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Lost spoiler practices: Online interaction as social participation

Ödül Gürsimsek and Kirsten Drotner

Institute for the Study of Culture | Media Studies, University of Southern Denmark

Abstract:

The American television network ABC's serialized drama *Lost* (2004-10) is a key example of recent media culture where both viewers and producers utilize a range of digital media tools to advance the narrative: producers through transmedia storytelling strategies and the creation of complex narratives, and viewers through tracing, dismantling – and sometimes questioning – content in order to create coherent meanings in the maze of narratives. Online audiences, such as spoiler communities, may uncover components of transmedia storytelling, discuss their validity and enhance them with individual and collective content production, thus negotiating purposes and interpretive practices with producers and amongst themselves. Through critical discourse analysis of key instances where the *Lost* community collaborates over resources beyond the official *Lost* transmedia narratives, this article argues and documents that interactions between *Lost* audiences and producers operate as forms of social participation when spoiler-seeking audiences work to unravel, challenge and predict the narrative while the producers seek to orchestrate transmedia storytelling experiences. Our results serve as a sobering empirical critique of the more celebratory claims made about the emancipatory potentials of participatory online practices.

Keywords: Transmedia storytelling, participatory culture, *Lost*, participation, spoilers, critical discourse analysis, audience practices.

Introduction

Contemporary digital culture prompts active participation through the use of digital technologies which afford easier access to tools of production and sharing (Erstad 2010). In stimulating such ways of connecting with others, “contemporary online communication is

becoming increasingly dependent upon collaboration, participation and content creation on the part of digital technology users utilizing several media channels and multimodal expressions for cross-media communication” (Sandvik 2010: 1). Cross-media communication is not a new form of narrative, since art forms such as theater, opera and hybrid arts have for long employed different media to sustain a coherent experience, as has television (Lehtonen 2001). Expanding narrative content in the form of posters, previews and other marketing devices is also an established part of media production. What is new are the ways in which producers and audiences engage in ongoing, public interactions about content development to the extent that narrative flows become more inconclusive and fluid. American media scholar Henry Jenkins terms these interactions transmedia storytelling (Jenkins 2006). This is a method by which producers first supplement the main narrative of, for example, a book or television series by distributing predetermined parts of the plot through media channels such as television, digital gaming, the internet, made-for-mobile short episodes (mobisodes) and other media forms. Then audiences trace these different paths to piece together an overall meaning, producing new interpretive paths in the process. While Jenkins and others focus on the ways in which producers seek to orchestrate narratives through transmedia storytelling, other researchers focus on ways in which audiences engage with so-called user-generated content across a variety of platforms (Evans 2011; Journet 2010). Some of these studies explore the narrative complexities and aesthetic properties of transmedia storytelling (Clarke 2010; Gray 2010; Mittell 2006, 2012-13). Less has been made about the interactions between producers and audiences involved in transmedia storytelling. Uncovering these interactions through discursive analysis is precisely the focus of the present study. In particular, we argue that these interactions are most fruitfully approached as socio-communicative practices involving power negotiations; and hence they are examples of participation in a sociological sense (Carpentier 2011).

American television network ABC’s television series *Lost* (2004-2010) depicts the story of a group of plane crash survivors on a mysterious, uncharted island. The series offers a prime example of such interactions in that *Lost* producers utilized new media tools to further the narrative through transmedia strategies, while digitally-connected audiences sought to locate information, dismantle and evaluate its legitimacy, add their own contents, and accordingly reconsider the producers’ transmedia narrative by engaging in so-called spoiler activities. Spoilers usually refer to information culled by audiences about parts and sections of a television program which are yet to be broadcast to the public. More specifically, this study analyzes the spoiler activities found on the key *Lost* weblog Darkufo and focuses on the discursive practices that occur as audiences interact with each other and with the producers over new information. Since these online interactions between producers and audiences and amongst audience members themselves came to a head at the end of season three (2007), this phase offers a precise analytical lens through which the transmedia practices may be illuminated and empirically documented. Therefore, this article seeks to answer the following question: In which ways did the online audiences of the transmedia production *Lost* respond to the information published online by *Lost* blogger

Darkufo regarding the final episode of season three; how did producers interact with this process; and how may these interactions be seen as examples of participation?

Online participation: interaction and social practice

Media scholars studying new media tools and the productivity of internet users agree that the advent of continuously developing digital technologies impact on audiences' communicative patterns and routines (Andrejevic 2008; Erstad 2010; Gilje 2008; Jenkins et al. 2009; Russo 2009). A focal empirical interest in these communicative practices is the collective, participatory activities that emerge from engagement with a particular form of media, and a focal conceptual interest is to uncover these practices as examples of participation. Jenkins is a key voice here, stating that active online participation implies a shift towards what he terms a 'participatory culture', a term that "contrasts with older notions of passive media spectatorship. Rather than talking about media producers and consumers as occupying separate roles, we might now see them as participants who interact with each other according to a new set of rules that none of us fully understands" (Jenkins 2006: 3). Jenkins is aware of corporate structures and inequities of access and use noting that "not all participants are created equal" (Jenkins 2006: 3); but his focus is clearly on exploring collaborative appropriations that can be attributed to what the Canadian media scholar Pierre Levy calls the collective intelligence of cyberspace attracting "different communities around a semiotic plane of information [...] where participants work to sustain the activities of others" (Levy 1997: 14).

This near-conflation of communicative interaction and social participation is critiqued by more sociological approaches to media. Belgian media scholar Nico Carpentier, for example, speaks of an "overstretched approach towards participation [that] causes the link with the main defining component of participation, namely power, being obscured" (Carpentier 2011a: 28. See also Carpentier 2011b). He advocates a narrower definition of media participation whose main characteristics are localized actors involved in communicative practices that are part of, and implicate, power negotiations over decision-making. According to Carpentier, mediated negotiations over decision-making can involve technology, content, people and organizations, and such negotiations should be distinguished from mere access to or participation in communicative practices.

In the following, we draw on Carpentier's definition of participation as mediated processes of interaction involving negotiations of power. We operationalize this definition in two important ways so as to further its empirical precision. First, we study negotiations over control over the information flow, and second, we study negotiations over the legitimacy of information sources. Both aspects involve interaction between producers and audiences and amongst audiences. On the one hand producers craft a blueprint for the transmedia experience and work to sustain its boundaries through controlled transmedia distribution and promotion (Evans 2011); and on the other hand audiences engage with the transmedia product and work to expand their experience beyond the producers' fixed boundaries. While producers keep the pulse of online reception, audiences keep the pulse

of producers, actors, and other resources which may present new information regarding the progression of the show. This shared space opens up possibilities for interaction and negotiations of power, manifesting themselves in extra-textual transmedia online practices such as executive producers approaching bloggers for assistance in Alternate Reality Game (ARG) construction (Lachonis and Johnston 2008), or using online platforms to distribute information regarding future episodes of *Lost*, a common practice for entertainment journalists, online *Lost* bloggers and audiences.

Operational aesthetics and transmedia storytelling

While researchers may disagree on the definition of digital interaction, they do agree that interaction is about something. In substantive terms, *Lost* is an example of a highly complex television narrative, and even more so when seen as part of transmedia storytelling, or, what others term transmedia television (Evans 2011) or complex television (Mittell 2012-13). Whatever the term, a number of scholars focus on the aesthetic and narrative dimensions, rather than the socio-communicative dimensions of analysis. Drawing on French literary theorist Gérard Genette's notion of *paratexte*, American media scholar Jonathan Gray (2010) offers a sophisticated revision of the term based on the enormous expansion of material surrounding contemporary media products such as podcasts, DVD bonus peeks and internet fora. British television scholar Elizabeth Evans stresses that today's transmedia storytelling is defined by "a combination of narrative, author and temporal coherence" (Evans 2011: 38). While producers strive to construct a coherent fictional universe existing during a limited timeframe in multiple formats and across a range of platforms, Evans is at pains to also understand audiences' strategies in seeking to unpick the results.

American television scholar Jason Mittell furthers this dual process of interaction. He homes in on the ways in which producers include the workings of the production process as tie-ins to the main storyline, an effort that he terms operational aesthetics: "we want to enjoy the machine's results while also marveling at how it works [...] narratively complex television encourages, and even at times necessitates, a new mode of viewer engagement" (Mittell 2006: 38). For example, producers construct anagrams and other so-called easter eggs (Clarke 2010) that are meant to be found by the careful observer – and often going viral as soon as they are discussed online. Also important are audience exercises in deciphering the contents of what Mittell terms mothership episodes. However, *Lost* audiences went further, as demonstrated more fully below, because they also developed skills in deciphering the very machinery of the production process for the specific purpose of uncovering details about upcoming storylines.

For example, they obtained filming reports through personal contacts or through members of *Lost* communities who made their way to the set in Hawaii to spy on the filming schedule. "... Jeff Fahey's character's name (Frank Lapidus) was revealed by an intern who pulled it up in Disney's complex project database, images of the exterior of the mysterious "Orchid" hatch made their way onto the Internet well in advance..." (Lachonis and Johnston

2008: 34). A particular landscape in Hawaii allegedly refers to a specific location in the *Lost* diegetic universe, a particular cultural backdrop seemingly points to a specific character's back story; or a particular group of characters seen on the film set refers to a certain progress in the plotline. Such production information provides clues to the scenery and content of future episodes, and the *Lost* community comes together to decipher the possible context and meaning of what will be presented to them. So, the operational aesthetics that spoiler communities explore go beyond Mittell's definition, they are a type of unprocessed operational aesthetics of the production rather than its results. Still, an analytical focus on narrative substance remains important, since transmedia practices, after all, involve making sense of narrative universes conducted in an interplay between producers, complex texts, and audiences. Importantly, this interplay is institutionally located and must be analyzed as such.

Spoilers: Institutional interplay and discourse analysis

British television researcher Roberta Pearson states that Disney and Apple were pioneers in reaching a commercial agreement that made *Lost* one of the first television products available for download to iTunes media player and gave ~~way~~ **rise** to innovative distribution practices (Pearson 2010). Following this development, ABC produced so-called *Official Lost Podcasts* featuring executive producers and main actors. *Lost*'s creator and producer J.J. Abrams sponsored an online platform named *The Fuselage* where *Lost* fans had the opportunity to converse with each other as well as with executive producer Damon Lindelof and script coordinator Gregg Nations, and several actors. Executive producers Lindelof and Carlton Cuse offered a direct communication channel by answering questions from fans in their weekly podcast, and they used several other channels – from the printed bimonthly *Lost Magazine*, to entertainment blogs and television journalists – to reach and engage with wider audience groups. Leveraging the active participation of *Lost* audiences who voiced strong reactions online to the episode schedule that was “interrupted with repeats” (Lachonis and Johnston 2008: 165), Lindelof and Cuse “defied the rules of American television in many ways” (Pearson 2010: 12) by negotiating an airing schedule without repeats or reruns, sixteen episodes per season and an end date to *Lost* with the ABC network.

While the producers employed transmedia methods to further the success and visibility of *Lost* as well as their communication with audiences, online audiences harnessed transmedia methods to collect information, connect with the producers and each other, voice their opinions and challenge those of others. As noted, the focus of this study is the final episode of season three which was produced after these negotiations between the producers and the broadcaster came to a conclusion. Spoiler activities related to the end of this season are analytically important since they occurred within a context central to *Lost*. Jon Lachonis, also known in the *Lost* blogosphere as Docarzt, published his account of *Lost* fandom in 2008. He notes that after the final episode of season three “the shift of spoiler sourcing from the mainstream to the fan scene was complete” (Lachonis and Johnston

2008: 34). He posits that after the penultimate and final episodes of season three were leaked, spoilers were sought out by bloggers, crew members and regular fans instead of producers and journalists. This claim suggests a shift in the power relations of participation between producers and audiences. The shift involves negotiations over the relative control over the information flow as well as the legitimacy of information sources during this particular period. One way to uncover and document this shift is to employ critical discourse analysis of the online interaction processes.

Critical discourse analysis offers “a means of studying power relations through orders of discourse, since it accounts for changes in discursive practices and relates these to changes in social practices” (Phillips and Jørgensen 2002: 70). According to the British sociolinguist Norman Fairclough, textual practices are discursive practices, and he defines them as elements in the constitution of social practice. “Discourse has the potential to bring together semiotic sources and frame them in a manner that indicates social identification and materializes as textual moments” (Fairclough 2000: 174). In this study, a particular spoiler post by Darkufo constitutes such a key textual moment when blog readers evaluate his post and discuss its legitimacy, thus forming discourses that establish a textual practice, a social practice and an identification of the blog commentator. Spoilers which reveal significant information create a set of interactions in the form of comments and interventions posted by different people with different social identities who all contribute to a discursive engagement.

Textual moments happen within networks of practices which Fairclough (2000) terms fields, and the structures within a field, which are constructed at a given textual moment, constitute orders of discourse. These orders refer to discourses that stem from different factions around a textual moment. In analyzing spoiler practices of online *Lost* audiences, we identify and trace the interaction amongst main orders of discourse, namely discourses of producers who promote their work, discourses of entertainment journalists who monitor both the production and reception of the television series, discourses of audiences who engage in textual practices regarding *Lost*, and discourses of bloggers who provide the spoiler information to these audiences.

According to Fairclough, “subjects are ideologically positioned, but they are also capable of acting creatively to make their own connections between diverse practices and ideologies to which they are exposed” (Fairclough 1992: 91). In the *Lost* universe, this creative (inter)action coincides with the interplay between producers and audiences which we analyze within online spoiler practices. If the control of information flow shifts from the producers to the audiences, as indicated above, how does the interaction between the producers and the audiences manifest itself? If audiences question the legitimacy of information sources, what kind of changes can be observed in their discourses?

Investigating spoiler activities

A “spoiler” can be defined in several ways. While Jenkins defines it as any person who reveals information regarding unaired entertainment productions as it is seen, for example,

with the television series *Survivor* (Jenkins 2006), Mittell and Gray define spoilers as content which “short-circuits the designed entertainment experience” (Mittell and Gray 2007: 1). The latter approach corresponds to our notion of the spoiler as the content which brings audiences into interaction, and the approach sides well with the operational aesthetics developed in *Lost*. Apparently, Lindelof detested any revelation of information, “including the teasers” that are conventionally aired during the week prior to the broadcasting of an episode (Lachonis and Johnston 2008: 29). In order to maintain control of the information flow that circulated online and in mainstream media, producers selected three entertainment journalists who had their own *Lost* spoiler blogs, “Kristin Veitch from *E! Online*, Jeff Jensen from *Entertainment Weekly* and Michael Ausiello from *TV Guide*” (Lachonis and Johnston 2008: 59). However, as the information from these three journalists started becoming repetitive and mundane, fans looked for different resources to gather genuinely new information.

Throughout the duration of *Lost*, several major, user-generated spoilers were reported by online spoiler blogs. One major spoiler that proved very revealing and was completely unintended by the producers emerged during the second season:

For many fans of the program, this ending was a first-class shocker, motivating discussions as to [...] what greater meaning might be extracted from this event. [But] spoiled viewers watched the episode to see how the story that they already knew would be told, but experienced little if any of the jaw-dropping surprise seemingly intended by the producers and enjoyed by other fans (Mittell and Gray 2007: 1).

What Mittell and Gray term short-circuiting, that is audiences obtaining online spoilers weekly and thus experiencing *Lost* differently from those who preferred to remain unspoiled, accelerated after spoiler communities got hold of a major full synopsis about the final episode of season three. Lachonis and Johnston report that during the first two years executive producers dispersed teaser tidbits exclusively to a select few television journalists, but “...when the spoilers started erupting from the fandom itself, the sliver of control that the producers had over the press evaporated” (Lachonis and Johnston 2008: 34).

According to Norwegian media scholar Ola Erstad digital content is not fixed, but rather it is in “constant flux, moving from user to user, and from context to context” as users remix content or appropriate it according to their modes of interpretation (Erstad 2010: 58). This concept of content in motion is directly related to the practices appropriated by spoiler communities, whose user-generated content added to the pool of information provided by official content providers and thus amplified the level of intermediality. Constantly reconsidering the relation between official information, user generated spoilers and the television narrative, the *Lost* spoiler communities went into a continuous process of appropriation. This term denotes a significant practice among online television audiences who use the official product, dissect and discuss it, and thereby redesign its meaning. This is

a common practice of remix culture and a common practice for *Lost* spoiler communities, since the narrative they were deciphering has a high level of complexity; and spoilers which provide information about future episodes adds to the complexity by expanding the narrative prematurely.

Website analysis delimiting the field

The online spoiler practices surrounding the final episode of *Lost* season three peaked on the main spoiler blog, monitored by Darkufo. In analyzing the Darkufo spoiler blog, we follow Danish Internet research scholar Niels Brügger's distinction between the media environment (media surrounding the website), the textual environment (the website is an interface between the user and the information, and as such it comprises the capacities of the browser and additional functionalities), and the textuality of the website (the website as a text) (Brügger 2009).

In terms of the media environment, the Darkufo blog is situated on the internet and surrounded by a transmedia environment. The blog is composed of sixteen sub-blogs, a forum, and an extension of this blogging format which focuses on all other mainstream television shows. The content ranges from magazine and newspaper scans to podcasts to promotional photography as well as fan photos, promotional videos, Twitter updates, and hyperlinks to websites, textual fan fiction, graphics and videos that are hyperlinked and embedded into the layout.

In terms of textual environment, the Darkufo blog is one in a collection of blogs, which moves vertically in a chronological fashion. On top it includes a section for updates, which is an embedded version of the blog owner's Twitter account. Each blog entry has a comment thread which is the platform for visitors to give their input in written form. Over the years, Darkufo applies several different methods to augment the website: the commenting service changes from a blog provider's default system to a service provider named Disqus. He uses the embedded Twitter account to announce the latest updates added to the website. Finally, another service provider named Lijit is used for the search function. These elements give the interface of the website a multifaceted appearance.

In terms of textuality, the Darkufo blog displays many intertextual features. Not only are different texts juxtaposed, *Lost* writers' texts are dispersed in different bits and pieces all over the website, promotional ads and teasers are also included alluding to the primary text of *Lost*. The website itself is a fan-made tribute to *Lost* and exists as a tertiary text (Fiske 1987) or in Gray's term a paratext (2010). Moreover, in certain sections such as episode reviews, fan fictions, or theories, the primary text is remixed.

Websites are by nature ephemeral, as they are in flux and may cease to exist if, for example, the service provider is no longer available. Still, it is possible to frame and stabilize the sites through several methods. Since the spoiler activities surrounding *Lost* happened in the recent past and some of the context has been deleted, we employed open-source archiving techniques found in web archiving projects initiated by several institutions and scholars, and collected data in the form of webpages retaining the form, formatting and

content of the website as it existed at the time of collection, and with the comments that were embedded in the blog posts documented as an archive of interaction. We applied the web archive project Way-Back that routinely crawls the internet and archives the submitted websites. Darkufo blogs have been periodically crawled by the Way-Back Machine from 2006 to 2010, so the initial format of the blogs are available as are the form and format of the blog as it was last updated.

How users evaluate content and the legitimacy of information

As noted, during season three of *Lost* audiences became disenchanted because the producers changed conventional broadcasting schedules and the duration of the program. So, towards the end of the season, writers were at pains to make the most of the final episode in order to regain viewers' trust. According to Lindelof, "the last five minutes of (this month's) finale are going to seal our fate" (quoted in Levin 2007: 1). However, two weeks before the airing of the final episode, its synopsis was posted on an internet forum named Ain't It Cool News. The source, Lostfan108, later sent the synopsis and more details to Darkufo's spoiler blog. After deliberating with his blog readers whether it should be published and putting the issue to a vote, Darkufo released the details gradually.

Johnston and Lachonis refer to Darkufo as a "nexus of all that goes on in relation to *Lost*. If news hits the web, air, radio or television, it is quickly scraped up and catalogued in one of Darkufo's numerous categories" (Lachonis and Johnston 2008: 33). As Lachonis suggests, Darkufo has been, for most of the online *Lost* fans, the first stop to get up-to-date information generated from every available resource. Tracing Darkufo's spoiler blogs reveals a total of forty-one entries regarding the final episode of season three, as shown in **Table 1** (below).

Most of the content is brought to Darkufo's attention by email or by the contact form on the blog. The promotional video for the next episode is aired immediately after an episode, blog readers record it, upload it to YouTube, and send Darkufo the link address. Whenever this is the case, Darkufo includes a note of appreciation, which also implies that the person is credited as the finder of the information. One such note of appreciation is seen in Figure 1. On 15 May 2007, Darkufo posted the Ain't It Cool News spoilers in a single blog text which included the main points of the last and penultimate episodes of season three. In brief, the penultimate episode centers on the character Charlie and his responsibility to disable an underwater facility so that the rest of the group can call for help. The final episode centers around the protagonist Jack and his elaborate plan to get saved from the island and deceive its hostile inhabitants who are conspiring against the plane crash survivors. Darkufo's blog text proved a controversial piece of information because it revealed that the flashbacks were actually from the future, showing Jack after he was rescued from the island. The text was not encoded into a mysterious format as was usual with *Lost* spoilers, it simply summarized the entirety of two episodes. As such, it provided its readers with a conundrum: the definitive format was very unusual which might mean that it

could be someone sending out false information (a Foiler). Darkufo stresses this in his blog post:

Content	Number of posts	Source of content
Podcasts	2	ABC's Official <i>Lost</i> website
Promotional video	8	Recorded from TV and uploaded to YouTube by blog readers / searched and found on YouTube
Promotional media appearances	2	Recorded from TV and uploaded to YouTube
<i>E! Online</i> – Kristin Veitch	5	Entertainment editor, television channel <i>E!</i>
<i>TV Guide</i> - Michael Ausiello	2	Television editor, blogger for <i>TV Guide</i>
<i>Entertainment Weekly</i> - Jeff Jensen	2	Entertainment blogger for <i>Entertainment Weekly</i>
Insider Sources	7	Personal contact of Darkufo
Print media (<i>NY Post</i> , <i>USA Today</i>)	3	Hyperlink to source website
Scans of television magazines	2	Scanned by and uploaded to the internet by blog reader
Television related websites	6	Internet link
Other <i>Lost</i> related websites (Hawaiiweblog)	1	Audio podcast
Promotional episode stills (ABC media net)	1	Graphic material for the use of members of press uploaded to the ABC server, obtained by blog contributor

Table 1: Spoilers for the final *Lost* episode of season three

A lot of the stuff mentioned here matches what I and the other major spoiler sites already knew but could not publish for fear of revealing our sources, but now it's out in the open we're posting it.

DISCLAIMER: I cannot verify 100% that this is all true so please don't shoot me if this turns out to be a massive Foiler. If it is then kudos to TPTB ['the powers that be', a common abbreviation for the show's producers] who have set up a complex number of sources and disinformation to fool us (Darkufo 2007: 1).

Darkufo stresses that his reason for posting the controversial blog text is that, to his knowledge, it is a genuine and true piece of information. His emphasis on the fear of revealing his sources indicates that he may be in contact with people working in the production or promotion of *Lost*. Still, his disclaimer also notes the possibility that the synopsis is false and that the producers may have designed a complex foiler employing

several sources. The first blog text – from Lostfan108 – generates 954 comments, which is the largest number of comments on any of Darkufo’s blog posts. For comparison with an average level of interaction around a spoiler content, below is a screen shot of a spoiler post.

Small update on the Deaths

Posted by DarkUFO at 5/10/2007 01:21:00 pm 82 Comment(s)

Labels: [Carlton Cuse](#), [Damon Lindelof](#), [Death](#)

Thanks to Margaret for the following info.

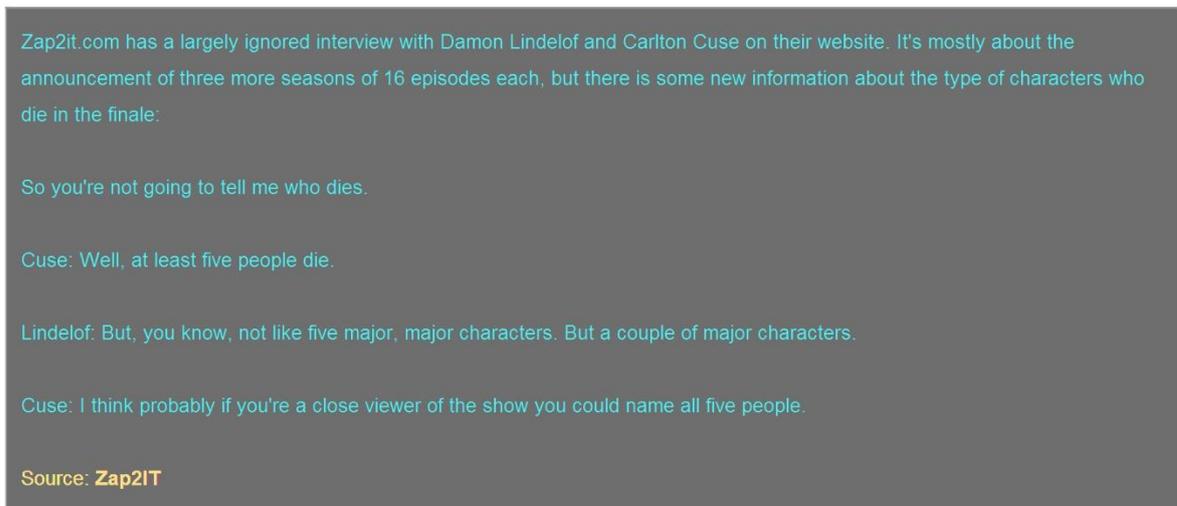


Figure 1: Spoiler post from Darkufo

In this interview passage, Cuse addresses the fans directly to inform them that as followers they are possibly familiar with all five characters even though not all of these are central to the plot, and thus he invites speculation about which five characters die in the final episode. There are seventy-six comments under this spoiler post. If a comment source is a magazine recycling interviews that were previously obtained from a different channel such as a television journalist and thus well-known to many followers, it attracts lower interaction with the number of comments being in single or double digits. While most entries generate double digit number of comments, triple digit number of comments indicates particularly intense interaction. Moreover, since Darkufo’s blog is constantly updated, new information may distract the attention paid to any entry which has lost its ‘new update’ status. Lostfan108’s spoiler generates 954 comments by 276 different screen-names within four days, an indication of its assumed importance. Among these, thirty-two posts are removed, including six posts that are made by Lostfan108, and three posts are made by Darkufo for moderating purposes. All the discussion participants are referred to by their chosen screen names. 155 commentators evaluate the spoiler as legitimate, 129 commentators see it as false while eight commentators re-evaluate their position in the course of the interaction. This distribution should be assessed in light of the fact that the main discussion revolves

around commentators' evaluation of whether the synopsis is true or false: a spoiler or a foiler. Evaluation is made on the basis of fact checking, comparing new with previously released or discovered pieces of information, and speculating about the sequence of post-production. Such speculation is exemplified by the blog commentator Koen: "It is a FOILER! The EP [episode] is still in the editing room ... This was said during the podcast" (Koen 2007: 2).

For spoiler audiences, the statement that the final episode is in the editing room may explain the timeline of post-production and help determine whether or not they may trust the information provided. However, the commentator Ryan responds:

Koen, I won't say that the summary isn't a foiler. However, I have to discredit you on the ep being in the editing room. The last podcast was recorded well over a week ago. In the last interview that DL [Damon Lindelof] & CC [Carlton Cuse] gave, they said that they had just sat down and watched the completed season finale. Also, the editors complete episodes within 2 days. Probably 4 days for a double sizer. And they finished filming two weeks ago, so do the math (Ryan 2007: 2).

This exchange reveals that some bloggers accept that power relations between producers and audiences must exist in order to maintain production stability and creative narrative development. Some commentators compare producer statements quoted from various channels with the posted synopsis in order to test its legitimacy, and their evaluations rely on comparing the consistency of the information with other producer information. For example, Muscle_Bob_Buff_Pants comments:

Well for the game changer, I can see how it could leave us talking about how did Kate and Jack got off the island, why is Kate so cold, what happened that Jack is so depressed, why did they leave behind everyone else....but that doesn't seem like enough discussion for 8 months. They need to give us something that we can find evidence for in the past two seasons. Something to make us go back and rewatch all those episodes and be like "Son of a bitch, they got me" (Muscle_Bob 2007: 2).

In considering the substance of the spoiler, Muscle_Bob_Buff_Pants evaluates the potential of the episode and compares it to the statement made by producers that the final episode will have everyone discussing *Lost* for eight months. Muscle_Bob_Buff_Pants also states that he expects to be so motivated so as to re-watch the last two seasons during the summer. He asserts that the revelation of changes in characters and background is not enough to motivate him. However, such acceptance of authority is also contested and negotiated. Ryan warns against taking the producers' words at face value and suggests

adjusting expectations according to their statements in various media outlets; and he suggests that the information should rather be assessed according to its narrative potential:

I know the press and TPTB like to hype things up, but that doesn't mean we should anticipate accordingly. If you just judge it by whether or not it's a good piece of episodic fiction, rather than everything being a game-changing, mind-blowing, mind-f-ing, Watchmen-like discovery/cliffhanger/character bomb, then you might find yourself calmer and happier (Ryan 2007: 3).

Ryan undermines both the commentator's reaction above in terms of its anxious nature, and the producers' promotion of the episode. He emphasizes this by the wording TPTB ('the powers that be'), referring to the auteur traits of Lindelof's and Cuse's work in *Lost*. Still, Ryan couples this abbreviation with "hype things up" thus undermining the authority of their statements. He wants to see the episode in its final form before evaluating its substance based on producer statements or the creative potential of the spoiler content. Producers are also said to have got indirectly involved in this interaction. Another commentator, Matt, notes: "The original post has been deleted at AICN [*Ain't it Cool News*]. In other words, this is more than likely correct" (Matt 2007: 1). Lachonis and Johnston comment on this incident: "While the full story has never been told, it is assumed that someone from within ABC contacted the writers of *Ain't It Cool News* and appealed either at a personal or a legal level to have the information removed" (Lachonis and Johnston 2008: 33). But for Matt, the fact that the post was removed indicates that producers intercepted the process and therefore validated the legitimacy of the spoiler. However, there is no consensus on this among the blog readers as noted by deviant_69:

So just because AICN deleted this, how does that mean it is true? It sounds like a great story, but the fact that it is all over the place on the net leads me to believe that TPTB are trying to flood the net with bogus info... that way if the proprietors of these spoiler sites get the actual spoiler of the finale... they are left to question whether or not to post it because they already think this first post was the spoiler (deviant_69 2007: 8).

After television editor of *TV Guide* Michael Ausiello makes an update on this synopsis on the guide's website, the commentator Steve assesses Lostfan108's synopsis as follows: "Unfortunally [sic] seeming like its true as in this weeks ask ausiello theres this My (slightly ironic) advice to you: Resist all spoilers concerning next week's game-changer. It'll ruin all the fun. Trust me" (Steve 2007: 10). Ausiello's update receives no objections. As Lachonis and Johnston (2008) mention, Ausiello, together with two other entertainment journalists, is known to report from the producers themselves, and so the legitimacy of his update is not questioned but used as further evidence that the synopsis is a spoiler. Ryan notes:

I guess a lot of "fans" are going to quit the show after all. Ausiello has warned people to stay away from spoilers. We've seen the second clip of Greatest Hits and footage of Charlie stopping a mugging. [...] And somehow I *highly* doubt that TPTB would put this much effort into making a foiler, including DocArtz, Moriarty, DarkUFO, and Ausiello in on it to trick fans (Ryan 2007: 9).

Finally, Muscle_Bob_Buff_Pants questions that there may be collaboration between the key bloggers Darkufo, Docarzt and the producers of *Lost*. He formalizes this with an exclamation of "Shenanigans!" Since the exclamation is used as a slogan for those who believe that Lostfan108's spoiler is false, it is repeated by other commentators, and, as a result, Muscle_Bob_Buff_Pants creates a Shenanigans List: "Kate, steve, yessifer, and sally have been added to THE LIST!!!!WE DECLARE SHENANIGANS ON DARKUFO AND DOC ARZT!!!!!!!" (Muscle_Bob 2007: 7).

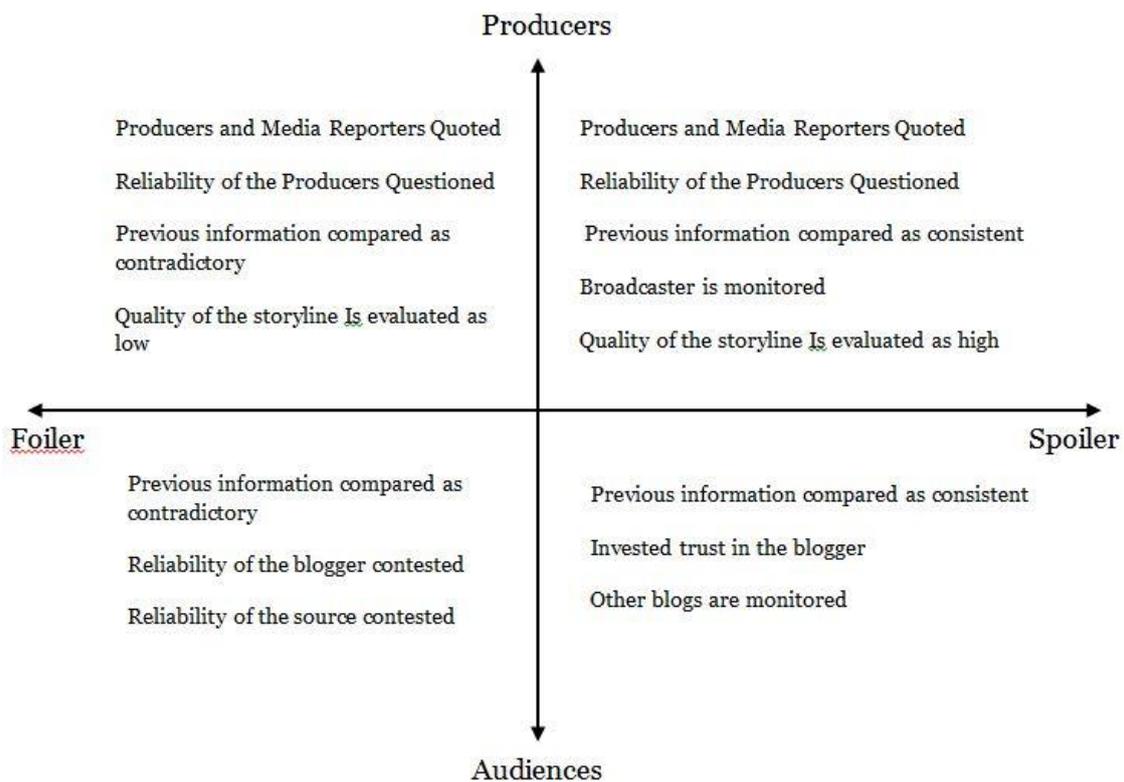


Figure 2: Audience-producer matrix

As noted, the discussion around the content of Lostfan108's synopsis for the final episodes of *Lost* season three sparks the most intense activity on Darkufo's blog. **Figure 2** shows the discursive elements which together shape the arguments for and against the legitimacy of the spoiler. These discursive elements can be called sub-moments. Whereas the spoiler as a textual moment brings together these readers, updates from Darkufo, and other

commentators serve to create moments which help shape the course of the interaction. The audience-producer matrix (**Figure 2**) illuminates sub-moments within the intensive interaction process around the spoiler. The interplay between the producers and the online audiences can be analyzed by the emergence of these moments. The sub-moments create discursive interactions through which audiences negotiate the significance of the spoiler. However, in the process they also question the authority of the spoiler-source (Lostfan108) since a legitimate link between *Lost* producers and Lostfan108 might legitimize the information. The producers’ interventions through magazine and other entertainment reporters as well as their alleged legal and personal interventions posted on the entertainment blog *Ain’t It Cool News* altogether signal that the producers face a severe challenge in controlling the information flow around the series – and document ways in which this control is managed.

The density of commentator interactions which are generated from these moments are shown in the Venn diagram in **Table 3**. It offers a representational map of the textual interplay originating around the spoiler:

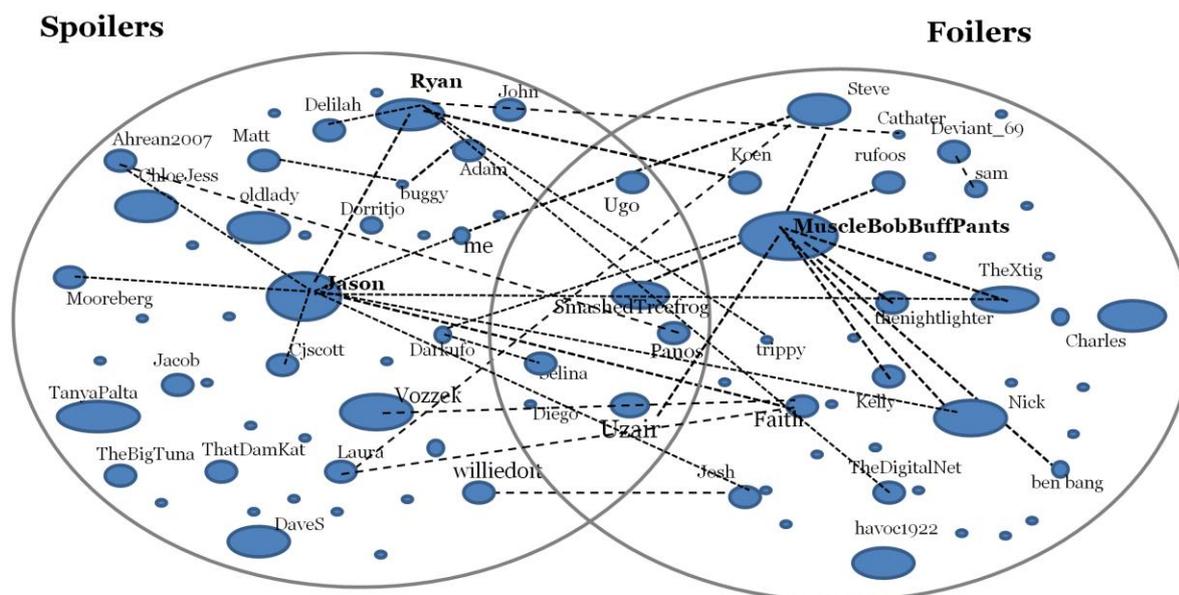


Table 3: Textual interplay around a *Lost* spoiler

Organized solidarity is observed among those who challenge the legitimacy of Lostfan108’s synopsis and emphasizes coherence through the phrase “Shenanigans!” The densest nodes occur when Lostfan’s information is negotiated, thus generating a sub-moment. These moments of intense interaction show that the commentators not only interact with one another debating the content of *Lost* or the content of the spoiler, they also negotiate the existing power structures between producers, bloggers and audiences. On the one hand, the commentators Ryan and Jason consider the information to be legitimate albeit with potential negative implications; they question the authenticity of the communicative

pattern between the producers and the online audiences and oppose other commentators' expectations which allegedly stem from the producers' statements. On the other hand, Muscle_Bob_Buff_Pants declares that bloggers and the producers may have arranged an elaborate fabrication of a false synopsis so that the online audiences are misled from the actual narrative of the episode.

While the reliability of a spoiler can be verified by the legitimacy of its source, the legitimacy of every source other than the broadcaster's is challenged by spoiler readers. Online audiences challenge producers who are seen to have a vested, i.e. commercial, interest in voicing particular statements; they challenge the source of the spoiler because the synopsis is unnaturally detailed according to the spoiler audience; and they challenge Darkufo for the discrete nature of his operation.

When the episode airs on 24 May 2007, Lostfan108's released information is verified. Still, the twenty-three comments posted after the airing scarcely mention Lostfan108 and focus on the episode itself. When fans revisit the Lostfan108 incident, it is with an emphasis on intellectual property rights and the questioning of power relations these entail. On 1 June 2007, Docarzt posts an online article where he infers, based on recent interviews with Lindelof and Cuse, that Disney may be pursuing legal options to take down spoiler sites (Lachonis and Johnston 2008). Docarzt blogs:

Damon and Carlton have finally opened up a little about their feelings over Spoiler Gate '07. I would characterize their statements as 'tempered' towards a minimal display of disappointment...The downside, and part of what I was cautioning about, is that Disney security is trying to form a chain of custody to try to figure out where the finale got leaked. Sure, this is probably more a study in internal process improvement, but it is also times like this [sic] where 'how do we combat this next year' focus groups are held and over zealous security and legal folks start flying the 'DMCA' flag.

ABC has been incredibly tolerant of the rampant copyright violations that we LOST fan sites commit on an average day, and why shouldn't they be? I mean, it is free promotion, right? But the fact is, at any given day ABC would have to do little more than write a letter to our hosting companies and registrars and we'd be forced to remove any photos, sound clips, video files, etc, that are protected by the copyright holders (Docarzt 2007).

Docarzt's comments point to the notion that the *Lost* producers, the parent company Disney and distributor ABC all have widespread legal leverage over bloggers like himself or Darkufo when they may feel that copyright boundaries are overstepped, despite their seeming tolerance of blogging and fanwork for the promotional advantages that these activities may incur. When Darkufo commentators reflect on their spoiler experience in light of Docarzt's article, they accuse Lostfan108 and his revelations to be a key reason why they may be

deprived of spoiler resources such as Darkufo's in future. BlackRockBob's criticism is indicative of the position taken by other commentators: "I do think Lostfan108 went too far by giving out the full ending. I think that any more detail than insiderscoop gives out the DAY OF the broadcast is too much" (BlackRockBob 2007: 2). Other commentators raise issues of trust between the producers and spoiler audiences emphasizing the need for alternative resources such as Darkufo's spoiler blog. These online discussions after the event are indicative of fans' sustained interventions when episodes raise wider issues of ownership. Their ongoing engagements serve to document that fandom interaction can, indeed, operate as a form of social participation challenging existing power relations.

Conclusion

In discursive terms, our textual analysis of the key Darkufo blog has demonstrated that audiences negotiate the meaning of *Lost* by referring to elements of transmedia storytelling, operational aesthetics and other discursive moments, such as spoilers, as well as to other commentators' discourse. In this process, each discursive moment is extended by adding new pieces of information, and discourses are developed accordingly. Audiences negotiate stabilizing points of joint meaning-making through their dialogues over transmedia components such as the sudden glimpses into the operational aesthetics of the series, or the uploading of secondary texts such as promotional videos and photos.

Our results illuminate how elements of operational aesthetics, visual and textual indications of the production process within the diegetic universe of the narrative, provide spoiler audiences with points of stability so that they may trace the possible direction of the narrative, in addition to understanding the inner workings of large-scale entertainment productions. As noted, this type of operational aesthetics does not function as a means of appreciation in Mittell's sense, but rather as a means of narrative deciphering and sense-making. Therefore operational aesthetics, as far as it is used as a sense-making tool with *Lost* audiences, offers audiences as well as producers textual moments that may trigger discursive practices. These results demonstrate the validity of taking a relational approach to transmedia storytelling in convergence culture rather than focusing on either audience or producer perspectives.

In terms of audiencing, we have seen how, textual negotiations over spoilers reveal negotiations of power and authority amongst online audiences, bloggers and followers and between audiences and producers. When Darkufo's readers and contributors consider Lostfan108's synopsis and start questioning what can and cannot be believed, they also begin to deliberate the validity of the producers' statements. Our analysis of the online spoiler vs. foiler discussion relating to the final episodes of *Lost* season three has demonstrated how interactions between audiences and producers operate as forms of social participation when spoiler-seeking audiences work to unravel, challenge and predict the narrative while the producers seek to orchestrate transmedia storytelling experiences. Established power relations of television production are questioned through two related dimensions, namely negotiations over controlling the information flow, and negotiations

over the legitimacy of information sources. Producers and audiences constantly recalibrate the distribution and flow of transmedia texts and promotional paratexts, and they do so directly on online social platforms and indirectly through other mediating agencies such as television journalists and prominent bloggers. Audiences jointly juggle and evaluate the legitimacy of the information provided by producers, professional bloggers and other online audiences. Legitimacy is therefore a notion in flux, open to constant contestations which together display the authority structures in play and their reconsiderations as they are re-evaluated.

We have offered a nuanced, empirical documentation of ways in which practices of participation may unfold. This documentation serves to nuance conceptualizations of the term 'participation' (Carpentier 2011) as well as the more celebratory claims made on the emancipatory potentials of online audience engagements (Deuze 2007, Jenkins 2006, Jenkins et al. 2009, Lessig 2004). On the one hand the authority of the source Lostfan108 and the content distributor Darkufo is questioned and contested. On the other hand the authority of the statements made by *Lost* producers as to the quality and content of the final episode are endorsed. While some commentators voice trust in these statements and deem Lostfan108's synopsis as reliable as the producers' statements, others warn against trusting such statements that are seen as promotional and commercial in nature. As such, the authority of producers' statements as a foundation on which to evaluate and interpret the spoiler and thereby the final episode of season three is negotiated between groups who question the spoiler content and observe inconsistencies with previous plotlines and documented spoilers, and groups who accept the content of the spoiler as legitimate and choose to see, and then evaluate, the episode in its final form as aired on television. With every authority other than the broadcaster being questioned, and with the broadcaster being the last link in the chain which delivers *Lost*, audiences shape and share their own tools of information and make sense of the information flow that is constantly updated.

Finally, we have seen how online audiences also follow and get a certain insight into the inner dynamics of the entertainment industry, including timelines of production and post-production of episodes before they are broadcast, and contracts and negotiations made between broadcasters, producers, and actors. Taken together, audiences' transmedia practices are at once exercises in understanding and impacting textual, social and commercial patterns and power structures.

Biographical notes:

Kirsten Drotner is professor and chair of media studies at the University of Southern Denmark and founding director of DREAM: Danish research centre on education and advanced media materials. Her research examines audiences (past, present), media and information literacies and digital creativities. Book publications include *Museum communication and social media: The connected museum* (edited, with Kim C. Schrøder, Routledge, 2013), *Digital content creation: Creativity, competence, critique* (edited, with Kim C. Schrøder, Peter Lang 2010), *The international handbook on children, media and culture*

(edited, with Sonia Livingstone, Sage, 2008), *Informal learning and digital media* (edited with Hans S. Jensen and Kim S. Schrøder, Cambridge Scholars' Publishing, 2008). E-mail: drotner@sdu.dk.

Ödül A. Gürsimsek is a ph.d candidate of media studies at University of Southern Denmark. She received her bachelor and graduate degrees in industrial design, and subsequently developed an academic interest in digital culture. She is currently conducting her research on television audiences, digital content creation and transmedia storytelling. Email: odgu@sdu.dk.

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