

## The Television Spoiler Nuisance Rationale

LISA GLEBATIS PERKS  
Merrimack College, USA

NOELLE MCELRATH-HART  
Strong National Museum of Play, USA

This essay explores tensions surrounding television spoilers through interviews with thirteen people who are paid to write or edit discourse about television. These professionals include television critics, editors, an entertainment reporter, a popular culture writer, and a television columnist. Analysis of interview transcripts revealed that varying attitudes toward television pleasure undergird the spoiler debate. After describing three divergent television pleasure attitudes, we present the second half of our analysis: interviewees' statements about the timing of their publications, the content of their writing, and the packaging of their writing. Properly packaging articles so that readers need to "opt in" was the only area of consensus among interviewees. The essay describes proper packaging through a nuisance rationale framework, one that reduces spoiler exposure for those who wish to avoid it but keeps engaging commentary available for those who actively seek it. These findings shed light on how to negotiate communicative tensions stemming from evolving media engagement patterns.

*Keywords: television spoilers, television pleasure, time shifting, TV critics, active audience, social media*

Communication about television shows can be a source of disappointment for not-yet-viewers and a discursive minefield for television critics and others who make a living communicating about television. When National Public Radio's (NPR's) TV critic Eric Deggans was chastised for including a spoiler in his work (see Figure 1), Twitter followers jumped to his defense by humorously reinforcing his claim that the spoiler statute of limitations was up.<sup>1</sup> @AmyZQuinn facetiously requested advice about issuing a spoiler alert for *Twin Peaks* and @craigtimes spoiler-alerted Nixon's resignation. Deggans took a firm stance in his response tweet and seemed to be vindicated by his followers' support, but history tells us that this will be a temporary peace. This essay offers media production perspectives on the complicated

---

Lisa Glebatis Perks: perksl@merrimack.edu

Noelle McElrath-Hart: nmcelra0@mail.naz.edu

Date submitted: 2016–02–10

<sup>1</sup> Our interviewees are all public figures. All but one preferred to have her or his name used in the write-up of our findings. We link to our named interviewees' professional profiles, some computer-mediated communication, and other professional work where appropriate to support our argument.

spoiler debate, analyzing interviews with thirteen people who are paid to write or edit discourse about television. These professionals include television critics, editors, an entertainment reporter, a popular culture writer, and a television columnist, all of whom are based in the United States.<sup>2</sup> The collective voices of our media production interviewees point us to sites of discord and agreement in the spoiler debate.



**Figure 1. January 26, 2015, Twitter spoiler exchange.**

Because many television viewers engage in time shifting, defined as watching an episode after its air date, spoilers have become an increasingly spirited subject of debate (Gray, 2010). The global circulation of media and fan communication also exacerbate spoiler frustration because of the tension between asynchronous global content release and the imperative of timely fan conversations (Newman, 2012). In his interview for this study, Hank Stuever, TV critic for *The Washington Post*, gave a hyperbolic nod to time shifting, stating, "Nobody is watching anything at the same time anymore." Time shifting has indeed become a significant viewing method, cannibalizing "live" television audiences: Nielsen figures note that time shifting an episode within seven days after the live viewing accounts for 50% of some networks' viewers in the 18–34 age group ("Building Time-Shifted Audiences," 2014).

Changing patterns of viewer engagement, along with experimental release models (such as all-in-one season drops), have gradually helped alter the definition of television spoilers. Perks and McElrath-Hart (2016) divide television spoiler definitions into network and post-network eras. Scholars writing from a network era perspective position television spoilers as narrative information learned before the first broadcast: content that has already aired can no longer be spoiled (e.g., Booth, 2010; Jenkins, 2006; Williams, 2004). Baym (2000) captured network era temporality when she explained, "spoilers *pretell*, repeating *previews* culled from magazines, personal appearances, and other computer networks" (p. 87,

<sup>2</sup> We name each person's job title when first introducing a quote from her or him but then describe the group as "writers and editors."

emphasis added). In the post-network era, spoilers may *retell*: the content of already-aired episodes can now be a source of spoiler information for not-yet viewers. In addition to acknowledging expanding spoiler temporality in the post-network era, studies have also identified many spoiler functions that go beyond the traditional negative spoiler connotations. Scholars have described social, cognitive, and emotional benefits to viewers' strategic engagement with spoilers (Booth, 2010; Gray & Mittell, 2007; Jenkins, 2006; Perks & McElrath-Hart, 2016).

The limited extant literature considers television spoilers from fan or viewer perspectives (e.g., Gray & Mittell, 2007; Jenkins, 2006; Williams, 2004). The media professionals' perspectives analyzed here enrich the conversation, offering different interpretations of existing issues in the spoiler debate and also broadening the scope of the debate. Several of our interviewees have published missives about spoilers: E. Deggans (2013), James Poniewozik (2013), H. Stuever (2013), and Todd VanDerWerff (2014). Additionally, various writers, such as *Vulture's* Dan Kois (2008) and *Entertainment Weekly's* Darren Franich (2014) have attempted to codify the spoiler rules for TV critics. However, stakeholders in the media environment have not reached consensus. This essay makes a stronger bid for understanding, analyzing themes from multiple writers' and editors' voices to flesh out the key questions at play in the spoiler debates and some of the common answers to those questions.

We initially set out to uncover our interviewees' spoiler attitudes and practices for dealing with spoilers in their work. As we analyzed the interview transcripts, we recognized that the spoiler debate revolves not just around questions of temporality and form, but that answers to these questions hinge on varying views of media pleasure. This constellation of issues highlights the interplay of personalized and communal aspects of media engagement. The analysis first addresses the wide range of spoiler attitudes and corresponding media pleasures interviewees described. Implicit in many of these attitudes were different views of their roles as writers and editors, roles that were at times irrespective of job title. Where possible, we put the writers' and editors' opinions in dialogue with other studies about viewers' and fans' spoiler attitudes to present multiple stakeholders' voices.

The attitudes about spoilers and media pleasures underpin the second half of our analysis: interviewees' arguments about the timing of their publications, the content of their writing, and the packaging of their writing. We address packaging last because it is the only area of consensus among our interviewees. Properly packaging their writing so that readers need to "opt in" essentially ameliorates the divergent attitudes about spoilers and media pleasures, the disagreements about temporality and content. The essay builds toward establishing a "nuisance rationale" framework for contextualizing spoilers, one that reduces potential spoiler annoyance for some but keeps engaging commentary flowing for those who seek it.

The nuisance rationale was highlighted in the *FCC v. Pacifica* (1978) case addressing the Federal Communications Commission's power to regulate the broadcasting of indecent language. Spoilers are not inherently indecent, but they are unpalatable to some. Our work draws solely from the spirit of the nuisance rationale (and not its legal standing) as represented by the statement from the Supreme Court's *FCC v. Pacifica* decision that "words that are commonplace in one setting are shocking in another." Spoilers only spoil those who fear they will miss out on pleasurable suspense; to others, spoilers are an

inevitable part of a media rich society and may even draw them into a story. Context, timing, and individual differences play essential roles in deciding what is a nuisance and how such nuisances should be minimized.

Our findings shed light on how to negotiate communicative tensions stemming from evolving media engagement patterns. As the television industry transforms along with reception patterns, how can people who make a living producing discourse about this medium adapt and encourage their readers to do the same? The findings here are applicable to broader shifts in new media experiences and communicative norms. During periods of change, it behooves us to recognize the dual importance of the right to communicate and the right to not receive communication in shared social environments.

### **Communal Television Engagement**

The spoiler debate spotlights the challenges of meeting the needs of diverse audience segments: people with different levels of interest in a show, varying knowledge about a show, and divergent attitudes about spoilers will have different communicative preferences. Without these differences, we would have no nuisance: we would all enjoy and dislike the same things. The diversity of these audience segments holds great significance because watching and analyzing television should be seen as a communal pursuit. Writing in the 1980s, Fiske highlighted the social component of the television experience: "What matters is not the audience and not the television text but the generation and circulation of meanings and pleasures throughout our contemporary social formations" (1988, p. 250). Fiske (1988) wrote that the point at which the individual dissolves into the social marks the formation of the cultural domain, the space where pleasures and meanings are activated and circulated.

Although television's social quality has existed in varying degrees since the medium's inception, Jenkins (2006) proclaimed that the media convergence era privileges communal modes of reception over individualistic models. He acknowledged that not everyone is watching together or communicating about what they have viewed, but that "few watch television in total silence and isolation" (Jenkins, 2006, p. 26).<sup>3</sup> Many have a desire to read, listen, and communicate about television texts. The active, collaborative viewer model has notable implications for how we define and analyze a television text. Herbig and Herrmann (2016) use the term "polymediated narrative" to capture the meaningful interactions among a formal diegesis, production forces, critics, academics, advertisers, fans, and other contributors. They encourage scholars not to position television episodes as bounded texts, but rather to see multiple internal and external influences as fragments that comprise the holistic discursive "episode" (Herbig & Herrmann, 2016, p. 761).

The interactions and content flows of social media both help constitute that polymediated narrative and amplify the communal television quality. In his analysis of social media practices, Highfield wrote that the "social media news ecology" includes a blend of factual content, personal opinions, and

---

<sup>3</sup> The Nielsen Company's assessment of valuable marketing data supports Jenkins's argument. Nielsen focuses not just on the audience of a "live" television program, but also ranks time-shifted programs, Twitter audiences, and Twitter impressions.

humor (2015, p. 2729). Within this ecological system resides a robust communicative space that is superseding other traditional spaces. According to Leetaru of *Forbes*, news website comments sections are disappearing because “the era of social media has given audiences profoundly new ways to engage and converse around the news that transcends what a single news outlet’s own website can offer.” A study by Buschow, Schneider, and Ueberheide (2014) found that opinions and social aspects of viewing accounted for 49% of television broadcast-related tweets, the highest percentage of any coded category (see also Frativelli, Negri, & Cori, 2015). Eyeballs on the screen will always matter in television production, scheduling, and advertising, but there are now more types of screens, more television content overall, and more user-created discourse that factor into a television program’s social impact. Communal modes of reception, whether in-person or computer-mediated, texturize televisual engagement by offering additional spaces and opportunities for viewer communication.

As our reception and communication modes have changed, so has the content of our communication. New media, including social media platforms, have cultivated “hyper-analytical” voices from both regular and professional television viewers, according to NPR popular culture blogger Linda Holmes.<sup>4</sup> These cultural conversations, Holmes claimed, have “elevated both professional television criticism and viewer engagement.” There are many opportunities for communication and there is an awful lot to talk about in the era of “peak TV”—the label many writers used to describe 2015’s record-setting number of scripted television shows and “avalanche of high quality shows” (James, 2015, para. 1). In the peak TV era, it is both easy and disappointing to be left out of the conversations. Todd VanDerWerff, currently culture editor for *Vox*, wrote about his 2012 realization that he and his *A.V. Club* team could not cover all deserving shows. The average viewer has no chance to keep up, thus leading to more opportunities to be spoiled by the multitude of hyper-analytical voices.

In his analysis of spoiler research and circulation in an online *Survivor* knowledge community, Jenkins shifted the terms of the spoiler debate asking if “one has the right to *not* know—or more precisely, whether each community member should be able to set the terms of how much they want to know and when they want to know it” (2006, pp. 54–55). By shifting the focus to information insulation and timing, Jenkins gestures toward the suitability of a nuisance rationale that highlights the importance of individual preferences and context when structuring the flow of information. The dialectic nature of the reader/writer relationship also asks when, what, how, and how much each community member has the right to communicate about a television show in a professional capacity. The answers to these questions are all predicated on the nature of viewing pleasures.

### Qualitative Methodology

After securing human subjects research approval in 2014, we conducted thirteen phone interviews with professionals in a variety of careers involving the writing and/or editing of television discourse. We purposely reached out to people working for different kinds of organizations (e.g., online news sites, popular culture websites, magazines, and newspapers) to present a diversity of professional perspectives. The pool of interviewees included five women and eight men. The interviewees’ professional

---

<sup>4</sup> Holmes was approached for the study but was not an interviewee.

writing experience ranged from four years to 25 years, with an average of 14 years among them. Interview questions included: How do you define a television spoiler? What is your general practice of including or not including television spoilers in your articles? Has your practice of including spoilers changed over time? Have your readers commented on your use of spoilers?<sup>5</sup> These questions were designed to tap into their attitudes toward spoilers, spoiler warning practices, and the perceived bases for both.

After transcribing the interviews, we analyzed the discourse using Grounded Theory, which helps to “demonstrate how logic and emotion combine to influence how persons respond to events or handle problems through action and interaction” (Corbin & Strauss, 2015, p. 11). As the Grounded Theory procedure prescribes, we read through the entire transcript, reflected upon the main ideas in segments of dialogue, re-read the transcripts, and then began analyzing the discourse (Corbin & Strauss, 2015, pp. 86–87). Our initial analysis focused on interviewees’ assertions of professional credibility, empathy with readers, and logical compromises among competing interests. Those themes still course through our analysis, but we realized that varying attitudes about viewing pleasures are essential to understanding how our interviewees make decisions about using spoilers in their work. We re-analyzed the interview responses, presenting attitudes about television pleasure first before delving into the writers’ and editors’ spoiler practices.

### **Pleasure in the Television Experience**

Our interviewees hold coveted jobs that require recognized expertise and skill. In his work on knowledge production in communities of practice, Wenger explained that “becoming good at something involves developing specialized sensitivities, an aesthetic sense, and refined perceptions that are brought to bear on making judgments about the qualities of a product or an action” (1998, p. 81). Specialized sensitivities (and, perhaps, being a public figure) can lead to prescriptive tendencies—in this case, prescriptions about the proper ways to engage television and maximize narrative pleasures. Focusing on the persuasive role of critics, Epstein (2016) wrote, “along with knowledge, which is available to all who search it out, the critic must also have authority, the power to convince” (para. 2). At minimum, our interviewees’ opinions about and experiences with narrative pleasure can have the incidental impact of shaping readers’ perspectives. This section analyzes interviewees’ arguments about sources of narrative pleasure and suggestions for how viewers can maximize that pleasure. The themes that follow include spoiler neutral, spoiler averse, and spoiler positive perspectives—from our interviewees and from relevant viewer or fan studies—to highlight the complexity of spoiler attitudes.

#### ***Spoiler Neutral***

Stuever and VanDerWerff discursively undercut the power of spoilers, arguing that enjoying a television show and knowing some narrative information are not mutually exclusive. They admonished viewers not to get hung up in plot twists (the substance of spoilers) because there is much more to appreciate about television. We consider this attitude to be “spoiler neutral”—spoilers neither enhance nor

---

<sup>5</sup> For a complete list of questions, please contact the first author.

diminish viewing pleasure. Stuever stated that if you are watching “solely for major plot” then “you are not fully watching.” The true pleasure of television viewing, he said, is “how that story is told. It’s about the artful way that it gets to that point.” This attitude privileges the narrative journey over plot landmarks. VanDerWerff, too, encouraged viewers to turn their attention to greater beauty in the television landscape: “The general trend in thinking of spoilers as sort of this all-consuming evil . . . biases the conversation especially in the TV space toward only talking about plot, and that is possibly the least interesting thing on the screen.” Not only did VanDerWerff advocate for a particular source of viewing pleasure, he extended that particular pleasure to conversations about television. If viewers are primarily tuning in to and talking about plot twists, they are missing out on much more enjoyable viewing experiences and communication that focus on features such as character development and aesthetics.

Spoiler studies have captured similar arguments from viewers and fans about narrative pleasure. Gray and Mittell wrote that spoilers helped some *Lost* fans to re-focus their attention on other narrative joys because “having already discovered what will happen frees them to concentrate on the formal pleasures of innovative narration and inventive presentation” (2007, para. 12). In his article on narrative complexity, Mittell described operational aesthetics as a focus not on what has happened in the narrative, but rather *how* the narrative mechanics have worked to “guide, manipulate, deceive, and misdirect” viewers (2006, p. 35). We can consider operational aesthetics a site of new and even enhanced viewing pleasure after learning spoilers. Several participants in Perks and McElrath-Hart’s (2016) study on spoiler attitudes delighted in operational aesthetics after being spoiled. For example, one woman recounted knowing that a key character was coming back in *Arrow* and still enjoying the episode because, “I still didn’t know how [the character came back], and the how turned out to be more interesting” (Perks & McElrath-Hart, 2016, p. 12). In this spoiler neutral perspective, knowing a plot twist does not diminish the significance of watching the events unfold as one journeys through the rich narrative.

### ***Spoiler Averse***

Jeremy Egner, assistant culture editor for *The New York Times*, spoke out against his peers’ dismissal of the links between spoilers, suspense, and pleasure: “I do know some critics who say, who argue that spoilers don’t matter . . . I don’t agree with that . . . I feel like suspense is part of the experience of enjoying television or any other sort of narrative work.” Maureen Ryan, *Huffington Post* TV critic during our interview and chief TV critic for *Variety* at the time of publication, also emphasized the relationship between suspense and enjoyment: “Part of them getting something from [a story] is preserving suspense, the surprises, preserving development, allowing them to experience some of it on their own.” In contrast to our other interviewees, Egner and Ryan saw writers and editors as having greater potential to stand in the way of readers’ television viewing pleasures by revealing substantive narrative information.

Egner and Ryan captured a perspective that is widely shared among television time shifters we surveyed: The words surprise and suspense commonly appeared in Perks and McElrath-Hart’s (2016) study participants’ professed reasons for spoiler avoidance. As one participant remarked, “learning what happens in a series before actually watching it . . . ruins the dramatic suspense, much like knowing what you are going to get for your birthday or Christmas” (Perks & McElrath-Hart, 2016, p. 9). In their short

story spoiler experiment, Johnson and Rosenbaum attributed the enjoyment of suspense to emotional and cognitive factors because study participants rated unspoiled stories "as more moving/thought-provoking" compared to spoiled stories (2014, p. 1079).

The spoiler averse attitudes revealed concerns not just about spoilers diminishing viewer enjoyment but about spoilers dissuading people from watching in the first place. Throughout her interview, Ryan evoked a teaser/spoiler continuum to describe narrative components that get people interested in a show compared to narrative information that can deflate pleasurable suspense. In this quote, Ryan distinguished between teaser and spoiler, respectively, and cited reader responses as the litmus test: "I don't get [reader] pushback if I describe really briefly who a character is. If you tell people what [characters] did, what the results of those actions were, then you get into trouble." The line between spoiler and teaser is undoubtedly individualized, but the judgment seems to be rendered in the outcomes—such as getting "into trouble" with readers. Angela Watercutter, senior associate editor of entertainment and popular culture at *Wired*, also drew from a teaser/spoiler divide when describing the crafting of her "binge-watch guides": The spoiler statute of limitations may be up on some decade-old, binge-worthy shows, but Watercutter said, "I definitely don't want the guide to tell you everything that happens in the show so you don't want to watch it. We're just trying to give you enough" to pique interest.

Even if we agree that one role of television critics is to serve as matchmaker between reader and television shows, the best way to cultivate those partnerships is unclear. Consider that Perks and McElrath-Hart's (forthcoming) qualitative study of time shifters revealed that around half of participants "who reported knowing narrative content before deciding to watch the show cited that narrative content and/or their spoiler sources as the *reason* they chose to watch the show." Connecting this finding to an earlier point in the spoiler neutral section, we can speculate that a spoiler may tease effectively by activating curiosity about operational aesthetics: How will the narrative lay clues that build to the plot twist?

### ***Spoiler Positive***

We began by representing a neutral view of spoilers, moved to the spoiler averse attitude, and now we end with the spoiler positive position. Deggans illustrated this perspective when he reframed spoilers as a potential viewing enhancement for people who watched the *Game of Thrones* "Red Wedding" scene after learning about the impending carnage: "you're still going to enjoy it. In fact, you might enjoy it more so waiting to see what is going to happen." The spoiler can, according to Deggans, augment the suspense by assuring that the feeling of suspense is warranted: punches will not be pulled. Summing up his 2007 *Lost* fan spoiler study with Mittell in a later publication, Gray wrote, "spoilers serve to stoke the fires of anticipation for fans, working much as trailers and previews do for continuing texts" (2010, p. 152). This enjoyable spoiler function exchanges surprise for suspenseful anticipation.

Another source of pleasure in spoilers can be found in enhanced cognitive involvement with the narrative. Gina Carbone, popular culture writer for *Wetpaint* and *Moviefone*, confirmed that some of her readers use spoilers to increase their cognitive play with a show "because they're the most passionate fan



who wants every little [narrative] aspect . . . Sometimes even knowing things in advance, you question it, you speculate about it even more, and then you send yourself down tangents.”

Hills’s argument that “spoiler fans’ practices can be viewed as highly creative” (2012, p. 119) and Gray and Mittell’s (2007) analysis of *Lost* spoiler fan discourse offer further support for these claims. Gray and Mittell advanced a link between spoilers/teasers and critical engagement, writing, “most spoiler fans did not see spoilers as about explicitly solving mysteries, but rather as offering teasers, creating as many questions as they answer, and enhancing the terrain for speculation about the general puzzle surrounding *Lost*” (2007, para. 36). Although spoilers may never find universal adoration, this theme’s negation of their usual connotations—plot enhancements rather than destroyers, narrative teasers rather than deterrents—productively alters the scope of their meaning.

### **Practices Informed by (Dis)pleasures**

The divergent views on television pleasures and spoilers described above do not lead us to a spoiler truce. Rather, they help us understand the rocky terrain writers and editors traverse on a regular basis. Spoiler definitions and functions are evolving along with viewing pleasures. So how have our interviewees responded to those changes? Three key spoiler concerns emerged from the analysis of interviewee transcripts: temporality, content, and packaging.

#### ***Temporality: When to Publish***

Interviewees offered a wide range of responses about the appropriate time to wait before revealing narrative details, suggesting that this is a central concern in the debate. John Jurgensen, entertainment reporter for *The Wall Street Journal*, succinctly affirmed this claim, stating, “The hard part is knowing when the statute of limitations expires . . . There’s no sliding scale of spoiler alerts.” *Vulture* TV columnist Margaret Lyons was on one side of the temporality continuum with her statement, “Once it airs, that’s fair game.” Lyons extended the analogy between her work and other forms of journalism to justify this professional obligation: “It’s news. It’s happening. This is what I cover. You wouldn’t expect sports reporters not to report box scores even if you haven’t watched the game yet.” Lyons argued that time shifting does not have to change all entertainment journalism by drawing a connection to sports television, an entertainment genre that has largely been insulated from the spoiler debate because of its in-time pleasures. This statement about timeliness rests on a foundational syllogism: news must be timely; entertainment journalism is news; entertainment journalism must be timely.

News timeliness was also a key concern for Sean O’Neal, senior editor of *The A.V. Club*, who stated that spoiler-phobia “makes it really difficult for us to do our jobs, and what we’re supposed to do is report news, which are new things by definition.” O’Neal evoked conflicting audiences for his work: readers who want news and readers who want to avoid spoilers. His professional obligations prioritize the former, but the nuisance rationale allows both to stand on equal footing and have their needs met as we will see in the final section of analysis.

Other interviewees acknowledged the significance of an episode air date when considering the publication of spoilers, but they advocated for more flexible temporal practices. Egner named the air date as “The only standard, objective standard we can really sort of use when it comes to spoiler,” but he only considered spoilers “fair game” in criticism pieces “a few days after the thing airs.” Deggans saw spoilers as gradually losing their bite “once you get a couple of weeks out” from their original release. After that temporal padding, Deggans was unapologetic about including narrative details in his criticism, challenging the commitment of spoiler-averse latecomers: “most people who care about the show have seen it already.” We see that for some interviewees, the air date is an objective, rational temporal standard, but many still offered a temporal cushion for time shifters. One way that they are responding to shifting television pleasures and spoiler definitions is to bend conventional standards and slow the dissemination of detailed narrative information, a form of temporary insulation (or nuisance prevention).

Viewers who “care about” a show are encouraged to watch earlier rather than later in part because of the social nature of television viewing. Spoilers abound not just from journalists and critics, but from other viewers who are excited to discuss what they just watched to expand and deepen their appreciation of a story. Jurgensen pointed to social media as a form of spoiler relief for the *Wall Street Journal*: “It’s more likely [readers are] going to get something spoiled on Twitter, Facebook, or social media rather than our coverage, which is not happening in real time . . . We’re less of an offender than we have been.” Egner concurred with these sentiments, offering the specific example, “If you know something about *Walking Dead* and you see that Tyrese is trending on Twitter or did that night, it leads you to think something bad happened to him.” Social media, Watercutter stated, makes “it easier for things to be spoiled long before I get to them,” so she would scan the Internet to “take the temperature of what is and isn’t revealed to somebody who hasn’t actually watched the show yet” before deciding how much to reveal and how to package particular narrative reveals.

Because the work of professional and amateur TV commentators mixes together in what Poniewozik, TV critic for *TIME* magazine during our interview and chief TV critic for *The New York Times* during publication, called a “soup of media input,” spoilers from other sources can provide the professionals with a pass to speak and write freely. These examples also highlight the need that viewers and amateur critics feel to communicate about television in the moment. The rights of time shifting spoiler-phobes need to be balanced with the rights of others who are clamoring for pleasurable, in-time television conversations.

### **Content: What to Write**

Balancing these competing needs presents a challenge for writers and editors who are trying to produce engaging discourse. This theme analyzes interviewees’ statements about using narrative information in their work. As the interviewees describe the content of their writing, they implicitly evoke generic conventions and reader expectations: What do I need to include in an insightful, engaging, and well-supported work of criticism or journalism? These persuasive statements do not advocate for spoiler abolition, but they do argue that spoilers play a necessary role in the substance of written discourse about television.

Several interviewees who identified as TV critics argued that the nature of criticism necessitates the inclusion of plot information. Stuever noted that he has to reveal narrative details because without them it is “impossible to write about television intelligently.” Poniewozik claimed that criticism must include some narrative information, such as quotes from scenes and information about characters “because you don’t simply make proclamations about the quality of something without giving substantiation to it.” He justified the need for narrative details—often from multiple stories—by explaining that television criticism is rooted in the literary tradition; “therefore, you should be able to use those same tropes and strategies in the criticism of it, which includes referring to a history and connecting ideas across them.” References to previous works that collectively comprise a cultural history or arts movement are thus seen as necessary ingredients for thoughtful criticism. Poniewozik bolstered his argument by citing the standard, innocuous practice of referencing Shakespeare plays in criticism “even though not everybody has seen or read every Shakespeare play.”

Comparisons serve a meaningful critical purpose; yet, they can present a thorny situation for readers who feel misdirected by an article’s headline or perceived focus. The Deggans (2014) article cited in this essay’s opening Twitter battle involved a comparison between *The Walking Dead*, a show mentioned in the article title, and other popular shows that were not previewed in the headline. The article addressed literary adaptations and how additional storylines and twists in the television versions add new meaning to the stories. Certainly, the analysis of multiple literary adaptations—*Walking Dead*, *Game of Thrones*, and *Dexter*—enhances the article’s scope and support. However, for time shifters who are scanning headlines to avoid spoilers for specific shows, the comparison to another show can be an unwelcome surprise.

Narrative substantiation is necessary for making a sound inductive argument, but not all narrative detail is necessary: our anonymous critic avoided gratuitous spoilers, stating instead, “I only talk about sensitive plots if I have something interesting to say about them.” She, however, was not concerned with how recently a show aired, nor was she willing to skirt sensitive plot issues to appease readers. This attitude was explicitly based on her style of writing: “my writing about television, it’s meant to be literary period-type writing, and it’s the kind that deals with it as it happens and find new ways of thinking about it.” She contrasted this style with “buzz oriented” writing that is “meant to kind of appease people.” Because she writes for a more traditional literary criticism purpose, she noted, “I don’t feel obliged in the same way to not spoil.” Viewed through this lens, narrative reveals are not latent spoilers but rather evidence and framing for illuminating, critical assessment of an artistic work.

Although our interviewees had different thoughts on what it meant to “ruin” a viewing experience for a reader, a consistent thread is that they sought to balance professional obligations with readers’ viewing pleasures. O’Neal said it was his job to report on recently aired television shows, but also stated, “it’s my job to not ruin a show for anybody. I personally don’t like [being spoiled] either . . . So I try to be sensitive about it.” Egner mirrored O’Neal’s empathic sentiment, noting, “I don’t want to ruin anything for anyone. I don’t take any joy from it.” Ryan noted that sensitivity is an important part of drawing in readers: “I’m in the business of getting people to come back and read my stuff, tomorrow, or next week . . . If you’re a jerk about your information, you’re not going to cultivate that audience.”

Alan Sepinwall, TV critic for *HitFix*, was contrite when discussing a time when he goaded readers into concluding their own spoilers by announcing which actor's contract had not been renewed following a violent cliffhanger on *ER*. He recounted: "I got a bunch of angry letters, and those people were right. There were casting spoilers and just rubbing it into peoples' faces in that moment." This example demonstrates that power differentials exist in viewing communities, but many professional writers and editors are responsive to their readers—especially a critical mass of disappointed reader voices. Sepinwall received angry responses, considered them justified, and altered his practices accordingly. Expressions of empathy with readers, when coupled with accounts of remorse, suggest that writers' and editors' views on both publication timing and appropriate content can become malleable in response to reader input.

### ***Packaging: All in the Presentation***

Heretofore this essay has captured a variety of (sometimes opposing) opinions and practices related to spoilers. We see agreement in our final theme: writers' and editors' ideas about "properly packaging" their discourse about television. This is the form or shape their content takes. We see this theme governed by nuisance rationale principles that preserve the right for willing readers or listeners to enjoy discourse about television *and* allow most spoiler averse to engage in strategic avoidance. It is the way that our interviewees best meet divergent reader needs, preserving both viewing and communication pleasures. Proper packaging always includes spoiler-free headlines and pictures, sometimes a well-placed "spoiler alert" (or its more wordy equivalent), and promotion of mutual understanding between writer and reader. Proper packaging, according to VanDerWerff, "should prepare people who haven't seen it, to not read it." Sepinwall stated his overarching philosophy as such: "It's all about [readers] opting in." To borrow from the *FCC v. Pacifica* language, the nuisance rationale of spoilers means that sensitive narrative information should not intrude into unwilling readers' minds.

None of the interviewees would knowingly put spoilers in their publication headlines that readers could easily stumble upon. O'Neal often expressed resentment of spoiler-phobes, but assumed all responsibility for headlines, stating, "I understand if you're mad if I put [a spoiler] in the headline." Egner highlighted the ease of headline spoiler access: "That's something somebody can see even if they're not looking for it." The key point here is that the reader does not have agency in the information exchange if a headline featured on a website or in a print publication contains a spoiler. Once readers click on an article, read past the print headline, or search for the specific details of a plot twist, they assume greater responsibility for finding narrative information. This spoiler-free headlining strategy reinforces Baym's (2000) observation that titles help structure an online community and help participants best meet their needs for specific communication. The spoiler-free headline zone functions as a filter to bring in readers who knowledgeably opt in.

Carbone had the only outlying headline strategy: she used two. Carbone would put "Spoiler Alert" or similar phrase in a headline that appeared on the *Wetpaint* site, but also wrote a search engine optimization (SEO) headline that would include the *content* of the spoiler. The SEO headline and accompanying article would emerge only after the reader had searched for the specific plot twist. The audience for spoiler-laden headlines, Carbone explained, are people "searching around trying to find reactions to the big news that happened." A 2016 article by Sara Boboltz also revealed that *The*

*Huffington Post's* editors have the spoiler-mitigating power to create dual headlines: the article has a more specific title and the link that is shared through social media has a more vague title (so as not to upset unwitting social media users). As writers and editors consider unique strategies to meet the needs of their readers, it may be helpful to know Carbone's finding that spoiler-laden headlines drew more traffic than spoiler alerts. Carbone's statistical evidence reinforces the importance of giving social members of the viewing community what they desire: communication about recent, surprising television moments.

Sepinwall broadened the scope of his opt-in strategies beyond headlines and into other visual attention grabbers: "I try not to put spoilers in tweets. I try not to whenever possible or use photos that might give things away." Tweets and pictures both provide quick, unavoidable information without taking a second agentic step (like clicking, turning a page, or hitting play). Sepinwall's tentative language ("try not to whenever possible") acknowledges that he and other writers do not have unassailable judgment when assessing what is a spoiler-y tweet or photo, but they give much thought to protecting readers. VanDerWerff recalled using a picture from the very first *Hannibal* episode to accompany an article and having many readers get upset because "if you hadn't seen any of the season, [the picture] would seem like it was a huge spoiler." Complicating these spoiler practices is the fact that a false sense of being spoiled may prevent readers from watching the show and being able to see the writer's or editor's side: why the photo or other piece of information was *not* a spoiler.

Opinions differed on how to properly package recaps—writing that provides the CliffsNotes of an already-aired episode. The major theme is that readers *should* know that a recap will include narrative information, but writers and editors still provided extra warnings. Egner waffled on the subject, stating, "with recaps there's this sort of understanding that this is specifically a little mini review or digest about a specific episode of a specific show" but conceding, "usually we do include some sort of spoiler alert." Egner thought that "most reasonable people" would know that a recap contains narrative information, but there can always be vocal, indignant exceptions. Poniewozik wrote in 2013 that "SPOILER ALERT-ing anodyne information" (para. 12) broadens the definition of a spoiler, but he surmised in our interview that many critics go overboard with warnings because they do not want to be "dealing with pissed off, whiny people on the internet." Watercutter took a least objectionable approach, acknowledging that formal conventions set expectations—"hopefully people are aware of what they're looking at when they start reading [a recap]"—but always beginning recaps with a warning. Spoiler alerting a recap is a sometimes-grudging-but-always-generous way to keep the peace among different factions. It is a sacrifice that writers and editors make to minimize harm.

Many interviewees built in extra spoiler protections for their readers and also encouraged readers to take control of meeting their own needs. Spoiler-sensitive time shifters were encouraged to recognize that their viewing patterns, reading habits, and internet use actually create opportunities to be spoiled. Sepinwall oriented his spoiler philosophy around a particular saying: "'At a certain point, you have to live in the world,' and you can't demand that the world bends to your viewing schedule." O'Neal reiterated that readers are opting in when choosing to read articles about television shows. He urged them: "Take control of your life. Don't voluntarily click on stuff and then get mad." Many writers and editors see themselves as merely asking the readers to save themselves from spoilers and to demonstrate sensitivity toward those who want to engage in conversations about already-aired television. Reader recognition of the generic

conventions in television discourse (e.g., recaps contain plentiful narrative information) and attention to spoiler alerts are ways to assume responsibility for their own viewing pleasures and preferences.

### Conclusions

Lotz noted that the television control technologies enabling time shifting have “diminished the already languishing notion of television as an initiator of watercooler conversation—a notion once enforced through the mandate of simultaneous viewing” (2014, p. 27). Many of these conversations are still taking place in fits and starts through the digital watercooler (Matrix, 2014). This essay paves the way for cooperation between the professionals who send out watercooler invitations and those who mosey by for a drink.

We began our analysis by presenting our interviewees’ three different views on spoilers and television pleasure—neutral, averse, and positive. Although the three points are contradictory, all are valuable perspectives that also had support from various audience or fan studies about spoilers. Knowing a spoiler may indeed undercut pleasurable suspense; however, spoilers can also draw new viewers into a show and enhance cognitive play by encouraging viewers to speculate about events or pay closer attention to operational aesthetics.

While describing their spoiler attitudes and practices, writers and editors implicitly or explicitly offered four different views of their roles: the *reporter* who delivers timely news, the *matchmaker* who encourages readers to pick up enjoyable shows, the *literary* critic who invites readers to see stories in new or intriguing ways, and the *facilitator* who contributes to and cultivates conversations about engaging stories. Varying attitudes toward spoilers and perceptions of their roles as writers and editors undergirded the interviewees’ practices about when to publish, what content to publish, and how to package that content. For example, interviewees who took on the reporter role felt an obligation to fully cover television content without temporal padding. Interviewees who saw themselves as matchmakers tended to be cautious about publishing spoilers and/or committed to providing obvious spoiler warnings, especially if they saw a strong link between suspense and viewing pleasure. Literary critics often justified their inclusion of narrative details (from many stories) as necessary support for their arguments about new ways of seeing or interpreting a show. Facilitators would often pay attention to the conversations around them as they decided how best to intervene in the discourse.

We see proper packaging as the prominent area of consensus that largely elides those differences. Most interviewees agreed that they should give their readers fair warning about spoilers, putting the onus on readers to opt-in to discussions about narrative content. These practices represent a nuisance rationale approach to spoilers that balances narrative revelation and insulation. In a media environment of fragmented viewing patterns, divergent attitudes about viewing pleasures, and differing needs for communication about television, this nuisance rationale is our greatest hope for continuing vibrant, meaningful discussions about media that do not interfere with would-be viewers’ potential pleasures.

Writers and editors revealed many ways in which they attempted to exercise due diligence about spoilers, but they also appealed for shared sacrifice in this mutualistic viewing community. VanDerWerff, for example, stated, "It's my job to police what I say to a reasonable degree, but it's also your job [as a reader] to avoid stuff that's going to spoil you." Understanding the generic conventions of various forms of television commentary—what each type of writing includes, how it is organized, and what its purpose is—will go a long way in facilitating readers' willing consent. Other writers encouraged readers to think carefully about narrative pleasures and remain open-minded about the possibility that knowing narrative details may not ruin their relationship with a television show.

The findings here are applicable to the negotiation of other new media communicative tensions. Multiple voices should be considered to reach mutually agreeable guidelines about divisive issues such as the appropriate content and frequency of workplace emails, or parameters for posts in social media groups. The nuisance rationale can be used to frame the negotiation of conflicting rights: one's right to communicate should be balanced with another's right not to receive communication. Compromises are most likely reached by understanding others' concerns, motivations, goals, and perspectives. Our analysis of the interviewee discourse highlights three essential components of negotiating communicative tensions in the new media environment: (1) acknowledging the diverse communicative needs of all members in a community; (2) being open-minded about the potential benefits of receiving communication; (3) working to minimize the intrusiveness of communication that may not be of equal value to those in the community.

The spoiler debate that rests on a foundation of perceived disrespect has been a source of frustration and disappointment for many who take pleasure in viewing television and engaging in television conversations. Discourse about television provides exciting possibilities for viewers to expand their involvement with a series, find new series, connect with other viewers, and learn intriguing new viewpoints. Cultivating greater understanding of the conditions under which professional television commentary is produced and circulated will help readers avoid stumbling upon spoilers or better recover from such stumbles. If writers, editors, and readers can all behave in ways that mutually respect the need to know and the need not to know, we will have a more harmonious culture with a robust digital watercooler—one that preserves agentic opportunities for bubbly exchanges as well as suspenseful silences.

### References

- Baym, N. K. (2000). *Tune in, log on: Soaps, fandom, and online community*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Boboltz, S. (2016, May 26). The Internet is dark and full of spoilers, but it doesn't have to be. *The Huffington Post*. Retrieved from [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/internet spoilers\\_us\\_57471935e4b0dac7ad423a8](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/internet spoilers_us_57471935e4b0dac7ad423a8)
- Booth, P. (2010) *Digital fandom: New media studies*. New York, NY: Peter Lang.

- Building time-shifted audiences: Does social TV play a role? (2014, November 4). *Nielsen*. Retrieved from <http://www.nielsen.com/us/en/insights/news/2014/building-time-shifted-audiences-does-social-tv-play-a-role.html>
- Buschow, C., Schneider, B., & Ueberheide, S. (2014). Tweeting television: Exploring communication activities on Twitter while watching TV. *Communications*, 39, 124–149. doi:10.1515/commun-2014-0009
- Corbin, J., & Strauss, A. (2015). *Basic qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory* (4th ed.). Boston, MA: SAGE Publications.
- Deggans, E. (2013, January 13). TV spoiler alert! You can't avoid them. *Tampa Bay Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.tampabay.com/features/media/tv-spoiler-alert-you-cant-avoid-them/1270426>
- Deggans, E. (2014, October 11). AMC's *The Walking Dead* is a hit show with two meanings. *National Public Radio*. Retrieved from <http://www.npr.org/2014/10/10/355130974/amcs-the-walking-dead-is-a-hit-show-with-two-meanings>
- Epstein, J. (2016, March 16). Where have all the critics gone? *Commentary Magazine*. Retrieved from <https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/where-have-all-the-critics-gone/>
- Federal Communications Commission vs. Pacifica, 438 U.S. 726 (U.S. Supreme Court 1987).
- Fiske, J. (1988). Critical response: Meaningful moments. *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 5, 246–251. doi:10.1080/15295038809366708
- Franich, D. (2014, February 20). Entertainment geekly: The new rules of spoilers. *Entertainment Weekly*. Retrieved from <http://www.ew.com/article/2014/02/20/spoiler-rules-entertainment-geekly>
- Frativelli, F., Negri, F., & Cori, E. (2015). Social media communities of practice: Reputation at risk. *International Journal of Management Cases*, 17, 102–119.
- Gray, J. (2010). *Show sold separately: Promos, spoilers, and other media paratexts*. New York: New York University Press.
- Gray, J., & Mittell, J. (2007). Speculation on spoilers: Lost fandom, narrative consumption and rethinking textually. *Particip@tions*, 4. Retrieved from [http://www.participations.org/Volume%204/Issue%201/4\\_01\\_graymittell.htm](http://www.participations.org/Volume%204/Issue%201/4_01_graymittell.htm)
- Herbig, A., & Herrmann, A. F. (2016). Polymediated narrative. The case of the *Supernatural* episode "Fan Fiction." *International Journal of Communication*, 10, 748–765. Retrieved from <http://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/4397/1560>



- Highfield, T. (2015). Tweeted joke life spans and appropriated punch lines: Practices around topical humor on social media. *International Journal of Communication*, 9, 2713–2734. Retrieved from <http://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/3611/1450>
- Hills, M. (2012). Psychoanalysis and digital fandom: Theorizing spoilers and fans' self-narratives. In R. A. Lind (Ed.), *Producing theory in a digital world: The intersection of audiences and production in contemporary theory* (pp. 105–122). New York, NY: Peter Lang.
- Holmes, L. (2015, August 17). Television 2015: Full drops and single shots. *National Public Radio*. Retrieved from <http://www.npr.org/sections/monkeysee/2015/08/17/432569378/television-2015-full-drops-and-single-shots>
- James, M. (2015, December 16). 2015: Year of "peak TV" hits record with 409 original series. *Los Angeles Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/envelope/cotown/la-et-ct-2015-peak-tv-new-record-409-original-series-20151216-story.html>
- Jenkins, H. (2006). *Convergence culture: Where old and new media collide*. New York: New York University Press.
- Johnson, B. K., & Rosenbaum, J. E. (2014). Spoiler alert: Consequences of narrative spoilers for dimensions of enjoyment, appreciation, and transportation. *Communication Research*, 42, 1068–1088. doi:10.1177/0093650214564051
- Kois, D. (2008, March 13). Spoilers: The official *Vulture* statutes of limitations. *Vulture*. Retrieved from [http://www.vulture.com/2008/03/spoilers\\_the\\_official\\_vulture.html](http://www.vulture.com/2008/03/spoilers_the_official_vulture.html)
- Leetaru, K. (2015, November 10). Is the era of reader comments on news websites fading? *Forbes*. Retrieved from <http://www.forbes.com/sites/kalevleetaru/2015/11/10/is-the-era-of-reader-comments-on-news-websites-fading/#5d8feff837d9685e26d837d9>
- Lotz, A. D. (2014). *The television will be revolutionized* (2nd ed.). New York: New York University Press.
- Matrix, S. (2014). The Netflix effect: Teens, binge watching, and on-demand digital media trends. *Jeunesse: Young People, Texts, Cultures*, 6, 119–138.
- Mittell, J. (2006). Narrative complexity in contemporary American television. *The Velvet Light Trap*, 58, 29–40.
- Newman, M. Z. (2012). Free TV: File-sharing and the value of television. *Television and New Media* 13, 463–479. doi:10.1177/1527476411421350

- Perks, L. G., & McElrath-Hart, N. (2016). Spoiler definitions and behaviors in the post-network era. *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*. Advance online publication. doi:10.1177/1354856516659403
- Perks, L. G., & McElrath-Hart, N. (Forthcoming). Television spoilers recast as narrative teasers. *Qualitative Research Reports in Communication*.
- Poniewozik, J. (2013, July 31). Secret intelligence: Time to draw a line against spoiler paranoia. *TIME*. Retrieved from <http://entertainment.time.com/2013/07/31/secret-intelligence-time-to-draw-the-line-against-spoiler-paranoia/>
- Stuever, H. (2013, June 6). TV's spoiler epidemic isn't really the end of the world. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from [https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/tv/tvs-spoiler-epidemic-isnt-really-the-end-of-the-world/2013/06/06/2802503a-cc63-11e2-9f1a-1a7cdee20287\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/tv/tvs-spoiler-epidemic-isnt-really-the-end-of-the-world/2013/06/06/2802503a-cc63-11e2-9f1a-1a7cdee20287_story.html)
- Tops of 2015: TV and social media. (2015, December 8). *Nielsen*. Retrieved from <http://www.nielsen.com/content/corporate/us/en/insights/news/2015/tops-of-2015-tv-and-social-media.html>
- VanDerWerff, T. (2014, June 30). Why it's time to stop the anti-spoiler paranoia. *A.V. Club*. Retrieved from <http://www.avclub.com/article/why-its-time-stop-anti-spoiler-paranoia-206152>
- VanDerWerff, T. (2015, September 14). There will be more than 400 scripted series this year: That bubble's bound to burst. *Vox*. Retrieved from <http://www.vox.com/2015/9/14/9301867/peak-tv>
- Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Williams, R. (2004). "It's about power": Spoilers and fan hierarchy in on-line *Buffy* fandom. *Slayage: The On-Line International Journal of Buffy Studies*, 11–12. Retrieved from <http://davidlavery.net/Slayage/PDF/williams.pdf>