The Shakespeare Online Community: A Literature Review

INFO 200: Information Communities

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Introduction

William Shakespeare is an icon of English literature and theatre; people around the world have read or seen his plays and poems for over four centuries. While some are casual readers, others have built professions around analyzing or producing his plays. As someone who has studied, performed, and simply enjoyed Shakespeare, I have interacted with others across the globe who are also fascinated by his words and characters. Due to the rise of social media and participatory culture, I have joined a massive online community of people who seek out and share information on Shakespeare and his works.

Generally speaking, three groups make up the online Shakespeare community, ranging from novices to experts:

- **Academic**: anyone (student or teacher) who is engaged in an official study 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

Shakespeare representations in social media have been an emerging research trend over the past decade. The focus on these studies is primarily on the creative content being produced by these three groups and its relation to Shakespeare scholarship. Yet the interactions of these groups as a converging community have seldom been examined. Social media has allowed these formerly separate groups to communicate more now than ever before. I want to examine how the groups share information on the Bard and in doing so, overlap to form a single community in the online world.

Review of Writings

Shakespeare representations on social media are primarily studied by literary/performance scholars or media studies professionals. Several of these studies analyze online performances in the same way they do professional theatre performances or literary text. In fact, studies also examine interactions between institutions and users and cite social media content such as tweets and YouTube videos as text. Alongside English academic works, I have included media studies that center on examination of specific online events and users, as well as interviews with theatre professionals regarding their use and behaviors. This literature review blends that academic work with articles from information behavior studies and social media usage to examine the bonds of online community.

Institutions Provide Access

The most cited research studies have focused on how academic or performance institutions have used social media to engage with a younger audience. Hallowed institutions such as the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC), British Library, or Shakespeare Birthplace Trust have used their online presence to allow a greater access of materials and learning to the public than ever before: "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" (Rumbold, 2010, pp. 318-9). Scanned images of the First Folio and online tours of Shakespeare's childhood home are all free for anyone with internet access to view. Sloss Performing Arts in Alabama is one such group who used Facebook to offer potential audience members access to rehearsal videos of their *Romeo and Juliet*

prior to the show's premier, even creating limited Facebook profiles for Romeo and Juliet that users could friend (Way, 2011). At Sloss, "…access to the rehearsal process [is] controlled by the directors, actors, and other production members. As a result, the audience's access to performance materials is contingent on what is shared by those active in the rehearsal process, as well as the context in which such access is provided" (p. 409). In the case of access, institutions have sole control over content shared.

In his book *Spectral Shakespeares*, Maurizio Calbi (2013) details a 2010 online production by the RSC – a version of *Romeo and Juliet* via Twitter (incorporating other platforms like YouTube) called *Such Tweet Sorrow*. The story unfolded through the interactions of several character profiles over the course of five weeks. This "production" was free for any Twitter users to view, another means of granting access to a wider audience. However, the RSC went beyond Sloss's online involvement; their characters' Twitter profiles actively engaged with their followers, retweeting audience members and answering their questions via tweets. In these scenarios, "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). When institutions invite individuals to participate, control over online content (i.e. comments and interactions) is then shared.

For decades the interaction between institutions and individuals was seen as creators educating or entertaining patrons in a one-way relationship. Kate Rumbold (2010) examines Shakespearean resources offered by major British institutions, taking note of their stated missions on their website: "The digital language of 'network' and 'connections' disrupts the ostensibly linear relationship of information provider and

recipient" and the information provided now serves as "resources for others' creativity" (p. 326). Rumbold's article outlines a process of institutions granting access of resources to the public, which invites individuals to participate in conversations with the institution, and that new relationship can inspire creative thought benefiting both the individuals and institutions. Any school, archive, or theatre that has an engaged patronage will thrive (donations!), as will the public with their new cultural knowledge. In this case Rumbold's process can be visualized as:

Access → Participation → Creativity

Individuals Create Content

Individuals, inspired by the offerings of known institutions, are making their own short movies, blogs, comics, and podcasts about Shakespeare. When institutions invite individuals to engage, online content is the result. Sometimes content is in the form of conversations, comments, and likes. Sometimes there is a directive to create content, for example YouTube yields many student project interpretations of scenes from Shakespeare. While many of these videos are created solely to earn a passing grade for a teenager, professional academics have begun to study these interpretations, citing them as text in the same way they'd analyze a professional production (Fazel, 2016). Other creative content comes at the invitation of an institution, such as the RSC's contest to hire rehearsal photographers, which encouraged young people to post photos on Instagram (RSC key photography competition, 2018). In this manner, social media fosters a symbiotic relationship between institutions and individuals.

On social media, one doesn't need to be an expert to have an opinion or to make art. Enthusiasts can become performers or armchair scholars and release their own

interpretations of Shakespeare, and they relish in sharing it with others: "Users variously make, share, circulate, produce, or perform Shakespeare through social media" (O'Neill, 2015, pp. 276-7). Some people simply discover a character with whom they connect, evidenced by the array of photo/quote/original art interpretations of Juliet on the blogging site Tumblr (Hendershott-Kraetzer, 2018). Amateur filmmakers consistently turn to Shakespeare as a source of "copyright-free material familiar to a web, geek, or student audience", as is the case of teenage-produced web series on YouTube 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). On my personal blog I write an entry for each Shakespearean work, connecting the themes or characters from a play to events in my own life. The connection in these disparate projects is that we are all trying to better understand Shakespeare through our own personal viewpoints and experiences.

Sense Making Through Content & Community

All these types of creative content and interactions are a form of sense making. In her many writings on the theory, Brenda Dervin establishes that the sense making process can be personal and social. It is also 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). 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 their process in 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" (Olssen, 2010, p. 244). Actors, much like the amateur artists mentioned in the previous paragraph, come to better understand Shakespeare's characters by empathizing through their own experiences. Those interviewed in this study also noted that they have to physically embody their understanding of Shakespeare's words and meanings, creating sets, costumes, and physical movement to portray their interpretations. In that view, sets and choreography are yet more examples of creative content (albeit not online), being the outcome of sense making.

Olssen's study also shows that the sense making process is collaborative. Cast and crew engage in constant discussions about character motivation or meanings of words, 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). While collaboration certainly has its place in a physical rehearsal room, such cooperative sense making also occurs in online spaces. In examining how Wikipedia editors work together to update entries, Yiftach Nagar (2012) analyzed user communications on best practices, policies, and etiquette on their community boards. Nagar observed individual sense making on the community boards as users asked rhetorical questions or puzzled over their own issues through writing. These boards are public, so they contain conversations between "newbies" and seasoned experts or can be viewed without having to be an active participant. Therefore, other users can and do chime in with their own thoughts, either directly helping or just furthering the dialog on a given topic. "As people try to make sense, they interact with others, whether those others are present in the moment, or imagined, because people know their actions

and explicit interpretations will have to be understood, accepted, and implemented by others" (p. 396). This type of communal interaction is a continuation of sense making, and is practiced in many types of online communities.

Social Media as Conduit for Community

I have established that creating content can be one aspect in the process of sense making, and it certainly is in the Shakespeare online community. But if sense making is a continual process, then something must be done with that content. Sharing content via social media contains a tacit agreement to invite interaction and feedback. Gruzd, et. al. (2011) examine Twitter interactions to see 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 identify four elements that create sense of community: membership (in an identifiable group), influence (members of group influence one another), integration and fulfillment of needs (supporting one another, providing/asking for help), shared emotional connection (through sharing experiences). This case study focused on one of the author's Twitter network to demonstrate these properties. Let us briefly examine a popular Shakespearean Twitter experience to establish "sense of community."

Writing, performing, and quoting are methods to understand Shakespeare through our own experiences or through other forms of (pop) culture to which we relate. Creative content can be an in-depth as a performance or as improvised as pairing a Shakespearean quote with a related pop culture gif or meme. The Twitter hashtag #ShakespeareSunday serves as a weekly online meet-up for Shakespeare fans of all walks, created and administered by user @HollowCrownFans, where users share quotes from Shakespeare's

works according to a pre-determined theme. This is a prime example of sense making, where content creation and communal sharing converge. Here, the shared interest in Shakespeare serves as the "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 one another through commenting, liking, and retweeting each other's content; users integrate and fulfill one another's 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 experiencing the same event on the same day and that many regular users follow one another, interacting beyond sanctioned Sundays. Through this regular social media event, Twitter users who are seasoned academics, professional performers, or simply fans share quotes and information, learning from one another's content and engage in debate or provide feedback.

Conclusion

Up until now, most research on Shakespeare and social media has been on the published online content rather than the interactions of the creators. Much of the literature has siloed these Shakespeareans into groups: academic, performance, and enthusiasts. In social media, these approximate groups overlap and converge into a single community with the intent of learning more about Shakespeare and sharing their findings. In learning about Shakespeare and his works' ever-changing interpretations, the community engages in sense making by creating online content, whether that is through videos and art, or simply through online discussion in the form of questions, informal polls, and comments.

As new forms of media and interaction are breaking down barriers between institutions and individuals, 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.

In social media Shakespeare thus far, literary academic circles have increasingly studied and engaged with performers and where they overlap with enthusiasts, particularly in examinations of Bard-inspired YouTube videos and series. I have linked that type of content to sense making behavior through its very creation and in the dialogue and community it inspires. I agree with Olssen's assertion that information behaviors such as sense making need to be further researched outside traditional library settings. Along those lines, I anticipate that studies of online Shakespeare resources will move beyond analysis of the content social media users create. Further research should also include the ways these users interact, sharing, commenting, and supporting one another's content.

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