A TRANSMEDIA TOPOLOGY OF
MAKING A MURDERER

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Abstract: This article constructs a transmedia topology of the *Making a Murderer* text, mapping the ecologies of interaction, participation and creation with and of the text by the audience. Firstly we explore the mixed textualities of the series delivered through the streaming service Netflix. We then expand the analysis to consider the wider transmedial textualities and trace the thresholds of the transmedial text to investigate new approaches to analysing transmedial work in the context of non-fiction media forms. We explore the relationships between the core series and the participatory engagement in the production of the text as a whole which includes online engagement, active investigations, and the production of a wide range of new material in response to the core series. Here we define transmedia topology as a tracing of what we could call the geography of the text, as defined by its features and boundaries (or lack thereof).

We situate the series as a piece of *Complex TV*, but explore how the series invites active participation from the audience; through its structure, complexity and form. The article maps the series textual connections with more traditional documentary form, and more experimental transmedial approaches, relating it to Alternate Reality Games. We consider (at the time of writing and publication) the tangible, real world outcomes of the text and the audiences participation in the production of the text.

This mapping situates the text within a number of media discourses to understand its media geneology and explore its textual trajectories. This mapping explores both the 10-part series, and the wealth of paratextual material as a text together, mapping the connections between the documentary series and the emergence of a transmedial textuality that is owed largely to audiences and the textual terrain.

Keywords: transmedia, *Making a Murderer*, textual analysis, complex TV, paratextual analysis

1 Tracing a Transmedia Topology of the Text

The opening episode of the American documentary series *Making a Murderer* (2015) introduces the story of Steven Avery, a man who is wrongly convicted of rape in 1985 and as a result spends the next eighteen years of his life in prison. We see how these lost years are followed at first by a seemingly happy ending, as in 2003 Avery is released when DNA evidence clears him of the crime. We see Avery decide to file a lawsuit against the county that convicted and imprisoned him, a lawsuit that would total $36 million in damages. It is difficult to imagine, given the injustice suffered, that the suit would not be successful. Then, in a strange twist, Avery is arrested for rape again, and this time also charged with murder. The victim's name is Theresa Halbach.

Figure 1. *Making a Murderer Titles*.

The next nine hours of the series, delivered as a montage of archive footage, video testimony, news reports, and interviews, detail how Avery and his nephew Brendan Dassey are convicted of the rape, mutilation and murder of Halbach. Its telling was designed to raise many questions about the nature of this troubling case, about the U.S. criminal justice system, and contexts of social and economic inequality in the U.S. that is at least partly to blame. The series was watched by a staggering 19 million viewers in the first 35 days after its release, making it one of Netflix's most successful series in 2015.[1] This opening episode sits separate from the main series, both narratively and formally, sitting as a series

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1 Jason Lynch, **'Over 19 Million Viewers in the U.S. Watched Making a Murderer in Its First 35 Days'**, *AdWeek*, 15 February 2016.

prologue. The story across the episode ends with a cliff hanger and open the viewer to the depths of the twisting narrative. The episode was also simultaneously released across a number of platforms as a trailer for the series. The narrative arch and the platform delivery set this episode as a form of trailhead for the audience to help steer them towards the narrative proper or narrative "rabbit hole" to the American heartlands which unfolds slowly over nine segments.

The digital milieu into which the *Making a Murderer* series arrives and the content of the series itself have engendered a fascinating reception for the series by empowered, active, and dedicated viewers. The *Making a Murderer* series thus becomes the basis for a larger transmedia narrative that sprawls across social-digital networks. The core narrative of the series itself is constructed in a relatively conventional style and has clear structural and aesthetic links to previous more traditional documentaries. However, its cultural impact and significance have been dramatically altered by the audience's active construction of a transmedial nexus of responsive materials: online maps, lists of characters and events, compilations of facts and potential evidence gathered by viewer-participants, social media posts, blogs – types of text that Jason Mittell has described as "orienting paratexts."[2] In cyclical fashion these paratexts become a key part, if not the dominant part, of the experience of *Making a Murderer*, enhancing the documentary's implicit invitation to take part in the Steven Avery narrative.

This paper will construct a transmedia topology of the *Making a Murderer* text, demonstrating influences of various forms of documentary, interactive gaming culture, and post-digital writing on the series itself as well as on the paratextual cloud of works that grew up around it. Here we define *transmedia topology* as a tracing of what we could call the geography of the text, as defined by its features and boundaries (or lack thereof). We will present some textual analysis of specific sections of the series to examine the structure of some of the scenes and how these might help to encourage the emergence of a transmedial textuality created by its audience as active participants in the construction of the text. This helps map the textual terrain of the series and the linking intertexts and paratexts. We will argue for the *Making a Murderer* series as a traditional documentary with a strong linage and geneology, and simultaneously for the *Making a Murderer* text —including its many orienting paratexts—as a progressive form enabled by participatory culture, not necessarily due to, but clearly influenced by its design or authorial intent.[3] Our construction is not an entirely straightforward process, as the boundaries of the text are blurry and could be contested; a key element of transmedia topology, we would argue, should be an awareness of the complexity of the textual environments and media landscapes from which the transmedial text emerges, and thus the provisionality inherent in any interpretation or tracing of the thresholds of the text[4].

As we move through the topology, our references to the "series" of *Making a Murderer* refers to the Netflix original series in ten episodes. Our use of the phrase "text" will refer to the entire transmedial nexus, including the series as well as the responsive paratextual materials produced by audiences. Our aim is to take a holistic approach to critiquing and interrogating the (net)work, in which the audience contributions are considered native and intrinsic to the experience of the post-digital text, even when the authorial modes of representation may intend to restrict. A major component of our argument is an exploration of how *Making a Murderer* enacts what Mittell has termed *complex TV*: in his book of the same name, he describes complex TV as a medium-specific transition in how narrative occurs, characterised by blurring of boundaries between episodes, shows, and series, chronological and authorial disruptions and interruptions, and other marks of a deeply participatory narrativity.[5] We will examine the ways in which the series conforms to and deviates from Mittell's characterization of complex TV. Furthermore, we will interrogate the ways in which complex engagement is owed to the series' contexts rather than to its authors, and how the modes of representation in the series itself might be disempowering and even potentially unethical.[6] Our topological analysis will make important links between *Making a Murderer* and other transmedial works such as Alternate Reality Games (ARGs) and co-operative podcasts, to help us create a richer map of its aesthetic and structural influences. Our approach is informed by recent discourses in transmedia narrative and audience participation including Henry Jenkins', Chuck Mittell's, and Frank Rose's work, for all of whom the text is not situated permanently in time, authorship or genre, but where interpretation necessarily includes consideration of intended and unintended collaborations and alterations.

2 Jason Mittell, *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling* NYU Press, 2015 p. 261.
3 Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, NYU Press, New York, 2006.
4 Gerard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 1997.
5 Chuck Tryon, *On-Demand Culture: Digital Delivery and the Future of Movies*, Rutgers University Press, 2013.
6 Anna Leszkiewicz, **'From Serial to Making a Murderer: can true crime as entertainment ever be ethical?'** 15 January 2016.

2 *Making a Murderer*: An Invitation to Participate

Video 1 *Making a Murderer opening credits*. Please visit the **online version** of the article to watch the video.

The series is, from its very first moments, both an unfolding story and an ongoing event outside of the text. The opening titles set out the ideological, behavioural and emotional positioning of the audience by presenting a series of images whose significance gradually emerges as the narrative progresses: a snow-covered car lot, a photo of blond-haired, blue-eyed Avery as a child, large knives hanging on a wall, a wooden cabin and its interior, a dilapidated car partially invaded by entangled shrubs; city buildings, court documents, a shadowy silhouetted male figure, with a visible American flag and Sheriff's badge emblazoned on his shirt raising a hand as if taking an oath. The plaintive, string-driven music that gradually grows in intensity alongside a synchronised drumming rhythm, suggests an emerging tale of dramatic, foreboding and tragic proportions.
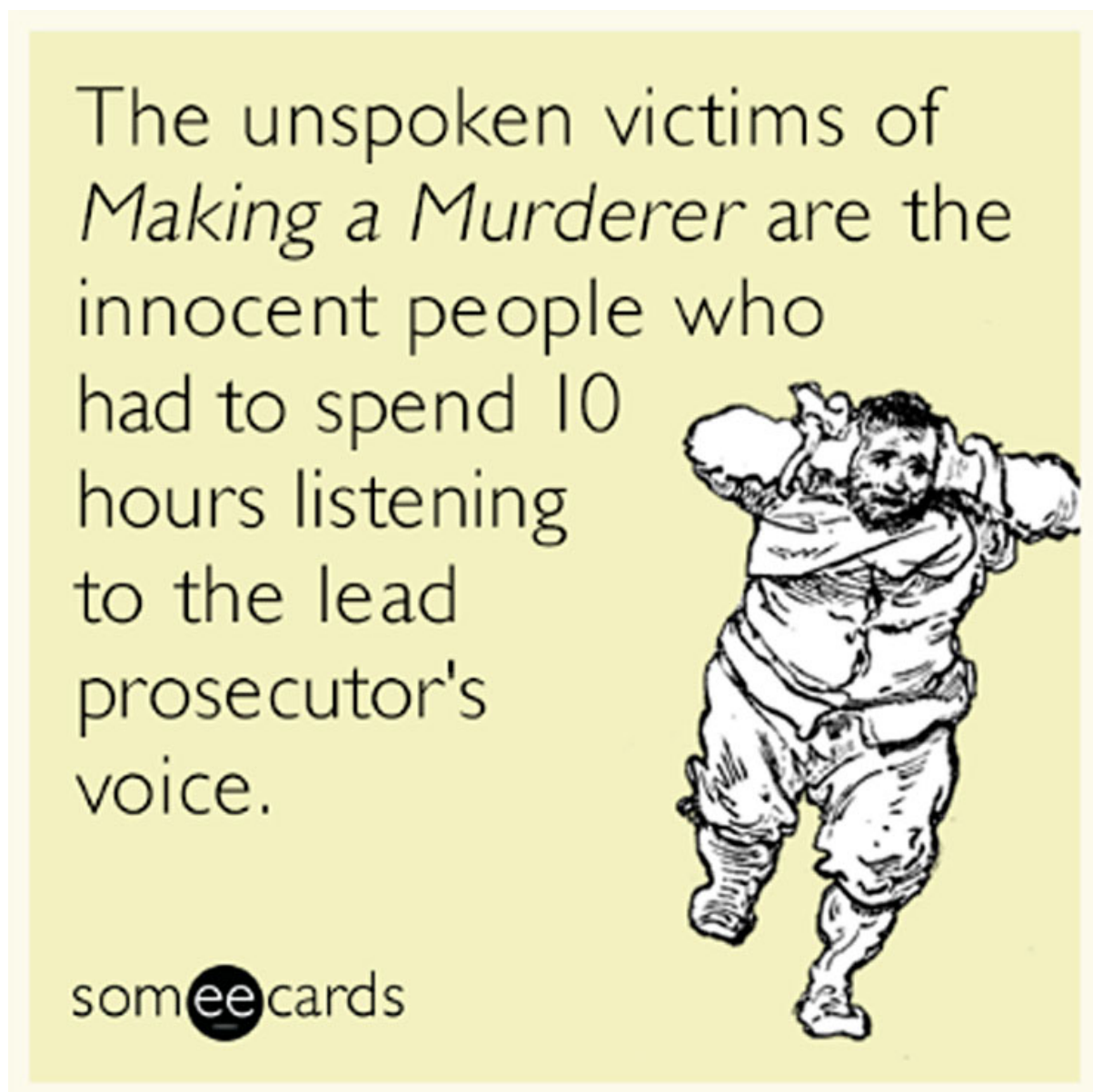

Figure 2. *Making a Murderer* Satirical E Card.

Broadly speaking, the interviews that comprise the bulk of the series are long: large sections of court testimony, long panning shots of Wisconsin scenery accompanying long clips of audio evidence, in the form of phone calls, for example. The narrative pace within series episodes is slow, seemingly methodical in its presentation, with evidence and points for consideration laid out carefully through interviews; there is a sense of being immersed in the trial itself.[7] Without narrative voice or obvious interjection by producers, we have a sense of parsing through the evidence as it is given; at the same time, the slow methodical pacing allows for a kind of boredom to pervade the watching of the series; in *Making a Murderer*, the surprise twist occurs in the very first episode, and all the episodes that follow seem designed to present the conditions surrounding that twist in all their complexity, more like a report than a thriller.

An important effect of this slow pacing and delivery is that it allows plenty of receptive space: not just for contemplation, but also for viewers to diverge and carry out simultaneous active investigation; this approach has previously been referred to as a "slow-motion journalism".[8] The delivery platform of the series (Netflix) and the series as a "Netflix Original" (a category of series produced by Netflix rather than licensed to be available on it) means that audiences experience the series in and through a network. This gives viewers easy and direct access, simultaneously, to an internet browser, search engines, message boards, and social media. The entire *Making a Murderer* series was released on the online subscription service Netflix on December 18, 2015, and predictably many users binge-watched all ten episodes,[9] experiencing the series as in effect one long film. The first episode was also promotionally released on YouTube, and a number of unauthorized streaming sites were also soon hosting the full series, taking it almost immediately out from behind the Netflix paywall.[10] As a result, the experience of the online television series, or the television series watched online, is contiguous to the experiences of all of these forms of active digital engagement, and is likely to be overlapping and even become entwined, as it true of all series viewed on devices other than televisions.

An interesting side effect of this delivery context is that the core text (the series) becomes hermetically unsealed thanks to the platform itself. For example, the episode divisions of a series released entirely at once on a streaming platform function differently to traditional serialisation, as viewers aren't forced to wait for new episodes to come out. Mittell argues that these gaps in viewing enforced by the truly serial release "allow viewers to continue their engagement with a series in between episodes, participating in fan communities, reading criticism, consuming paratexts, and theorizing about future installments," a mark of complex TV. The receptive space that the series allows, through its slow pacing and forensic attention to detail, allows a space for engagement with other investigative activities and paratextual production while the series continues. This differs from other more traditional televisual material where viewers often interact with online and social media in the temporal breaks, in which viewers can consume paratexts and participate in communities as they watch.[11] For the viewer of these long takes, slow paced dialogue and meticulous court transcripts the series becomes durational and opens up reflective spaces for consideration, speculation, investigation and production. The gaps in the text which are usually created rhythmically at set intervals with serial release become absorbed into the flow of the series and viewers are given space to search legal terminology, court mandates, information from wikis and fan theories about the case. The viewing shifts cycles from passive consumption to active engagement, participation and what has been referred to in ARGs as producer-triggered player-production.[12] The complexity of the information provided by the series and its unwavering approach to presenting the testimony seemingly unedited creates a drillability in the text.[13]

Video 2 *Remaking a Murderer*, an interactive map by Hugo Garcia and Paola Falero. Please visit the **online version** of the article to watch the video.

Sifting through audience opinions on web forums and social media, following conversations through hashtags, searching case law, fact checking, collectively interrogating the evidence and processes presented through the series—all these

7 Jennifer O'Meara, '"Like Movies for Radio": Media Convergence and the *Serial* Podcast Sensation', *Frames Cinema Journal*, 7, December 2015, 3.

8 Sarah Koeing **"The Long Center", "Long Center Presents: Sarah Koenig."** thelongcenter.org.

9 Sam Adams, **'"Making a Murderer" and True Crime in the Binge-Viewing Era'** 13 January 2016.

10 Ted Johnson, **'Study: Piracy Shifts Away From Downloading to Video Streaming'** 10 February 2015.

11 Jason Mittell, *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling* NYU Press, 2015.

12 Christy Dena, (2008) 'Emerging Participatory Culture Practices: Player-Created Tiers in Alternate Reality Games', *Convergence Journal: International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, 14, 1, 41–57.

13 Jason Mittell **'Forensic Fandom and the Drillable Text'** (web-exclusive essay) 2013.

activities were carried out by many viewers of the series as evidenced by the continued proliferation of these materials on the web. *Making a Murderer* viewers were instantly, some even before the series was released, posting questions and opinions on diverse online platforms, researching court precedent in order to share it with other viewers, investigating real evidence related to the case, searching for information at a volume and with a level of detail which had not been previously done by the entities involved in the legal case proper, whether for lack of resource or lack of effort. This likely describes the actions of a minority of viewers, but we know that many did act based on a variety of archives of interactions readily available on social media and web forums, for example **twitter**, **wikis**, **forums** and **fan conspiracy** theories. This tiered participation is common in transmedia productions, but usually written for and often facilitated by the production process. This often breaks down into roles such as Organizers, Hunters, Detectives and Lurkers[14] by which different members of the audience community contribute differently to the production of the text and have differing interests and motives in their participation.

This active participation in the production and consumption of the transmedial text outside of the series, represents a high number of individuals from across the world involved in a single legal case, in ways that have been documented in the popular media both for their effectiveness and the sheer volume of engagement. Importantly, (inter)active audiences of the series did not categorically share the views of its producers. While the case has become a point of focus and contention in the media and particularly on social media, much of the attention has been focused on criticism of the approach the filmmakers took, which many argue was biased and even **intentionally misleading**.

3 *Making a Murderer* and Long Form Documentary

The 10-part series *Making a Murderer* sits to some degree within the definitional and ontological complexities of the documentary genre. The opening shots exemplify this, whereby the filmmakers and audience are positioned as present/ entwined/inside-outsiders who are compassionate witnesses to an unfolding horror of institutionally constructed and purposely orchestrated errors.

Video 3 *Making a Murderer - Eighteen Years Lost* Opening Sequence. Please visit the **online version** of the article to watch the video.

The first shot depicts a flat, almost featureless, rural landscape with a car approaching on an unmarked road. It functions as the conventional establishing shot, signalling upfront the film's setting, visually contextualising the unfolding narrative in its socio-economic milieu. The date and time in digital form appear in the bottom right of the screen, a trope associated with the personal camcorder, and 'unprofessional' or amateur home-recorded footage. The 'shaky' handheld quality deepens the semiotic signification that we are watching an 'unpolished', minimally mediated text. We are at once inside and outside of the narrative: observant, vigilant, emotionally engaged. We hear a male voice, with a non-generic but presumptively American accent (the precise regionality of which is perhaps not readily identifiable to global or European audiences) speaking in a tremulous voice, suggestive of being in a highly emotional state. He says, 'Here they come. Up the road. After 18 years.' We cut to a closer mid-shot of the car arriving. It is surrounded by a group of people, a number of whom are pointing microphones towards Avery or carrying large, shoulder-mounted cameras. This signals that his arrival has prompted 'media' interest and is therefore significant. The framing of this from our 'insider' perspective, immediately differentiates 'the media' from our 'unprofessional/amateur/insider' figurative and ideological positioning. We see a bearded man emerge from the vehicle. He is joyfully embraced by a woman, who appears to be his mother or close relative. She cries 'Oh god Stevie you're home!' She looks directly at the camera and declares, 'We knew he was innocent. We knew he was innocent.' A shot of a newspaper article reads 'DNA frees man after 18 years.' An unidentified male narrator says 'Law enforcement despised Steven Avery. Steven Avery was a shining example of their inadequacies, their misconduct.'[15]

Avery's arrival further establishes our viewing position within Steven Avery's cohort; when we cut to the arrival home, in which Avery is swamped by reporters shouting questions, the framing of our shot casts this amateur video in relief against a more polished media presence, and positions us visually within Avery's crowd of friends and family rather than as a part of

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14 Ivan Askwith, This Is Not (Just) An Advertisement: Understanding Alternate Reality Games. MIT Convergence Culture Consortium. 2006.
15 *Making a Murderer* (2015) 'Eighteen Years Lost' 1:1.

the media presence. A woman embraces Avery, and repeats twice into the camera, 'We knew he was innocent.' These first scenes are consistent with the tone of the entire series, with an aesthetic of minimal mediation and post-production polish in the "cinéma vérité" style to suggest authenticity.[16] They are also consistent in that, throughout the series, the viewer is to be positioned continuously in intimate contact with Avery's family and friends, in contrast to the more sterile way the series engages with opposing legal counsel and government officials (mostly through press conferences and polished public media statements). Simultaneously as we are invited into Avery's personal cohort, we are alienated from the perspectives of others, for example, representatives of local law enforcement: 'Law enforcement despised Steven Avery,' says a male voice in the close of this sequence. 'Steven Avery was a shining example of their inadequacies, their misconduct.'

Figure 3. An example of the many meme's born from viewers active engagement in the creation of the text.

A number of other documentaries have used similar framing. The aesthetic and structural style of *Making a Murderer* has been compared to, for example, *The Thin Blue Line* (1988), *Brothers Keeper* (1992) *Paradise Lost* (1996, 2000, 2011) and *West of Memphis* (2012). For the heavy reliance on archival materials, family interviews, news reports and testimony, the series has been compared with Andrew Jarecki's *Capturing the Friedmans* (2003), which can be seen as perhaps a precursor; Jarecki's film, like *Making a Murderer*, entirely avoids making any direct call to action, instead promoting audience consideration by providing evidence edited together in a particular kind of case narrative.[17] Errol Morris' *The Thin Blue Line* (1988) is even perhaps a more fitting comparison; it has been considered a benchmark of such documentaries due to the real-world effects engendered by the film's representation of the innocence of Randall Adams, who was previously convicted of murdering a police officer. These effects included media interest and a public outcry that contributed to Adams' release and the state dropping the charges against him in 1989. "Constructing innocence," as it is described by Renee Curry, relies on ordinary telling techniques (verbal monologues, newspaper graphics) as well as employing cinematic techniques, psychological images and sound effects designed to create critical points of emotion, like the "twirling crisis light of the police car."[18]

16 Mark Cousins and Kevin Macdonald *Imagining Reality. The Faber Book of Documentary*. London: Faber and Faber, 2006, p. 251.

17 Zoë Druick, "The courtroom and the closet in The Thin Blue Line and Capturing the Friedmans," *Screen* 49.4 2008: p. 440–449.

18 Renee Curry, 'Errol Morris' Construction of Innocence in 'The Thin Blue Line,' *Rocky Mountain Review of Language and Literature*, Vol. 49, No.2, 1995, p. 153–154.

Video 4 Closing scene of *The Thin Blue Line*. Please visit the **online version** of the article to watch the video.

King Adkins has argued that this emotionally charged, direct cinema aesthetic is used by filmmakers to "distance themselves from the media," stating that "[w]hat we do is very different from what the media does. … By not using voiceover, we hope to engage the audience more directly … and force them to come up with their own conclusions."[19] This approach is instrumentalized in the series' depictions of the media, the shaky camera always positioned behind the media lines, framing the interactions between the Avery's and the journalists, and physically and aesthetically distancing themselves from the traditional journalists and attempting to render or present a depiction of the events which is outside of media bias to help viewers feel like they have possession of all of the facts without mediation. The effectiveness of this method is evidenced by the public responses to Avery's case, to Adams's case, to the release of the West Memphis Three in 2011, indeed to the new trial ordered for Adnan Syed this year following the podcast *Serial* and the active participation from its audience. This type of narrative has the capacity to build new narratives—in which audiences are entirely engaged and even involved - that, as Cousins and MacDonald have it, "make us all obsessed detectives."[20]
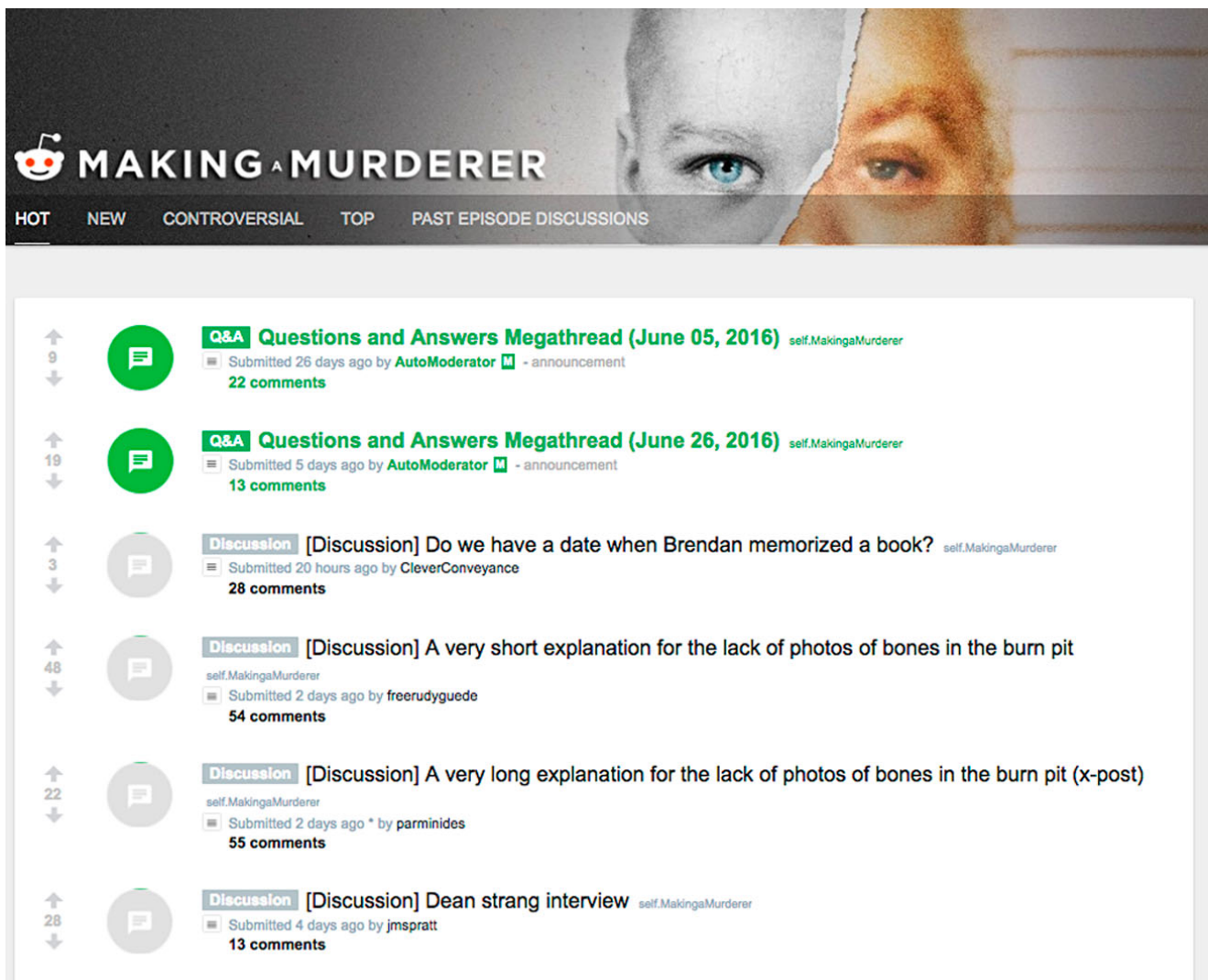

Figure 4. *Subreddit: Making a Murderer.*

19 King Adkins, "Paradise lost: Documenting a southern tragedy," *Journal of Film and Video 60.1* (2008), p 17.
20 Mark Cousins and Kevin Macdonald *Imagining Reality. The Faber Book of Documentary*. London: Faber and Faber, 2006, p. 33.

4 *Making a Murderer* and Serial Documentary

A variety of reports suggest that *Making a Murderer* is quite often viewed irrespective of episodic divisions (even "binge-watched" as a ten hour block) which is made easier by its block release, and yet it has important things in common with other single-subject serializations released weekly—for example the much-lauded and extremely popular podcast *Serial*, first released in 2014. This weekly episodic audio documentary investigated the murder of Hae Min Lee in 1999, and the subsequent arrest and conviction of her ex-boyfriend Adnan Syed. The story, which played out over twelve weeks and was produced by *This American Life*'s Sarah Koeing, was seemingly intended to be a narrative about Koenig's investigation of the crime and its outcomes, rather than what it ultimately became: a hugely popular podcast (perhaps the first hugely popular podcast) which spawned a network of web content, user investigations and audience produced paratexts. The similarities between the settings and themes of the two series are fairly clear: each series focused on a murder in a small town, an ostensibly closed case with many gaps in evidence and suggestions of missing information, issues of social dysfunction, prejudice, and violence against women.[21] One important difference is that Koenig was openly involved in the narrative of the case, and engaged directly with many of the people involved, including Min Lee's ex-boyfriend Don and Syed himself. She also engaged with listeners, through various media and by addressing questions posed by the public in her weekly recordings, making the documentary experience both reflexive and interactive, even co-operative. Listeners became active contributors to the podcast itself; a point that Koenig made clear by, for example, referencing reddit threads, discussing her conversations with Syed and his reaction to being the subject of a podcast, and addressing questions that listeners were sending via email. Koenig was producing what we might call "complex radio."

In contrast to the open format seriality of *Serial*—and perhaps as an effect of the long development time and the rapid shifts in viewing culture contained therein—*Making a Murderer*, while forward-thinking, retains overtones of control and bias that subvert its moments of complexity, undermining in many ways the serialized format. Much of this bias did not become clear until after the series premiered and citizen investigators began contributing pieces to the narrative; the series creators were accurately aware of an "appetite" for long-form journalism, but perhaps not as prepared for the level of meaningful engagement that viewers were likely to interject. It's important to note that long-form journalism in the early 2000s, when the series was likely first conceived, and long-form journalism in 2016, are received rather differently, evidenced by not just *Making a Murderer* but by other instances of participatory transmedia journalism including *Serial* or *Someone Knows Something* (2016). In the past, long-form journalism served as a kind of monologue in which a narrative might be presented in totality; today, that monologue is increasingly interruptible, regardless of authorial intent or textual format, as the politics of new media have made more of us active listeners and interjectors across media.[22]

But there's more to it. The activity around *Making a Murderer* and also *Serial* were characterized by the enthusiastic involvement of communities of interest around each featured case, and contained—in both series—a wealth of information that could be explored deeply and in granular detail, socially as well as individually, in what Mittell calls "forensic fandom."[23] This is a special kind of forensic fandom as well, because, rather than drilling into the detail of a fictional world, as audiences have done in, for example *Lost* (2004–2010), and *Battlestar Galactica* (2004–2009), for the documentary series, the length and content supply real-world materials to drill into, as well as questions of media manipulation, and actual systemic social issues. Not surprisingly, the drillable factual text can capture a larger amount of public attention, particularly where the series provides, if not a time-release formula for steady engagement, at least an epic amount of material through which to sift constructing a deep media.[24] The epicness of the single-subject serial documentary is perhaps one factor contributing to such involved community action: the sheer scale of the story invites a sort of awe, where we could keep zooming out, or keep zooming in, and seemingly never find the boundaries of the tale.

Video 5 SPOILER-SPOILER-SPOILER The final Scene of *The Jinx*. Please visit the **online version** of the article to watch the video.

21 Elizabeth Yardleya, David Wilson & Morag Kennedy '"TO ME ITS [SIC] REAL LIFE": Secondary Victims of Homicide in Newer Media', *Victims & Offenders: An International Journal of Evidence-based Research, Policy, and Practice*, 00:1–30, 2016.

22 Henry Jenkins, *Convergence culture: Where old and new media collide*, NYU press, 2006.

23 Jason Mittell, *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling* NYU Press, 2015.

24 Frank Rose, *The Art of Immersion: How the Digital Generation is Remaking Hollywood, Madison Avenue, and the Way We Tell Stories,* Norton Paperback, 2011.

Figure 5. Adnan Syed Update, The Guardian, 1 July 2016.

Making a Murderer has also been compared to the five-part mini-series *The Jinx: The Life and Deaths of Robert Durst* (2015), released weekly on HBO, in which *Capturing the Friedmans* Writer and Director, Andrew Jarecki, investigates the key suspect in a series of unsolved crimes. The seriality of the narrative clearly links with *Making a Murderer's* format, and the series also draws heavily on existing footage, testimony and archival work. *The Jinx* however is peppered with reconstructions, dramatization and dramatic pose which draws attention to the authorial, editorial and the mediating process which *Making a Murderer* attempts to deny or mask. The series has also not grabbed the attention of the online communities, promoting the collective detective or forensic fandom of *Making a Murderer*. This could be attributed to the lack of drillability in the text, as the evidence presented to the audience through the series appears heavily mediated, even skewed or tampered with by the director in its depiction and the authorial voice. The series presents a heavily weighted argument against Robert Durst and there is no protagonist to fight for. The series closes with a dramatic unintended confession by Durst as he is confronted with evidence, leaves the interview and goes to the bathroom without removing his radio microphone. This scene closes the series and the text, leaving no space for the audience to contribute or participate in the narrative or investigation. The openness of *Making a Murderer* and *Serial* are important as they invite participation and active engagement in the creation of the transmedial textuality.

5 *Making a Murderer* and Games

We can also read the *Making a Murderer* text as a sort of puzzle that asks; "Who killed Theresa Halbach?". The authors provide clues, evidence, and plenty of missing fragments that, the format suggests, will add up to an answer; this answer, almost certainly for the authors, is that Steven Avery is innocent—but there is no final catharsis or revelation to drive this

point home, or give us closure. In that sense, the text is more like a game. In part at least, the experience of unsolved crime series has become more playful because forensic fandom is fairly game-like: active, interactive, narrative-building, narrative-solving.[25] But the series seems at times to lay out a series of clues—albeit in heavy-handed fashion—implicitly offering up the narrative as a thing to be pieced together into a coherent, truth-telling picture. In reality, truth is complex and the unspoken view the series takes on the case is simplistic; but, for example, in the final episode, after we learn that the Supreme Court has refused to review Avery's case, we listen as Avery's lawyers lay out the remaining possible approaches to proving innocence, which largely centre around investigative work yet to be done. With the failure of the U.S. criminal justice system to investigate adequately now patently clear in the narrative, the outlining of possible alternate routes is signposted, practically with red flashing lights, as a moment in which someone else (we?) are dared to take action.

Figure 6. A community created meme reflecting on the forensic fandom in *Making a Murderer*.

25 Jason Mittell **'Forensic Fandom and the Drillable Text'** (web-exclusive essay) 2013.

Approached paradigmatically, the text also resembles another transmedia type, the Alternate Reality Game (ARG). ARGs are games played across multiple platforms on the web, typically by many players at once, as a one-time event happening in multiple spaces and connected networks.[26] ARGs have a number of common identifiers which can be used to identify them from other transmedia forms.[27] While ARGs are often driven by narratives that chime with more conventional game formats—a mission to save a person in distress, to uncover a mystery, to bring a criminal to justice —they differ in how the players engage with the task, where collaboration and information-sharing across digital platforms are essential to game play. ARGs present a puzzle too complex for a single member of the audience to solve alone, encouraging collective engagement and online forums to harness collective intelligence.[28] These border-crossing games blur boundaries between the game fiction and the real world, often involving the use of real websites, real documents, and real-life personalities for the delivery of clues or the enrichment of the narrative "unfold(ing) in the places where we work and live."[29] ARGs are known for belonging as much to players as to game designers, having a relatively open structure where the narrative can take different directions dependent upon how the players engage.[30]

Like an ARG, *Making a Murderer* presents a mix of mediated narrative and real world content (eg. news interviews, viewer interactions on Reddit, documents in and out of the public domain) and extends its medium spatially, temporally and socially.[31] Also like an ARG, the text comprises dispersed narrative(s) across a wide range of platforms, engages missing fragments and holes in the narrative that appear to need answering. We could consider the first episode of the series as the ARGs rabbit hole which poses a call to action for the audience to engage with the complex narrative. Viewed in this way we can easily reframe the episode and understand it as a point of departure into a narrative for the audience, one that they can interact with, investigate and get lost inside.

The narrative is driven by a pervasive sense that Avery and Dassey need to be saved: they are downtrodden, clearly disadvantaged in a provincial social system, and have been legally misrepresented. Low IQ and lack of social skills are put forward as further evidence of vulnerability. As in an ARG, there is no distinct authorial voice in the *Making a Murderer* series, nor is either Avery or Dassey presented as a clear protagonist, but instead, through a shrewd post-production editing process, the producers have crafted a gaping hole where a hero should be. While Avery's attorneys, Jerry Buting and Dean Strang, at times begin to take up the mantle of heroism, clearly and repeatedly they fail to live up to the task; ultimately, the hero is to be you, the viewer. This approach to real world problem solving and combating conspiracy and cover-up was also seen in the wake of the September 11th attacks in which players of the first ARG *The Beast* discussed using their collective skills and intelligence to investigate the attacks.[32] This also conforms entirely to Mittell's complex TV viewer, who is engaged, involved, active, and indeed there are links between ARGs and complex TV, for example the *The Lost Experience* (2006). The narrative is constructed so that the audience feels as if they have an agency to effect the outcomes of the incarcerated Avery and Dassey, as the public has had in previous cases such as *The Thin Blue Line* or *Serial*.

A hallmark of the ARG genre is the degree to which players must surrender control to the game, to its collective structures, hidden designers, to simultaneous suspensions of disbelief and scrutiny of detail. Interestingly, this has much in common with the way *Making a Murderer* draws viewers through equally indistinct worlds of reality and fiction— where viewers are parsing the truths and untruths of personalities involved, including those of the Reddit community, social media networks, and series producers. Like the ARG, *Making a Murderer* challenges the boundaries of play—or rather, it challenges the boundaries of work, where the work of investigation, of series promotion, of Netflix promotion, of Avery's and Dassey's defence, are being done by the public.

26 Jane McGonigal,"'This Is Not A Game': Immersive Aesthetics and Collective Play". paper presented at the *Fifth International Digital Arts and Culture Conference* May 19–23 2003.

27 Ivan Askwith, *This Is Not (Just) An Advertisement: Understanding Alternate Reality Games*. MIT Convergence Culture Consortium 2006.

28 Elizabeth Bonsignore, Kari Kraus, June Ahn, Amanda Visconti, Ann Fraistat, Allison Druin, (August 2011) *Alternate Reality Games as a Platform for Practicing 21st Century Literacies* HCIL-2011-18.

29 Ivan Askwith, *This Is Not (Just) An Advertisement: Understanding Alternate Reality Games*. MIT Convergence Culture Consortium 2006.

30 Nicola Whitton and Alex Moseley, eds, *Using Games To Enhance Learning and Teaching*, 2012.

31 Markus Montola, Jaakko Stenros, & Annika Waern *Pervasive Games: Theory and Design* 2009 p. 21.

32 Jane McGonigal,"'This Is Not A Game': Immersive Aesthetics and Collective Play". paper presented at the *Fifth International Digital Arts and Culture Conference* May 19–23 2003.

This argument is not to suggest that *Making a Murderer* is an ARG, that the case is fabricated and fictional, but it is to suggest that the modes of production and consumption of media are similar and earlier transmedia works have shifted and influenced the authorial voice of the work and the audience's approaches to engaging with televisual culture. The audience has become active, participatory and investigative and if we can understand the narrative outside of the core narrative (i.e. everything the public has added) and the audiences approach the investigation holistically then we can learn new ways to frame and analyse the text.

The investigation, as a narrative, is open and in movement and adds depth to the media experience.[33] Not all of the puzzle pieces are clear, and the authors of the stories, both the series writers Laura Ricciardi and Moria Demos and the participatory audience who are continually writing and rewriting elements of the text outside of the fixed televisual content, aren't even aware of the final pieces of the puzzle, or what the final solution to the riddle is.

Figure 7. *Making a Murderer* and Post-Digital Writing.

33 Frank Rose, *The Art of Immersion: How the Digital Generation is Remaking Hollywood, Madison Avenue, and the Way We Tell Stories,* Norton Paperback, 2011.

The series and its outcomes owe much to the domain of writing itself, particularly as we understand narrative as the exchange of information, the role of the audience in how we receive this information, the politics of what we do with it. The transmedial resonates in contemporary literature with writers like Paul Auster, Mark Danielewski and David Foster Wallace: post-digital writing embeds and overflows the text with information and disinformation filtering through numerous channels, creates active textual environments full of structural gaps and demands, characteristically lacks a consolidated subject that we can feel we know. There is a dizziness and indeterminacy inherent as well, an aporia in how characters are (not) constructed that we also get in *Making a Murderer*; there is a round-and-round quality to the series that progresses the narrative slowly by revisiting and revisiting the same multiplicity of voices - lawyers, members of the Avery family, Dassey's mother, Avery's girlfriends, the media - creating a web of interlinking versions of Avery and Dassey, a network of possible realities of who they might be. Narrative and characters emerge and/or are built by cumulative revisitings, some of these done across media and by multiple authors.

Figure 8. Remixed still for Brendan Dassey's *Interrogation*.

Problematically though, the series does have a clear bias, which greatly undermines its representations of complexity. If this style of news telling is intended to disrupt the imagined, closed textual community of the newspaper, the local news cycle, or more accurately the social news bubble that many of us now operate largely within, it doesn't manage this. The authors don't appear in the series, but the editorial voice is patent in the way the story is told: Avery and Dassey are innocent. The producers have decided this before we could decide for ourselves, as is clear by, for example, the way in which shots are framed. This is in contrast to *Serial's* Koenig, for example, whose editorial process is obvious but who genuinely seems to leave questions unanswered for the audience. Both cases covered by these two serialisations are closed cases, but the authorial and investigative approach to exploring the complexity of the cases differs greatly. The ongoing production of *Serial* makes the text responsive, the production is in motion and the core of the series as a symbiotic relationship with the fan produced content, in a co-authorial process. *Making a Murderer* as a series is static, but its textuality as a whole is still in movement.

Perhaps what the authors intended is less important, however, than what emerged from the series thanks to an active viewership. Indeed, it could be argued that there should be no hierarchical distinction in analysing the series versus the whole transmedial text, including its paratexts. Mapping the complex transmedial topology of a text such as *Making a*

Murderer is useful, in one sense, as an approach to understanding the complexity of emerging media forms, particularly in their overlapping inception, authorship, reception, and dispersion through these post-digital means. This kind of analysis is suited to a narrative form that is "written" or possibly emerges across multiple platforms and with contributions from multiple people, because it allows a rich reflection on the constraints and possibilities of various textual strands apparent in the transmedia work, as well as providing a variety of contexts in which to consider the implications of the work. This includes, of course ethical and civil considerations, and potential biases of all parties inherent in engaging in these forms of production.

Making a Murderer, as well as other forms of post-digital writing including socially-oriented games and podcasts, indicate a shift in reportage and media literacy oriented toward real-world outcomes; formats like *Making a Murderer* and *Serial* are sure to lead to more community-oriented narrative formats designed to spark investigation and, we should hope, more critical analysis of complex social issues within, for example, the criminal justice system. The potentials of harnessing collective effort and making the most of collective intelligences are encouraging. However, it will be important to look further in how these works operate, particularly how their design can be developed toward meaningful engagement, critical thinking on the part of audiences, and genuine awareness of social issues, in order to increase the real benefits they might offer.

There are a number of tangible outcomes that may be realistically attributed to the transmedial text of *Making a Murderer*, including the series and all paratextual materials, at the time of writing (December 2016):

- Brendan Dassey's murder conviction was overturned by a federal judge in Wiconsin, ordering Dassey to be released within 90 days (this has subsequently been blocked by prosecutors).

- Raised coverage of conviction centers and innocence projects across the U.S. and highlighted the increasing number of exonerations in the U.S. based on, for example, advances in DNA testing.

- Crowdsourced insights and investigation from a wide array of people within and outside the criminal justice system, resulting in scrutiny of various aspects of how the case was conducted, for example flawed methods of police investigation whose results were used against Avery at trial.

- Brought attention to the issue of false confessions, a commonly misunderstood or dismissed phenomenon by members of the public (ie. juries).

- Brought attention to the issue of the interrogation of minors, necessary regulations and how these can be abused. Model legislation has been drafted linked to calls for laws preventing underage suspects from being questioned without an attorney or parent present.

- Brought attention to the treatment of poor and/or indigent defendants within the criminal justice system in comparison to that of, for example, upper middle class defendants.

- Led to the appearance on a number of law school courses as an instructional tool.

- Drew a large amount of direct attention to the persons involved in the case, including the defense attorneys and prosecutors.

- Drew the attention of the group Anonymous, who apparently invested resource into locating and releasing evidence in the case, eg. relevant phone records.

- Raised the interesting question of whether involving the media in an ongoing legal case is beneficial for defendants, and what role the public should play in exonerations.

- Prompted President Barack Obama to respond to a pardon request for Avery, with representatives stating that since Steven Avery and Brendan Dassey are both state prisoners, the President cannot pardon them. A pardon in this case would need to be issued at the state level by the appropriate authorities.

- Led to a juror from the 2005 trial against Avery contacting *Making a Murderer*'s producers to say that he believed Avery was framed, and further, that he helped to convict Avery out of a fear for personal safety.

- Helped to re-open the case. At the time of writing, Avery has a new Lawyer, Kathleen Zellner, who is presenting new evidence to the court, using new technology to sample chemicals from the evidence and run new blood analysis which are both approaches suggested by the series and pursued by the community.

Mapping and understanding the complex transmedial topology of a text such as *Making a Murderer* is important as it offers new approaches to transmedia criticism, and new approaches to understanding complex emerging media forms constructed both by the author and the active participation of the audience called for by scholars such as Long[34] (2011). Although it is important to understand the textual dialogues of new emerging forms, it is equally important to understand the textual genealogies of new emerging forms of textualities. When working on new approaches to transmedia criticism we must understand the textual contexts that the work as a whole evolves from and its intertextual qualities which draw on new modes of production and participation. It is important to understand and situate the similar textualities, modes of production and participation to help map the heritage and textual trajectories from important transmedia contributions. Analysing a dispersed and complex text such as *Making a Murderer* can help to offer reflections on what degree the text is clouded by the constraints of the form, authorial bias, and the ethical and civil considerations in engaging in these forms of production. What the authors intended is less important, however, than what emerged from the series thanks to an active viewership.

Making a Murderer, and other texts or its ilk such as *Serial*, point towards new approaches in documentary film making, reportage and media literacy which could be honed and directed towards more tangible real-world outcomes. Focusing on this can increase the tangible impact of the text and build towards a more mature and directed form of social justice storytelling.

This new form of non-fiction transmedia, with its orientating texts; constituting court evidence, crime scene investigation, media archives, and real world events, could point towards a new mode of triggering collective investigation and driving social justice.

Biography

Alan Hook is a Lecturer in Interactive Media, and Researcher in New Media and Play in the Centre for Media Research at Ulster University. His teaching and research focus on play as a form of interaction and how participation in games and transmedia texts affects and shapes behaviour both in and outside of the game.

Danielle Barrios-O'Neill is a Lecturer in English and Publishing at Falmouth University. Her research is largely focused on emergent practices and intersections in narrative and technology, with particular attention to what might be described as "sustainable worlds" discourses: critical conversations engaging textual and human futures.

Jolene Mairs-Dyer is a Lecturer in Media Production at Ulster University. Her work is a mix of traditional scholarship and practice-led enquiry which investigates representation in documentary forms and post-conflict society.

34 Geoffery Long, *How To Ride A Lion: A Call for a Higher Transmedia Criticism,* MIT Convergence Culture Consortium 2011.