science fiction post-apocalyptic show, whose audience remains largely North-American and lacks the popularity of the British series. I chose to compare these shows for two reasons. First, this research will benefit from comparing two contemporary shows that depicts, in *Sherlock*, a fantasized romantic and sexual relationship between two men, and, in *The 100*, an actual relationship between two female characters. Second, the two series exemplify drastically different responses from the producers to their fans’ complaints.

This article will focus on queer representation on television and within the fandom. Media is studied from many different entry points—production, text, audience—and queerness penetrates all of them (Navar-Gill and Stanfill 2018). In a social context where the rights of queer persons and their presence in the public sphere is increasing, it is vital that our discipline understands not only the part these issues are playing in the way we represent and look at queer characters, but also how the industry responds to these changing understandings of sexuality. Queerness, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick underlined, is too polysemic a concept

to be given a meaning other than one’s own (Kosofsky Sedwick 2012). However, Annemarie Navar-Gill and Mel Stanfill propose three working definitions of queerness within fandom: the transgression of norms, the erotics in fan fiction and between fan fiction writers<sup>4</sup>, and “the presence of self-identified non-heterosexual and/or non-cisgender people” (Navar-Gill and Stanfill 2018, 88). For this research, I will consider “queer” representations that stray from the hegemonic cisgender and heterosexual portrayal of TV characters – though I acknowledge the many inventive ways in which fans break norms in their appropriation of TV content. Indeed, fan activity and the queering of TV content is a much well-studied phenomenon, from the seminal work of Constance Penley (1992) on *Star Trek* to more contemporary research. As they favor a specific interpretation of their favorite TV show, an important practice amongst fans is to “see queerly” (Kohnen 2008), often by putting forward a homo-erotic subtext in order to make it “canon” – acknowledged in the narrative - both in their online production and hopefully in the show itself. I argue that fans engage in queer counter-hegemonic modes of expression (Halberstam 2001), which is a political move towards more and better representation of sexual diversity on television and in the media in general.

I will focus on the engagement of *The 100* and *Sherlock* fandoms on Tumblr to analyze how fans “see queerly.” Created in 2007, Tumblr is a microblogging platform that allows its users to post or reblog multimedia content in a very simple manner. Media scholars, and especially “aca-fans,” or academic fans (Hills 2002), have underlined the growing importance of Tumblr for fan studies, evidenced in the June 2018 special issue of *Transformative Work and Popular Culture* (Morimoto and Stein 2018), which focused exclusively on the platform. Tumblr is of particular interest, to start with because of its growing popularity. In October 2017, Tumblr hosted no less than 373 million blogs. Moreover, Tumblr aims at ‘creators’, marketing itself as a free and easy way to share creative content (Tumblr, n.d.). As it hosts a myriad of different fan-made productions, Tumblr is also interesting to open up the research that has habitually emphasized one medium of expression: mostly fanfiction in its textual form, or video editing–viding for instance. This article will analyze fan content on various Tumblr micro-blogs, focusing on ‘fan-art’ that discusses or illustrates queer aspects of the shows. As the content that could be of interest on the website is of gigantic proportions and the research tools provided by Tumblr unprecise (searches are made through ‘tags’ users add to their blog posts), this study will not and cannot be an exhaustive one. Therefore, I will also use the insights from many existing works as well as a personal experience of fan activity on Tumblr. I will base my analysis on Tumblr, but because Media and fan activity take place across platforms, I will also refer to other social media sites such as Twitter. Adopting the position of the ‘aca-fan’, I argue that fans are not only characterized by their emotional attachment to the show but also politically involved for better representation and that they are, through the production of user generated content, calling out the media industry’s executives on their actions. This activism shapes fan communities and renders the boundaries of fandoms and media industry more and more permeable, thus creating new logics in the media landscape.

I will first provide an introduction and an overview of Tumblr as a platform for fan production and activism. Then, I will study more closely the tropes that sparked the fans’ ire against the industry, which shaped the fandoms as they present themselves on the platform. Finally, I will look towards the industry’s reaction to this new fan-based activism and discuss the concrete repercussions of this involvement.

## **Tumblr, Locus of Fan Activism**

### ***The Producer Fans***

Early studies of fandoms, from Jean Lorrain (1984) to Henry Jenkins (1992), underlined the importance of fan creating their own artefacts using their favorite show’s material, what Jenkins – using De Certeau’s concept<sup>5</sup> – defined as textual poaching. These descriptions of fan activity highlighted how the consumers of TV shows can in turn start producing their own content and create their own network of exchanges, as they share their creations. In the information age, this content creation and cultural and social networking take on an increased importance around the globe. With the development of the Internet and its accessibility, and the industry’s focus on user generated content and multimedia interfaces (Srnicek

2016), fans are offered new platforms to foster their creations and communities. Amongst those new possibilities is Tumblr. Megan DeSouza writes:

The uniqueness of Tumblr lies in several key features. Content can be reblogged with a single click of a button from the dashboard, without ever having to leave the home page. Users can therefore produce a high-volume of posts without ever having to stop scrolling through the dashboard page. This facilitates the consistent consumption of images, content, and media while also promoting consumption to others, while concurrently establishing oneself as a producer of content, through the process of reblogging. (2013, 10)

This particularity of Tumblr, namely the fact that its users can be regarded as content producers whether they be actual authors of the work or not, makes it particularly interesting to study fan activity. The identification of a fan as being a consumer or a producer indeed becomes blurry and multi-layered: not only do they consume media products created by the traditional TV industry, they also produce their own, appropriating the content of their favorite shows. They are as well consumers of other fanarts that they might find on the platform and by reblogging these, they create their own blog in a collage of different reinterpretations of various shows in a unique blog.

Fan productions on Tumblr take on many forms and shapes. Photo set and gifs (Fig. 2), highly popular, highlight a particular passage of an episode, such as this exchange of looks between Lexa and Clarke, lovers in *The 100*. In this post-apocalyptic show, human civilization has largely fled the Earth to live in space. As a test, a hundred young people, including blond and rebellious Clarke, are sent back to verify whether the planet might be habitable again. Those 100 soon discover they are not the only humans on Earth, and soon encounter violent neo-tribes. Lexa leads one of them, and soon a romance develops between Clarke and Lexa. These following screenshots, taken out of their first context and underlined by the classic Tumblr layout, allow the fans to give their relationship renewed importance or a new meaning.



Fig. 2 comdrleksa.tumblr.com, published November 2017, 1268 reblogs

Fanfiction is the second main type of Tumblr post. Using the original narrative and plotline, fans reappropriate and rewrite their own stories (Bronwen 2011). Sometimes sticking closely to the original diegetic universe, or transposing the characters to an entirely different setting, the fans adapt the content to their own wishes. Moreover, Tumblr is also a platform commonly used for the dissemination of fans' own material, drawings or other creations not using the shows' original visual material (Fig. 3).

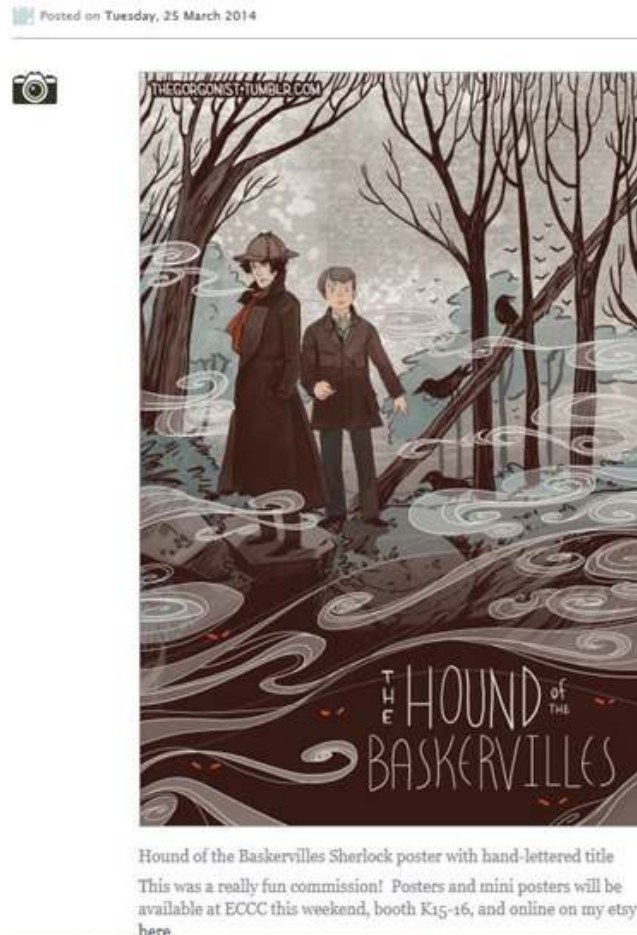


Fig. 3 thegorgonist.tumblr.com, published March 25, 2014, 375 notes

Often dismissed as mere derivation, if not appropriation of cultural goods, this fan activity is increasingly identified by many scholars as a form of free labor. As defined by Tiziana Terranova, free labor is the “creation of monetary value out of knowledge/culture/affect” (2000, 38), an activity enjoyed by the consumer and exploited by the industry, encouraged in the current neoliberal digital economies of entertainment. Indeed, user-generated content adds to the show, in producing not only new images but new meanings and therefore value (Stanfill 2015).

### ***Fans' Preferred Reading: 'Seeing Queerly'***

Jenkins' analysis underlined that fandoms are organized around preferred critical readings (1992). In the case of fandoms on Tumblr, regarding *Sherlock* and *The 100*, as well as many other shows, this preferred reading focuses on the sexuality of the characters. This tendency does not necessarily apply to all blogs, some of which may focus on theories regarding the series plot or the production for instance. Nevertheless, a lot of the fan-produced content hosted on Tumblr by members of *The 100* and *Sherlock* fandoms focus on the homoerotic text or subtext present in the shows. Called “seeing queerly” by Melanie Kohnen (2008, 207), this “desired way seeing” is the fans' acknowledged decision to approach the series through the

particular angle of gender and sexual identity, underlining the potential or realized queerness of its narrative and characters. Queerness is understood in its broader definition, as in the following illustration, underlining Sherlock's queerness and John's potential bisexuality.



Fig. 4 neverendingjohnlock.tumblr.com, published July 28, 2016, 2802 notes

On Tumblr, the “ship” name – name of the fantasized relationship – becomes as important as the name of the show: the first related term associated when one searches “Sherlock” in the Tumblr research bar is “Johnlock”.

A well-known practice of fans in their appropriation of their favorite show’s material is viding, that is the appropriation of video content from for instance a TV show, edited to emphasize a fan’s personal reading of the original material. As Russo studied, in the context of *Star Trek*, viding is particularly used to bring forward homoerotic subtext and render visible the queer dimension of the show (2009). Tumblr user TheAbbeyGrange’s video “He likes boys” illustrates this fan twisting of the show’s narrative to suit the fans’ ideas on Sherlock and John relationship<sup>6</sup>. Hosted on YouTube and totalizing over 277 000 views, the video uses clips from season 3 second and third episodes. In these, Sherlock is “dating” a woman, Janine (but it later turns out it was only for a case he investigates). Wishing to emphasize this relationship was a

lie and affirming Sherlock’s belonging to Watson, this fan producer edits clips from the show with a telling soundtrack: the song “he likes boys” by Simone Battle, the clip reading as Janine’s realization of Sherlock’s love for John. Matching the song’s chorus, she compiles clips that are well known in the fandom for their easy reading as queer moments: the first dinner Holmes and Watson have together, them holding hands, John’s stag night (Fathallah 2015). This is only but one example of the constant decoding and recoding fan produced content on Tumblr achieves to emphasize the desired relationship the fans have for the shows’ characters.

Media representations introduce “truth claims”, explicit or implicit, which, because of their systematicity, shape the common perception of what constitutes society and thus social and political issues (Couldry 2012). The repetition of normative representations excludes non-heterosexual, non-cisgender individuals from what is thought of as making our society. Enlightening data recorded by journalist Heather Hogan on lesbian and bisexual characters on TV demonstrates this underlying homophobia on screen, arguing for instance that only 11% of TV shows between 1976 and 2016 featured lesbian or bisexual characters (Hogan 2016)<sup>7</sup>. Queer representation online can therefore be read as aiming at fixing or challenging the erasure of queer people from mainstream media.

Therefore, I argue that the practice of queer poaching by fan producers on Tumblr is a politically committed form of intervention, aiming for more representation, and equating fan activity to online activism. Moreover, this intervention brings forth a new aspect of fan labor: not only do fans provide added value to the original material, they actually are responding to a discriminatory imbalance in representations that is causing issues to the industry.

### ***Fan Content outside Fandom***

An important aspect of both the *Sherlock* and *The 100* fandoms is their presence outside of the realm of Tumblr. I would here like to emphasize how these Tumblr-based fandoms have invested rather mainstream spaces and have provoked reactions and involvement from the industry. From lead actors being asked their opinions on racy fanart, as Benedict Cumberbatch and Martin Freeman were on the set of “The Late Show with Stephen Colbert” on December 2016 for instance, to memes from the Clexa fandom being picked on by mainstream media (Fig. 4 and 5)<sup>8</sup>, many examples show the new permeability between the fandom and the IRL (in real life) world.



Fig. 5 ClarkeGriffinTexts.tumblr.com, blog since deleted

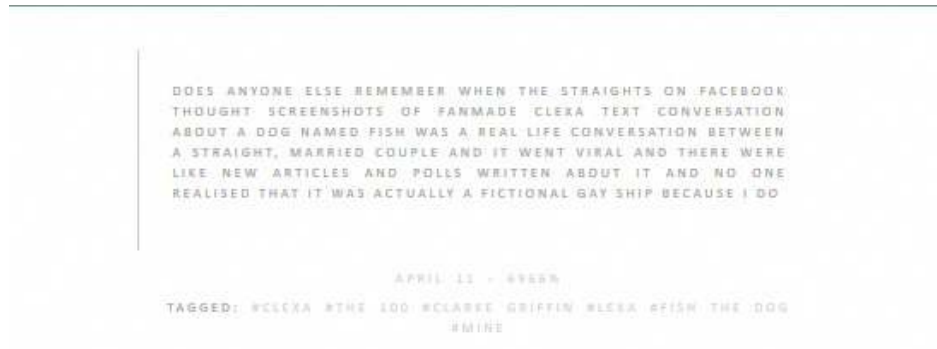


Fig. 6 dykerheights.tumblr.org, april 11 2017, 6966 reblogs

More importantly to this research, the shows' producers themselves engage with the fan communities. If Gatiss and Moffat mostly interacted with their audience through Twitter, *The 100* also has a presence on Tumblr, with an official blog on the platform. Gatiss and Moffat have participated in a #AnswerTime, a sort of Tumblr event where, during a limited amount of time, the guests answer questions asked by Tumblr users. They have directly engaged with fan productions, providing information regarding the series to the renown Sherlockology blog, as well as notably appeared in fan videos<sup>9</sup>. This performance of their persona as producers close to their fans has brought them a reputation of fanboy auteurs (Hills 2012). The producers have recognized the phenomenon of fan fiction and the queering of their characters within the series. The first episode of season three, "The Empty Hearse," clearly exemplifies the way in which the industry acknowledges fan theories. The first minutes of the episode summarize the last scenes of season two (which aired two years prior): Sherlock Holmes's faked death by jumping from the top of St Bartholomew's hospital. But soon new scenes are integrated in the infamous sequence, showing how Sherlock's body was replaced with Moriarty's—who had just shot himself—and Sherlock actually bungee jumped from the roof, and then passionately kissing Molly Hooper, the coroner and his love interest. After over three minutes of this wild scenario, the scene cuts to Inspector Lestrade exclaiming "Bullocks!" revealing the crazy introduction to be the fantasy of Anderson, a reoccurring secondary character most known for one of the series' most famous quote, "Shut up Anderson, you're lowering the IQ of the whole street." Another scenario follows, this time presenting Sherlock's faked death as a way to elope with Moriarty, his lover all along. This theory is revealed to be another of Sherlock's fan's, a chubby girl seemingly embodying the stereotype of the fangirl. Anderson then explains to her he founded this 'club', so that "like minded people could meet and discuss theory"—much like the activity of a lot of fans on Tumblr during the series' hiatus. By integrating these depictions of fans and fan theories, Sherlock's producers wink at the community of their followers, however, they maintain an ambiguous relationship by adopting a very mocking tone. This nod has been picked on by many fans, who sometimes very quickly guessed the opening to be "fan fiction," as shown in various 'reaction videos' they uploaded online<sup>10</sup>.

### Queerbaiting and "Bury Your Gays": Tropes, Performativity and Fan Activism

The important focus of *The 100* and *Sherlock* fandoms on queer readings of the show is confronted in both cases to deception from the developments in their narrative: season 4 of *Sherlock* does not see any evolution in the relationship between John and Sherlock and Lexa is abruptly killed in "Thirteen" (episode 7, season 3). This sparked a growing discontent, crystallized around two tropes: queerbaiting and "Bury Your Gays". Judith Fathallah defines 'queerbaiting' as:



a strategy by which writers and networks attempt to gain the attention of queer viewers via hints, jokes, gestures, and symbolism suggesting a queer relationship between two characters, and then emphatically denying and laughing off the possibility. Denial and mockery reinstate a heteronormative narrative that poses no danger of offending mainstream viewers at the expense of queer eyes (2015, 491).

On the other hand, the "Bury Your Gays" trope refers to another recurring phenomenon in the representation of queer characters on screens, that is, the statistical probability that a LGBT+ character will know a violent death, often deemed unnecessary in the narrative, the phenomenon particularly focusing on queer women. Besides the poor representation in terms of sheer numbers I have mentioned earlier, Hogan (2016) pinpoints the discrimination lesbian and bisexual women are victims of on TV from a qualitative point of view as well. For instance, she argues that, in the minority of shows featuring a queer female character, only 16% of them result in a "happy end."<sup>11</sup>

These issues of representation are primarily narrative tropes, but they also involve the audience and the fans in a particular way. This essay will not linger on whether the queerbaiting in *Sherlock* is real or not nor on symbolical and sociological impacts of Lexa's death. Focusing on the character of Moriarty, played by openly gay actor Andrew Scott, as embodiment of the potentiality of a gay relationship that haunts the entire show, Fathallah (2015) already brilliantly explores the issue of queerbaiting and compellingly argues for the hidden conservatism of *Sherlock* regarding its depiction of masculinity and sexuality. The effects of such lack of representation and even manipulation of the fans are crucial when looking at the young audience they might touch. I here bear in mind Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's plead for thinking queer studies as approaching issues that are capital to the survival of queer youth, a particularly vulnerable community (2012). Acknowledging that these points are of paramount importance in studying queerbaiting and the already substantial scholarship about it, I will rather develop on the significance of these tropes for the fans, the media industry and the fan-producer relationship.

### ***Tropes and Community Building***

To explore how both tropes I am focusing on are impacting the fan-producer relationship and highlighting fan's agency, I will study first how the mobilization against them shapes the fan community itself. Fan studies, when looking at fan activity as resistance, has indeed often limited to an interpretative focus of this creativity rather than an interactive understanding of it (Jones 2014, 89). Studying fandoms on Tumblr highlights the interconnection between community building and resistance against two major tropes.

Parts of the fandoms have indeed structured around the ideas of queerbaiting and Bury Your Gays, highlighting important aspects of fan identity and fandoms. Following Jenkins' analysis, this essay has focused on the definition of the fan through its activeness and outputs. However, the fan is also defined by its interaction with other fans, which become particularly important when studying fandoms. Jin-Shiow Chen notes that fandom is "a multicultural territory, where each fan community subscribes to its own unique media substances, values, and contexts." (2007, 14) Chen's conclusions bring forth the heterogeneity of fandoms, focused around a show but also different "values" or readings they might assign to it. Indeed, fandom is structured around a system of codes, conventions and practices (DeSouza 2013). An easy example of these potential divergences within fandoms would be fan theories regarding the overarching story of a season for instance however, disagreements can also very much focus on the nature of relationships between characters. Analyzing the tropes of queerbaiting and Bury Your Gay and publicly standing against them in one's blog has in fact become a coded social practice for the majority of the *Sherlock* and *The 100* fandoms. It has redefined what being a fan means and what a fan should do to prove their belonging to the fandom. This obviously echoes TwelveClara's blog post that I chose to introduce this article. They underlined not only the queerbaiting at stake in the character of Quinn of the show *Glee* but also the violence of the exchange between "shippers", fans of the same show who nonetheless disagreed on their favorite pairing. Lewis posits that fandoms are a "product of a hierarchical social system in which privilege

and value are accorded to only the few” (Lewis 1992). The fandom is not the equalitarian, democratic, anarchist place it so often claims to be but rather a locus of fight for the most legitimate reading of the shows it focuses on, where – in a bourdieusian reading – cultural and social capitals are actively sought and where adhering to the fight against producers and writers is of the utmost importance. For instance, *The 100* fandom witnessed a schism between the remaining Clexa shippers and the Bellarke shippers, the fans rooting for the relationship between Clarke and Bellamy – a male character. In this opposition, it is even more important for a fan, in order to be legitimate in their position, to reasserts what part of the fandom they identify with, as for instance Hakel-Dama is in the beginning of this post.

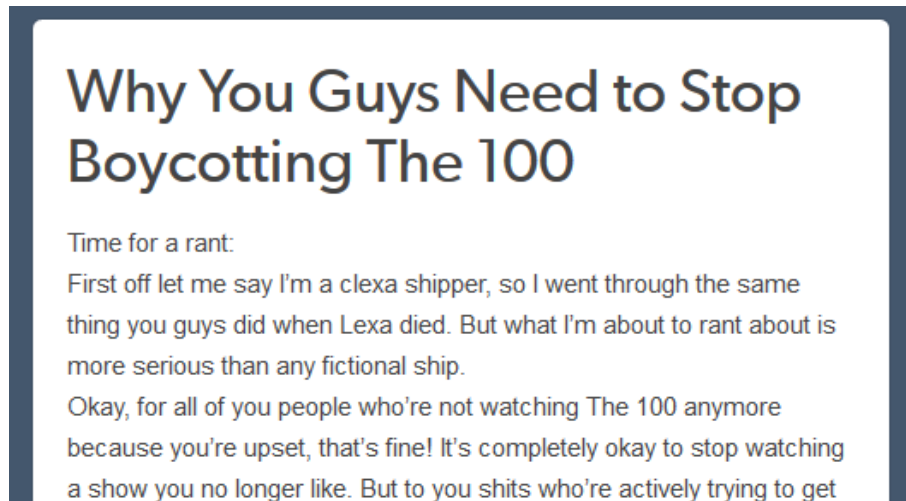


Fig. 6 hakel-dama.tumblr.org, feb 2 2017, 1,4057

Studying the fandom as its own “imagined community” regulated by its own social conventions allows to understand the tropes as both identified by and formative of the fandoms. The multiplicity of platforms enabling this community building surrounding these TV show not only intensify the potential audience investment but also its volatility, and if it is encouraged in some ways, it also sometimes goes against executive interests (Johnson 2007)

### ***Tropes and the Activist Fan***

Not only do the tropes have a performative effect on the structure of fandom, following Nordin’s conclusions about fans’ activism, I will argue that they also increase the political role of the fan (Nordin 2015). Slash - homosexual erotic fan fiction- and ships have been extensively studied. Mirna Cicioni for instance writes about slash’s “subversive potential”, analyzing this practice as a critique by women of the issues of power in heterosexual relationships (Cicioni 1998). Joseph Brennan argues that slashing procures at the same time pleasure, meaning and identity (1996). I would like to add to these approaches a more political, activist definition of the queer readings of fans.

Fans’ agency is striking when looking at what fan production is used for. The importance of the two tropes within the fandoms and how they prompt fans to raise against them is changing the purpose of user-generated content. Prior studies argued that fans kept their creations to themselves (Fiske 1992) and would be uncomfortable with the circulation of their production (Jenkins 2006). Constance Penley’s (1997) leading research on the matter and the following applications of her arguments (Brennan 2014) have presented slashing and shipping as secret refuge for the fantasizing fan. These analyses, if they remain true – for instance, many Tumblr users have spoken of their dislike that Benedict Cumberbatch and Martin Freeman be shown their artwork without their consent– need to be nuanced in the case of activism on Tumblr. Indeed, the fans may not want their productions to be directly taken out of context and shown in public space, however, they want the message carried in their production to be heard and respected by the producers and writers. Many shippers and Tumblr users give to their work the dimension of a proof, in the

case of *Sherlock* for instance, that a relationship would not go against the ‘nature’ of the show - a common argument from writers and or fans not supporting a ship (Scodari and Felder 2000). This constitutes a significant evolution from the traditional approach of user-generated content and fans. Fans themselves recognize their fannish projects as political projects, for they aim at developing and valuing marginalized images in popular media (Busse and Lothian 2017).

Not only is the appropriation and change in meaning of fan production on Tumblr political for its depiction of sexualities erased from the mainstream, but the fans’ wish to spread that queer reading to many, including the media industry, reaffirms the political potential of their online activity. User-generated content provides pleasure and empowerment within the community, and engagement and activism, outside of it. As stated by De Certeau, quoted in Jenkins (2007, 171), the text is “a cultural weapon; a private hunting reserve”. Fans appropriation of a text they deem disrespectful of their community and identity, as they occupy a position of “cultural marginality and social weakness” (ibid., 28), appears as a strong political statement, one that they wish to bring forth to the industry, in hope for actual change.

### **Facing a Wall: The Industry’s Take on Fan Activism**

According to Jenkins, fans find themselves unable to influence the industry for they lack access to “means of commercial cultural production” (Jenkins 2014, 171). The increasing significance of fans’ online activity and content for the industry as well as their strong commitment to better representation for sexual minorities challenges this traditional defeatist view on fan’s weight in media production.

#### ***Interdependence of the Industry and Activist Fans***

The mobilization of Tumblr users and fan activists can have a tremendous impact on a show. Looking at *The 100*, ratings for the Season 4 premiere dropped 32% from the previous season where the character of Lexa dies. Furthermore, in the day following Lexa’s death, the show’s creator Jason Rothenberg lost over 10,000 Twitter followers, and his followers continued to decrease in the following days and weeks (Deshler, 2017). Though this movement has not provoked too dire consequences for the show, which is still airing, the fans engagement around the Bury Your Gays trope clearly presented a threat on the producers.

The definition of queerbaiting by Fathallah raises different issues that I would like to further explore in relation to the media industry. Indeed, according to this definition, queerbaiting is characterized by the intentions of the “writers and networks”. It thus posits the question of the motivation behind queerbaiting. Toby Miller associates it to the appeal of the “pink dollar” (2005, 115), in other words, the increased audience gained by appealing to a niche audience while still targeting a more mainstream one. I would like to suggest another one. Indeed, studies on fans and fandoms have highlighted that the fan is often a white heterosexual woman (Jenkins 2006). Knowing the industry acknowledgment of the fan’s implications, I would in fact argue that queerbaiting may target queer audiences as much as it targets the fandoms - understood as a mostly straight community-, to profit from their involvement and stimulate the following and outputs of an incredibly dedicated public. In other words, I argue that queerbaiting can be read as encouraging the fans’ free labor, providing the shows with free advertising, be it good or bad. De Souza presented the long hiatus in the production of the *Sherlock* series (two years between season 2 and season 3, three years between season 3 and season 4), as a challenge for the fans who turned to creation, fan fiction etc., to maintain the community alive. In her words, “the fandom members have taken control, simply out of sheer necessity of perpetuation” (DeSouza 2013, 28). Building up on DeSouza’s argument I add that without this engagement, the series might not have been able to maintain such a level of mass popularity, leaving several years between each season. The fans may have produced even more content to deal with the hiatus, and these productions were beneficial to the series as it sustained a strong community of fans. The industry is therefore clearly dependent on the fans and the tropes appear as an ambiguous challenge: they not only attest a moral issue in the depiction of minorities on screen and can anger fans, they are also fertile ground for a free workforce to build a strong and committed fanbase.

### *Maintained Hierarchy*

In her PhD thesis, which focuses mainly on *The 100* and “queer grief”, Kira Deshler (2017) precisely reconstitutes the engagement of the show runners with the fandom and their acknowledgement of fans’ concerns regarding the Bury Your Gays trope, prior to airing the episode ‘Thirteen’ (season 3, episode 7). With a writer keeping an eye on popular fan and lesbian forums, the producers quickly reacted when the fans began worrying about Lexa’s future in the series. They therefore invited fans to join the cast on shoot in Vancouver for a day, where Lexa and Clarke’s relationship was strongly emphasized, as apparent in this tweet from Jason Rothenberg, executive producer of *The 100*.



Fig. 7 Jason Rothenberg, Twitter, February 3, 2016

However, a few weeks later aired the episode that triggered the fans’ ire. The producers’ involvement with their fans appears as a performance, a double-sided engagement carefully curated (Hellekson and Busse 2014).

Similarly, *Sherlock* has engaged with fans’ hopes in a transmedia fashion. *Sherlock* producers have created a pseudo-blog for John Watson to encourage fan discussion where they acknowledged the queer possibilities of the show on numerous occasions (Lavigne 2012). Gatiss and Moffat seem to have made of the homoerotic subtext of *Sherlock* not only a homage to the work of Conan Doyle but a tool to anchor the show in modernity. This strategy, though never publicly acknowledged, is picked up by many academic articles and often appears through the producers’ declarations. This acknowledgement is once again double sided. Indeed, the producers not only dismiss the potential for more than friendship between their characters, they also mock the fans who hope for it. The negative depiction of fangirls in the show itself, and so on multiple instances (Kitty in “The Reichenbach Falls”, Anderson in “The Empty Hearse”)

indicates how the producers indulge in policing the fans’ involvement in the series. According to Derek Johnson, producers can “construct ‘acceptable’ fan activity by building critiques of unruly fans directly into the text” (Johnson 2007, 294-295). Defined as fans who “re-state the source material,” and respect the producers as having the final word on a show, Jenkins considers the affirmational fans as the producer-“sanctioned fans” (Jenkins 2013). Hence, Moffat and Gatiss engaging with fandoms and even appearing in fan videos seem to be but another way they reaffirm what is the legitimate reading of *Sherlock* and the legitimate way to be a fan.

As pointed out by Collier, these denigrations of the fans are also part of the fans’ critique. She explains that when fans ask for particular developments in the narrative, they do not only look at the “canonical text” but also the “extra-textual word of the producers”, resulting in the creation of a “hyperdiegetic” world (2012, 4). These interactions between fans and producers can even lead to seemingly positive outcomes, since for instance in the case of *The 100*, fans’ disappointment and outrage led to public apologies from the creator of the show as well as different events.

Indeed, if fandom activity did not lead to a change in the content of the shows, it is slowly disturbing the media industry’s homeostatis. Following the outrage surrounding Lexa’s death in *The 100*, two important decisions took place. First, TV screenwriter gathered in signing the Clexa Pledge. Hosted on the website “LGBT Fans Deserved Better” and accompanied by a fundraiser for the Trevor Project, suicide helpline for LGBT youth – hence bringing what started as fan mobilization closer to traditional and legitimate means of action – the pledge describes in seven points the revindications of the fans (Carbone, n.d.). If this pledge was indeed considered as a progression for LGBT+ representation on TV, following the work of organizations such as GLAAD (Gay and Lesbian Association Against Defamation) that focuses on issues of representation in Hollywood, it has only been signed by 16 producers and writers, mostly at the time of its redaction, and has not been successful at spreading after that crisis moment. The Clexa phenomenon was also the starting point leading to the organization of a convention for LGBT+ women in the media entertainment industry: Clexacon. The first event happened in Las Vegas in 2017 and two other ones are scheduled in 2018, in London as well as Las Vegas. According to their website, the conventions have a double objective: connect and empower. The organizers, who describe themselves as ‘fangirls’ in their interviews (ClexaCon – Interview with the Organizers 2017), planned the event in relation to the Clexa disappointment, as the first occurrence of the convention happened on the one-year anniversary of the episode ‘Thirteen’. In 2017, the convention gathered 2200 persons, according to Variety, who attended panels and meet and greets with various actors and creators of LGBT+ friendly TV shows (*Grey’s Anatomy*, *Wynona Earp*, *The L World*, *Steven Universe* amongst many others) (Ryan 2017).

## Conclusions

Studying *The 100* and *Sherlock*<sup>2</sup> fandoms on Tumblr, this article presented the challenges fan activity and user generated content present for the media industry, in the specific context of queer representation. These issues are increasingly studied by scholars, and I have heavily relied on many theses to produce this research, adopting a media management studies approach in order to underline the evolution of fan activity away from its traditional theorization. Sometimes summarizing other aspects of the topic, I have here presented how this specific fan activity and queer activism posit issues for the media industry and how this focus rejuvenates understandings of fan communities and fan labor.

*The 100* and *Sherlock*<sup>2</sup> fandoms are important user generated content producers. This fan activity, theorized by Jenkins as “textual poaching”, is emphasized by the very structure of the Tumblr website, blurring the delimitations between producers and consumers. Fan-produced content is defined by its emphasis on the queer aspects of the shows. Moreover, fan activity has reached such an importance the media industry acknowledges and engages with it. As their own readings come into friction with the narratives of the show they follow, fans have identified and spoken against two major tropes and topical issues of the representation of LGBT+ people on screens: Bury Your Gays and Queerbaiting. This

engagement shapes fandoms, gather fans around the same issue and redefine what being a fan means. Striving to make private readings public and recognized, the fans become activists, working against queer erasure in the media. This activity, considered free labor for it creates value to the industry, brings not only creative but also social value, as it aims at filling a gap in mainstream representations of sexuality. However, the responses this engagement triggers from the industry often are disappointing to the fans. They in fact remain dominated and disciplined by the producers, who, even though aware of their dependence to the fans and engaging in the discussion surrounding the representation of LGBT+ people, still ultimately impose the legitimate reading and use of their creation. If the antagonism between fans and producers remains, the conversation on queer representation is growing in the media industry. Involvement of lobbies such as the GLAAD (Gay and Lesbian Association Against Defamation) or the creation, following *The 100* outrage, of the ClexaCon and the Writers Pledge demonstrate the burgeoning changes on this topic.

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- 4 Scholars have variously addressed each of these meanings. See, for ex. Russo 2010 and Hampton 2015 for the first one and Lackner et al. 2006 and Lothian et al. 2007 for the second one
- 5 Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley: (University of California Press. 1980)
- 6 TorrentialxRain. *He Likes Boys: Janine & Sherlock (Johnlock)* Video File. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K17SqD-oCYM,2014>.
- 7 Heather Hogan. “Autostraddle’s Ultimate Infographic guide to Dead Lesbian Characters on TV”. *Autostraddle.com*. March 25, 2016. <https://www.autostraddle.com/autostraddles-ultimate-infographic-guide-to-dead-lesbian-tv-characters-332920/>
- 8 One of the most flagrant instances of user generated content stepping out of the fandom zone happened in 2015. Tumblr user ClarkeGriffinTexts created a fanfiction in the form of a text log AU (alternate universe). In this alternate universe, Clarke and Lexa appear as though in a relationship within our world, arguing about Clarke adopting a dog behind Lexa’s back. The post went viral on multiple social media, Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. However, to the “outside world” the fictional nature of the post was not obvious, and it was believed by many to be an actual conversation between a man and his female partner. This episode remains a joke in the fandom.
- 9 The Hillywood Show (2016) *Sherlock Parody by The Hillywood Show*®. Video File. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ArdWL2uKf7k&t=296s>
- 10 Sherlock 3x01 „The Empty Hearse“ - Anderson’s Theory (Reactions Mashup) Video file <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uFYgmPHP748&t=9s>
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