



## In the post-TV era: transmedia and fandom in *Sherlock*, by Moffat and Gatiss

*Na era da pós-TV: transmídia e fandom em Sherlock, de Moffat e Gatiss*

*En la era post-televisiva: transmedia y fandom en Sherlock por Moffat y Gatiss*

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**Abstract:** Serial narratives such as TV series have their own language, genres and narrative tools, according to their media specificities. It is observed that the television of today is going through a process of rapid cultural and technological transformations. Such advances have led to profound changes in the formats of the series, as well as in their modes of production and consumption. As for the production aspects, for example, we observe the creation of new narrative models in which the technological resources are shaped as extensions of the television product, creating a multiplatform or transmedial narrative experience. In this paper we will examine the case of the television series *Sherlock* by Steven Moffat and Mark Gatiss, broadcasted by BBC, as an example of a program designed for a transmedia television, one that encouraged the emergence of an engaged audience willing to follow the series beyond the TV screen across other media platforms.

**Keywords:** television; TV series; Sherlock; transmedia; after-TV.

**Resumo:** Narrativas seriais como as séries de televisão possuem linguagem, gêneros e ferramentas narrativas próprias, conforme suas especificidades midiáticas. Observa-se que a televisão de hoje passa por um processo de rápidas transformações culturais e tecnológicas. Tais avanços têm levado a profundas modificações nos formatos, modos de produção e consumo das séries. Em relação aos aspectos de produção, por exemplo, observa-se a criação de novos modelos narrativos nos quais os recursos tecnológicos se configuram como uma extensão do produto televisivo, criando uma experiência narrativa multiplataforma ou transmidiática. Neste trabalho analisaremos o caso da série televisiva *Sherlock*, de Steven Moffat e Mark Gatiss exibida pela BBC, como um exemplo de programa elaborado para uma televisão transmidiática que estimulou o surgimento de um público engajado, disposto a seguir a série para além da tela de TV.

**Palavras-chave:** televisão; série de TV; Sherlock; transmídia; pós-TV.

**Resumen:** Las narrativas en serie, como las series de televisión, tienen su propio lenguaje, géneros y herramientas narrativas, de acuerdo con sus especificidades mediáticas. La televisión de hoy está experimentando un proceso de rápido cambio cultural y tecnológico. Tales avances han llevado a cambios profundos en los formatos, modos de producción y consumo de series. En relación con los aspectos de producción, por ejemplo, se observa la creación de nuevos modelos narrativos en los que los recursos tecnológicos se configuran como una extensión del producto televisivo, creando una experiencia narrativa multiplataforma o transmedia. En este artículo veremos el caso de la serie de televisión de la BBC *Sherlock*, de Steven Moffat y Mark Gatiss, como un ejemplo de un programa diseñado para una televisión transmedia que ha estimulado la aparición de un público comprometido dispuesto a seguir la serie más allá de la pantalla de televisión.

**Palabras clave:** televisión; serie de TV; Sherlock; transmedia; post-TV.



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Resulting from increasing competition between producers, considerable changes have been witnessed in the format of TV series in the past two decades. As Mélanie Bourdaa explains, these changes began in the late 1990s when HBO began producing shows with innovative aesthetics as well as more complex plotlines such as *The Sopranos* and *The Wire*, in a ground-breaking move that could be translated by the *slogan* of the time: "It is not TV, it is HBO" (Bourdaa 2011). One of the changes observed back then regarded the format of the narrative. Until the 1980s, a procedural model prevailed in which each episode represented an autonomous and complete story. Inspired by the models of telenovelas, producers began to develop narratives with a greater number of characters, more intricate narrative arcs and more realistic stories. These changes aimed at a greater engagement on the part of the viewers, who had to follow the weekly episodes – or find a way to be updated if a certain episode had been missed – in order to understand the story. This new type of series received high ratings at the time and a greater attention by the critics.

From that moment, some strategies were required to refresh one's memory concerning the most important events of the story in order to make sure that the spectator would be willing to continue watching the program, as well as to offer new spectators entry points to the narrative: a. the flashback of a character; b. the recap of previous episodes, generally in the beginning of a new one; c. that moment when a character tells another one what has happened before. Besides, the cliffhanger started being used as a strategy in order to elevate the suspense of the narrative at the end of an episode or season. The idea was to keep the spectator interested during the hiatus between weekly episodes or months-apart seasons.

Along with the changes in the format and strategies of the series, the technological advances have also exerted profound modifications in the modes of reception and consumption of the television products. In this respect, the Internet played a fundamental role, as it enabled online viewing and the (legal or illegal) downloading of

the programs. The possibility of downloading or watching series on the Internet has transformed the behavior of the viewer, who until a short time ago could only consume the television product at the time it was being broadcasted. Thus, the exhibition time and the duration of a given series was no longer subordinated to the programme grid of broadcasters but began being controlled by the viewer. In addition, the evolution of cellphones to *smartphones* has qualified them as devices for production and consumption of high-quality audiovisual media. They have thus become an alternative to television, an apparatus through which the viewer can not only watch his favorite series when and how, but also where s/he wants to. One can speak, today, of the ubiquity of TV, which is no longer confined to the living room of our homes.

This new panorama exposes the instability of the media characteristics of television. In *Transmedia Television*, Elizabeth Evans argues that we need to review the parameters of what we know as TV today, because "if downloaded content is packaged and experienced differently from traditional TV content, can it still be considered 'television?'" (Evans 2011: 56). For Eckart Voigts, just as the mediality of literature is currently under debate due to e-books, digital readers and new forms of reading and revising, the mediality of television is also going through a transition, which results from the rapid cultural and technological transformations to which it has been subjected (Voigts 2015: 311). In fact, all media can be modified by cultural and technological aspects over time. Television itself was created by the remediation of other media such as theater, film, radio and television, as Bolter and Grusin (1999) remind us, proving that media borders are fluid structures that change over time.

One of the consumer practices that emerged as a consequence of the new possibilities of television was binge-watching, in which the viewer watches several episodes of a series in an uninterrupted way, something that was only possible a few years ago if s/he bought or rented the DVDs of an entire season or if s/he managed to be at home watching the episodes that sometimes would be exhibited continuously

(although interrupted by the commercials) on cable channels. Online streaming services such as Netflix, Hulu and Amazon Prime have helped popularize the binge-watching, as these platforms usually provide all the episodes of a certain season at once. Among other effects, this practice breaks with the principle of seriality of the programs and minimizes the effect of the cliffhanger between episodes and seasons (Bourdaa 2011).

These new modes of consumption have promoted the emergence of series that are broadcasted exclusively through online platforms such as *Orange Is The New Black* (2013-) and *House of Cards* (2013-), both distributed by Netflix. In other cases, even though they are not produced for exclusive distribution on online platforms, some series are already being designed to be watched in binge-watching format, which implies, for example, the development of more complex narratives and the absence of major cliffhangers between episodes.

This change in the mode of consumption of TV series was the subject of an article in *The New York Times* (Rafferty 2015) which claimed that, as it is a recent trend, the development of series according to the intended consumption mode still goes through a process of experimentation on the part of the producers. One example of an unsuccessful choice of viewing mode was the second season of HBO's *True Detective* (2014-), which had been broadcasted as weekly episodes in the TV channel. Negative reviews argued that spectators were having a hard time following the plot with weekly intervals between one episode and another. According to the article, series made to be watched uninterruptedly should have a significant different narrative structure that would allow for a denser plot; at the same time, they would discourage the speculation among fans between episodes. In the case of *True Detective*, the complex plot of the second season would work best if binge-watched, as the audience could watch all the episodes at once, without a weekly gap between them, which would minimize the problem of forgetting the details of the story and facilitate the understanding of such a complex narrative.

The influence of digital technology on the production and consumption of television series, however, goes beyond binge-watching. It was not long before the producers realized that the audience spent time on the internet not only watching their favorite series, but also looking for additional information or even reading or writing comments about them. In this sense, producers began to publish content related to the series in other media. Television thus becomes an expanded and participatory platform designed to promote viewer engagement by extending television content consumption time, which will no longer be limited to the program's broadcasting time, but will begin before and end after that, just in other media.

For Bourdaa, this set of factors – the great convergence of technologies, interactive extensions, the greater engagement of viewers, and the strategies of immersive serial narratives – marks, in fact, a new television era, that of "techno-television" (2011). Voigts refers to the same phenomenon as an advanced mode of television, characterized by the transition from analog to digital and by the convergence of several media, to what he calls "after-TV". The author also points out that what was once called a "program" and was part of the broadcasters' program grid, today has come to be known as "content" and is part of a distribution schedule designed to work in various media (Voigts 2015: 312). Thus, we are now living in what could be called a "post-TV" era.

In *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, Janet Murray had already announced an integration between digital media and television programs:

Our clicking would then be motivated not by curiosity about the media objects (show me a video clip) but by curiosity about the plot (why does she say that about him?). The computer presentation would thereby allow pleasures that are unattainable in broadcast soaps. For example, we could follow a single appealing subplot while ignoring the companion plots that may drive us crazy, or we could come in at any time in the story and review important past events in all their dramatic richness (Murray 1997: 67-8).

This is called by the author as *hyperserial*, a format in which artifacts from the fictional world

of programs or series would migrate to the internet, giving rise to virtual environments that are extensions of this world and containing information that would fill in the gaps of the dramatic narrative, a phenomenon that somewhat coincides with which has been called for some time now as *transmedia*. By expanding fictional content into the virtual environment so that the viewer stays connected with the program after the end of the episode on television, Murray argues that hypertext stories create a "continuous sense of ongoing lives," (Murray 1997: 318) that is, the viewer will continue to experience the fictional world, only on another platform, which may imply erasing the perception of the boundaries between reality and fictional.

The use of transmedial resources in cooperation with television narratives is also examined by Elizabeth Evans. The author identifies two aspects of this "transmedial television": the *transmedia storytelling*, which allows access to parts of the text that are not available in the episodes of the series, such as details of the fictional world; and the transmedial engagement, which involves two processes: transmedial distribution, "the placing of TV content by a number of agents on multiple platforms", and the transmedial engagement, "practices of audiences in this environment of transmedia distribution as they move across media." (Evans 2011: 40)

In the television industry, such transformations have led to the emergence of expanded versions of former producers who, in cooperation with other media companies, have formed giant entertainment groups that not only take charge of broadcasting programs today but are also responsible for the creation and distribution of content in various media.

As Elizabeth Evans notes, the BBC, for example, "has become a genuinely tri-media organization, with television, radio and online services all complementing and enhancing each other, enabling far greater delivery of value to license payers than was ever possible in the age of linear media" (Evans 2011: 34). One of BBC's projects designed in this era of transmedia television is *Sherlock*, a series that not only adapts the stories

of the famous literary detective for the television, but does so in accordance with a contemporary model of convergence of media and public.

### Sherlock

Sherlock Holmes is the protagonist of 4 novels and 56 stories by Arthur Conan Doyle written from 1887 to 1927. Since the late 19th century, Doyle's stories have rapidly gained public recognition and have also since then served as material for a large number of adaptations in the most diverse media. Holmes is certainly one of the most frequently adapted literary characters since the early 20th century. Only in the last decade there have been: a. three television series - *Sherlock*, BBC (2010-), *Elementary*, CBS (2012-) and *Sherlock*, Russia-1 Channel (2013); b. three films on the mainstream cinema - *Sherlock*, Guy Ritchie (2009), *Sherlock: A Game of Shadows*, Guy Ritchie (2011) and *Mr. Holmes*, Bill Condon (2015); c. video games - such as *Sherlock Holmes vs. Jack the Ripper* (2009); d. comics - such as *Victorian Undead* (2010); and e. novels - such as the *Young Sherlock Holmes* series (2010-); not to mention the parodies and the works inspired by the character, but that do not recognize it openly such as *House MD* (2004-2012), for example.

BBC's *Sherlock* television series premiered in 2010 and has 4 seasons, each with 3 episodes of 90 minutes each, plus a few extra episodes. In this version, the stories of Sherlock and Watson, represented respectively by actors Benedict Cumberbatch and Martin Freeman, are brought to the present day, and remodeled according to the cultural values and norms of our time. Among other things, this means that the series makes use, in several episodes, of technological innovations in a diegetic and transmedial way: *Sherlock* characters, for instance, have blogs and social networks to communicate with each other and with other people.

In *Sherlock*, the use of these transmedial features by the characters comes with migratory signs that are displayed on screen during the program. These are clues that the most attentive public should observe and that lead to the transmedia extensions developed by the producers. As Christy

Dena points out, these “clues” or “easter eggs” planted in certain scenes act as “triggers” for the viewer to move to other media: “To the unaware viewer, the scene would progress just the ordinary, but to other viewers the website address and phone number are catalytic allusions to other compositions in other distinct medium que will reveal more information” (Dena 2009: 307).

In addition to demanding more from the fans of the series – who should pay attention to small details in certain scenes of the show –, the diegetic indication of the transmedia extensions reinforces the impression of verisimilitude. According to Dena these fictional profiles, websites, and emails serve to resituate the real world within the fictional world, making the fictional world more believable and producing a result similar to what Barthes called “*effet de reel*” in relation to certain descriptions in novels that give the reader the impression of describing the real world (Dena 2009: 283).

The use of blogs and profiles in social networks in transmedial projects usually aims at:

- promoting a product of the franchise;
- keeping the fandom engaged, with periodic postings from the characters;
- making a recapitulation of the events occurred, usually from the point of view of one of the characters;
- telling new stories related to the series or exploring details of it, expanding the narrative of the TV.

In *Sherlock*, the websites and fictional profiles do not serve as tools for the explicit marketing of a product; neither do they contain details about the series production; nor there is an effort to foster a continuous engagement of the fandom by means of characters' postings (since the blogs and profiles have not been updated during the long hiatuses between seasons). Rather, the blogs and fictional profiles created reveal a mixture of two strategies: while reiterating events of the program from the perspective of one of the characters, they also function as expansions for

the television narrative, providing new information and details to the stories seen on TV.

A clear example of how the blogs postings not only reiterate but expand the television narrative through details of stories mentioned quickly or omitted on TV is seen on Molly Hooper's blog.<sup>2</sup> Molly is a coroner who works at St. Bartholomew's Hospital and nurtures a platonic passion for Sherlock. During the TV show, in the episode “The Great Game”, Molly introduces Jim, her boyfriend, to Sherlock, but the series does not explain how Molly and Jim met. The explanation is only made available to the spectator who goes to the internet and finds the blog of the coroner. On March 25, Molly accidentally types the name of Sherlock on it, who she only called until that moment by the nickname “you-know-who”. In the comments section of the blog, Molly confesses her stupid mistake, and then Jim (supposedly a computer tech who works in the same hospital as Molly) comes in and invites her over for coffee. On March 30, the conversation between Molly and Jim in the comments section of the blog reveals that the two had already met on two other occasions and were probably getting romantically involved: [Molly:] “Yes!!! You!!! Thanks for lunch!”; [Jim:] “Thank YOU for last night!! Xxx”. So, whereas for the regular viewer, Molly's relationship had probably come as a surprise, the fan who accessed the blog already knew the coroner was seeing someone, although nobody knew his true identity – we later find out on the show that Jim was actually Moriarty, who used Molly only to get closer to Sherlock.

A second example: in the blog kept by Sherlock, *The Science of Deduction*,<sup>3</sup> we observe the complete explanation for a case only briefly mentioned in the episode “A Study in Pink”. In the television series, the investigator asks to use Watson's phone and sends the following message to Lestrade: “If the brother has a green ladder, arrest his brother.” No other comment or explanation about this message appears in that or in the following episodes, which probably has left the regular viewer confused with a seemingly strange sentence that apparently

<sup>2</sup> MOLLY HOOPER. Available at: <http://www.mollyhooper.co.uk/>, accessed on November 26, 2015.

<sup>3</sup> THE SCIENCE OF DEDUCTION. Available at: <http://www.thescienceofdeduction.co.uk>, accessed on November 26, 2015.

has no connection to the story at all. The mystery, however, is solved when the viewer accesses Holmes's blog, which contains, in the archives section, a case entitled "The Green Ladder", about two brothers involved in an inheritance dispute after their father's death. Only the spectator who is also an internet user and an engaged fan of the series would then understand what that SMS message is all about.

In a third blog by one of *Sherlock's* characters, Dr. John Watson's,<sup>4</sup> the posts work as a supplement to the television episodes: there are cases to be solved that are not mentioned in the show, such as "The Six Thatchers," "Death by Twitter," "Murder at The Orient Express." In addition, the blog offers the opportunity to revisit some events from the perspective of Dr. Watson, which brings the electronic diary close to Conan Doyle's stories, usually narrated by the doctor. Only through Watson's blog are we able to know, for instance, what happened and how he felt after the "death" of Sherlock, a period that is not portrayed in the series.

Not a fan of blogs herself, the character Irene Adler prefers to use an account on Twitter, the @TheWhipHand,<sup>5</sup> in order to contact and respond to other characters and fictional clients. In her profile, all posts were made on January 1, 2012, the same day that the episode "A Scandal in Belgravia" aired. Again the real and the fictional are blurred: on that day Irene interacts with both Jacob Sowersby (a character in the series) and Eddy (apparently a fan of the real-life series). Thus, the aim of Adler's messages is to, once again, increase the sense of verisimilitude, so that the spectator would "believe" she also exists outside the TV world.

The proposed game of blurring the boundaries between reality and fiction often ends up stimulating the participation of fans in the transmedial platforms, who seek to interact with their favorite characters. In the case of *Sherlock*, the producers seem to enjoy playing with the limits of fictionality/reality, as one can notice by

some comments such as: "TheRealJoe: Wait are any of you real? Is any of this real? How do we know that people like 'Harry Watson' and 'Mike Stamford' are not just made up for this blog?".<sup>6</sup> Or as in the following conversation:

Harry Watson: Wait! You're not on Twitter?!!

John Watson: No. Never have been.

Harry Watson: Then who the hell have I been talking to?<sup>7</sup>

Sometimes the blurring between chats of characters and of real fans or the lack of a clear indication of official blogs and profiles can lead fans to access websites created by other fans, thinking that these are official transmedial platforms. Because of this, at one point it became necessary to list on BBC's website the electronic addresses of all platforms that were part of the series' official project.<sup>8</sup>

The use of video and texts platforms and other media forms within the participatory culture is a tendency that has been affecting the status of cultural artifacts, transforming "an object of interpretation and perusal into material to be played with", according to Voigts (2015: 317-8). This is also present in *Sherlock's* project: one additional official platform related to the series was *Sherlock: The Network*, a game app for smartphones launched in 2013 in which the player assumes the role of a member of a network of informants who helped Sherlock solve some cases. In the game, the player receives voice or video messages from Sherlock, John, Mycroft and Lestrade or watch scenes that were exclusively shot for the game, in which Sherlock and Watson address the camera/player directly with hints to solve ten cases.

As the player icon moves around the map of London, details about certain places appear, along with the information concerning the TV episodes in which those locations served as scenery. The tasks proposed to the players relate to the cases shown

<sup>4</sup> THE PERSONAL BLOG OF DR. JOHN H. WATSON. Available at: <http://www.johnwatsonblog.co.uk>, accessed on November 26, 2015.

<sup>5</sup> THE WHIP HAND. Available at: <https://twitter.com/thewhiphand>, accessed on November 26, 2015.

<sup>6</sup> Available at: <http://www.johnwatsonblog.co.uk/blog/17june>, accessed on November 26, 2015.

<sup>7</sup> Available at: <http://www.johnwatsonblog.co.uk/blog/23may>, accessed on November 26, 2015.

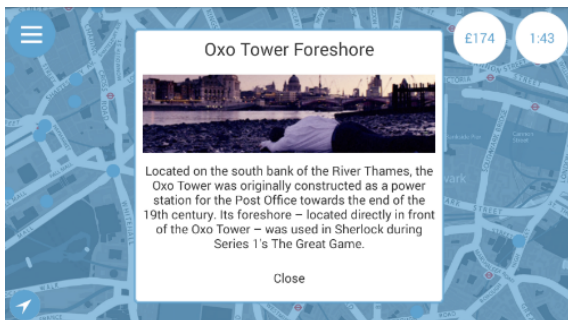
<sup>8</sup> Available at: <https://bbc.in/1K1OgJs>, accessed on 6 Feb. 2015.



in the series, so it is possible to make a connection between the events that take place in the game and the serial narrative. In other words, *Sherlock: The Network* motivates the player to transmedially engage with the series fictional world by solving the cases proposed, in an interesting combination between the narrative and the ludic.



**Fig. 1** – Dr. Watson addresses the player. At: *Sherlock: The Network* app.



**Fig. 2** – Map of London and series location. At: *Sherlock: The Network* app.

Although the sense of verisimilitude is not as strongly present here if one compares the game to the blogs and social networks profiles (perhaps because of the nature of the game itself), as a transmedial extension *Sherlock: The Network* revisits the locations and cases shown in the series, as well as exposes the player to new situations and events within the fictional world of *Sherlock*.

Aiming for an engaged spectator

The flow from one medium to another reflects an engagement by the public, forming a group of fans who will eventually meet in groups with the same interests. In addition to seeking and sharing information, such groups will actively promote the franchise by producing and distributing content related to it.

The *Sherlock* series has an engaged and active fandom that has produced and shared memes, gifs, fan fiction, fan art, as well as promoted campaigns that go beyond the limits of social networks and expand to real life, as it was the case with the campaign #BelieveInSherlock when, at end of the second season, Sherlock was accused of being a fraud and his suicide was announced in tabloids on screen. The movement in defense of the detective spread beyond the fictional borders of the TV series and manifested itself in various forms and throughout several countries (Fig. 3 to 5).



**Fig. 3** – Fan actions map in #BelieveInSherlock campaign. At: <http://www.tmcresourcekit.com/sherlock-holmes/>



**Fig. 4** – Sentence written in a public restroom in Berlin. At: <http://www.tmcresourcekit.com/sherlock-holmes/>



**Fig – 5:** Ad on a square in Verona. At: <http://www.tmcresourcekit.com/sherlock-holmes/>

Concerning the engagement of the fans, it is also interesting to observe that, in *Sherlock*, the flow of ideas runs as a two-way movement. This means that, not only does the series promote the creation of fan material and speculation based on the series, but also that the producers have appropriated from fan theories to create narrative events in the series.

In the time between the end of season 2 – the episode in which Sherlock “dies” – and the beginning of season 3 – the episode in which the detective reappears –, many fan theories aroused explaining how Sherlock Holmes had survived. Creators Gatiss and Moffat certainly became aware

of some of these theories and included them in the series. One possible explanation idealized by fans and portrayed in the series involved a romantic relationship between Sherlock and Molly Hooper; another one, between Sherlock and Moriarty. Transmedia, therefore, encourages situations where fan-created content becomes part of the fictional world's discourse, available to other fans and to the producers themselves.

Although the consequences of this greater interaction among fans and between fans and producers are still being examined by several scholars, two aspects seem common ground. First, despite the influence of fans in social networks and online communities, there is a clear limit between producers and fans, especially regarding participation and possibility of interaction as a way to change the narrative of the series. The type of fan participation that is promoted in *Sherlock* is not one that can exert drastic modifications in the plot; nor does it allow the fan figure to break the fictional barrier and actually integrate the show. In fact, the relationship between producers and fans in *Sherlock* lies in a controlled environment and seems much more reciprocal and closer than it really is, mainly because of the interaction between these two parties in social networks. There is a “built intimacy,” in which producers pretend to offer fans what they want (or what they think they want) (Maloney, 2014). Therefore, one aspect that deserves a deeper analysis is the limits of fan participation in transmedial projects.

Second, the use of fan-created content by producers may go beyond the ludic aspects. Although it may sound as a “gift” to the fan – who should feel honored to see his/her version of the story as part of the canonical narrative of the series –, as Mark Andrejevic reminds us, “viewer participation, while providing perceived benefits to viewers, doubled as what I will characterize as a form of free labor for producers” (2008: 28). In other words, in addition to the apparent playfulness, many fan creations are created in the hope of having their effort recognized by being incorporated to the official platforms. And, as some fans may be satisfied with this symbolic



reward, one may question the monetization of their works, since the producers will use this material for profit. Furthermore, the issue of legal rights is also problematic because when fans contribute "to the expressive aspects of a transmedia fiction", they become co-constructors of a fictional world (Dena 2009: 230).

## Conclusion

In order to understand television today, it is necessary to think not only on the broadcasting of programs on the TV set, but also in terms of the development and dissemination of transmedial content in other media. From the point of view of production, one can see that in this new context the end of the program broadcasted on television is only the starting point for the consumption of other program-related content in other media platforms. The flow from one medium to another reflects an engagement by the public, which will eventually meet in groups with the same interests. In addition to seeking and sharing information about their object of interest, such groups will actively promote the TV series by producing and distributing content related to it.

Thus, from an analytical perspective that considers not only the main television product but also its transmedia extensions, the transmedial project of *Sherlock* has the initial objective to adapt the text of Conan Doyle to our time, in order to establish a dialogue with a younger audience. But, more importantly, such strategy encourages the emergence and maintenance of an engaged audience, the fandom, willing to follow the program beyond the TV. However, as we have just briefly mentioned, encouraging audience interaction just to promote the series (in opposition to a real and meaningful participation) as well as using fan material without a legal acknowledgement, are just another side of the apparent ludic relation between fans and producers that have been established in transmedia television, issues that certainly deserve more attention in media studies worldwide.

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