

[Warning, warning, warning. Emergency protective circuit activated. Warning: forty thousand volts.]

Nora: Ah, nothing like catching up on some of your favorite T.V. shows. And you know, it's pretty easy to get hooked on a T.V. show when you really, really love the characters. You can have passionate debates about the lives of Stringer Bell and Omar on "The Wire." Or argue over which character you love most on "Mad Men."

The Web lets people explore their fascination with characters in a more interactive and collaborative way than ever. People create pages, photo galleries, and fan fiction. And with the international reach of the Web, sometimes fans post scenes from shows from other countries to sites like YouTube and painstakingly translate dialogue into other languages. All this is sometimes called "fan labor," and it's part of what makes pop-culture tick today.

The trouble is, sometimes the creators of these characters aren't too thrilled with all that fan labor, for copyright reasons. And even if they see the value of these fan communities, it can be hard to know how to tap into that niche fan base.

CBC producer and Spark pal Clare Lawlor observed the ins and outs of this up close. She's a fan of a soap opera that airs on German T.V., but it also has an international online fan base that includes a large lesbian following. Put the web, the fans, and the soap opera together, and you get a fascinating look at how T.V. is morphing in the twenty-first century.

[Intro of James Blunt's song "Stay the Night"]

Clare Lawlor: This is the theme song to the German soap, "Hand aufs Herz." Don't worry if you haven't heard of it...it seems like most Germans haven't either! But over the past month, I followed this small soap into the ongoing battle between fan sites and corporate copyright holders.

[James Blunt's song ending - "Stay the night. Yeah, the night."]

Clare Lawlor: Hand aufs Herz, which means, "Hand on Heart," is basically a German "Glee" knock-off. But somehow, between the songs and all the crazy soap opera drama, something really special is happening.

[Jenny's first day in class is played.]

Transcription graciously provided by JemmaFan, "Bern"

Julian Götting: Guten Morgen! Das ist Jenny Hartmann.

Jenny: Hallo.

Emma: Ich bin Emma.

Clare Lawlor: Jenny Hartmann and Emma Müller are two eighteen-year-old women, and they are falling in love. And I am totally glued to my computer, watching them do it.

So how did I get so hooked on a small subplot on a soap that doesn't even air in this country? Well, a crazy gang of German Jemma fans - "Jenny" and "Emma" together is "Jemma," get it? Okay. - so, these German Jemma fans have been isolating from the full show just the scenes that actually feature or affect Jenny and Emma. Then, they package them together, add subtitles - in six languages - and finally, post them all on a YouTube channel called "jennyandemma." Essentially, they're creating their own show out of an existing one. And man, it is my most favorite show in the whole wide world. But, a couple of weeks ago, tragedy struck. YouTube pulled down all the subtitled Jemma clips. And I kind of lost my mind.

[Jenny admitting her crush on Emma.]

Jenny: Emma, ich bin verknallt! In Dich! Kein Spiel... kein Sport und... auch keine Wissenschaft.

Clare Lawlor: Did you understand that? Me either! But it was apparently Jenny telling Emma that she has a big crush on her! Are you starting to feel my pain? Well...so, were thousands of other dykes across the globe. And all of a sudden, a giant lesbian tsunami was surfing the internet in search of Jemma clips. They crashed the server at a fan forum, and then messages started popping up on other popular lesbian sites. Bootlegged clips would arise on YouTube, and other video streaming sites, but as soon as word spread about a new destination, it was down within hours.

But our collective frustration was nothing compared to the people at the now defunct jennyandemma YouTube channel. This is one of their translators: Utu.

[Clip 1: Utu]

Utu: It was really frustrating. You know, we don't lose our videos, or our translations, we have them all stored somewhere else. What's really painful is to lose the community - you have this huge community of

Transcription graciously provided by JemmaFan, "Bern"

people who've followed the story together, and have commented on the videos and joked about things, and speculated about things, and are participating in this together online, and then it all just disappears! And then also just the general frustration that we don't feel like we're doing anything to harm the show, and in fact, you know, we feel like, hey, you know, where would this hype and this buzz be, if it weren't for our offering the show in, you know, six languages? Who around the world would've heard of them?

Clare Lawlor: Ironically enough, that was part of the problem. See, the people at jennyandemma had done such a fantastic job of subtitling, and distributing the clips, that the production company was now exercising their copyright. But knowing of the growing international popularity of the Jemma storyline, the show's German broadcaster, shocked everyone by mounting their own Jemma page. Which seemed like a totally excellent solution for everyone...until they actually did it. See, there are two big problems with the company's page: First off, as a fan, I don't think the clips they chose adequately convey the nuances and intricacies of Jenny and Emma's tortured romance. But more importantly, there aren't any subtitles!

But before everyone can freak out, another lesbian stepped up to solve the problem. Doreen Reinbacher quickly pulled together a website called "jemmainternational," where she started posting translated transcripts of the legally available clips.

[Clip 2: Doreen Reinbacher]

Doreen Reinbacher: I don't know what happened. It's...they just took off like crazy. I get e-mails from like, Arkansas, and...and Indonesia! And um, I mean, there are like even people in Algeria, and in Egypt, and in Borneo. All these places watching that storyline. That's incredible. It's just amazing.

Clare Lawlor: So the transcript site was totally taking off, but the truth is, the process is well, a little bit clumsy. Which is why within a week, the women running the original jennyandemma YouTube channel were back online with a new fansite, featuring some excellent technology. They made available a piece of software that lets Jemma fans superimpose their subtitles over the T.V. station's legally available clips. And within five days of launching, they had over twenty-three thousand page views, from seventy countries: including Bahrain, Iraq, Kuwait, Guatemala, and at least one from Canada - me! In fact, so many

people have been drawn in to help out, that they are now starting to offer clips in nine languages! Including Chinese - traditional and simplified.

So now, Jenny and Emma can be enjoyed by even more lesbians around the globe. And who knows? Maybe even some straight people will start watching this show.

For Spark, I'm Clare Lawlor, in Winnipeg.

Nora: Hand aufs Herz is just one fascinating example of something that's going to happen more and more for broadcasters all over the world. As traditional broadcasting and T.V. licensing - which typically works on a country-by-country basis - meets up with international fan communities on the web.

And that's why we wanted to talk about it. It had us wondering, how can broadcasters protect their content and also appeal to these new fans? What strategies can work?

And that's where Xiaochang Li comes in. She's a digital strategist at Weber Shandwick's Digital Communications practice, as well as a fellow with 'Futures of Entertainment,' which brings together academia and industry to talk about these sorts of issues.

Hi Xiaochang!

Xiaochang: Hey Nora!

Nora: So the German broadcaster had a strategy to address the interest that this show was generating – they posted the clips to their own website without subtitles. So as a digital strategist, what do you think of that strategy?

Xiaochang: You know, the reaction to the popularity of the show was based on a very specific niche audience, and the difficulty that a broadcaster faces is that they're very much set in a broadcast mentality where they want to appeal to the greatest mass audience that they can.

Nora: Right.

Xiaochang: And that very much necessarily means sort of creating the lowest barrier of entry. Which, in this case, means adding nothing on to the videos, in terms of subtitles, and sort of trying to appeal to the largest common denominator. Whereas the actual appeal of the show, internationally, was to a very specific transnational niche audience based on their specific

interpretations and interests in two of the characters on the show. So I think there is already there a disconnect that needs to be addressed, that needs...for the broadcasters to step back and say, well, what is our goal here, really? Is it to continue to drive people to our site? Is it to ensure that people watch content on our site? Do we want to captivate these specific international fans? Or do we just want them to continue to do what they're doing and wish them well?

Nora: So from the perspective of just being a savvy twenty-first century broadcaster, what do you think they should have done?

Xiaochang: A couple of things. I think they should have first considered what their goal was. Because if it's about driving people to the site, at the end of the day, you're not going to do so by alienating some of your biggest advocates.

Nora: Hm.

Xiaochang: Right? You know, people aren't watching this content elsewhere because they want to be vindictive or they don't want to give your show traffic. They love your show.

Nora: Right.

Xiaochang: Given the opportunity, they will promote it in any way they can. And this is the ways that they're finding to do it. I think they have to look at, well, what's being offered here that we don't offer on their site. And this is everything from this sort of technical side the user experiences, in terms of the translations, and the fact that what we're ultimately seeing is not about the content, it's about the community that's being built up around the content. They're using the content as a vehicle to talk to each other, to create a discourse around the issues, around the characters, to really also curate specific scenes that articulate some of their social values.

Nora: Yeah, I mean, one of the women that Clare uh, spoke to in her piece lamented the loss of the community more than the actual content itself. So, what role does the community play in creating online hits these days?

Xiaochang: I mean, especially with international content, there is such an immense social system around how people circulate and distribute that in an ad hoc manner online. I mean, if you look at the history of fan-subtitling or fansubbing - across, especially East Asian content - fansubbing arguably started in the mid-eighties with anime fan clubs and they, in turn, started subtitling the content. Which, at that time cost about four thousand dollars per episode for a fan to subtitle because it...the kind of equipment necessary was so immense. The kind of time they had to devote to it was so immense. I mean,

we're talking about VHS cassettes that you have to time and synch up to one another.

Nora: Wow.

Xiaochang: Um, you know, now it's much easier but they still put the kind of time and devotion into it. It's a multi-step process. We're talking about not only translation, but editors, spot editors, people who time - who watch carefully and time when people are speaking so that all the subs synch up, people who encode the content, people who encode it in different sort of compression systems so that there's different file formats for various fans to use depending on what their PC systems are.

Nora: Hm.

Xiaochang: And it's really just for putting content out there so that fans can talk about it and share it with one another. And with these communities that we've seen that have a very long established international, sort of subtitling and circulation process, they actually went and created a market for a content that didn't have a market there before.

Anime in the U.S. and in the West overall, is now a much larger market in part because of these fansubbers. And we're seeing the same thing happen with um, primetime soap operas from Asia, that through fansubbers, are now seeing online platforms that are licensing content and using actually fansubbed content and negotiating deals both with fansubbers and with the Asian licensing companies so that they have sort of a Hulu-esque platform that is now advertising-supported.

What sort of so-called "piracy" does, is it answers a market demand that's not being met elsewhere.

Nora: Right. And so in the case of um, anime and the uh, Asian um, primetime dramas, were the content creators kind of turning a blind eye to all this fansubbing and stuff that was going on?

Xiaochang: You know, early on in anime, the content creators very explicitly turned a blind eye to what was happening. There are some more tensions happening now with some of the rights-holders for the East Asian soap operas just because you know, we're all in one space now - everyone's online, everyone's sort of looking at the same things, and there's a new sort of land grab happening. But, by and large, there has been a blind eye turned - so long as they don't have an existing licensing deal or an existing market that they're trying to reach there. What a lot of anime fansubbing groups have as either an

explicit or an unofficial policy, is that they will stop subtitling once there is a deal inked, because the goal is to promote the content, it's not to sort of cannibalize that market.

Nora: So what's the line for broadcasters, though? I mean, if I'm imagining that somewhere down the road I might want to license my content to other markets, then how do I know whether I'm, you know, cutting off my nose to spite my face by turning a blind eye to...to what uh, fans are doing?

Xiaochang: Well, I mean, I think you have to ask yourself a couple of questions. The first is that, is taking down this content from a YouTube or other share platforms really going to do anything? I mean, fans are very smart. And if you're taking it down and not providing them the same kind of facilities and user experience and communities that they want to have, to share and discuss this content, then they will continue to find other ways to do it.

Nora: You know, I was thinking about the success of "Glee" which has been very loosey-goosey about letting people um, do like tribute videos where people will put together montages of the material and post it to YouTube, and a lot of these things are very lovingly uh, timed out, and so on.

I know that you've authored a paper called - or co-authored a paper - called "If It Doesn't Spread, It's Dead" about this idea of viral, spreadable media online. So, I mean, ultimately, what are the lessons for traditional broadcasters?

Xiaochang: As a traditional broadcaster, as a handful of people in a room making decisions, you're never going to be able to anticipate what people really want. Even when they look at the same content, different groups of people are seeing different things. And if you give them an opportunity to articulate and share the things that they're seeing, and in that way, connect with other fans who see the same things as they do, who interpret the show in the same ways, you're going to give them a bigger opportunity to promote your content to other niche circles that you can't imagine wants to see it.

And I think the expectations of audience size are going to start changing drastically as we can start measuring how many people globally are looking at things across different channels in different niches. Um, and you won't be able to meet those expectations if you don't allow them to.

Nora: Fascinating. Thanks so much for telling us about it.

Xiaochang: No problem. Thank you so much for having me.