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## Hating yet loving *The Bachelor Australia*

### Abstract

This essay is an examination of hate-watchers of reality television with particular focus on the most recent series of romance reality show *The Bachelor Australia*. It offers an explanation of why audiences will continue to loyally watch a show that they profess to hate and the interactive experiences that support and justify this type of viewing.

Based on both primary and secondary research and supported by a range of theoretical studies, this discussion will consider the history of participatory audiences and the importance of online interactivity. It will touch upon the ideas of surveillance and the spectacle of reality TV, and the role television producers play in courting the hate-watchers to broaden their audience reach.

The viewpoint for this research is as a neutral observer, having not watched *The Bachelor Australia* or participated in online discussion but instead having watched those who watched.

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When bachelor Blake dumped final contestant Sam shortly after his on-air proposal that concluded series two of *The Bachelor Australia*, broadcast, print and online media cashed in. It was the twist that producers could only dream about in terms of boosting audience engagement, providing a multitude of media spin-offs and guaranteeing the future of a planned third series. The success of the series and aftermath, which both proved to be ratings winners, can in part be linked to the successful engagement of viewers online. In particular a relatively new genre of television viewers, the hate-watchers, were drawn to the show by their reading and participation in an online satirical blog. They professed to enjoy the show in an ironic sense, claiming not to be fooled by the fabricated pretence. But by watching they too became a part of the producer-manipulated reality TV audience.

Television participatory fan culture is well documented and researched by scholars such as Henry Jenkins, S. Elizabeth Bird and Mark Andrejevic. What started out as fan mail, soon developed into a broad range of participatory practices including fan magazines or 'fan-zines' where fans would develop their own plotlines and characters in response to the narrative presented by television producers. Initially distributed in paper format at fan conventions, fan-zines moved online with the advent of the internet. They formed the basis for discussion and debate amongst both fan communities and with TV producers who saw the potential of courting input from fans in setting the direction for future episodes.

Jenkins argues that that through collaboration interactive audiences gained increasing power and autonomy in their relationship with media producers and owners. He discusses online fandom as being

an example of “collective intelligence”, where the knowledge of the individual when shared with others combines to form an expert “knowledge community” online, as theorized by Pierre Levy in 1997 (Jenkins 2002, p. 2).

By contrast academic S. Elizabeth Bird argues that media producers by offering and encouraging online interactivity are increasing control over fans, co-opting them to participate under imposed terms and conditions that satisfy the agenda of the industry. She believes that for online content creation there is “increasing evidence that the surveillance and disciplinary functions of those controlling the online environment may be outweighing its liberatory potential” (Bird 2011, p.9)

Studies of fan culture by Andrejevic conclude that the motivation for this free fan labour is driven by a sense of belonging to the inside group of fans, those with perceived influence over TV producers. Fans freely give time and contribute ideas for the satisfaction of being involved and collectively creating an improved output or product. The trade off may be that through this interaction producers are thereby watching and manipulating the fan audience, but for true fans it is a small price to pay.

It was not only the ideas of fans that producers were beginning to pay attention to when they moved online, but also their methods. Fans were early adopters of web technology, and producers also wanted to join the discussion. Jenkins in his discussion of Star Trek online fans asserts their early web presence as being “a model for other fan communities to create forums for debating interpretations, networks for circulating creative works, and channels for lobbying the producers” (Jenkins 2002 p.3).

Online fan communities in the early days of the web had huge and sudden growth. In doing so, some sections of the original off-line fan community were left behind and felt alienated. There was a sense for some that these global online communities were simply too large, too crowded and male dominated because of the technical skills required for entry. Ultimately however online fandom has created “something much more powerful than the sum of its parts” (Jenkins 2002, p. 4), by bringing together diverse groups from across the globe to participate and share knowledge

The growth in fan communities also enabled many women to develop technical skills in order to contribute. Both despite and because of the tremendous growth of the internet, women have built successful and enduring online fan communities. In the world of fandom overall, domination of the ‘fanboy’ looks set to be eclipsed by the rise of the ‘fangirl’ as she is recognised by producers for her spending power and targeted through cinema in series such as *Twilight* and *The Hunger Games* and in television through *Sex and the City*, *Gossip Girl* and *The Bachelor*.

By 2006, recognising the persistence and reach of online fan communities, the newest trend of TV show official websites was to include a character blog. The idea was that by engaging with fans, albeit in a

fabricated way through a fictional character, a closer connection would be established. Many of the blogs allowed for comment and participation by viewers, although also required registration hence the trade off for participation was increased producer surveillance. Examples included the blog of character Dr Robin Scorpio from *General Hospital*, and Joe the barman from *Grey's Anatomy*.

The blogs cut between reality and fiction, breaking through the 'the fourth wall' between viewer and TV broadcast where the fiction is temporarily suspended while a character turns to address the audience. This narrative convention was first seen in series like *Malcolm in the Middle* and more recently demonstrated in *Modern Family*, where characters address the audience to add more substance or an alternate viewpoint to the story. In the case of *Modern Family* in particular, there is a sense of surveillance built into these interactions – not unlike the video confessions on TV reality shows *Big Brother*, *Survivor* and of course *The Bachelor*.

Curiously both the *General Hospital* and *Grey's Anatomy* blog examples were discontinued in 2009, indicating producers had moved on from this type of fabricated fan discourse. In reality TV series, where there were essentially no fictional characters because these were real people, online official blogs were often the voice of the producer penned by the show host, a former show contestant or a celebrity blogger.

But it is often the non-corporate blog, the one written by fans for fans that attracts the most attention as witnessed *The Bachelor Australia* series one and series two. During both series Rosie Waterland, from website Mamamia.com.au became a blogging star for her witty and ironic weekly commentary. Before turning to an examination of Waterland's blog, and the influence it had on viewers of *The Bachelor Australia*, it is important to consider it in the context of the website where it originated.

In many ways Mamamia is an extension of the female online fan communities. As the name would suggest, written for women by women, the site mixes feminist commentary, parenting tips, fashion news and current affairs, with entertainment news and 'fluff'. Essentially it is an online tabloid with a feminist side and perceived social conscious. Commencing as a staff writer in 2012, Waterland is now the editor of the Rogue section, "Mamamia's space for fun, viral and random content, with everything from feminism to pop-culture" (mamamia.com.au, 2014). Within the Rogue space Waterland's satirical blog on *The Bachelor* found a suitable home and a receptive audience.

The clear audience for Mamamia, and therefore Waterland's blog, is young, educated women, a demographic recognised as significant in their spending power and thereby extremely attractive to media producers and advertisers. Building on the success of her *The Bachelor Australia* blog from 2013, Waterland had a loyal fan-base with high expectations of her commentary on the 2014 series. There is

much evidence to suggest that her blog drew audiences to the TV show, in particular the hate-watchers or ironic-watchers.

First named in 2012 in relation to anti-fans of now-defunct US TV series *Smash*, the hate-watcher is a fan that knowingly watches a TV program because it is so bad. They then engage, pre-dominantly online, with other hate-watchers to discuss the failures of particular plotlines or actions of an individual character. There is a position of superiority assumed in the viewpoint of the hate-watcher, in that they purport to be watching understanding that this is mediated and not real while assuming there are other viewers who watch believing reality TV is the truth.

Dana Cloud in her 2010 article *The Irony Bribe and Reality Television*, argues that in fact these viewers are maintaining a simultaneous investment in the show experiencing both “the pleasure of the romantic fantasy and the pleasure of irony in recognising the fantasy’s folly” (Cloud, 2010 pg 414). In doing so they are subjected to the “irony-bribe” where they believe they are “somehow outside of the fantasy and its spectacular failures to deliver on its promises” (Cloud, 2010 pg 416), yet in reality they are still viewing and thereby supporting the show. Hate-watchers regard *The Bachelor* “as ‘real’ and ‘not-real’ and therefore worth viewing and worthless at the same time” (Cloud, 2010 pg 415).

Research conducted with audiences who identified as watching the most recent series of *The Bachelor Australia* in an ironic sense confirms not only the fact that Waterland’s blog influenced their viewing stance, but also their viewing and post-viewing behaviour. One viewer admitted not watching any of series one as she was overseas, but instead as a Mamamia reader had read Waterland’s blog each week. This convinced her to watch series two, but only in a self-perceived ironic sense with Waterland’s blog in hand. She admitted that along with friends, all educated women in the final year of university studies, she watched avidly twice a week or online to catch up and then spent further time discussing the show afterwards. There was a sense of not wanting to miss a thing, in terms of both what was televised and what Waterland said in response.

The question is why smart young women would buy into such a fantasy that presents such an anti-feminist narrative, with multiple women competing for one man, where women are objectified and put on display for mass-criticism and where the ultimate achievement is in catching the bachelor.

Identifying as a feminist, another research subject found no ideological conflict in watching *The Bachelor Australia*. She recognised this as fantasy but accepted the reality that women had made a choice to be on the show and in doing so were empowered. Her stance was firmly that these women had chosen to be objectified or portrayed in this way and rather than being critical, she supported their choices.

Indeed there is a sense of empowerment presented in the show in that the beauties have a choice in whether they accept the rose offered by the bachelor at the end of each episode, thereby ensuring they remain as contestants for the following week. However as academic Rachel Dubrofsky points out this perceived empowerment is a charade. “When all is said and done, the empowered choices a woman has are few: she can decide to stay only if the bachelor offers her this choice, or she can reject the bachelor’s invitation to stay” (Dubrofsky, 2011 pg 120).

The conflict between career and marriage is also skilfully avoided in the construct of *The Bachelor*, demonstrating how “contemporary media culture frequently usurps and contorts feminist discourse” (Lindfield, 2013 pg 389). In all 18 US series and in both Australian series, contestants on the show have been educated, middle class women either entering or already established in their careers. There is no post-feminist tension presented between career and family. “Indeed having a career seems naturally to lead onto marriage on *The Bachelor* rather than present an obstacle in the quest to have it all” (Dubrofsky, 2011 pg 114)). By presenting women who have seemingly resolved the career question, who are now moving forward willingly to resolve the issue of marriage and children and by packaging this within a discourse of empowerment, producers have eased the path for a much wider audience to immerse themselves in the fantasy without any sense of guilt or feminist conflict. The show successfully presents the “post-feminist nirvana” a “utopic postfeminist space where women exist” in a “peaceful un-conflicted state” (Dubrofsky, 2011 pg 124).

The targeted audience for *The Bachelor* matches closely the demographics of contestants on the show, females who are young, single, educated and primarily middle class. Contestants on the show present as images of the perfect woman; similar body types, not too tall or too short, and without visual disabilities. They are women prepared to primp and preen ready to present in bikini or ball gown as the show demands. As such they are media bodies modified both by technology and for technology to enhance the spectacle for the viewer. The irony-watcher finds pleasure in viewing the spectacle of how desperate these women are to find love, or how hopelessly they fail. They maintain a sense of detachment towards contestants despite their obvious similarities which then justifies their claim to be viewing ironically.

Confirming this viewpoint, interview subjects compared their watching of *The Bachelor Australia* as being akin to watching a car crash, “where you know you should really look away but you just can’t because you don’t want to miss a thing” (D. Wilkinson, interview, 1 November 2014). The crash that viewers of *The Bachelor* are hoping to witness is in seeing a contestant unravel on the show emotionally. Dubrofsky calls this ‘the money shot’ (Dubrofsky, 2011 pg 68) where a contestant breaks-down emotionally on camera, storms off in disgust or fights openly with other contestants.

For producers these scenes are the rating winners, and thereby the money making events. For contestants these emotional outbursts generally result in their demise. A woman who presents as emotionally unstable is considered unfit for love in the constructed romance reality world of *The Bachelor* and is therefore eliminated soon afterwards. “The unruly woman violates the unspoken feminine sanction against ‘making a spectacle’ of herself” (Dubrofsky, 2011 pg 84). Contestants must have the correct measure of emotion and only distribute it at the appropriate time in order to remain as viable love interests. There is a requirement to show a certain “economy of emotion – not too much and not too little” (Dubrofsky, 2011 pg 53) and they must be capable of delivering real emotions during unreal situations such as in the video confessional.

The confessional is a reality TV method of revealing the self “a means of proving or verifying ones self-knowledge and self-awareness and that this (thereby) works in a therapeutic capacity” (Dubrofsky citing Andrejevic, 2011 pg 92). It also serves to highlight the surveillance aspect of the genre, where similar to Bentham’s panopticon, a prison organised around a central tower where a guard can see into every cell, confessors are aware they are being watched and this thereby regulates their behaviour and emotions accordingly. Highly mediated and regulated both by the technology of surveillance and by the production and editing process, confessionals are an important part of the narrative within *The Bachelor*. They aim to create a connection with the audience through a demonstration of authenticity in emotion and yet highlight the contrived relationship between contestant, producer and viewer.

The online relationship between producers and viewers is likewise contrived. There is much to suggest that producers of *The Bachelor Australia* were not blind to the impact of Waterland’s blog in attracting a wider audience, and that they actively encouraged its success. For example Waterland was offered pre-screening access to each episode to allow her time to compile her blog. Her commentary also featured prominently on the official *The Bachelor Australia* Facebook timeline, significantly more than the official blog penned by former series one contestant Ali.

Ali’s (self-awareness) blog began “I have absolutely no regrets about going on the show because I learned so much about myself. In order to find a special someone, you need to know yourself and love yourself” (Ali 2014). By contrast Waterland’s ironic version commenced “Season 2 of The Bachelor Australia is officially here and already I can’t even deal because the first shot is of him doing some serious beach-gazing from a sexy, bachelor cliff top. Because pensive. Because looking for love. Because Bachelor” (Waterland 2014). It is little wonder that viewers preferred the Waterland version.

As the series progressed, Waterland ironically highlighted the blatant product placement within the show by continually mentioning the jeweller BUNDA (all in uppercase) in her blog. By episode 19 the irony escalated to the ridiculous with her statement:

“Bachie is off to a jewellery store to pick a ring for the lucky lady at the end. And because BUNDA it really looks like they’ve BUNDA got a really important deal BUNDA going with BUNDA, I feel BUNDA like I should BUNDA mention that the jewellery store he BUNDA goes to is BUNDA called BUNDA. BUNDA. (Can I have something free now?)”. (Waterland 2014)

In reward for her ironic product placement Waterland was indeed gifted with a pair of diamond earrings by Bunda at the conclusion of the series, which she proudly featured on Instagram and her Facebook timeline. The inter-dependent nature of online interactivity and television broadcast was thereby clearly revealed.

In examining hate-watchers of reality TV it is important to trace the history of participatory fandom to establish the motivation behind fan engagement online, and the willingness of fans to offer free labour and thereby submit to increased producer surveillance. This provides insight into the activity of producers in the online space, and the courting of fans by the offer and promotion of interactive experiences. While hate-watchers maintain they view shows like *The Bachelor* from a distance, comparable to viewers of a spectacle, there is evidence to suggest they maintain a position of both detachment and engagement simultaneously. Despite the gender stereotypes and anti-feminist premise, producers have successfully crafted the narrative of the show so that it presents the ideas of female empowerment and fulfilment via true love in parallel and without conflict. Perhaps the ultimate irony of watching *The Bachelor Australia*, is that love it or hate it TV ratings do not discern between fans and hate-watchers. The contribution of each fan base in terms of commercial success is identical - the producers are the ones having the ‘ironic’ last laugh.

Judi Wilkinson

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