USING SCI-FI TO OBSERVE THE EFFECTS OF SOCIAL MEDIA AND REALITY TV

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ABSTRACT: Science-fiction has a reputation for doing two things remarkably well. The first is creating commentary on present-day societies, and the second is being eerily good at predicting possible technologies and societies. This paper utilizes pieces of science-fiction from various mediums in order to establish an observable pattern amongst writers in the genre today, and what these pieces say about the current state of two media forms: reality television and social media. As well as questioning whether the ubiquitous presence of reality television and social media are perpetuating the normalization of using others as our own personal entertainment.

Introduction

There is a large group of people that aren't afraid to voice just how much they loathe reality television for being trashy or stupid, while it may at times be those things, it's also practically a human tradition. We've been on the edges of our seats watching the successes and failures of others for ages. Reality entertainment is nothing new. No matter how many actors, stand-up comedians, and other performers offer to provide us with entertainment there is a strong collective desire for real people. The perfect historical example is the Roman Colosseum; even if the events that took place in that stadium are far more gruesome than what can be found on today's televisions.

In all fairness, the Colosseum wasn't all that dissimilar to the sporting events of today, where we flock in droves to stadiums or gather around a television to watch athletes prove their physical abilities in competitive and at times aggressive formats. The viewing of real people in perilous activities hasn't ended, they have merely been transformed to meet modern society's ideas of what is acceptable. Most often with the addition of a little padding and an official to enforce a few rules.

However, television isn't the only place to go for reality entertainment these days. The internet and social media by extension have created a place where we don't have to wait once a week for episodes to view the latest installment of "real people." Social media has created a place for any ordinary person to display their talents and abilities for the world to see without the need for permission from producers, casting agents, and the like. Powerhouse social media sites like YouTube and Twitch have more or less built their platforms around the idea of average people presenting their lives online for others to see.

This proliferation of content both online and on television that observes, judges, and analyzes everyone from top celebrities to random people on the street continues to normalize the age-old habit of viewing others for entertainment. The internet practically surrounds us. It is not an easy task to find yourself more than a few feet away from some kind of screened device whether it be a computer, phone, or tablet. It's these ideas that science-fiction writers in many mediums appear to be contemplating lately. Are the ubiquitous presence of reality television and social media increasingly perpetuating the normalization of using others as our own personal entertainment?

Literature Review

The Netflix series *Black Mirror* is a show that contemplates possible bleak technological futures based on the more regrettable facets of human nature. In fact, Charlie Brooker and Annabel Jones the original creators of *Black Mirror* originally pitched the show as, "Modern parable stories around the theme of social media, technology, and AI advances," (Inside, 2018).

The series includes two vastly different episodes "Nosedive" and "White Bear" that respectively tackle social media and the idea of using others for entertainment through social media.

In the episode "Nosedive" people appear to be even more dependent on their phones than society today is. All characters appear to be on the same social media site (Whether by choice or by force is unclear). On this site, not only are you able to post images and statuses for people to rate on a 1-5 star scale, but the users can be rated by others based on real-life encounters. Phones appear to detect one another allowing users to easily rate anyone they've come into contact with, without the need to search for others or even know their name. All of these ratings are compiled into an average user score. Those below a certain ranking in the episode find it difficult to receive service in most business establishments, and when the characters are able the service is sub-par. On the other hand, those with higher ratings often see perks and rewards coming their way. Throughout the episode characters are seen using various behaviors in an attempt to receive better ratings from the people around them. Behaviors range from giving hollow compliments, to trying to discretely align themselves with people of desirable rankings. Others are a little more blatant about their intentions are seen offering food items such as smoothies and cookies to one another for a little boost to their social media statistics (Nosedive, 2016).

Meanwhile, the episode titled "White Bear" portrays a woman named Victoria (Lenora Crichlow) seemingly waking up with amnesia (White, 2013). She fumbles about in confusion only to quickly find herself being chased my homicidal mask-wearers. She sees dozens of other people throughout the episode and frequently asks for their help, only to be met by silent gawking and picture taking. As the day unfolds, a mystery woman offers aid and brief explanations to Victoria. Despite the woman's aid later on Victoria is caught by the frightening mask-wearers and tied up anyway, where she begs for mercy declaring her humanity over and over

again. It is then revealed to her that the entire day was orchestrated. Anyone who spoke to her was an actor, and the people taking pictures on their phones were paying audience members. This is her daily punishment for having taken part in the murder of her own child. Victoria is then paraded past all the paying tourists in one last shameful act before being injected with a drug that not only puts her to sleep but wipes her memory of the day (White, 2013).

The Fox Network show *The Orville* aired an episode in their first season titled "Majority Rules" with a rather similar premise to that of "Nosedive." Although "Majority Rules" takes the idea of user ratings a step further. Space travelers from Earth (a few hundred years in the future) visit a world that is described as quite similar to 21st century Earth. In this world up-votes and down-votes are not displayed on a social media profile, but on a badge that every person is required to wear by law. The people of this episode, as in "Nosedive," find it difficult to receive business if they have too many down-votes. But worse yet, if at some point they have more than 1 million down-votes they're arrested. Instead of going to court anyone arrested must go on an "apology tour," wherein the defendant must appear on a number of television talk shows and discuss what happened with the host(s), and of course, apologize. Viewers will then give the person an up-vote if they believe the given apology was sincere or the person to be likable. If they do not believe this, then they give the person a down-vote. If at the end of the tour, the defendant has gotten 10 million or more down-votes, they are given "social correction" to "pacify" them. (Which is really just an electric shock to the brain substantial enough to make a toddler seems more cognizant.) If the defendant has less than 10-million down-votes then they are free to go home. This is the method of all governmental decisions in this world. One character goes as far as to call the judicial system, "Government by *American Idol*" (MacFarlane, 2017).

The Orville is meant to take a more optimistic view of possible futures than shows such as

Black Mirror. Even the episode "Majority Rules" provides an ending that leaves the audience hopeful that perhaps change will happen for the better on the planet where the episode takes place. The creator, Seth MacFarlane, says that most science-fiction written these days is dystopian, bleak, and defends his own show by saying, "There is some space for aspirational" (Moraes, 2017). Yet, despite the show's more hopeful viewpoint we still see it providing similar lenses and claims that the darker and bleaker science-fiction have when it comes to social media and reality entertainment.

While *Black Mirror* and *The Orville* both take place in the future, the novel An Absolutely Remarkable Thing takes place in a modern-day United States. The novel was released in October of 2018 and uses science-fiction to provide thought-provoking commentary on social media use today (As well as a number of other things). The book is written by Hank Green, a social media influencer who made a name for himself on the platform of YouTube. This, of course, gives an interesting weight to the scathing self-reflection the main character April has on her own usage of social media. Especially when the author admitted online via Twitter that April was quite similar to himself by saying, "People who think April May is a deeply unlikeable character, I have bad news about......me," (hankgreen, 2018). In the story, April finds herself suddenly and unexpectedly catapulted into online fame after going viral. This occurs because she and a friend happen to be one of the first people to post about seeing an other-worldly-statue. As engrossing as this alien statue should be a large portion of April's focus (and therefore the story's focus) is on her desire to maintain an online presence. The story shows just how quickly she becomes consumed with updating her Twitter and YouTube pages, even though, far larger events are taking place in her life.

Discussion

Gamification in Social Media

"Nosedive" looks closely at the gamification of social media and how intrinsically we've allowed these sites to become woven into our lives. Gamification is defined as "The process of game-thinking and game mechanics to engage users and solve problems" (Zichermann & Cunningham, 2011). Users find themselves being engaged with gamification on most, if not all, social media sites these days. Their success on the site being measured in statistics, gaining credibility, digital rewards for passing certain milestones, etc. are all forms of gamification.

In the story *of An Absolutely Remarkable Thing*, April is a prime example of someone who becomes addicted to social media through gamification. She pushes important people in her life away from her to focus on cultivating her online presence. At one point shortly after creating her first social media account the main character says this: "I had also been building my Twitter following… I had also developed a new and voracious interest in growing my number of Twitter followers, which had become a fun game. My brain liked seeing the numbers go up," (Green, 2018 P. 42). Whether intentionally or not author Hank Green points to the exact quality that makes these gamified websites work. Later on in the book April is seen cultivating her online presence so carefully that she hires an agent to provide her with advice on creating her online brand. The agent goes as far as to tell April that it isn't in her best interest to admit publicly that she's bisexual, but should instead identify herself as a lesbian. April who is more concerned about her numbers than her truth puts aside the qualms she has with the request and does as she is told. April's behaviors are not unlike those seen in the real world or even those seen in "Nosedive." In fact, "Nosedive" also features a character who pays for advice and assistance on how to raise her own social media statistics despite alienating people around her with her new behaviors.

There are app developers that have already tried to create a social media site such as the one in "Nosedive" that allows users to rate one another based on personal experiences. The app not-so-creatively titled Peeple includes user

profiles that have ratings and reviews, (Peeple, 2016). Much like an Amazon product page. The creators of this app seem to have been banking on potential users being curious and then quickly becoming addicted to raising their profile statistics; ultimately proving to those around them that they are a good person, or perhaps even worthy of spending time with. The app advertises itself as being good for hiring employees and even deciding on whether you should go on a date with someone (Peeple, 2016). Peeple never did manage to take off, but this app isn't the only attempt made at a human rating system, nor is it likely to be the last. Many people already do their best to associate only with people they believe are worthy of their social circle. An app with human ratings would only make that easier.

Peeple was likely hoping to use the addictiveness of social media to build their business. It's common knowledge that social media is often referred to as being addictive. Many frequent users have admitted to realizing they have in some way attached their perceived self-worth to their profiles and the numbers displayed on them. This gamified system encourages addictive behavior. With every like and comment comes a small surge of dopamine. However, Peeple's advertising appears to have been a bit too transparent, and many people realized exactly what they were doing. Ultimately preventing the growth of the company. Individuals want to have control over what their own profiles say. They want to paint themselves in the best light possible. Peeple made it obvious that the power to tell your story was given to everyone except for you.

Social Media Today

The problem is that despite your best efforts you don't always get to be the author of your own story- even with today's social media. The word of others almost always carries greater weight than your own on the topic of yourself, which is something that both "Nosedive" and "Majority Rules" exemplify clearly. Moreover, "Majority Rules" sheds light on how much enjoyment people can derive from wielding that type of power.

There are numerous real-life examples of this occurring as well. For example, the boy who is known as Alex from Target. In 2014, a teenager in Texas was working a normal shift bagging purchases at his local Target when a teenaged girl decided that he was cute. Rather than smiling at the boy and walking away as most would do, she snuck a picture of him on her cell phone. However, she didn't just stop there, she posted the image to Twitter. This secret picture almost instantaneously went viral with over 100,000 likes and retweets. Before Alex's shift had even ended the line at his register had become oddly long with a blatant demographic skew of young women. It wasn't until Alex went to the backroom to check his phone on a break that he realized he was now internet famous. In the following days, he would be offered everything from modeling contracts to movie deals, all because the internet deemed this 16 years-old worthy. The only offer he ever accepted was an appearance on the *Ellen Show* (Bilton, 2014).

In Alex's case having a profile and existing on the internet didn't matter, he had about a hundred followers that probably didn't think much of his posts. However, because somebody else made a point to inform the online sphere of his (apparently) wonderful existence he became a sensation. Alex's story is one of the rarer positive stories, though he didn't really seem to enjoy the sudden catapult to fame, nor was the internet entirely kind to him. Other people such as Plane Bae haven't fared as well, and more clearly exemplifies the warnings that science-fiction entertainment appears to be issuing.

The story of Plane Bae took place in the beginning of July 2018. A woman named Rosey asked another woman to trade seats with her on an airline flight so that she could sit with her boyfriend. Rosey joked that if the woman made the switch she may end up sitting next to the love of her life. The second woman complied and moved to the row in front of the couple. Much to Rosey's excitement the passenger

that took the seat beside the second woman was a rather attractive man. What proceeded to happen throughout the flight was Rosey and her boyfriend avidly watching and live-tweeting the actions of the two strangers in front of them. She reported that they both appeared to have similar interests saying "They're both personal trainers. They have touched arms a few times. "They are both vegetarians" (Hater, 2018). These updates were also accompanied by candid pictures of the two people and went as far as to inform the general internet that the two strangers went to the bathroom at approximately the same time. Rosey also admits in one of her tweets that she paid for in-flight internet specifically to keep posting about the two personal trainers (Moye, 2018).

Nobody can know what motivated Rosey's actions. Was she hoping that the thread would go viral? (It did.) Was she hoping to gain some form of internet fame through the attention her thread may receive? Or was it just the fact that she was so intensely curious about the lives of others that she felt the need to share the goings-on? No matter the motive Rosey is not the first of this kind, and she won't be the last either. Perhaps we're so used to seeing "regular" people on display through social media and reality television that we don't even consider the oddity of taking someone's picture and using it without their knowledge. Perhaps the fact that we are nearly constantly surrounded by cameras for security and monitoring continues to erode the boundary of discretion in our minds.

Understandably the woman whose pictures were taken on Rosey's airplane was rather upset. She felt as if her privacy had been invaded. In response, the posts were all taken down, but other people had already used the images in articles and shared them online. They're on the internet forever now. They're even cited in the very reference section of this research.

Digital Mobs

The episode "Majority Rules" contemplates the real-world repercussions that can come of actions taken online. Even further it reflects the sheer amount of entertainment people receive from watching and participating in digital mob scenes. Constantly throughout the episode, people are watching talk shows that are part of the apology tour. There are live feeds on screens in every direction that show exactly what people are saying about the latest person to be put to trial. These down-voted people are what everyone is talking about. They are the daily news in this world.

The episode contains some rather on the nose comments from the outsiders observing this world. Since the world in this story is driven by social media anyone and everyone can have an opinion on any topic, knowledge or experience is unnecessary. One character points out the flaw in this system by describing it as, "Confusing opinion with knowledge," (MacFarlane & Gates, 2017). Another character asks a native of this social media and reality entertainment driven world, "With so many voices how do you filter out the truth?" To which the woman responds with a succinct phrase, "The majority are the truth," (MacFarlane & Gates, 2017). Which, as far as Twitter is concerned, seems to be about right.

Twitter has increasingly become the place to go to for finding out what the verdict is in the court of public opinion. "Majority Rules" has merely taken this statement and applied it in a more literal sense. These opinions on Twitter may be innocent ones such as whether or not a movie is any good, but all too frequently they're about people. It can be celebrities, but it can also be an average everyday user. Anyone is fair game and you never know when the internet's attention may be turned towards you. There are dozens of accounts where people have been fired or harassed due to a mob on Twitter. Users will sometimes discover a single piece of information about a person or read a single tweet from them and collectively decide that this person needs punishment. Often this results in Twitter trending topics, personal information of this user being sought out and shared online, and screenshots of the questionable tweet sent to the user's boss or company of employment. Sometimes it seems

fair and necessary, such as when food servers admit to and even post pictures of contaminating customers' food (11 Tweets). Other times the situation appears to be far less black and white.

For instance, there have been a number of people fired for actions and comments made entirely unrelated to their work. Instead of attempting to educate this person on why their remark may be hurtful, ignorant, or offensive the internet screams. They scream loudly. Both in the direction of the user and anyone that may be associated with them, especially if they're in a position of power. One girl in 2013 who wore an admittedly cold-hearted and offensive Halloween costume (that of an injured Boston Marathon runner) ended up having to beg on Twitter for people to stop sending death threats to her parents through the postal system (11 Tweets). This mob demonstrated not only a disturbing mal intent towards people who weren't part of the situation, but those sending the mail were making it obvious they were perfectly capable of following through with their threats by utilizing their possession of the parents' home address.

A far more recent example would be that of director James Gunn, a man most famous for working on both Guardians of the Galaxy and its sequel. Up until the summer of 2018 fans adored him, the cast and crew praised him, and Disney was clearly a happy employer. That is until a determined user combed through Gunn's Twitter profile. Once they were almost a decade deep into the profile they found jokes posted by the director that were less tasteful than what Gunn is known for today (Bishop, 2018). The user then took screen-shots and re-posted these jokes for all the world to see. Now that James Gunn is far more well-known than he was when the jokes were originally penned, the content mattered to people. Disney almost instantaneously fired him.

James Gunn is not the same person he was ten years ago. Most people aren't the same as they were ten years ago. But that didn't matter either. Sean Gunn, James' brother even went to Twitter in order to tell people that working on the Guardians franchise is in large part what helped

James realize the changes he needed to make in his own life (seangunn, 2018). The court of public opinion does not accept character testimony.

It didn't matter that the tweets were from as far back as 2009. It didn't matter that they were made years before he was ever hired. It didn't even matter that James Gunn had made the Marvel franchise millions upon millions of dollars. The court of public opinion had spoken their verdict, and punishment must follow. Lest the company itself be the next target.

The absolutism of "Majority Rules" and even "Nosedive" echoes perfectly the unwavering decisiveness that can on any given day be witnessed on sites such as Facebook and Twitter.

White Bear

"White Bear" is a prime example of precisely the type of horrifying punishments that could be wrought if social media were given the kind of power demonstrated in "Majority Rules." It's also an excellent example of dehumanization of others for the purposes of pleasing audiences. People revel in seeing the bad punished. Those we deem immoral are dehumanized. They're called animals and savages. It isn't uncommon online to see statuses wishing crimes to be committed against people who have been convicted. Most often people will say whatever crime the person committed should be inflicted upon them to see how they like it. "White Bear" is only holding up a mirror to these base instincts. Asking if this technology creates an echo chamber of similar ideas, and preventing us from critically analyzing these desires.

Victoria, the woman who is being punished in "White Bear," seems to have been singled out for this cruel and unusual sentence. If every criminal was given this disturbing eye-for-an-eye style punishments, there would be criminal theme parks everywhere. The novelty would wear off for audiences. This attraction seems to be unique in this world. But this begs questions. What made Victoria different? Why did she get chosen? The way she is spoken about in the episode makes it sound as if she's widely known.

Social media likely vilified her long before her jury ever came to a decision. This would also explain the eagerness of the audience members to snag a picture- one little girl going as far as to sneak off away from where she's supposed to be in order to attempt grabbing a close up shot of Victoria (Brooker, 2013). Getting a picture of a well-known person/attraction for bragging rights is highly desirable for anyone who wants to get a boost on their social media account. The use of audience members recording her on their phones suggests that her court case was extremely public. People want to add to the narrative. Or perhaps become a small part of it. Becoming a part of someone's torture sounds to be of horribly bad taste to most viewers of the episode. Surely nobody in their right mind, would do that. However, this is clearly the writer's modern adaptation of public executions. Everyone knows that for centuries executions, and even trials were used as public entertainment. A small solace in "White Bear" is that Victoria is not killed.

The Hunger Games and Big Brother

The Hunger Games, a movie released in 2012 based on a book of the same name by Suzanne Collins, provided audiences with another shocking futuristic story of forcing people to be entertainment for the masses. This story follows the character Katniss Everdeen (Jennifer Lawrence) as she is forced by a dystopian government to play in an annual fight to the death (Ross, 2012). The most jarring and horrifying part of this event is the fact that all 24 participants must be children. Once the participants are let loose in what is called "the arena" the children must find ways to survive against the weather, the animals, the traps, and each other. Some resort to making temporary alliances, while others prefer to go it alone. No weapons or provisions are not guaranteed, but if a participant is lucky they may find some (Ross, 2012).

More startling than perhaps anything else is the fact that The Hunger Games feels eerily familiar to anyone who has ever watched the real-life television show *Big Brother*. *Big Brother* is a long-running reality television show that has, in the United States alone, run for 20 seasons. Additionally, this show has many iterations in varying countries. The premise of the show is not unlike that of *The Hunger Games*. Approximately 16 people (referred to as house guests), who don't know each other, are all placed inside of a house. In this house, they are isolated from the outside world, and constantly monitored with video cameras and microphones 24 hours a day for over 100 days. That is if you make it to the end. Over the course of the season house guests are given challenges to test various abilities. These competitions will test players' agility, physicality, intelligence, endurance, and sometimes a combination thereof. Winning different competitions allows the house guests different perks, sometimes it's safety from being evicted from the house for a week, other times it's just the ability to sleep in a soft bed and take warm showers. At the end of each week, the house guests vote to have someone removed from the house (Mol & Roden, 2000).

The Hunger Games stories may use many types of futuristic technology with scenes involving hybrid animal species created for the torment of players, or commonplace holograms. Yet, interestingly, this world isn't all that different from ours today. Television still appears to be a largely important segment of the entertainment industry. People flock to their TVs to view the annual games, the interviews, the fashion, and other periphery events. Much like U.S. citizens gather to watch the Super Bowl with its the pre-game analysis, and post-game press conferences.

The house guests on *Big Brother* may all be more than willing volunteers, but they really do suffer. Being cut-off completely from the outside world stuck in a single building filled with lying and backstabbing is a recipe for disaster. In fact, the penultimate episode in a number of the show's seasons include a Cry Montage. Instead of providing a light-hearted reel of out-takes like most movies and shows Big Brother opts to highlight the sheer number of times house-guests burst into tears that they didn't have time to air in

earlier episodes.

Fans of the show *Big Brother* refer to themselves as "super fans." And these fans adore the ability to change the game through use of social media. Multiple times throughout each season viewers are given the opportunity to vote for what will happen. This can be anything from an advantage, a rule change, or a punishment. Sometimes these changes will affect the entire house, and other times a specific house guest. The end of every season allows viewers to vote for whomever they want to receive the third place cash prize (Mol & Roden, 2000). This mechanic is quite similar to one in *The Hunger Games*, where viewers have the ability to intervene on behalf of players they like by paying money for something useful to be sent to a player's way (Ross, 2012).

Big Brother may not be governmentally run nor is it as watched as the Super Bowl, but the community around it and the basis of the rules are unnervingly similar to that of The Hunger Games. Many people view the dystopian event as ludicrously improbable in the real world, but the creator of the fictional story, Suzanne Collins, doesn't necessarily seem to agree. Her story seems quite grounded in realities that either have existed in the past or currently exist now. We've already completely normalized the idea of socially isolating over a dozen humans every year and watching them fight one another- even if it isn't to the death.

Conclusion

Science-fiction has always served two functions very well: providing social commentary on current societies and predicting possible futures. The writers of this genre, no matter the medium they use, are aware of this and choose this medium in order to do these very things. Therefore, it is important to consider the fact that there are such similar stories being written about social media and reality entertainment over and over again. Additionally, they appear to be increasing in volume. These writers are noticing trends. They're applying their knowledge of human history, human nature, and the world as it is today. The conclusions they're coming to are all disconcertingly similar.

The addictive nature of social media has made it pervasive. This makes it not only hard to avoid playing the "game" that is social media, but it has also almost made it a requirement to participate in certain aspects of society. This has allowed the problematic aspects of these sites to fester. If you want to succeed in this realm you are encouraged to participate in sensationalism- even if it's the sensationalism of yourself or the people around you. It encourages constant use, which ultimately allows for the types of behaviors on these sites to quickly and easily become normalized. People who are more susceptible towards these types of behaviors can become so engrossed in improving the statistics of their own accounts that the "real world" suddenly seems to fade away. All that matters is, what lies behind the screens. Because of this fact it's unsurprising that we've begun to see personalities such as Lil Tay and Jake Paul begin to emerge online.

Reality entertainment, though far more ancient in nature, has become even more common than it once was thanks to television, and has in many ways intertwined itself with the ideals of social media. Though reality television seems almost more sinister. It allows for audience members to not only view other people in situations that are uncomfortable or emotionally vulnerable, but it also encourages audiences to enjoy these scenes. It also provides audiences with a narrative that may or may not be true; with editors striving to give viewers someone to love and someone to hate, which ultimately gives viewers even more pleasure when seeing the villainized in positions of distress.

One could say that science-fiction writers are attempting to issue warnings, while this sounds dramatic it doesn't have to be. The futures depicted in these various pieces of entertainment are all just possibilities. Though it isn't easy to become self-aware of one's bad habits and weaknesses, especially collectively as a society, it isn't impossible. The writers of *The Orville*

even make an effort to create their stories to encourage that kind of optimism. The start may even be simply asking yourself why you watch certain shows and interact with certain online posts. What is to gain personally? What does the person on the other side of the screen have to gain? And what might they be losing?

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