

## Unboxing TV

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Both the existence of this conference and of this panel testify to our shared rethinking of what constitutes TV. Certainly in studying TV fans, we can't ignore that TV is no longer limited to a single box. It's commonplace behavior for TV fans to download episodes onto their PCs, edit them into music videos and share them on social networking sites, alongside art and fiction envisioned in the same televisual universe. Viewers also share versions of TV episodes small enough to be viewed on video Ipods, or burn them onto disc and send them off to fellow fans. For contemporary fan studies, TV as a practice has moved far beyond the actual television set.

But I've been thinking about what methodological questions arise with this shift in approach. What is our purpose here, in our (academic) movement to "unbox" TV or consider its extensions? Are we reconfiguring our definition of TV, or solidifying it by establishing what is peripheral? Or are we not concerned with definition at all, but more with the discourses surrounding TV, and how they're shifting to encompass a wider scope?

My take on this is influenced by the evolution of genre studies. Scholars studying genre originally sought to achieve either a focused or comprehensive definition of a given genre; more recent work in genre studies instead approaches genre not as defined on high, but rather as dependent on the shifting articulations of viewers and producers, as elusive discourse rather than object with clear boundaries.

Taking a cue from genre studies, I'm especially interested in how viewers themselves perceive TV, and how viewer discourses on TV are in turn influencing how the industry markets TV programs. As fan behavior influences production discourse (with official websites etc. mimicking fan creativity), casual viewers encounter industrially articulated discourses which echo fan perceptions of TV as a medium.

Those perceptions include the notion that TV is an imaginative space, a ludic storyworld rather than an isolated set of episodes, and that viewers can engage with, or even alter, that storyworld. Fans see TV as a malleable set of extensions, with the center perhaps mattering less and less. Such a flexible viewer-held notion of what constitutes TV may seem to dilute notions of TV and threatens to overlook medium specificity. However, we must acknowledge the reality and specificity of our converged, multi-media cultural sphere. For many viewers, engagement with the television text takes place within a crossmedia space, and it is that converged reality that is relevant to them, rather than the actual airing of a given TV program on their TV screen at a given time. Aware of this viewing reality for *some* of their viewers, TV producers in turn acknowledge it and incorporate it into their websites and in their on air program advertising. Thus, TV programming (and its extensions) hail viewers who may have more traditional conceptions of TV as a medium as if they already inhabit a converged, interactive crossmedia sphere.