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The Imagined Industry

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Media studies scholars have long examined media industries' fascination with audiences, detailing industries' incessant work to define, locate, and measure media consumers. If audiences prove elusive and alluring for media, it is important to recognize that audiences often just as keenly seek media industries, looking to understand and influence such arbiters of culture. I argue that how audiences and users conceive of media industries' members and norms and the viability of various ways to engage (with) them constitutes an "imagined industry." Imagined industries are consequential and inextricably linked to audience practices. This article articulates, deploys, and argues for an imagined industry framework for revealing results and implications that reflect the complexities of media systems in the digital age. I demonstrate the framework's ability to disaggregate imagined industries from larger media systems and illustrate its utility through the results of empirical case study research on two contemporary online activist-audience groups. Findings from the case study show that the imagined industry is useful in augmenting both active audience and institutional approaches to the study of media.

Keywords: media audiences, media industries, imagined industry, Internet and technology, social constructions

In 1991, Ien Ang wrote that media industries, struggling to produce content for viewers "extremely difficult to define, attract and keep," were consigned to "forever desperately seek the audience" (p. ix). In this article, I contend that often, audiences just as desperately seek (new) media industries, looking for ways to make their identities and demands visible to the producers of culture. In the digital age, there is often an expectation that new technologies can bridge the distance between traditional audiences and industries. That the Internet has become a place to work out our relationships to industries is not new. However, when society's most powerful institutions seem to have been upended by online groups that consider themselves marginalized by media, the cultural and political stakes feel increasingly high. The contemporary moment is characterized by a U.S. president's labeling mainstream news the "Fake News Media," critiques that social media companies allow health misinformation to spread unchecked online, and social media hashtags, such as #MeToo and #Gamergate, that spawned mass critiques of film and video

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game industries, respectively. How people think about and talk about media industries is central to society's most pressing cultural and political concerns. To translate such large-scale concerns to an accessible level of analysis, this article discusses and demonstrates the analytic utility of an "imagined industry" framework for the study of (new) media.

I argue that how audiences and users conceive of media industries' members and norms and the viability of various ways to engage (with) them constitutes an "imagined industry." It is this imaginary that leads to people's expectations and practices related to those industries and industrially created/mediated content. Media studies have long focused on how corporate media entities and industrial members construct, or *imagine*, the audiences for content they produce, distribute, and market. From a political economy or institutional perspective, the imagined audience refers to industrial conceptions of individuals and groups that consume content. Media industries construct from what Ang (1991) called the "infinite, contradictory, dispersed and dynamic practices and experiences of . . . audiencehood enacted by people in their everyday lives" (p. 13), industrially recognizable and measurable demographics and markets. However, as institutions and industrial workers—including marketers, executives, producers, writers, musicians, and actors—imagine whom their work reaches, audiences also imagine the unknowable people, groups, and interests "behind the scenes." Digital technologies have allowed imagined industries to flourish online, fomenting endless opportunities for constructions to form, gain support or opposition, and be tested and revised. These include former president Trump's dubbing of the "failing" *New York Times*, and hashtag movements exposing industrial inequality, such as #OscarsSoWhite. The overlay of black box technologies on black box industries means people face even more uncertainty about the media impacting their everyday lives. The growing body of literature on algorithmic imaginaries (Bucher, 2017)—how users conceive of how algorithms curate their lives—is a literature about imagined industries and how and why these industries deploy particular technologies. Similarly, user understandings of how and why social media platforms moderate content and even hire the people they do are imaginaries of industrial motivations and practices. The same is true for users who are suspicious that industries listen as they use digital assistants or who worry platforms are selling their data. Indeed, imagined industries are central to digital media studies' most relevant areas of interest, including algorithmic culture, digital activism, polarization, platform politics, and surveillance.

In this article, I provide a framework for researching audiences and users' imagined industries, arguing that these imaginaries are consequential, particularly in their inextricable links to audience practices—or *tactics*. The framework points to past scholarly calls for such a focus, details the ways that imagined industries do and do not align with their analytic obverse—imagined audiences—and demonstrates how imagined industries are at times collapsed in audience and institutional approaches to media. I argue for the framework's ability to disaggregate imagined industries from larger media systems and demonstrate its utility through results of empirical case study research on two online activist-audience groups' imagined industries and associated tactics.

An *Imagined Industry* Framework

Much research on media institutions/industries and the political economy of media examines how corporate media institutions and industrial members construct or *imagine* the audiences for the content they produce. These "imagined audiences" are inextricably tied to industrial practices that include the

segmentation, measurement, and targeting of audiences (Ang, 1991; Baym, 2013; Turow, 2006). Other research emphasizes the active nature of audience consumption (Fiske, 1987; Jenkins, 2013). It often highlights the Internet's tendency to make audiences more participatory and productive (Baym, 2000; Bruns, 2008; Livingstone, 2004), providing means for audiences to exert influence over industries and text (Baym, 2018; Maris, 2016). Despite a wealth of work on both media institutions and audiences, media studies sometimes gloss over the key role of *audience constructions* of media industries in media systems. I argue that specifically attending to what I call audiences' "imagined industry" can provide valuable insights into (new) media phenomena in the digital age.

The Collapsing of the Role of the Imagined Industry in Media Systems

Both institutional and active audience approaches to media provide rich data and insights into media processes. However, the role of the imagined industry is often collapsed analytically in both, leaving audience constructions of industries undertheorized. Despite this, scholars in both areas have often uncovered what we might call "the imagined industry." Indeed, implicit in Hall's (1980) important work on encoding and decoding was that how audiences understand media is related to their orientation to *whom* they imagine encodes the text. Liebes and Katz's (1990) classic empirical audience study applying Hall's (1980) model revealed participants' imagined industries. Liebes and Katz created categories for participant readings of the television series *Dallas* (Capice, Rich, Katzman, Hagman, & Horton, 1978–1991). However, one small section of the results pointed instead to audience understandings of *industry* rather than text. Liebes and Katz (1990) called this small (sub-sub) category of responses "Business" and defined it as audiences' awareness of "the business behind the box" (p. 124). Describing American respondents, Liebes and Katz (1990) noted,

> Their critical statements show keen awareness that characters come and go, not only as a function of the needs of the story but also as a function of the deals they strike with producers and of the accident rate on the Santa Monica Freeway. (p. 124)

In comparison, Russian respondents "are not interested . . . in actors' contractual relations but in the business of buying and selling audiences and are suspicious of the ideological control of the program by elites" (Liebes & Katz, 1990, p. 125). The authors noted that it was difficult "to distinguish easily between 'the program teaches us' and 'the producers are trying to tell us'" (Liebes & Katz, 1990, p. 119). It seems likely, then, that audience readings informed by an imagined industry were included in other result categories, demonstrating analytic difficulty isolating an imaginary. That the role of audiences' imagined industries in media systems can, as in this classic study, quite easily become collapsed into results understood as textual readings/responses—or other analytic foci such as institutional audience construction—means that imagined industries have likely been underresearched.

Others have noted this gap and suggested that such a focus would prove productive. Turow and Draper (2014) called for research on interacting audience/industry constructions:

> It would be fruitful . . . to explore the ways in which the creator-users construct media executives and their contributions with the ways the executives see themselves and their mandates . . . it is essential to understand how the users view themselves and their industry counterparts. (p. 652)

Similarly, Johnson (2007) argued that in the digital age, audiences are increasingly "invited in" by industry, and so "we should investigate the shift it points to in our conception of audiences, their antagonistic relationships to television texts and their position in relation to production" (p. 62). "Audience" is a complex term (Livingstone, 2004), given that audiences are a constructed reality (Ang, 1991; Livingstone, 2004)—and so, too, then, to those who make up audiences, are the industries that create/curate the content and culture they consume. However, there is a dearth of critical research that systematically explores and interrogates *how* audiences imagine media industries. Next, I suggest a conceptual framework that begins the work of addressing gaps in media studies' considerations of imagined industries.

Flipping the Imaginary?

The imagined audience lends itself conceptually to the development of a "bottom-up" framework for investigating audience constructions of (new) media industries. While an imagined industry may seem a mere flip of the classic imagined media audience, there are ways that it does, and does not, align with the concept. This framework for the imagined industry will often return to an exploration of these similarities and differences with imagined audiences as they assist in its articulation. Most crucially, both concepts describe variously constructed groups' ("media audiences," "media industries") *constructions of one another* and the possibilities for engaging each other based on those constructions. Audiences and industries both exist as constructions because other individuals and groups see them as elusive, while also potentially valuable when defined, located, and influenced. While scholars such as Ang (1991), Gitlin (1983), Napoli (2003), and Webster (2014) have described the difficulties for media industries in knowing the "audience"—a category industries value as potential consumers of content and advertising—audiences often instinctively understand (new) media industries as important and influential arbiters of culture (Means Coleman, 2002; Montgomery, 1989; Noble, 2018; Seiter, 1999; Smith-Shomade, 2012). For audiences, media industries often seem difficult, if not impossible, to access and influence. Gitlin (1983) noted parallels in television industry/audience fascination and bewilderment with one another. Caldwell (2008) described underlying reasons for the industries' mystery:

> Modern film and media companies are resolutely proprietary in nature; they guard many internal processes and on-screen content decisions possessively; they force employees to sign "non-disclosure" and "confidentiality agreements"; and their employees usually only enter the public world and trades as opportunities to hype projects in development or distribution or to fuel PR campaigns and marketing initiatives. (p. 14)

These industrial norms remain in legacy media, and Caldwell's description just as easily fits new media and technology industries where secrecy and nondisclosure agreements are standard (Florentine, 2018), and similarly lead to users piecing together imaginaries in the absence of transparent industrial practices.

Within the social constructionist tradition (Berger & Luckman, 1966), there exist numerous conceptions of imaginaries (Herbrik & Schlechtriemen, 2019). Taylor's (2004) definition of the social imaginary proves useful here: "the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations" (p. 23). Importantly,

> The critical first step toward an adequate understanding of the social imaginary is to stop opposing it to some form of "reality". . . . The task is then to study the various forms of expression of the social imaginary in their inherent dynamism, their specific effects and modes of functioning. (Herbrik & Schlechtriemen, 2019, p. 4)

Indeed, examining audience–industry relations through an imagined industry analytic may help to provide a nuanced view of media studies debates that can become bogged down by questions of accuracy or efficacy.[2] Generally speaking, in attempting to understand an audience's imagined industry, one would likely be focused on questions related to where it emerged, how it connects to other social imaginaries, its links to audience (and industry) practices, and its larger interactions with society, culture, and politics.

Audiences' imagined industries are often complex and in flux. They can include various, and sometimes competing, notions of who or what constitutes "the media," and how and why media operate. This too is similar to media industries' imagined audiences. Tulloch (1990) explained about television producers, "A sense of aggregating audiences is at all times in the minds of producers of commercial TV drama as much as collecting different kinds of voters is in the minds of politicians" (p. 191). These aggregates emerge intraorganizationally or intraindustrially as commercial media industries construct commodified audience segments. For most audiences, any imagined industry is also likely to at least partially derive from media industries themselves—not from commercially driven imaginaries traded on in-industry, but from industrial products. Media consumers have had prolonged exposure to representations of media industry culture continually (re)produced by those very industries. Caldwell (2008) argued that entertainment industries hold a narcissistic preoccupation with self-examination in their products, noting, "industry self-analysis and self-representation now serve as primary on-screen entertainment forms across a vast multimedia landscape" (p. 1). Indeed, some commonly held perceptions of entertainment media industries that will be discussed in the case study (such as media workers being rich, insular, and disconnected from everyday realities) have taken hold at least partially because that is how those industries self-depict. Of course, there are numerous sources of imagined industries, including public discourse and debate, journalism, trade press, social media, academia, politicians, religious and community leaders, family and friends, and audiences' own experiences.

While aggregate imaginaries like market demographics are key elements of industrial workers' creative processes, many also develop their own personal imaginaries of audiences. These less systematic constructions can be (though are not necessarily) unrelated to commercial goals inherent in institutional audience construction. A useful preelectronic media precedent for this is the literary "writer's audience," which "serves the writer" rather than media institutions (Marwick & boyd, 2010). For example, Gans (2004)

[2] See the agency versus structure media studies debates (Livingstone, 2015).

found that journalists "filmed and wrote for their superiors and for themselves, assuming . . . that what interested them would interest the audience" (p. 230). And marketers (Sender, 2004) and television producers (Maris, 2016) sometimes create for political/identity communities with which they feel aligned. These imaginaries, distinct in many ways from larger shared institutional constructions, are importantly *still* imagined audiences: "Media audiences are always imaginary, whether they exist in the writer's mind or as the target demographics for a sitcom" (Marwick & boyd, 2010, p. 128). There is a corollary of the media's "writer's audience" for imagined industries. Audiences often imagine distinct "writers" at work in the production and curation of culture, whether actual scriptwriters or other industrial workers, such as actors or directors. Many now even hold imaginaries of particular (new) media workers, such as Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg. These imaginaries can differ from broader institutional imaginaries. For instance, one might say, "That mainstream film will have strong LGBTQ representation because that director is an activist and will stand up to their conservative studio," or, "This conservative works in the liberal media but can't reveal his politics because he's outnumbered." Often, micro-imaginaries like these inform about a broader imagined industry by adding context or contrast. Overall, it is important to understand that imagined industries span numerous industries, industrial members, corporations, organizations, levels, and contexts.

Imaginaries and Tactics

The imagined industry, as formulated herein, aligns especially with understandings of imaginaries as necessarily tied up with *practices*. Appadurai (2006) argued,

> The imagination has become an organized field of social practices, a form of work (in the sense of both labor and culturally organized practice), and a form of negotiation between sites of agency (individuals) and globally defined fields of possibility. (p. 587)

Taylor (2004) explained that imaginaries and practices are inextricably linked: "If the understanding makes the practice possible, it is also true that it is the practice that largely carries the understanding" (p. 25). I argue that the imagined industry is consequential. An audience's imagined industry is often revealed through audience practices and the stakes of the imaginary made apparent in those practices. Thus, it becomes vital to trace both in any examination of imagined industry.

Audience and industrial imaginings of one another involve many practices*,* often aimed at locating, knowing, and influencing the other.[3] De Certeau's (1984) notions of strategies and tactics work well to contrast industrial practices based on imagined audiences and audience practices based on imagined industries. Understanding these practices as De Certeauian strategies and tactics also acknowledges one of the most significant differences between the concepts: power. Industries construct audiences from a position of institutional power. De Certeau (1984) called institutional practices *strategies*, explaining that powerful subjects, such as armies or businesses, use strategies to manage an "exteriority," such as enemies or customers. De Certeau linked such management to panoptic practices. Thus, media practices of audience

[3] Overt audience practices are taken up in the empirical work described herein. However, understandings of audience practices ought to be expansive and include how audiences actively consume content.

construction, deeply focused on measurement and surveillance for the manufacture and trade of audiences, can be well understood as strategies.

Audiences do not trade on constructions of industry as commodity. This may not precisely be the case for audiences organized by groups with political-economic interests, such as advocacy or lobbyist groups, but typically it is a fundamental difference from imagined audiences that imagined industries are not generated from places of power. Audiences also do not typically attempt structured measurement of industries. This is because, unlike industrial constructions and segmentations of audiences as markets, audience imaginings of industry are rarely profit-driven. Rather, they are often linked to notions of identity, ideology, and other estimations of political or cultural representation or power. Audiences' imagined industries, then, are tied up in practices meant to understand, navigate, and sometimes influence the strategies enacted by powerful media entities. De Certeau (1984) explained, "A tactic is determined by the *absence of power* just as a strategy is organized by the postulation of power" (p. 38). De Certeau's tactic "must play on and with a terrain imposed on it" (p. 37). Audience practices related to imagined industries, then, can be understood as tactics that audiences use to understand and navigate industry-controlled media.

Case Study: Activist-Audience Groups and the Imagined Industry

Here I will apply the analytic framework to a case study of two activist-audience groups organizing online to influence media industries. As described previously, there are numerous (new) media industries, and innumerable imagined industries circulating. This case study provides just one example of the many analyses of imagined industry that could be undertaken. This analysis represents a brief selection from results of a larger five-year digital ethnographic study (Maris, 2018) of the heavily LGBTQ and feminist fan group Xena Movie Campaign (XMC) and the Christian conservative activist group One Million Moms (OMM). XMC is a fan group attempting to influence media industries to create a film or television reboot of the NBCUniversal series *Xena: Warrior Princess* (Tapert, Stewart, & Raimi, 1995–2001). XMC advocates for feminist and LGBTQ media content and prefers a new *Xena* project's protagonists be represented as queer (the original series only hinted at queerness). Following an announcement that NBCUniversal would reboot[4] the series without the original *Xena* actresses, XMC became increasingly activist in its demands for including the actresses and fighting ageism and sexism in media more generally. OMM is what we might consider XMC's ideological opposite, though similar in demographic membership and size. It is a conservative Christian group[5] of primarily mothers and grandmothers working to dissuade media industries from representing LGBTQ identities and other content they consider objectionable. OMM focuses on spotlighting and boycotting media that they believe have deleterious effects on children and society, and on promoting Christian content and values. It is in their oppositional characteristics and politics (e.g., queer vs. antiqueer) that XMC and OMM represent a useful comparative case study.[6]

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[4] The reboot was later scrapped.

[5] OMM's parent organization is the American Family Association (AFA), a Christian nonprofit that the Southern Poverty Law Center lists as a hate group.

[6] While XMC campaigns for LGBTQ media representation and OMM for LGBTQ erasure, I do not imply that this is a "normal" ideological/political spectrum with a "neutral" middle. XMC's activism is oriented toward equality, while most of OMM's activism seeks to exclude and oppress.

Both groups are also similar in many ways. Both emerged around the same time (2011–2012) based on a desire to influence media industries toward particular practices and representational goals. They have a similar number of likes (approximately 91,000) on their social media platform of choice—Facebook. After more than five years of participant observation with the groups online and in-person, interviews with them and members of industries they target, and analysis of trade and popular narratives related to the groups, it became clear the groups shared similar imagined industries and used tactics tied to those imaginaries, though toward very different goals. The following overview of the groups' three primary imaginaries and their related tactics begins to demonstrate the rich data provided by an analytic focus on the imagined industry.

Imaginary: The Industry Is Exclusive, Insular, and Motivated by Profit

Both groups imagine media industries as exclusive, insular, and motivated by profit. Profit is key to this imaginary, given that exclusivity and insularity are understood to be results of industrial wealth. Indeed, money is seen as bolstering the divide between industries and members of XMC and OMM. The privileging of profit over all else is imagined as a trait of "the industry" collectively—particularly for executives and those at the top of industrial hierarchies. "Jordan," an XMC member, expressed little faith in industries: "I'm really cynical about big business . . . I'm not a capitalist." While most in OMM would identify as procapitalist, the group's "About Us" page declares, "Money is the name of the game for those who exploit, and they are exploiting our children for their financial gain" (OMM, 2020, para. 5). Entertainment media industries are viewed as even more profit-driven and morally bankrupt than other industries by both groups, particularly because of the perceived entanglement between their profitability and larger political or cultural "problems." When I asked Tina Griffin, an OMM partner and Christian influencer known as Counterculture Mom, why media make the content she finds objectionable, she tied their representations to a variety of profit-making ventures:

> There's a lot of money to be made by selling sex, drugs, and alcohol, cutting, suicide, and pregnancy to all of our kids. Kids get pregnant, what happens? Planned Parenthood makes another, how many billion dollars a year? More babies are murdered. They sell pornography to a 10-year-old, and they push the porn in the video games. Why? Because if a 10-year-old/11-year-old sees pornography while they're playing games—which, many of them are showing porn today—who'll make money? The porn industry. They've . . . got a customer for life. The reason they're pushing it is because they can make a ton of cash at it.

Although less far-ranging than Griffin in her explanation, members of XMC often point to industries' political practices (such as not representing older women or people of color) as being based on fear of losing money. Thus, members of both groups believe that most industrial decisions are made with profit in mind.

Because the industries are assumed to deal in large sums of money, and because of the high-profile nature of working in entertainment, the group members imagine that those in industries practice a sort of exclusivity—not just anyone can join. Because of their perceived insular nature, media industries hold a "black box" quality for the groups. There is a strong sense that the industries consist of a tight-knit group of insiders and that audiences, particularly those represented by XMC and OMM, would not naturally

be welcomed into their community. Both groups perceive industrial exclusivity and insularity as obstacles to overcome, and many tactics were developed with these obstacles in mind.

Tactic: Learn the Game

To communicate with and influence media industries, members of both groups feel that they must first understand them. Thus, many of their tactics are aimed at learning more about the industries, their practices, and how to reach them. Indeed, this is a core service that OMM provides members. Members trust OMM to identify the "worst" media content and where and how to direct their complaints. Member "Susan" brought up the NBC series *Good Girls* (Bans et al., 2018–2021) as a show she had never seen but had taken OMM's suggested action against. When I asked why she trusts OMM to identify content to boycott, she responded,

> It usually has to be really bad before they're going to do a boycott . . . if you've got their attention . . . it's not borderline. . . . They look for the most offensive thing they can find, and that's what they boycott.

According to OMM director Monica Cole, OMM actually relies heavily on members to identify content of concern; the OMM site even features a "Submit Trash" link on its front page.

Not only does OMM do (or crowdsource) the work of identifying offensive content, but it also makes communicating with industries as easy as possible. Because the workings of media—like sponsorship practices—can seem mysterious to members busily going about their lives, OMM identifies sponsors of content, along with corresponding contact information. OMM also monitors industrial responses so the group can change tactics swiftly. For example, Cole told me in response to their petitions that "some companies will block emails or close that email address." When OMM realizes that a company has done this, it quickly implements communication through a new channel, publicizes that the company refuses to hear feedback, or otherwise modifies its tactics. Thus, OMM maneuvers swiftly in response to industrial strategies, reducing any confusion felt by the casual member. Although members may feel disconnected from industrial power players, they trust OMM to do the work of breaking through to the insular industries.

Conversely, XMC openly struggles with identifying and reaching industrial decision-makers, especially at NBCUniversal. Thus, it focuses on alleviating its distance through learning and practicing industry-quality marketing and branding, hoping that its high-quality work will demonstrate the group's, and the original series', relevance and value to industrial decision-makers. For industries, "engagement is what works," XMC admin "Eddie" explained. Thus, such media buzzwords became goals for the group. Professional backgrounds in marketing, public relations, and digital content creation are highly valued by XMC and required of volunteers. Volunteer "Laura" initially joined in response to an XMC post looking for people with her skills, which include graphic design, editing, publication layout, and, as she said, "number crunching . . . like today I had to take all of our Twitter stats and comb through it and find the big numbers and the low numbers and the 'why did this happen?' numbers." Mirroring the media industries' struggles with measurement in the digital age (Baym, 2013; Bermejo, 2009; Napoli, 2003), XMC watches its data

closely. The group tracks which of its targeting tactics are working and which are not, taking seriously that, for large companies, as Laura says, "Numbers matter."

Tactic: Power Recognizes Power

Members of XMC and OMM both believe that because those in media industries are insular and powerful, they are more likely to engage with other insiders or powerful entities than directly with the groups. This belief fuels tactics designed explicitly to mitigate this barrier to influence. For example, one of XMC's tactics to convince NBCUniversal to reboot its *Xena* (Tapert et al., 1995–2001) property was a hashtag campaign (#NetfliXena) ostensibly meant to persuade Netflix to take on the reboot. However, an XMC volunteer told me they didn't actually expect Netflix to buy the property. Instead, they imagined that if Netflix or other media companies took interest in *Xena*, NBCUniversal might take notice of this older property that perhaps they had all but forgotten. Tactics like this demonstrate XMC's belief that NBCUniversal is more likely to notice another media company's interest in *Xena*, compared with an invested audience group's interest.

XMC also realizes, sometimes to its chagrin, that the most valuable audience for media industries is the youth demographic. Because media notoriously prize youth and equate young audiences with profit (Ewen, 2001), XMC works to cultivate a young fan base for a potential new *Xena* (Tapert et al., 1995–2001), especially as the original fan base ages. Eddie described adopting social media platforms used by the industries' preferred age demographic: "We decided to make a Tumblr in order to hit teenage and college-age students. . . . We're trying to increase *Xena*'s presence there." Thus, XMC attempts to amplify characteristics that it imagines are valuable to the distant industries it wishes to influence.

Rather than appeal to powerful groups *within* mainstream media to pressure targets, OMM creates and maintains strategic alliances with other powerful groups and individuals, including Christian conservative organizations, interfaith religious alliances, and Christian influencers. Cole told me, "We work together because there is strength in numbers. . . . We know that working together, we're just helping the cause, and we're all on the same team." In the digital age, these intergroup connections are easy to make and sustain. Members often told me about multiple allied organizations and influencers they followed and envisioned as deeply connected to OMM's cause. For instance, "Victoria" heard about OMM from her involvement with Mom's March for America, explaining about that group, "The ladies that sit up in California with the pink hats that went to D.C.? This is the total opposite." For Victoria and other OMM members, these easy-to-access interconnected online communities can empower members who may feel outnumbered on the wider Internet or in society and who feel excluded from mainstream media industries. If they cannot grasp power within the culture created by those industries, they imagine they will demonstrate their power through numbers and alliances with political heavyweights.

Imaginary: The Industry Is Wrong

Both XMC and OMM imagine that the media industries are "wrong." The groups' members believe that the industries are antagonistic toward their identities, and they doubt the validity of the logics underpinning industrial practices. For example, XMC members believe that media industries incorrectly focus on entertainment for young heterosexual men, making an action-adventure reboot featuring queer women

over 40 a hard sell. However, the group members believe that these industrial priorities are outdated and incorrectly predict profitability. Laura described industry research as feedback loops:

> All the research they do, which of course, is based on the movies *they* produce, which are geared toward 18–24-year-old men, this is what they're gauging everything on. When they look at *that* research they say, "We should be making movies for men ages 18–24." They don't want old chicks. . . . That's the way Hollywood is.

Xena's sexuality also represents a challenge, considering industries' preferred demographics. Many in the fan base would consider a heterosexual Xena a failure by industries powered by White heterosexual men. Jordan explained,

> I have . . . a lot of friends who are filmmakers. . . . And the only ones that really went anywhere were White men. Which is just true. There are how many women filmmakers? Like, none. And then women of color who are filmmakers?. . . It's so shitty because those are the most important voices that need to be heard.

Such industrial characteristics lead XMC to believe that media marginalize the identities they represent.

While XMC works for representation of women, LGBTQ, and other minorities, OMM members such as "Linda" believe media focus on identity such as "the genders, race, sex, et cetera," to society's detriment: "The 'art' of it all has been lost in translation, political correctness and liberal ideologies that are anti-God and not family-friendly." Members often tie "values" problems in media to increased LGBTQ representation. Victoria explained,

> Every single time . . . it's like they have to throw in . . . same-sex [relationships]. There's got to be something. It's either a kiss, or it's a sexual part, or it's somebody coming out. . . . It's irritating. And they say we're hating on them. It's not that we're hating them. We're hating the activity because we love the people. We just wish they would understand our side of it, too.

To OMM, media cater to left-leaning audiences and ostracize Christian conservatives. As an example, members often point to Disney, describing it as once beloved for family-friendly content, but increasingly hostile to Christians. One member commented, "Disney's heyday is over. Their leftist anti-God agenda doesn't belong in entertainment and the public doesn't want it." The group members worry about increased LGBTQ representation in Disney content, with members citing a gay character in 2017's *Beauty and the Beast* (Condon, 2017) and early rumors that *Frozen II* (Buck & Lee, 2019) might feature a lesbian princess. OMM members think that industries incorrectly believe that "secular" content is most profitable. Member Susan thought a Netflix cooking series that her grandkids enjoy would be more successful without profanity, explaining that parents are afraid to leave kids alone with the TV: "But if it were a good wholesome show . . . then parents could allow their child to watch it and walk away." It is concerns like this that OMM members believe industries don't understand.

Tactic: Educate the Industry and Society

OMM and XMC both deploy tactics to educate media industries and society in the ways that media are "wrong," especially through demonstrating their demographic value and marginalization by media. For OMM, this means communicating the profitability of content that it endorses to convince industries to pursue similar projects. Members often mentioned Pure Flix as a successful media company providing quality content. Pure Flix, a Christian movie studio and video-on-demand service, is best known for its *God's Not Dead* (Cronk, 2014) film series. The first installment surprised the film industry by earning over $64 million on a $2 million budget (Markovitz, 2014). OMM encouraged members to support the film in theaters, explaining in a Facebook post, "How a film performs opening weekend is critical to the life of the film–and . . . critical to the impact this truth-bearing message will have on our culture." Griffin said of another surprise Christian hit, 2018 film *I Can Only Imagine* (Erwin & Erwin, 2018),

> Positive entertainment is in. That's what people want . . . there's just a lack of it. And if we don't buy what Hollywood supplies . . . they will go out of business. So we as parents have the power in our hands to create the culture that we want to be living in.

Publicizing successful Christian content educates industries about the power of OMM's base, and members about their value as a neglected, but valuable, market. OMM also highlights this industrial neglect, targeting content that it considers mocking of Christianity, such as a TV Land series about a man posing as a gay pastor, and Fox's popular *Lucifer* (Kapinos et al., 2016–2021), about modern-day Satan. These examples show members that they are disrespected by industries and provide comparative "positive" liberal, atheist, and/or LGBTQ representations.

XMC's core educational strategy is publicizing the *Xena* (Tapert et al., 1995–2001) brand, to draw new audiences and cement the show's place in feminist/LGBTQ history. XMC shares articles to educate about *Xena*'s sociocultural value, such as, "How 'Xena: Warrior Princess' Paved the Way for Modern Female TV Characters" (Krieg, 2017) and "This *Xena* Episode Helped Fight the Stigma Around HIV/AIDS in the '90s" (Weekes, 2018). Indeed, Eddie believes that NBCUniversal has forgotten the value of its own property: "They need to start thinking a little bit more intelligently . . . they're trying to think of, 'What will sell?' 'What will market?' It's like, 'Guys, *Xena* was successful because of *quality*.'"

In reaction to the announcement that the original actresses wouldn't be cast in the NBCUniversal reboot, XMC began publicizing cases of sexism and ageism in media, educating about the importance of older women in media industries and content. Further, given that XMC disagrees with industries' financial valuation of youth at the expense of older, more established demographics, it hopes to educate industries about their financial value. Eddie described a recent *Xena* (Tapert et al., 1995–2001) convention:

> We were really thrilled to see all of the young people. Because even though it is us older folks who can afford movie tickets and cable bills, somehow Universal thinks that early twenties and teenagers are the demographic to hit. It's like, "Guys, they're not actually giving you any money!"

XMC also emphasizes the profitability of representing older women. One fan commented about the 2017 film *Wonder Woman* (Jenkins, 2017),

> Audiences went crazy for Robin Wright and Connie Nielsen, two middle aged women who kicked all kinds of ass in the movie, and it just topped $400 million in the U.S. I really think fans need to use that argument now as ammunition (with) Universal.

Indeed, an admin posted about *Wonder Woman*, "We encourage Xenites to support this film to show reluctant Hollywood executives how much profit they are missing out on."

Imaginary: The Industry Is Risk Averse

That the industries continue operating within the first two imaginaries, profit-driven but using faulty logics of profitability, along with what both groups perceive as very little deviation from the status quo, is viewed as an outcome of industrial aversion to risk. Both groups repeatedly described media and corporate sponsors as risk averse and terrified of change. Loss of profit, controversy, reputational harm, and reduced job security were all cited as driving media industries' fears of taking risks.

Although the groups differ in their understandings of the identities and politics fueling industrial fears, both imagine that industries will err in the interest of an industry-defined "mass appeal." OMM members feel that LGBTQ representation currently holds this mass appeal. The group members believe that such content isn't considered risky to industries; an article from its parent organization, AFA, states, "Can we talk about the LGBTQ agenda for just a moment? Their worldview is everywhere. On Disney channel last year alone there were a record number of LGBTQ 'firsts'" (White, 2018, para. 5). To OMM members, it is positive representations of Christians and Christianity that the industries consider risky. Indeed, in an interview with *The New York Times*, the founder of Pure Flix argued that mainstream media like making money from Christians, but fear actually featuring them in content (Rosman, 2017).

XMC would disagree that LGBTQ identities are as well-represented in media as OMM claims. XMC admin Ariel Wetzel argued that while LGBTQ representation has improved, along with representation of women and people of color, the industries avoid representing intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) for fear of missing the widest possible audience:

> Media companies are realizing a movie like *Black Panther* is profitable, but they have to take out the queer content because they're not comfortable with intersectionality right now. . . .We can say the same thing about *Wonder Woman*. We have a movie where the character is canonically queer, but as far as we can tell from the movie, she's heterosexual and a white woman . . . Hollywood still wants to do one identity at a time.

XMC members believe that representational change is slow because industries fear taking financial risks. Laura explained, "There are worksheets of data, and the numbers have to be worth it because they put a lot of money into it, so they sure as heck don't want to *lose* any money." Both XMC and OMM are especially

attuned to how such skittishness portends for industrial reactions to the groups' own tactics. Thus, both design tactics to either alleviate or emphasize perceptions of risk associated with their demands.

Tactic: Negotiate Delicately

Because XMC members feel that they have worked long and hard publicizing *Xena* (Tapert et al., 1995–2001) and getting NBCUniversal to consider a reboot, they now have something to lose. Thus, they increasingly find themselves willing to negotiate their demands. For instance, despite original *Xena* actress Lucy Lawless publicly stating that the new Xena should be Black (and queer), Ariel believes that Xena will likely be bisexual, but White:

> I hope I'm wrong, because I'm in favor of showing diversity in all the ways it exists. But I think media creators, at least a big company like NBCUniversal, are probably afraid to take risks, and they're slowly seeing. . . . "Oh, queer content is profitable!" But if we have Black lesbians on an action show set in Ancient Greece? "That's too niche."

For XMC members, this industrial logic means that their representational demands must be negotiable.

Although XMC long encouraged fans to embrace their power in an era of corporate attention to fandom, it later scrambled to reign in fan anger over NBCUniversal's exclusion of the original actresses, telling members in a Facebook post, "We believe that decision-makers at NBC Universal *do* monitor social media, and . . . we do not want the reboot to be canceled due to fan backlash." Increasingly aware of industrial attention, XMC feared revealing infighting or animosity and eventually took to Facebook forbidding members from posting any "calls to cancel or boycott the reboot." Eddie explained,

> We think that will just cause Universal to not market it to us. Instead of marketing it to the queer community that is the old fanbase, they will create a show for straight men. . . . We want them to see us as profit, not as too hard to please.

XMC's position is precarious; admins feel that they must prove to be realistic negotiators to industries *and* serve members—and this often means managing fan expectations to soothe industrial nerves.

Publicly, OMM's tactics are less delicate than XMC's. OMM confrontationally describes targeted content as "filth" and "trash" throughout its website, e-mails, and social media posts. Privately however, messages to media are milder. An OMM (2018) e-mail template for contacting a *Good Girls* (Bans et al., 2018–2021) sponsor reads,

> While your company is a household name, I do not agree with your financial backing of this program. I certainly hope your company's financial support of this type of television programming with advertising dollars is simply an oversight. . . . As a consumer, I am asking you to please pull your sponsorship immediately. . . . My decision to support (sponsor) . . . depends on it. (para. 1)

Lacking the condemnation of OMM's public voice, members approach targets as concerned consumers hoping *not* to boycott. Cole explained, "We want to support them with our dollars," emphasizing support to skittish targets rather than ruin.

OMM members believe that industries fear controversy, so they provide companies "outs" from the political stakes of their demands. OMM encourages corporate "neutrality," understood as exclusion of LGBTQ representation, which it considers politicized or special treatment. OMM posted on Facebook about an LGBTQ wedding band collection, "If all married couples want to be treated equal, then special wedding bands are not necessary." One member replied, "EXACTLY my thoughts! If they're all equal, why do they need 'special' wedding bands?" Cole told me,

> Some companies . . . want to hear from the other side. And I understand that. . . . We ask companies . . . to remain neutral in the culture war. So sometimes they will just drop their support silently, and that's all we ask.

The two-"sides" framing of LGBTQ representation is meant to suggest that it is controversial. Further, OMM's invitation to quietly comply helps companies avoid risks in publicly acknowledging the group.

Tactic: Court Controversy

Because both OMM and XMC members believe that industries will ultimately avoid risk, they often look to leverage the risks they themselves might deploy. While guaranteeing industrial profit-loss is a tall order, audiences feel equipped (especially in the digital age) to embarrass large companies or embroil them in controversy. Indeed, many of both groups' tactics function as threats of generating controversy. For example, XMC's activism to expose the plight of older actresses is meant to convince NBCUniversal that it would be risky *not* to produce a series representing older women. XMC retains a contingency plan for any *Xena* (Tapert et al., 1995–2001) project that completely ignores its demands. Eddie explained,

> If Lucy and Renee are not a part of it . . . they'll probably get them to sign contracts . . . not to bad mouth it. But if they're not part of it, that means they didn't want to be. And that means we're not watching it. Hands down.

Indeed, many members noted that they would look to the original *Xena* cast and crew to decide whether to support or brew controversy for any new project.

Any OMM campaign demonstrates its comfort with threatening controversy. Although OMM is often mocked for having nowhere near one million members, the audacity of its name and the humor that many find in its demands mean that anyone it targets risks becoming associated with OMM's infamy. OMM embraces this brand of controversy that can be directed at targets of its choice. For example, in response to the OMM campaign against NBC's *The New Normal* (Di Loreto, Adler, & Murphy, 2012–2013), the series producers included satirical OMM-like characters in an episode ridiculing the group. OMM responded on Facebook, "Even though they attempted to poke fun, the show actually made One Million Moms look good . . . thanks for the free publicity!" Because of such publicity, however, OMM understands that most

mainstream media will not publicly approach the group (as they might with fans). Cole told me, "Networks want to ask for forgiveness instead of permission." Thus, OMM reserves the option of leveraging industries' fear of controversy by maneuvering them into positions in which they must "ask forgiveness."

The Utility of the Imagined Industry Framework for (New) Media Studies

The imaginaries and tactics from the case study discussed here are meant to demonstrate the utility of a focus on the imagined industry, without extensive analysis/implications drawn from the specific cases. In line with the framework, the groups' imagined industries demonstrably involved audience-developed tactics requiring extensive time and labor. These tactics at times adhered to industrial logics, with the group members often believing that to influence industries, they must play by industrial rules and/or demonstrate socioeconomic value. For example, XMC's adoption of some industrial practices lends support to arguments that media industries exploit audience labor, training them in industries' preferred productive practices (Andrejevic, 2008; Deuze, 2007). We also see that industrial distance and perceived politics can feel so insurmountable that some audiences withdraw from the mainstream, like OMM members entrusting their activism to leaders they imagine have the sociopolitical and economic clout to spar with industries. This aligns with Montgomery's (1989) claim that special interest and pressure groups are answers to the mystery of the media industries. Indeed, the marginalization felt by both XMC and OMM, which industries might claim as evidence of their political neutrality,[7] actually exposes industries' very real political choices in which groups and causes are engaged (or not).

Augmenting Active Audience and Institutional Approaches

While important for many analytic goals, starting with audience reception of media texts—as in Liebes and Katz (1990) and many audience studies—rather than with audience constructions of industry can suggest that audiences consume content without preconceived notions of where it comes from. The imagined industry contributes an analytic distinction to engage more closely with these notions. Indeed, someone's relationship to industry need not involve texts much at all, for the imagined industry might determine the entire relationship. Currently in the United States, there are likely politically liberal audiences who have never watched Fox News but have opinions about its content based on shared imaginaries of the network's goals, politics, and practices. The same is likely true of politically conservative audiences who may consider CNN "fake news," based less on content than their communities' dominant imaginaries. Work on active/productive audiences may also be usefully augmented by understanding how imagined industries shape audience productivity. For example, the case study demonstrated that although XMC criticizes media industries for erasure of older women, it prioritizes Tumblr and other youth-centric platforms to recruit demographics that industries value. The imagined industrial priorities spurring such tactics provide context and nuance to audience practices.

Institutional approaches to media sometimes inadvertently privilege industrial narratives, not least because they often necessarily take these narratives (through interviews and analysis of corporate documents) as a primary data source. Further, institutional approaches to audience productivity often center

[7] See Sender (2004).

questions of audience efficacy. Such approaches can miss perspectives from audiences wrestling with industrial barriers and overlook the common refrain from industry that inner workings of media are opaque even for insiders (Deuze, 2007; Gitlin, 1983). Indeed, my larger research on XMC and OMM made clear the value of the imagined industry in augmenting industrial narratives. For example, I reached out to media industries to understand how (or even if) they thought about the groups and their tactics. I received many responses about XMC. Writers, producers, and actors were happy to discuss why fans mattered or why their efforts were in vain. However, few would discuss OMM and would only go "on the record" to insist that they would never entertain a group like OMM. Publicly available narratives from mainstream industries made similar claims about OMM. However, years of studying OMM made it clear that some mainstream media *do* interact with the group, typically negotiating privately to avoid controversy. No industry interviews revealed this consequential information. The framework's opening up of complex media systems exposes the limits of reducing these nuanced interactions and relationships to "objective" measures of efficacy, instead allowing social constructions to productively speak with one other, providing insights into audiences, industries, policy, politics, identity, technology, and wider society. This article has provided the imagined industry framework as a contribution toward media studies' imperative to understand such key issues.

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