
Fan-Producer Relations of Doctor Who—The Modern Doctor

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The Fandom: It's Bigger on the Inside

A fandom begins as a cult following of active fans that study the show and become what Leora Hadas and Limor Shifman call experts (276). They contribute their own creative works to this cult community. As the participatory culture of a fandom expands, “agents of consecration” emerge who help to form a collective belief among the fans and judge the producers of the show (Shefrin 270). Elana Shefrin goes on to explain that the agents “may be critics, scholars, or professionals” and “possess special knowledge” greater than just being emotionally involved in the show (269). It is through these agents that a fandom can express praise or discontent (Nikunen 116; Shefrin 270).

Audience approval plays a huge role in how high a show's ratings are and it can be categorized into six activities: selectivity, attention, involvement, avoidance, distraction, and media skepticism (Kim and Rubin 108-11). Fans facilitate a show by being emotionally involved and drawing attention to it (Kim and Rubin 110). They can also act as deterrents by expressing skepticism or avoiding particular aspects of the show that they don't agree with (Kim and Rubin 111). A person does not have to be a member of the fandom to be part of the audience and producers focus on pleasing the audience as a whole (Hadas and Shifman 278; Shefrin 272).

Fandoms have grown significantly because of the Internet (Hadas and Shifman 277; Nikunen 116-7; Shefrin 273). The Internet allows for an international community of fans to connect and share ideas (Nikunen 117). It also gives more opportunities for the devoted fans to share their work through different mediums.

Because of the impacts the Internet has made on fandoms there are different levels of fanhood (Hadas and Shifman 283-4; Shefrin 273-6). Fans do not have to actively participate in events or write fan fictions to be considered a fan (Hadas and Shifman 283). Casual fans of *Doctor Who* can simply join and post on the *Doctor Who* fan page on Facebook, which has over 560,000 members (“Doctor Who and the T.A.R.D.I.S.”). Fandoms are no longer a minority, but make the majority of the audience (Shefrin 278).

Fan influence on show producer is possible and, in fact, has been observed in the *Doctor Who* series (Hadas and Shifman 279). However, there is a strong argument that fan influence is negative (Hadas and Shifman 280; Shefrin 277). My research is arguing the opposite: that fan influence can be positive as well. This is in response to Hadas and Shifman's statement:

“A more in-depth investigation of the Moffat era [of the modern Doctor Who series] may thus provide us with valuable insight on the role of the specific fan-producer relationship...future research may ask whether the same practices are shared in fandoms in which the production has more positive attitude toward faithful viewer... (289).”

My research will provide a new viewpoint to the current conversation.

Exploring the “Who”niverse

My research originated with the question: “Can a discourse community (fandom) pressure writers and significantly influence how a television series is written?” I arrived at this question after I saw how the “Brony” fandom is constantly trying to coerce the producers of *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* to add certain types of characters and get them to do certain things. But observing the behaviors of men between the ages of 18 and 40 who are obsessed with a television show meant for 5 year-old girls is a topic that I’ll leave for someone else to research. However, there is a more established fandom associated with *Doctor Who*.

Before collecting data, I refined the question I was seeking to answer into something that might be supported by an analysis of data. My data collection consisted of targeting a few episodes that have sparked much fan interest and have evidence of influence. I have examined Reddit for threads where fan-shared opinions are widely approved of by the community. I have also looked through the largest *Doctor Who* fan page on Facebook for widely approved opinions and a general consensus on which elements are fan-favorites. I started my research by isolating possible influenced events. From there I observed specific events of fans on social media. After, I watched specific episodes where the possible influences are shown and noted them. Then, I reviewed it and decided whether the event is a correlation or causation and that determined if it was an influence. I also analyzed interviews with the writers Russell T. Davies and Steven Moffat. However, this only supported that there was influence from what the fans liked. To legitimize my claim, I added show rating for those certain episodes into the picture to determine if the influence helped or harmed the show. In addition to that, I analyzed numbers for the online fandom size.

The types of data collected were mostly textual and multimedia. Statistical data was also calculated from the *Doctor Who* fan page on Facebook. This involved sampling sections of photo albums and determining the percentage of images containing or referencing a fez (the reasoning for this is explained below). I calculated percentage using the formula below:

$(\text{Fez images} / \text{total sample images}) \times 100 = \% \text{ of images}$

Sample sizes were between 150 and 300. The percentages were then averaged to an estimated total percent.

EXPLAIN! EXPLAIN!

From my research from watching *Doctor Who* episodes, I isolated two elements of the show that are not only evidence of fan influence, but had a positive outcome from the influence. The character Rose Tyler and a very peculiar hat were fan favorites. They were so positively regarded by the fandom that they were brought back by the writers on multiple occasions after their exiting the show.

Rose Tyler, I...

Rose Tyler was the first companion of The Doctor in the modern series and was played by actress Billie Piper. Rose accompanied the ninth Doctor, played by Christopher Eccleston, through the entire first season. At the end of season one The Doctor regenerates, leading into season two where Rose continues her adventure with the tenth Doctor, played by David Tennant. She was written out of the series in the second season finale where she became trapped in a parallel universe, never to return (“Doomsday”). Over her two seasons Rose and The Doctor develop a deep connection, much like a sci-fi love story.

Rose Tyler was not forgotten by The Doctor or the fans. Fans rank her as one of the best companions of all time (Schneider). Since her departure from the show in 2006, fans have been asking for her back, posting such comments as: “Do we ever ever ever get to see her again? Can we? Does anyone else want to see her again?” (Natalia_Bandita). There are entire threads dedicated to

discussing Rose’s character on Reddit. They all contain the pros and cons to Rose. However, there are numerous threads created by Rose Tyler fans explaining why she is the best of the New Who companions (Natalia_Bandita; Tatertot1000).

Russell T. Davies brought Rose back for a three-part episode toward the end of season four (“Journey’s End”; “The Stolen Earth”; “Turn Left”). This was to the fans delight. Instead of her story having such an abrupt stop, it merely experienced a prolonged intermission before the final chapter. Davies even created a human version of The Doctor to spend the rest of her life with, giving their love story a happy ending (“Journey’s End”). The ratings for the episode where Rose was written out and the episodes where she returned rank in the top 20 of the IMDb user ratings (“Episodes Rated by IMDb User Rating”). This reveals a strong correlation between fan influence and the show’s success. This fulfills the potential of the fan-producer relationship in *Doctor Who* that fan influence can positively impact the show. Whether or not Russell T. Davies planned the return of Rose Tyler two seasons in advance or not, the fans asked for it, and the show received praise for Davies writing the plot in that way.

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Although Rose Tyler was truly gone, the actress who played her wasn’t. In 2013 Billie Piper was cast in a role for the *Doctor Who 50th Anniversary Special* (“The Day of the Doctor”). However, she didn’t play Rose. Piper starred as an object used by an older generation of The Doctor and was personified as Rose’s figure (“The Day of the Doctor”). The object explained to The Doctor that its persona is his future (“The Day of the Doctor”). This special appearance of Billie Piper factored into how well the episode did with ratings. The 50th Anniversary episode ranks second in IMDb user rankings (“Episodes Rated by IMDb User Rating”).

Fezzes are Cool

In the classic series, The Doctor sported a fez in a few scenes and comics. It is possible that this why the ridiculous hat was given its fifteen minutes of fame in New Who episodes. The fez made its debut in the modern series in the season five finale (“The Big Bang”). Unfortunately for the fans, Steven Moffat did not allow the fez to survive the episode. In its short life, the fez immediately became an icon synonymous with The Doctor as played by Matt Smith.

The fan page on Facebook contains thousands of fan-submitted photos of anything related to *Doctor Who*. Within the albums containing well over 24,000 photos, hundreds reference the fez (“Doctor Who and the T.A.R.D.I.S.”). From being part of a fan’s costume to being the topic of the photo, the fez is scattered throughout the fan page. Fez-themed photos account for approximately 3.125% of the albums (“Doctor Who and the T.A.R.D.I.S.”). Considering that a vast majority of the images of the *Doctor Who* Facebook page are of the characters and the actors who play them, 3.125% is significant. The only objects that are present more than the fez are the T.A.R.D.I.S.¹ and The Doctor’s sonic screwdriver (“Doctor Who and the T.A.R.D.I.S.”).

Moffat’s revival of the fez was a staple of the 50th Anniversary Special. The fez played a comedic role in guiding the different generations of The Doctor through time and space to each other in the beginning of the episode (“The Day of the Doctor”). The fans were not only able to see Matt Smith reunited with his fez, but also David Tennant wear the funny hat as well (“The Day of the Doctor”). The fez’s appearance clearly pleased the fandom since it was another factor in the second place rank of the 50th Anniversary Special from fan rankings (“Episodes Rated by IMDb User

¹ Acronym stands for Time and Relative Dimension in Space

Rating”). It would be irrelevant to the viewers to give a meaningless prop such a role, supporting that the fans influenced the return of the fez. Also, in return for the fez, the episode was rewarded with extremely high ratings. This is yet another piece of evidence that the modern *Doctor Who* is impacted positively by fan influence.

Steven Moffat

Steven Moffat is the current writer for *Doctor Who*. Like Russell T. Davies, Moffat was a fan of the classic series when he was young. His writing made one of its first appearances with *Doctor Who* in 2007 (“Blink”). His episode is the top fan favorite of the modern series (“Episodes Rated by IMDb User Rating”).

As a fan himself he has influenced the show. He created an episode just to satisfy his childhood wonder from the classic series. He was excited to see the many rooms of the T.A.R.D.I.S. as rumored by a tabloid (Moffat). He was disappointed to discover that it wasn’t true (Moffat). So, as a writer for the modern series, he wrote and created visuals for the inside of the T.A.R.D.I.S. to finally reveal it to the fandom (Moffat).

Through his writing, Moffat has created a strange relationship with his fans. They love what he has done with the show but he has this way of giving beloved characters a tragic demise (“Doctor Who and the T.A.R.D.I.S.”). He has often taken the show in one direction then drastically changed the direction to keep the fans excited (Moffat). However, he does listen to the requests of the fandom. When asked about bringing back two specific characters Moffat responded, “We brought them back purely because they were so popular, so instantly popular” (Moffat). Even Steven Moffat facilitates events of positive fan influence.

The Whovians Have the Phone Box Now

Doctor Who has become the show of its fans. The modern Doctor was created and is still produced by fans of the classic series. Russell T. Davies and David Tennant have expressed their fanhood of the show (Davies). In fact, *Doctor Who* is part of the reason Tennant went into acting (Davies). *Doctor Who* has a unique and close fan-producer relationship. The fandom has praised certain aspects of the show and in return the writers have emphasized those aspects somewhat.

Those who are interested in this topic are involved in telecommunications, specifically media and communications and social media sites. Researchers contributing to this topic are mostly those in the field of media and communications. This study is relevant to them because it builds on their research. They’ve analyzed the development of fandoms through the transition to the technology age. This research is adding the next chapter to the current fan research by showing that fan influence can have outcomes that are beneficial to the show.

There is the remaining hypothesis on pleasing the few or the masses. Before and during the early stages of the Internet, fans were the dedicated few who enjoyed and were emotionally immersed in their show of choice. Entrance into a fandom was more than being a casual watcher. However, the majority of audiences are casual watchers. This means that for a writer to please the fandom, they risk losing the interest of the masses. My hypothesis is that the Internet has allowed easier entrance into the fandom. Now that there is more variety to being in the fandom, or a new definition of what constitutes being a fan, it opens up to the masses. So, for a writer to please the fandom, they would also be pleasing the masses. This hypothesis still needs to be thoroughly tested. This could be studied through the modern *Doctor Who* series and its future.

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