

The Shakespeare Online Community

INFO 200: Information Communities

Deidre Brill

Prof. Kevin Bontenbal

San José State University

Spring 2018

Abstract

This research paper considers the expansive Shakespeare online community, where performers, academics, and enthusiasts overlap and interact. It follows the process of academic and performance institutions offering access of information to individual members of the community producing and sharing all manner of creative content to interpret and understand Shakespeare's works. The paper examines how this content and its distribution on social media is a form of sense making behavior as well as a community builder. As a case study, this research examines two social media sub-communities, a podcast and a Twitter community built around a hashtag, which each serve as "high centers" that unify disparate Shakespeareans into a single online community. Finally, the paper addresses the current role of information professionals as a part of this community and makes suggestions for expanding their assistance and reach.

Introduction

For over four centuries, people throughout the world have viewed, read, studied, and discussed the plays and poems of William Shakespeare. He stands as a cultural icon whose writings contain universal themes and language that can be difficult to interpret. This is why an entire community of people seeks out and shares information about his works via the Internet. Through social media, three formerly distinct groups converge to form a single community:

- **Academic:** anyone who is engaged in an official study or teaching of Shakespeare and/or his works
- **Performance:** anyone participating in or viewing a performance or interpretation of Shakespeare's works
- **Enthusiast:** hobbyists who enjoy reading and discussing Shakespeare

In this paper, I will examine how members of the Shakespeare online community engage in sense making behavior. This process can begin with institutions offering greater access to Shakespearean resources to the public, leading to individuals to create online content to better understand the Bard's works: "Users variously make, share, circulate, produce, or perform Shakespeare through social media" (O'Neill, 2015). One aspect of sense making is sharing that content with others, which implicitly invites feedback and discussion to further understanding. While this online content has been a source of academic research over the past decade, the interactions of the creators as a community have seldom been examined. Yet as Calbi and O'Neill (2016) point out:

BRILL, D: SHAKESPEARE COMMUNITY RESEARCH PAPER, SPRING 2018

As "we," an amorphous digital collective, share Shakespeare digital objects, in the form of a Pin on Pinterest, a YouTube video shared to followers on Twitter, or a meme favorited on Tumblr, we embed Shakespeare into our mediated, networked world and key into shared Shakespearean lives.

Social media has allowed formerly separate groups of Shakespeareans to communicate more now than ever before, fully breaking down the silos that kept academics, performers, and enthusiasts separated. I will examine how these groups share information on the Bard and in doing so overlap to form a single community within social media platforms.

Literature Review

Many research studies have focused on how academic or performance institutions have used social media to engage with a younger, tech-savvy audience. Several such attempts have been a means of reaching a wider audience to continue patronage into subsequent generations. Some institutions such as the British Library or Shakespeare's Globe make use of their online presence to allow public access to their specialized materials, such as scanned copies of a First Folio, or provide online teaching resources (Rumbold, 2010). Kate Rumbold succinctly sums up education via online methodology: "These institutions borrow the positive qualities, associated with new media, of immediacy, reach, and relevance - ideal for engaging a young demographic for whom Shakespeare may seem remote, complex, or painfully compulsory" (pp. 318-9). Here, institutional access to formerly restricted materials as newly shared content enhances an understanding of Shakespeare.

BRILL, D: SHAKESPEARE COMMUNITY RESEARCH PAPER, SPRING 2018

Still other institutions have found ways to explore social media as a realm of artistic expression as well as access, as demonstrated by the Royal Shakespeare Company's 2010 Twitter production of *Romeo and Juliet* entitled *Such Tweet Sorrow*. Maurizio Calbi (2013) details that the "production" unfolded through the interactions of several character profiles over the course of five weeks and was free for any Twitter users to view – another example of granting access to a wider audience. Moreover, the characters' Twitter profiles actively engaged with their followers, retweeting audience members and answering their questions via tweets. In this scenario, "social media as a means for access" develops into "social media as a means for participation" between for the individual audience member with the performance institution (Way, 2011, p. 403). In inviting individuals in the audience to participate with Shakespeare's tales, the institution (here, the RSC), engages in shared online content with the audience in the form of replies and comments.

Institutions can inspire not just communal but also creative content in individuals, such as the RSC's Instagram photo contest, a means of engaging young people to post in order to be hired as a rehearsal photographer (RSC key photography competition, 2018). Rumbold (2010) sums up the overall interaction between institutions and individuals in the Shakespeare online community, which can be visualized as:

Access → participation → creativity

Indeed online creative content is the source of much academic study, with many literary scholars treating amateur Shakespeare interpretations on social media as text, citing them as examples in the same way they would analyze a professional production (Fazel, 2016). This is evidenced by studies such as Kirk Hendershott-Kraetzer's (2018) essay on

BRILL, D: SHAKESPEARE COMMUNITY RESEARCH PAPER, SPRING 2018

reimaginings of the character of Juliet on the visual blogging site Tumblr. YouTube is another popular place for creative content based on Shakespeare as a source of “copyright-free material familiar to a web, geek, or student audience”, whether videos are produced by teenagers for assigned school projects or as budding filmmakers who launch web series such as *Nothing Much To Do* (based on *Much Ado About Nothing*) or *Like, As It Is* (based on *As You Like It*) (Lanier, 2018, p. 188). All these forms of creative content serve as a means of trying to better understand Shakespeare’s works, a unique form of sense making behavior.

In her many writings on the theory, Brenda Dervin establishes that the sense making process can be personal, both emotional and adaptive: “Sense making assumes that the entire human package – body, mind, heart, soul – is simultaneously verbed, constantly evolving and becoming, and intricately intertwined” (Dervin, 1998, p. 42). Naumer, Fisher, and Dervin (2008) elaborate that sense making “assumes people perpetually move between states of certainty and uncertainty” (p. 2). It bridges gaps between the unknown and a person’s own “ideas, thoughts, emotions, feelings, hunches, and memories” to understand something new (p.3). Michael Olssen (2010) kept this concept in mind when he endeavored to study the sense making process outside a traditional library/systems setting. He interviewed a range of theatre professionals about working with Shakespeare’s plays. His findings correlate with Dervin’s in that the process was described as having an “ongoing nature” and that emotions “[play] a much more complex role in people’s individual and collective sense-making than most information researchers have hitherto acknowledged” (p. 244). The subjects in this study

BRILL, D: SHAKESPEARE COMMUNITY RESEARCH PAPER, SPRING 2018

demonstrate sense making both in creating content (here, a stage production rather than online) and by interacting as a community.

Methodology

When starting this research, I centered on Shakespeare and social media. Academic articles that include both topics have come primarily from humanities disciplines focusing on literature and theatre. I tracked these down on Google Scholar and through SJSU's library. When consulting LIS databases, I found only one strong article that included Shakespeare as a subject – Michael Olssen's (2010) study on sense making in theatre professionals. His writing inspired my connections of sense making behavior with this online community, and I used those same LIS databases to uncover further information on Dervin's sense making studies. Both Google Scholar and LIS databases yielded powerful resources on community development in social media, which has been studied by a variety of disciplines, not just information science.

In examining my own participation in the Shakespeare online community, I chose two sub-communities where I witnessed cross-interactions between the three groups (academic, performance, enthusiast) within the community. One is a regular, online meet up via Twitter; I was able to track down a valuable academic essay on that exact topic. The other sub-community stems from a podcast whose listeners and creators engage in online discussion. Per directions from the course instructor for this assignment, I did not interview users or creators from either sub-community. Rather, I gathered metric data on Twitter usage and examined that along with empirical observations from online interactions with both sub-communities to gain insights into overall communal behaviors.

Discussion

Sense Making = Content + Interaction

“But we shall meet, and break our minds at large” – Henry VI, Pt. 1, 1.4.79

Olssen’s study also demonstrates Dervin’s assertion that the sense making process is collaborative. Cast and crew engage in constant discussions, with Olssen noting, “...participants’ sense-making/s are an essentially social process and recognizes that they need to develop their understanding in the context of a collaborative creative process” (p. 244). In other words, interactions in a community help participants to better examine a shared topic. This interaction occurs in online spaces too, as Yiftach Nagar’s (2012) study of volunteer Wikipedia editors’ collaboration shows. Nagar observed sense making on the site’s community boards as users puzzled over their own issues, performing individual sense making through their own writings. As these boards are public, any user can chime in with his/her own thoughts to help with or debate a given topic. This meant those individual sense making acts became communal as other users responded: “As people try to make sense, they interact with others” (p. 396). Henry Jenkins and Mark Deuze (2008) also acknowledge the importance of online community in sense making (one aspect of convergence culture theory) in that it allows “people from diverse backgrounds [to] pool knowledge, debate interpretations and organize through the production of meaning” (p. 6).

Creating content is a primary means for members of this community to assign meaning, a way of filtering Shakespeare’s words and characters through a personal lens. Making videos, writing blogs, even pairing quotes with pop culture memes are all forms of individual sense making, but the content opens further possibilities for understanding

BRILL, D: SHAKESPEARE COMMUNITY RESEARCH PAPER, SPRING 2018

Shakespeare words when it has an audience – much like Shakespeare’s plays themselves.

Sharing content via social media contains a tacit invitation for reader/viewer interaction and feedback. The Shakespeare online community has emerged from this very premise – seeking “golden opinions from all sorts of people” as *Macbeth* states (1.7.33).

Social Media as Means of Community

“You must translate, ‘tis fit we understand them” – *Hamlet*, 4.1.2

Media that may have been created with a specific audience can grow and adapt as it is shared through social media. Online content can become forums for interested people to discuss or debate Shakespeare, as evidenced by numerous personal blogs. Toting his website as “The Original Shakespeare Blog”, Duane Morin (n.d.) writes about relevant Shakespearean news, shows, or projects that interest him. He does this as a means of connecting with likeminded people:

I went looking for other people who wanted to talk about Shakespeare in the same way that I did. I’m not an actor and I don’t have my degree in literature. I’m actually a life long computer geek. I just happen to love Shakespeare. I don’t fit the mold. Surely I can’t be the only one? Turns out I’m not.

Even sites initially produced for academic circles have spread to other interested parties. MIT’s website “Global Shakespeares” used a network of both scholars and performers to amass an online archive of recorded professional Shakespearean performances from around the world, yet this site is open for anyone to use. Academic journals such as the University of Georgia’s *Borrowers and Lenders: The Journal of Shakespeare and Appropriation* are also online as an open access resource (Estill, 2014). These resources,

BRILL, D: SHAKESPEARE COMMUNITY RESEARCH PAPER, SPRING 2018

when shared through social media, become more widely known and used by all kinds of people, whether academics, performers, or enthusiasts.

Gruzd, Wellman, and Takhteyev (2011) conducted a case study focused on Twitter to determine if the platform “can sustain and provide grounds for development of an online community that is not simply imagined by each user but that is built on the shared sense of community” (p. 1298). The authors identified four elements that create sense of community: membership (in an identifiable group), influence (members impacting one another), integration and fulfillment of needs (supporting one another), and shared emotional connection (through sharing experiences). Shakespeareans of all backgrounds have also used media such as Twitter as a means of establishing a “sense of community”. Additionally, Gruzd et al. use Benedict Anderson’s idea of “high centers” as a means of analyzing community on Twitter, suggesting that communities can be built around a central user who connects other users and wields heavy influence. Let us examine two “high centers” on Shakespearean social media, and how they help establish a sense of community.

Examples of Online Shakespearean Community’s “High Centers”

“Hear sweet discourse, converse with noblemen...” – The Two Gentlemen of Verona,

1.3.31

The Twitter hashtag #ShakespeareSunday serves as a weekly online meet-up for Shakespeare fans, where users share quotes from Shakespeare’s works, often paired with related pop culture gifs or images of the user’s design, usually with a specific weekly theme as guidance. This is a prime example of sense making, where content creation and communal sharing converge. Here, the shared interest in Shakespeare serves as the

BRILL, D: SHAKESPEARE COMMUNITY RESEARCH PAPER, SPRING 2018

“conduit through which connectivity in an increasingly globalized world is made”

(Mullin, 2018, p. 223). The hashtag #ShakespeareSunday is public to all Twitter users yet implies membership in that all users share a common interest in Shakespeare; they influence through commenting, liking, and retweeting each other’s content; users integrate and fulfill needs by using the hashtag to share information on performances and research in addition to quotes; and users have a shared emotional connection in that they are sharing an enjoyable experience. The hashtag was created in 2012 in response to a popular Shakespeare mini-series on the BBC by Twitter account @HollowCrownFans, and this account continues to serve as one of the “high centers” for Twitter-using Shakespeareans.

@HollowCrownFans serves as the de facto moderator of #ShakespeareSunday. Twitter users that explore the hashtag can eventually discover the unofficial guidelines: @HollowCrownFans designates themes for quotes, retweets relevant posts, and alerts participants of spam or inappropriate conduct to report. With over 18,900 followers as of May 2018, the account connects followers worldwide and promotes any Shakespearean news, performances, or resources that followers mention. Their followers are made up of individual fans, professional actors, PhD students, even institutions such as the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust and the Folger Shakespeare Library (Hollow Crown Fans, n.d.). Mullin recognizes the account’s wide array of followers, claiming it is “situated at the intersection of these various groups, with academic and non-academic followers alike and broaching discussion across a polyphony of digital voices that share an interest in Shakespeare” (p. 211). Indeed, the creators of @HollowCrownFans state their purpose is to draw together a Shakespearean community: “...Shakespeare is for everyone, no matter

BRILL, D: SHAKESPEARE COMMUNITY RESEARCH PAPER, SPRING 2018

your age, native language or level of education. We try to show, on a daily basis, that Shakespeare can be a part of pop culture.” (“Game of Crowns”, 2014, p.14).

Members of the greater community can also bond in smaller subsets over other types of shared, online media. I have witnessed overlap of Shakespeareans from all backgrounds in the audience of a particular podcast produced by two friends who run the Seven Stages Shakespeare Company. The *No Holds Bard* podcast has regular segments designed to include, educate, and entertain each of the three groups of Shakespeareans this paper identifies. The podcast includes a “Homework Help” section aimed at high school/college students, as well as a bit called “Everyday Shakespeare”, where the hosts give textual insight to a specific phrase from a play then provide contextual modern-day instances in which Shakespeare fans can use it. Producers/hosts Beaulieu and Condardo, both performers, also occasionally invite other professional artists or performers on to the show to give insight into their creative processes. Additionally, Condardo has specifically addressed the importance of academic professionals communing with their podcast, claiming, “a huge portion of our fan base is made up of English teachers who have improved our understanding of Shakespeare, and certainly improved our dialog” (Beaulieu & Condardo, 2018).

Aside from interviews, the regular segments are designed to illicit and incorporate feedback from the community of listeners, affectionately dubbed “Bard flies” by the hosts. “Plugs, Corrections, and Banter” is another section of the program specifically designed for the hosts to address listener questions and issues or to promote Shakespearean productions and media that have been sent their way by listeners. This feedback typically comes to the hosts via social media, primarily Twitter (often using

BRILL, D: SHAKESPEARE COMMUNITY RESEARCH PAPER, SPRING 2018

#Bardflies) and Facebook. In addressing listeners so specifically and personally in their own creative content, the hosts rally their podcast fan sub-community and serve as another “high center” within the overall Shakespeare online community. They have fostered the four elements of “sense of community” according to Gruzd, et al., establishing membership and a shared emotional connection with their listeners, as well as wielding influence in the Shakespeare community through their promotion of others’ ideas and work. While their fan base may not be as numerous as that of @HollowCrownFans, it is just as deeply diverse. The No Holds Bard podcast has created an online space that serves as another direct intersection where Shakespeare performers, enthusiasts, and academics connect.

Information Professionals & Shakespeare Online

“Our court shall be a little academe, still and contemplative in living art” – Love’s

Labour’s Lost, 1.1.13-14

Shakespeare’s importance is acknowledged and supported widely by libraries and schools, both as literature and performance. Teachers especially, in assigning projects in which students create and share online interpretations of Shakespeare’s works, encourage contributions to the Shakespeare online community. Some of these students may be inspired to go on to create entire web series much like the ones mentioned by Lanier (2018). High school teachers particularly embrace online media to engage their teenage pupils, with some sharing podcasts such as *No Holds Bard* in order to allow their students to better understand the material. One concern within the community is that, when assignments such as YouTube performances are studied and cited as text by

BRILL, D: SHAKESPEARE COMMUNITY RESEARCH PAPER, SPRING 2018

Shakespearean scholars, academics must consider the ethical ramifications of publically sharing content performed by minors (Fazel, 2016).

Much as Rumbold's (2010) paper demonstrated, institutions continue to allow greater public access to previously privileged information about Shakespeare's works. Some information institutions such as the Folger Shakespeare Library or the British Library engage the greater Shakespeare online community through social media, by participating in #ShakespeareSunday on Twitter or simply by engaging with their followers through comments and reposts on a site like Instagram. When resource sharing and discussion happens at all levels, from institutions and individuals, from experts and novices, the Shakespeare online community can learn, thrive, and grow.

Conclusion

Up until now, most research on Shakespeare and social media has centered on published online creative content rather than the interactions of the creators. Much of the literature has placed these Shakespeareans into distinct groups: academic, performance, and enthusiasts. As Rumbold (2010) outlined, greater access to information about Shakespeare from hallowed institutions has invited non-professionals to participate in discussions about Shakespeare and even served as "resources for others' creativity" (p. 326). This has led to a wave of fans creating content about Shakespeare and sharing it online; the content and the collaboration and feedback it elicits are forms of sense making behavior to better relate to and understand Shakespeare's works. Social media has served as a platform for all interested parties, regardless of experience level, to share their interpretations of Shakespeare, to ask questions, simply to interact. As new forms of media and interaction are breaking down barriers between institutions and individuals,

BRILL, D: SHAKESPEARE COMMUNITY RESEARCH PAPER, SPRING 2018

and enthusiasts are emboldened to voice their opinions without fear of chastisement from experts, it is foolhardy to continue to separate Shakespeareans into three realms. They are, in fact, a single engaged community, growing ever more so.

Large-scale institutions that have demonstrated resources toward their social media presence have greater engagement with the Shakespeare online community, simply because of their regular interaction with their online followers. Local libraries should not miss opportunities to engage with the online community as well. Smaller branches may struggle with allotting resources to build their own social media presence and interact online with Shakespearean patrons. Perhaps one way to address that would be to integrate Shakespeare online resources into their physical community spaces. Perhaps there could be room for smaller libraries to also offer Shakespeare online performances streamed from Shakespeare Globe or the Stratford Shakespeare Festival, or to promote online Shakespeare resources (podcasts or online study help like Thug Notes videos) in their Young Adult study sections. Mostly, we should look to the Shakespeare online community itself to see how it can serve as an example for information professionals of how minds from a wide variety of backgrounds and talents discourse, share, and learn from one another.

References

- Beaulieu, D. & Condardo, K (Producers). (2018, April 4). What fool hath added water to the sea [Audio podcast]. *No holds Bard*. Retrieved from <https://www.noholdsbard.com/episodes/>
- Calbi, M. (2013). *Spectral Shakespeares: Media adaptations in the twenty-first century*. New York, New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Calbi, M. & O'Neill, S. (2016). Introduction: #SocialmediaShakespeares. *Borrowers and Lenders: The Journal of Shakespeare and Appropriation*, 10(1). Retrieved from <http://www.borrowers.uga.edu/783211/show>
- Estill, L. (2014). Digital bibliography and global Shakespeare. *Scholarly and Research Communication*, 5(4): 1-13. doi: 10.22230/src.2014v5n4a187
- Fazel, V. (2016). Researching YouTube Shakespeare: Literary scholars and the ethical challenges of social media. *Borrowers and Lenders: The Journal of Shakespeare and Appropriation*, 10(1). Retrieved from <http://www.borrowers.uga.edu/1755/show>
- “Game of Crowns”. (2014, April 22). *Shakespeare Magazine*, 1, 10-17. Retrieved from https://issuu.com/shakespearemagazine/docs/shakespeare_magazine_01/10
- Gruzd, A., Wellman, B., & Takhteyev, Y. (2011). Imagining Twitter as an imagined community. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 55(10) 1294–1318. doi:10.1177/0002764211409378
- Hendershott-Kraetzer, K. (2018). Juliet, Tumblr: Fan renovations of Shakespeare’s Juliet on Tumblr. In S. O’Neill (Ed.), *Broadcast your Shakespeare* (pp. 141-160). London, UK: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare.

BRILL, D: SHAKESPEARE COMMUNITY RESEARCH PAPER, SPRING 2018

Hollow Crown Fans [HollowCrownFans]. (n.d.). @HollowCrownFans [Twitter profile page]. Retrieved May 8, 2018 from

<https://twitter.com/HollowCrownFans?lang=en>

Jenkins, H. & Deuze, M. (2008). Editorial convergence culture.

Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media

Technologies, 14(1), 5–12. doi: 10.1177/1354856507084415

Lanier, D. M. (2018). Vlogging the Bard: Serialization, social media, Shakespeare. In S.

O'Neill (Ed.), *Broadcast your Shakespeare* (pp. 185-206). London, UK:

Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare.

Morin, D. (n.d.). Welcome to the original Shakespeare blog [Web log page]. Retrieved

May 3, 2018 from <https://www.shakespearegeek.com/>

Mullin, R. (2018). Tweeting television/broadcasting the Bard: @HollowCrownFans and

digital Shakespeares. In S. O'Neill (Ed.), *Broadcast your Shakespeare* (pp. 207-

226). London, UK: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare.

Nagar, Y. (2012). What do you think?: The structuring of an online community as a

collective-sensemaking process. *Proceedings of the ACM CSCW'12 Conference on Computer-Supported Cooperative Work*, pp. 393–402.

doi:10.1145/2145204.2145266

Naumer, C. M., Fisher, K. E., & Dervin, B. (2008). Sense-Making: A methodological

perspective. CHI '08 Extended Abstracts on Human Factors in Computing

Systems, Florence, Italy. Retrieved from

<http://dmrussell.googlepages.com/Naumer-final.pdf>

BRILL, D: SHAKESPEARE COMMUNITY RESEARCH PAPER, SPRING 2018

O'Neill, S. (2015). Shakespeare and social media. *Literature Compass* 12(6). 274-285.

doi:10.1111/lic3. 12234

Olsson, M. R. (2010). All the world's a stage – the information practices and sense-

making of theatre professionals. *Libri*, 60, 241–252. doi:10.1515/libr.2010.021

RSC key photography competition. (2018, April 22). Retrieved from

<https://www.rsc.org.uk/rsc-key/rsc-key-photography-competition>

Rumbold, K. (2010). From "access" to "creativity": Shakespeare institutions, new media, and the language of cultural value. *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 61(3), 313-336.

doi:10.1353/shq.2010.0009

Shakespeare, W. (1988). The Complete Works (Wells, S. & Taylor, G., Eds.). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Way, G. (2011). Social Shakespeare: Romeo and Juliet, social media, and performance.

Journal of Narrative Theory, 41(3), 401-420. doi:10.1353/jnt.2011.0096