Cristina Romero

Prof. Gary Vaughn

English 2089

9 April 2014

Tagged: Discourse Community, English Paper, Tumblr, SuperWhoLock, Fandom, The Constant Reshaping of the Tumblr Fandom Discourse Community

One day in the summer two years ago, I was bored on the Internet and began searching for sites that would fulfill my need for constant entertainment that was tailored to me. I found a blogging website called Tumblr that allowed me to chose whose blogs I wanted to receive content from and easily search for more blogs that pertain to my interests. Slowing an addiction grew to this site that constantly updated with new content. Soon I began to feel a part of a community unlike any one I had experienced before as I saw posts discussing everything from sexism and homophobia to posts about the most hilarious moments from some of the site users’ favorite shows. After reading about John Swales’ “six defining characteristics” of a discourse community, I realized I am a member of a discourse community, the ‘fandom side’ of Tumblr, which separated itself from its regular community of ‘social media blogging site’ (471). Through becoming a more involved member, I have noticed growing conflicts among the members of this discourse community, including attacks on plagiarists and the unexpected hypocrisy of a community that demands diversity in almost everything and yet worships shows and movies that lack much, if any, diversity.

Tumblr is a social media site that has approximately 80 million blogs. Blogs are run by users (who use usernames rather than their real names) who can post original content (through text, photos, quotes, links, chats, audio files, and videos) or can “reblog” posts from other users. Some users have blogs but choose not to post or reblog on them, but rather follow other blogs and enjoy the content on their own personal “dashboard.” People may run more than one blog, but usually have a “main blog” (a blog that they upkeep the most). Users organize their blogs through “tags” which are gray text words that appear underneath any post. However, tags are more commonly used for people to express their thoughts on a post without adding on to the post. (See Appendix A for a diagram of a typical text post). The fandom side of the site usually involves blogs dedicated to the TV shows *Supernatural*, *Doctor Who*, and BBC’s *Sherlock* (collectively referred to as SuperWhoLock) and the movies *The Avengers*, *Frozen*, and *Mean Girls*.

The fandom side of Tumblr has a loose set of common goals, but the general goal is to post and share information about these shows and movies. Other goals could also be initiating others into the fandoms, creating “headcanons” (theories about shows and movies that are not explicitly shown on the screen), and providing free advertisement for their shows and movies to increase ratings for a show or get more people to see a movie. To achieve these goals, Tumblr users utilize intercommunication within the website, including tagging other users in their posts and sending messages or fan mail to other users. These allow for personal interaction solely through text communication.

Commenting and tagging posts also allows users the ability to provide feedback to other users. A post about the main characters in *Sherlock* may result in a user commenting on the post about the lack of diversity in the show and another user utilizing tags to share their[[1]](#footnote-1) hatred of some of the characters. Both users are providing feedback to the original poster, but are commenting on different aspects of it. Other feedback may include users correcting posts, such as an original post saying that *The Avengers* character Hawkeye’s real name is Clint Barron and another user correcting them replying that the character’s name is Clint Barton. Another form of feedback can be through asking other users questions. A user can either message another user a question or can make a post asking their question to the general Tumblr community; both allow the user to receive direct feedback to their question.

As mentioned above, Tumblr has its own genre of website format. Most users work with the default layout of Tumblr, including the different, free blog themes. Other users, however, utilize a free, non-Tumblr supported formatting system called X-Kit. X-Kit was created by a Tumblr who expanded the capabilities of Tumblr’s formatting and created a system to improve it; this user relies on other users’ donations and feedback to continue to expand his formatting. In a way, users are willing to monetarily support another user in an endeavor that benefits the whole community. Both layouts have people use usernames, which can be changed at any time and can be fairly long. Most users in the fandom side have usernames that are references to their favorite shows and movies. The layouts also have the messaging and sharing capabilities expected from social media websites, as users can message each other and share links to their favorite posts to others outside of Tumblr. Also connected with the genre of social media websites, all images are clearly visible, the font is easily readable, and a button to share information is at the bottom of each post.

Tumblr users have developed their own lexis, which has both images and words. For the fandom side, GIF (Graphics Interchange Formant) images featuring characters from favorite shows and movies are often used as ‘reaction images’ to posts. These images are used to express the feelings of the replying user or to create a humorous response. For instance, a post about the sad parts of *Doctor Who* could have a reply that is simply the main character of *Doctor Who* standing in the rain with tears in his eyes; this GIF would reflect the responding user’s feelings and reinforce the original post’s comment on the sadness of the show. Fandom users also regularly use terms like “shipping” (Audrey), “OTP” (rosieramblings[[2]](#footnote-2)), “SuperWhoLock” (Sara), and ‘I can’t’[[3]](#footnote-3) (the user is so overwhelmed with some emotion that they cannot articulate a response).

The lexis is more complicated than that, however. Tumblr users are not all native English speakers, and yet nearly every post relies on a deep understanding of the English language. Many posts have no punctuation, meaning the reader has to automatically know where the pauses typically go for sentences in English. Lack of capitalization and proper grammar are also very common in posts, showing that Tumblr is a place where content of writing is judged more than execution. I refer to these posts as ‘just words’ posts as, for the most, they have only words. Posts also use numerous abbreviations, such as ‘lol’, ‘smh’, and ‘omg’ that have taken on a different meaning than their usual, more popular use. ‘Lol’ (laughing out loud) tends to be used sarcastically in response to a character’s minor struggle. ‘Smh’ (shaking my head) is a common response to a post about a character completely ruining something. ‘Omg’ has a different feeling of excitement than the full ‘oh my god.’ The assumption throughout the lexis is that by being part of the Tumblr community, every user understands the posts. A few users I follow often share their excitement about being able to read less formal English and understanding ‘just words’ posts that rely on high and complex knowledge of English.

Members are not just broken down to ‘native English speaker’ and ‘non-native English speaker,’ though. Every “group” of members serves a purpose to the fandom community. There are original poster (OP) members who create new content that can then be shared. This content could include fan art (ranging from music to videos to knitting), text posts, updates or new revelations about a show or movie, and commentary on the shows and movies. Tumblr user rosieramblings notes that she “will post original things, like mini essays/analysis and some fanfic” for her contributions to the fandom side. Another type of member is the casual member; they are the member that reblogs the OP, sends links to posts, and reply to posts, which is how interviewee Sara views herself as being a part of the community. The casual user appears to be the most common type of Tumblr user. Professional media is an additional type of user as many TV shows and movies have official Tumblr blogs about their content. More passionate members are shippers, users who generally focus on the romantic relationships between characters, which is where Tumblr user Audrey sees the most conflict for the site. While shippers can be controversial, they are, overall, well liked in the community. The most disdained user is the reposter. A reposter is a user who takes an OP’s work, downloads it from Tumblr, and then posts it on their blog with no credit to the OP. They serve as the ones that create the most conflict within the fandom community.

The main issue with reposters is that they download someone’s work from Tumblr and post it to their blog rather than just reblogging the post that they liked so much. Some reposter may not know how to share content through Tumblr because they are new to the community and may not understand the layout. In these cases, the reposter rarely takes credit for the repost and shares it like they would share a post they reblogged by including tags that act as comments. Many in the Tumblr community understand the mistakes made by these reposters and assist them in learning how to reblog posts and give credit to the OP. These cases are usually solved civilly through users’ ask and message boxes, and the accidental reposter does repost again. However, there are users on Tumblr who are aware that they are reposting and also chose to claim credit for the reposted work.

Similar to how committing intentional plagiarism can lead to expulsion from college, this high offense can lead users to bar another user from participating in the Tumblr community. Some reposters are publically shamed on Tumblr by having their username spread around and people messaging them anonymous hate mail (which can only be publically responded to). Other plagiarist users delete their blogs or change their usernames to avoid any negative responses to their reposting. In a few cases, reposters have had public posts back and forth with the OPs, which usually involve the reposters claiming they made the original thing and the OPs providing evidence that the reposters’ claims are untrue. While the conflicts between OPs and reposters continue on Tumblr, a newer conflict has emerged on the site.

As the fandom community has expanded on Tumblr, topics such as culture awareness, inclusivity, and discussion of social norms have become constant areas of contention. As Tumblr user rosieramblings notes in my interview with her, “there are a lot [of conflicts] with the social justice community and people not understanding issues such as white privilege and the like” that are regularly posted about. For the fandom community, discussions on the need for more female protagonists and characters, queer characters, and racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity in shows and movies are regularly reblogged. Yet, hardly any users tend to post about the underlying hypocrisy that while Tumblr users yearn for more diversity, the main fandom SuperWhoLock’s shows consist of mostly white straight males, who are constantly treated as the gods of the community. And when *Supernatural*, *Doctor Who*, and *Sherlock* do feature characters that fit the wishes of the Tumblr community, the users tend to immediately critique these characters as weak, stereotypical, and boring. Here is where the greater conflict within the community begins to grow.

Much like the reposters, anyone who critiques the main fandoms on Tumblr receives hate mail and may be publicly berated on posts. Arguments usually start between those who want to see more diversity on shows and in movies and those who think that these shows and movies are perfect the way they are. While, in most cases, all users in an argument agree that the shows and movies are great and that they like the characters within them, the users disagree with whether the shows and movies have to express diversity or whether having a show with mostly white-straight-male characters is fine and should not be criticized for its lack of diversity. Some of these conflicts are civil, in which both sides use *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos* to construct their arguments and remain composed throughout their responses.

Other conflicts, however, can involve numerous sides attacking each other, the characters, and the actors and creators of the shows and movies. These arguments also tend to involve personal responses and examples rather than less bias information; ultimately, these conflicts can delineate into accusing users of having ‘white privilege,’ being ‘anti-feminists,’ and, in the most extreme cases, being racists, sexists, homophobes, and classists. Some of these conflicts continue due to some users’ inflated beliefs that their opinions are superior to others as they view themselves as more knowledge than others in content that is highly valued on Tumblr, similar to how Elizabeth Wardle describes Alan, the subject of her case study, who considers himself to be God in his knowledge of technology in relation to his humanities department colleagues’ knowledge (528). Sometimes users even begin conflicts on relatively uncontroversial post, as user jesussbabymomma (utilizing the common way Tumblr users write) states, “you can literally start a fight about anything on this website life is amazing,” which reflects the current mentality of the community.

Recently, more members have spoken out against harassing every user if they make a post that other users find disagreeable. These mediator members often ask the aggressive users to show respect, to understand that not everyone is as knowledge about diversity, and to educate the user rather than attack them. Mediator members understand that Tumblr, especially the fandom side, feels like their “home always from home” and “It makes [them] happy on sad days” (Sara). Ultimately, many in the fandom community want Tumblr to be a safe place for all its members, where they can find their interests and share what they love. With more attacking arguments at users, the discourse community of Tumblr is reshaping itself as chaotic and misguided in social justice rather than as a welcoming community that is accessible to new members.

Tumblr’s fandom side has morphed into its own discourse community, complete with its own lexis and conflicts outside of the main frame of Tumblr. As more users join, even more changes happen to the community, whether these new changes are new fandoms, different trends, different perspectives, or more aggressive (and ultimately frowned upon) social justice. The fandom side has allowed people of similar interests to come together and share what they love. As rosieramblings states, “I’ve made lots of friends with the different fandoms I’ve become interested in and interacted with.  Tumblr makes it much easier to find people of like minds” and that is what many users hope Tumblr continues to be. Tumblr users want Tumblr to be an understanding, open community where friendships can form and knowledge shared. With more time for this newly emerged discourse community, perhaps the attacking conflicts will diminish and only thoughtful and respectful conflicts will remain. The discourse community is still growing and every day its goals are being reshaped, but its members make it consistently interesting, engaging, and a place to share, even at the risk of negative feedback.

Works Cited

Audrey. Online interview. 8 Apr. 2014.

Jesussbabymomma. Weblog post. *Tumblr.com*. N.p., Aug. 2013. Web. 8 Apr. 2014. <http://jesussbabymomma.tumblr.com/post/54944803227/you-can-literally-start-a-fight-about-anything-on>.

Rosieramblings. Online interview. 8 Apr. 2014.

Sara. Online interview. 8 Apr. 2014.

Swales, John. "The Concept of Discourse Community." *Writing About Writing: A College Reader*. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2011. 466-79. Print.

Wardle, Elizabeth. "Identity, Authority, and Learning to Write in New Workplaces." *Writing About Writing: A College Reader*. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2011. 520-35. Print.

1. I will be using ‘their’ as a singular gender-neutral pronoun as the Tumblr community is very conscious of other gender identities besides male and female and, thus, uses ‘their’ instead of ‘his or her’ in their writing. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Tumblr usernames are not capitalized [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. That is the full phrase, though sometimes people add ‘I can’t with this.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-3)