The Sense of Connection, or, Complex Narratives and the Aesthetics of Truth

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Abstract

This article explores fact and fiction in digital culture by linking "complex" or "networked" narrative forms in television, Alternate Reality Games (ARGs), and other transmedia forms of storytelling—with the persistence of paranoid models of knowledge and post-critical modes of judgment. It argues that distinctions between fact and fiction are aesthetic judgments that differentiate kinds of knowledge and kinds of experience, and demonstrate the limits to contemporary articulations of critical interpretation.

"Feeling connected" describes a particular experience of living with digital, networked media, a feeling that provides grounds for distinguishing between true and false within digital culture. As Michel Foucault has suggested, the ability to speak truth, to be recognized as one who speaks truth, depends on a particular, contextual regime or mode of *veridiction* (3). A major regime of veridiction at play in digital culture relies on the ability to sense particular, totalizing chains of connections. The distinction between fact and fiction, then, should be understood as *political*, as it relies on maintaining and redrawing partitions of what can be sensed, along with what can be said about what is sensed (Rancière; cf. Bollmer, *Theorizing Digital Cultures* 162-7). The feeling of connection can be mobilized as an *aesthetics of truth*, meaning that truth and fact are assumed to emerge from *sensing* connectivity—from visualizing, diagramming, or modelling connectivity, rendering felt connections directly sensible—an act that partitions and differentiates who can sense and who can speak truth from those who sense and speak falsity.

I am not suggesting that the sensation of connectivity leads to the identification of an absolute (or even remotely correct) knowledge of truth or fact. Rather, I am interested in how the sensation of connectivity has become a means for differentiating who senses and has the authority to speak fact from those who can be dismissed as lacking the ability to "know," contributing to a context—often termed "post-truth"—in which kinds of evidence and kinds of expertise are dismissed because they do not conform to predetermined judgments of fact that emerge from sensations of interconnection, sensations that may nonetheless be groundless or spurious.

This model of truth is itself conjoined with a particular narrative form. Through "networked" or "complex" narratives, a wide range of fiction and non-fiction alike depict a world in which truth exists, buried, to be uncovered through the arrangement of a sequence of hints and details. This form can be overtly observed in television shows which, through the cultivation of "mystery," actively engage fans via online forums, paratextual artefacts, and other objects that cannot be limited to the diegesis of the show—shows such as *Lost* or *Doctor Who*. It can be seen in alternate reality games, or ARGs, employed both as

new forms of theatre and as advertising campaigns to generate interest in a range of cultural commodities, such as one developed to promote the videogame *Halo 2*, named *I Love Bees*, which involved telling a single story delivered through a broad range of esoteric "media," including websites, programmed telephone calls to payphones, and even jars of honey mailed via FedEx. The blurring of online and offline characterizes these transmedia forms of storytelling, blending the factual world with fictional narrative via social media. The boundaries of a text cannot be located within the text itself but in a range of interconnected—networked, even—textual and paratextual artefacts. While we cannot assume a hard boundary between online and offline in today's digital culture (see Bollmer, *Theorizing Digital Cultures*, 30-35), what I examine here demonstrates how any blurring of online and offline likewise blurs the boundaries between "truth" and "fiction" and reshapes the grounds for making judgments about truth.

To advance these arguments, this essay links two themes: the emergence of complex or networked narrative form and the persistence of paranoid models of knowledge in critical (and post-critical) modes of judgment. In conjoining these themes, I suggest that contemporary distinctions between fact and fiction are not about the assertion of truth or falsity but are aesthetic judgments that differentiate kinds of knowledge and kinds of experience, ultimately deferring to a sense of totalizing interconnection. The terms "narrative complexity" and "network aesthetics" describe formal aspects of television, literature, and gaming that emerged primarily in the 1990s and continue to characterize large-scale fictional works. These forms rely on a sense of narrative interconnectivity which unfolds over scales that cannot be experienced outside of their fictionalization. In spite of the apparent flatness or immanence represented by these forms of narrative, they perpetuate a variant of critical knowledge that suggests truth can only be sensed by those with the capacity to map interconnectivity. This mode of knowledge descends from "paranoid" post-WWII narratives in literature and film, such as those that characterize 1970s conspiracy thrillers or the novels of Thomas Pynchon, which, as Fredric Jameson describes, depict "a potentially infinite network, along with a plausible explanation of its invisibility" (9).

So, this sensation of connection reimagines what have been theorized as paranoid forms of knowledge, transforming paranoia into complexity, and suggests that the world exists as a particular kind of narrative: as an ordered, totalizing system there to be read or interpreted by tying together disparate signifiers.

Partiality and Totality

Epistemologically, truth and networked media have long had a troubled relationship. "Facts" on the internet seem positioned between, on the one hand, falsehoods disseminated over social media by way of user-generated content, and, on the other, an emergent and self-correcting collective intelligence that sorts out true from false at a scale that transcends any particular individual (Jenkins; Lévy). Facts have been positioned somewhere between a simulated hyperreality (Baudrillard) and the truth of big data collected and analyzed beyond human awareness, directing human sensation and behavior prior to consciousness through predictive technical models (cf. Hansen; Kitchin). When it comes to digital media, truth and fact are often about questions of scale. While an individual may be misled or duped, the collective "brain" fostered by the massive scale of networked data online can identify "true" knowledge removed from any particular individual who may or may not "know."

If the past decades of critical and cultural theory have embraced a model of partiality and particularity, of situated knowledges (Haraway), and the modest claim that individuals only experience through their own particular bodies and orientations (Ahmed), of a refusal of paranoid knowledge in favor of reparative methods of interpretation (Sedgwick), then the vast scale of digital media has positioned fact elsewhere, at the level of totality that emerges from mapping the system as a whole, a scale that devalues human knowledge in favor of patterns that emerge from chaotic, complex systems, organized automatically by technical systems and algorithms capable of knowing beyond the limits of a particular individual (Bollmer, *Inhuman Networks* 220-6). As Chris Anderson notoriously argued during his tenure as editor-in-chief of *Wired*, the scale of Big Data allows for the discovery of truth without human

judgment: "Out with every theory of human behavior, from linguistics to sociology. […] With enough data, the numbers speak for themselves" (n. pag.). While Anderson's claims are mistaken for a number of reasons (see boyd and Crawford), he is one of several writers who see the internet, algorithms, and data as productive of a truth that comes from charting totality beyond human awareness, bias, and intervention.

Recent political events have demonstrated the exigence of sorting out individualized falsity and collectivized fact. Does it matter if "the network" can identify truth when individuals are constantly misled, unable to see or comprehend truth at a larger scale? Desires for connectedness realized through social media have manifested as an intensification of propaganda, of tribalism, of manipulation. Fears of the false have proliferated, best embodied in the terms "post-truth," "post-fact," and "fake news." The solution to disinformation too often perpetuates an explanation repeated throughout Western thought—to distrust representations and believe in science, in authority, in "reality," to trust rationalist mechanisms for analysis built into technological systems for synthesizing knowledge.[1] Yet the assertion of truth and fact to rectify falsehoods online appears to do little, if anything, to reassert the reality of evidence against the material effects of narrative. The reason, I contend, is because of the particular model of connected truth that characterizes digital media, a model that also characterizes a wide range of popular culture, perpetuating forms of paranoid knowledge as networks to be traced and uncovered, a model that suggests reality is structured like a complex fiction. In digital culture truth and fact are placed at the level of totality, where individuals have no direct access to truth aside from a (questionable) ability to map the connections of the network.

Network Aesthetics and Complex Narratives

The narrative structure that I am referring to goes by several names, but is usually referred to as either "network aesthetics" or "narrative complexity." These structures work to represent the complexities of connectivity

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[1]   For an example of a theorist who makes arguments such as these, see Maurizio Ferraris' various outlines for his "New Realism" (Ferraris).

as cultural form. Forms described as networked or complex are unusual, however, because of the sheer difficulty of representing or depicting the (totalized) material relations associated with network technology.

The mundane, repetitive habits of digital culture—checking emails, scrolling through social media feeds, checking the clock on one's phone, even the feel of a phantom phone vibration, hailing us to answer even when no one is calling—all demonstrate what James J. Hodge terms the "*impersonal* sociability of always-on networking, of living life on the basis of an ambient possibility of being connected otherwise afforded by digital infrastructures" (paragraph 3; emphasis in original). While social media and digital networks are often framed as connecting people and peers—a belief that neglects the material agencies of infrastructures (Bollmer, *Inhuman Networks* 3-5)—Hodge argues that the feeling of connection is not just about connections between humans, and certainly not about connections to *particular* humans, as digital connections are mediated by technological systems and algorithms that are less about specific people than abstractions that do not correspond to an individual subject (paragraph 15). Being networked is not about *actually* being connected to anything specific but the *potentiality* of relation. The feeling of connection is a relation of non-relation.

This relation of non-relation cannot be directly represented, or directly experienced because of its impersonality. And this relation certainly does not correspond to common mechanisms for visualizing networked interconnection. Typical methods of representing networks, as a diagram of nodes and edges, are restrictive and totalizing (Galloway 90). Networks are bound to a singular model of connectivity, reproduced in infinite variations, reducing networks to a constricting archetype that, at least it seems, has no alternative.

But, in spite of this seeming uniformity, "network" nonetheless names a formal structure that has permeated contemporary culture. As Caroline Levine and Patrick Jagoda have both argued, networked form characterizes a wide range of television, film, games, and literature, though this form also comes riddled with contradictions. "Sprawling and spreading, networks might seem altogether formless, perhaps even the antithesis of form," Levine suggests (112). Networks seem dy-

namic, and their massive scale undermines, or at least challenges, typical ways of grasping form. But, while we may imagine that networks literally connect everything in a concrete and direct way, this overlooks the limits of connection and the uneven forms of relation that characterize actually existing networks (Munster 3). The internet has physical boundaries, seen, for instance, when submarine cables surface on the beach (Starosielski). The feeling and dramatization of connection is filled with incongruities that split the metaphorical and the material. Connectivity, then, is a striving to relate that can never fully manifest in a purely material way.

But networks still exist as a formal structure that represents connectedness, revealing and making sensible the potentialities of connection beyond those of network graphs. For Levine, networked form highlights the partiality and ignorance of individual knowledge, the limitations of subjective situatedness: "At any given moment we know that we cannot grasp crucial pathways between nodes, and this points to our more generalized ignorance of networks. We cannot ever apprehend the totality of the networks that organize us" (129), mirroring the scalar distinction between individualized ignorance and systemic truth. Jagoda, however, argues that networked form can be sensed and apprehended by individuals, at least through particular digital games, artworks, and fictional narratives. He suggests that videogames like *Journey* and online experiments like "Twitch Plays *Pokémon*"—the former a widely acclaimed independent game, the latter an online experiment where thousands of individuals collaboratively completed the different installments of the *Pokémon* series of games through the video streaming platform Twitch (see Bollmer, *Theorizing Digital Cultures* 160-3)—reveal and make sensible the kinds of interconnections experienced in digital culture, which are also represented in literature, in television, and in cinema.

The games Jagoda identifies often literalize social, technological interconnection—we play these games with networked others, others who we may be connected to but only partially contact. Journey, for instance, can be played with others via networked infrastructures. Yet the actual ability to interact with these others is stunted or incomplete. Other players appear anonymously, and it is impossible to directly com-

municate with them. These games reveal the kinds of abstract, anonymous, and impersonal forms of connectivity noted by Hodge. The examples from literature, film, and TV Jagoda discusses make this networked interconnection metaphorical. Characters interact only briefly, but their interactions result in effects that exceed individual awareness. The Wire, a show Jagoda discusses in depth, takes pains to dramatize the social interconnection of government, law enforcement, education, the drug trade, and more, resulting in a realism that comes from how it maps structural interconnection. While fictional networks may only deal with interconnection through a metaphorical structure, Jagoda argues that both these network narratives and the more literal examples of interconnection in games and social media make sensible the condition of being networked, along with the limits and unevenness of the connections that characterize the present, moving beyond the reductive visualizations of network diagrams and the graphs of social media.

These structures are not completely new. Networked form has long characterized literature, linked—as are the fictional networks of today—with scientific and technological structures, imported into novels such as *Middlemarch* and *Dracula* (Otis). Networks, after all, have existed for several centuries, a model for technological, biological, financial, and social forms of connection. Networks, while initially a term for a manufactured woven net, moved to describe the circulatory and nervous systems, branch banking, and social relations, alongside technologies for communication (Bollmer, *Inhuman Networks*). Because of these historical conflations between technology, biology, economy, and society, it should be unsurprising that networked technological structures—be they the networks of the railroad, telegraph, or the internet—regularly dramatize other social structures also thought to be produced by a given technology dominant at a specific moment in time.

Probably the most obvious fictionalization of networked narrative structures today occurs in television, particularly in TV programs that rely on what Jason Mittell has termed "narrative complexity." The specific difference between networked form from the late 1800s and early 1900s and today can be seen most acutely in the complexity of television and adjunct forms of transmedia storytelling, in which

networks and connectivity expand a formal narrative structure into a model of knowledge and interpretation demanded of viewers and readers. Narrative complexity is defined by an approach to storytelling that adopts the serial mode of narrative seen in soap operas, but, unlike soaps, this approach uses the serial format to advance narratives that have either particular endpoints or story arcs developed over time. Televisual narrative complexity emerged in the 1970s and 80s, often in parodies of soap operas such as Soap or Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman, along with prime-time soaps like Dallas. In the 1990s, following the short-lived popularity of David Lynch and Mark Frost's Twin Peaks, a number of television series embraced the idea of alternating between an episodic structure and a series-long narrative that would be developed over the entirety of a show, seen in The X-Files and Buffy the Vampire Slayer, among other examples. Since 2000, this model of storytelling has become de rigueur among almost all prestige television series, with complex narratives seen in dramas like The Wire, Lost, Breaking Bad, Game of Thrones, and comedies like Arrested Development. While Mittell focuses almost exclusively on American TV, there are many examples of narrative complexity elsewhere. Lars von Trier's Riget, originally aired on Danish television in 1994, is another notable, early example of narrative complexity, one that precedes other "complex" Danish series, such as Forbrydelsen and Borgen. Examples of British television, be it The Office or The Thick of It, or the more recent versions of Doctor Who and its offshoots, also exist in this mode, as does the German-language Netflix drama Dark. Complexity in television is, quite clearly, a global phenomenon that characterizes a vast amount of television that is both critically acclaimed and designed to foster deep fan investment and attachment (Jenkins).

While Mittell argues that this phenomenon is particular to television—in part because of television's particular embrace of both episodic and serial narrative structures—these shows' narratives mirror Jagoda's claims about network aesthetics in culture more broadly. The interconnected structure of plots and characters mimic the complexity of the internet, with "truth" only disclosed when the entire web of connections has been narratively revealed. This is particularly the case with specific

programs like *Lost*, *Doctor Who*, and *Game of Thrones*, among others, that invite audience speculation and fan theories by providing hints and clues—along with distractions and red herrings—to foment audience investment and discussion, which are themselves fostered by social media. These shows often require audiences to create "orienting paratexts" (Mittell 261-91), such as videos and maps that summarize or outline speculative theories, helping other viewers make sense of the massive web of connections these shows develop over time.

One particular paratextual mode of orientation is central for the claims that I am making here, which Mittell describes as the "drilling" of "forensic fandom," in which viewers work to uncover the truth buried within a show:

> Complex television encourages forensic fans to dig deeper, probing beneath the surface to understand the complexity of a story and its telling. Such programs create magnets for engagement, drawing viewers into the storyworlds and urging them to drill down to discover more. […] Drillability as a metaphor suggests that viewers are mining to discover something that is already there, buried beneath the surface. (288)

Audiences assume a position akin to a forensic investigator, examining particular clues and signifiers seen in a show to develop theories and explanations for what's "really" being represented, buried underneath the diegetic world of a particular show. Perhaps best seen with *Lost* and its associated licensed products, including four 1000-piece jigsaw puzzles which literalized the idea of the show as a puzzle to be solved, the approach here follows *Lost*'s creator J. J. Abrams' idea of shows or movies as "mystery boxes," a theory laid out in his popular TED talk, "The Mystery Box," that describes the pleasure of popular culture as one of an endlessly deferred mystery. Abrams' view is that shows like *Lost*, along with his other creations, work to actively generate interest from readers, viewers, and fans through the piling up of mysteries that may never be solved or concluded, pointing instead towards other texts beyond the main one of the show for solutions, which includes social me-

dia accounts, web pages, and YouTube videos, expanding the world of a particular story beyond the limits of a text.

The problem with Abrams' mystery box theory is that it does not seem to truly acknowledge how many people actually engage with popular culture. The failure of *Lost* to have satisfying answers to its many mysteries resulted in its convoluted and confusing final seasons, and enraged many of the most devoted fans of the show. But *Lost* nonetheless relied on, and perpetuated, a particular form of viewership in which the truth of the show is to be sorted out by mapping the interconnections between the many clues and hints given throughout its airing. The assumption is that the creators, writers, and showrunners of a particular program "know" the truth of their stories, a truth that viewers are interpellated into uncovering or solving through the multitude of signifiers that appear to be significant or important in unlocking the truth of the narrative, fostered by online discussion boards and wikis dedicated to the show. While decades of critical work have worked to challenge the hegemony of authorial intent in interpretation, at least a particular mode of engaging with television has placed the showrunner back in the position of the subject supposed to know the truth of a particular story.

The lessons of these transmedia mysteries can be seen elsewhere, demonstrating how narrative complexity cannot be located within television, properly speaking, but in a range of fictional narratives that employ digital and social media, deliberately blurring the boundaries between fictional worlds and "reality." Alternate Reality Games (ARGs), for instance, bridge the "real world" and fictional narratives through deliberately networked forms, telling stories via multiple media platforms. While there are many examples of ARGs beginning in the 1990s, *I Love Bees*, an ARG from 2004 designed to promote the videogame *Halo 2*, is one of the first to achieve widespread popular recognition.[2] *I Love Bees* began with jars of honey sent via FedEx to a number of people who had participated in earlier ARGs. The jars contained cutout letters that, if correctly pieced together, would lead recipients to a web-

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[2] *I Love Bees* was preceded by a number of ARGs, some with the explicit purpose of promoting a product. One of the most notable was called *The Beast*, which promoted Steven Spielberg's film *A.I.: Artificial Intelligence* in 2001.

site, www.ilovebees.com, which appeared to be a beekeeping website called "Margaret's Honey." This website seemed corrupted or glitched, with a timer counting down towards an unknown future event. The cinematic trailer for *Halo 2* also contained the URL for the website, cryptically included at its end. Through the website, players would sign up for the "game" of *I Love Bees*, and would receive codes that, if properly interpreted, would reveal the GPS location of a pay phone, along with the time that phone would be called. Brief audio recordings broadcast via phone call would then gradually tell a story of six main characters, eventually leading into the story of *Halo 2*.[3]

The success of *I Love Bees* has been repeated by those looking to promote new television shows, movies, and albums, with ARGs for *The Dark Knight*, J.J. Abrams' *Cloverfield*, the band Nine Inch Nails' album *Year Zero*—announced with a website scrawled in bathroom stall graffiti at NIN concerts—and Boards of Canada's album *Tomorrow's Harvest*, which relied on the release of a string of six-digit numbers, sent to radio, television, and web venues, including BBC Radio 1, NPR, and Adult Swim, along with numbers embedded into a preexisting YouTube video and on an unannounced 12" single. All of these ARG examples involve releasing cryptic hints to fans, requiring them to piece together a narrative, bridging the "real world" and a game, often ending at the release or announcement of a cultural commodity.

The theatre company Odyssey Works has taken this form even further, developing elaborate theatrical productions designed for one person that last days, weeks, or even months, deeply intertwined with the life of the intended audience member. One Odyssey Works performance, *When I Left the House It Was Still Dark*, created for the novelist Rick Moody and performed in 2013, began with Moody's priest giving him a book titled *The Secret Room* to read to his daughter, which appeared to be from the 1950s but was created by Odyssey Works for their performance. The performance eventually led Moody to a vacant hardware store in Brooklyn and a field in Saskatchewan, with numerous, individualized events intended to foster a deeply moving experience for Moody, a *Gesamtkunstwerk* for one (see Burickson and LeRoux).

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[3]   See Devidas for more on the backstory of *I Love Bees*.

Paranoia, Conspiracy, and Criticality

Were it possible to isolate questions of form, narrative complexity would exist merely as a bridging of various media platforms to craft fragmentary stories, an innovation that relies on the kinds of convergence described by Henry Jenkins. But, as Caroline Levine suggests, form is political, as it arranges and orders the world, making it sensible in particular ways. Forms "shape what it is possible to think, say, and do in a given context" (5). The interpretive mode required by these examples mirrors a logic of conspiracy, requiring paranoid reading practices that assume a hidden form of knowledge, a hidden reality guarded (and guided) by an authority elsewhere (be it a showrunner, advertising agency, band, or theatre troupe), to be discovered by a reader who can correctly discern the connections that matter in a narrative that may be filled with irrelevant details and distractions.

Given contemporary politics, in which absurd conspiracies increasingly shape mainstream political reality—perhaps best represented by the so-called "Pizzagate" or "QAnon" conspiracies in American politics, but also the paranoid conspiracies offered by Alex Jones' InfoWars and the reportage of Fox News—this form of judgment has clearly migrated beyond fandoms, beyond the fringes of the internet, into mainstream regimes of veridiction. While I am not claiming that narrative complexity and network form are *causing* the existence of these conspiracy theories, especially since conspiracy predates narrative complexity, I *am* claiming that these texts encourage and, in the case of ARGs, *require* reading practices that mirror the logic of conspiracy, perpetuating a form of veridiction in which the connections of conspiracy become a popular, even dominant means for narrating fact. Since network aesthetics and complex narratives are often assumed to reveal, aesthetically and poetically, something about how we experience and make sense of digital media and networked connectivity, then they also train a form of interpretation that links the everyday experience of digital culture with the necessity of paranoid, intertwining narratives to be uncovered and exposed by readers online.

Narrative complexity and network aesthetics are similar to how Fredric Jameson once described conspiracy—seen in popular thrill-

ers of 1970s film and, for example, in the novels of Thomas Pynchon. Jameson suggests that conspiracy can be best thought of as an attempt "to think a system so vast that it cannot be encompassed by the natural and historically developed categories of perception with which human beings normally orient themselves" (2), a system that transcends spatial locality, linked with the technological and financial networks Jameson identifies as the material base of postmodernity. What the conspiracy thriller represents is an attempt at mapping space in which bodies, objects, and the city itself have seen "their wholesale transformation into instruments of communication" (11). The heroes of films like *Three Days of the Condor* and *The Parallax View* are able to follow "imaginary networks" that show "the representational confirmation that telephone cables and lines and their interchanges follow us everywhere, doubling the streets and buildings of the visible social world with a secondary secret underground world," producing "a vivid, if paranoid, cognitive map" (15). The heroes of these films become experts in performing a critical unveiling of the "real" relations—technological, communicative, political—buried beneath the surfaces of everyday life.

The paranoia of these thrillers—which can be described as the sensing, uncovering, and mapping of an interconnected system invisible to most—depict a regime of veridiction similar to the one critiqued by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick as paranoid reading. Sedgwick argues that paranoia, as a system of reading, works to expose buried knowledge, though what is buried is already known in advance and, thus, the answers paranoid reading supplies are not and cannot be surprising. Paranoid reading is a "strong theory," meaning that it is tautological, "it can't help or can't stop or can't do anything other than prove the very same assumptions with which it began," but nonetheless "may be experienced by the practitioner as a triumphant advance toward truth and vindication" (135). Countless variants of critical interpretation can be seen as conforming to Sedgwick's description of paranoia, acting as if the reader sees the truth buried underneath, while merely affirming the truth of what is known in advance.

The model of interpretation required by complex narratives suggests that a particular truth will arise once the network is mapped in its to-

tality. It also implies that a particular perspective—one that parallels what Sedgwick identifies as paranoia, embodied by the heroes of the films and novels Jameson describes—permits the identification of truth through the arrangement of the correct clues conjoined together, revealing the answers of the mysteries buried by an author otherwise invisible and unreachable. Now, while the modes of reading described by Jameson and Sedgwick are explicitly individualistic, the mysteries of transmedia storytelling and narrative complexity are often revealed by large groups of people networked together online, suggesting that "knowing" is only possible through a kind of collaboration, albeit a kind of collaboration designed to reveal and unmask what is "known" by a particular person or small group of people (be it J.J. Abrams and the writers of *Lost*, or any other showrunner, or the developer of an ARG). This knowledge is not performative or generative, then, because it merely seeks to unveil what someone else is believed to know in advance.

We should keep in mind that the conspiracies of today are often perpetuated by large groups of people brought together through social media and online message boards. The QAnon conspiracy, for instance, was initiated by someone posting to the /pol/ board of 4chan as "Q Clearance Patriot," delivering cryptic clues (referred to as "breadcrumbs" by QAnon followers) debated and linked on YouTube in videos with hundreds of thousands of views. The relationship of reading into the QAnon conspiracy is functionally indistinguishable from the forensic fandom of *Lost*; there is an analogous structure of interpretation required by some complex narratives and contemporary conspiracy. Paranoia has become "complexity" while, at the same time, becoming collective, (politically) differentiating groups of people based on their ability to sense and know particular networks of connections that make up a conspiracy.

Conclusion: Networks and Postcritical Reading?

Within literary theory, the apparent paranoia of criticality has met with a turn towards "postcritical" forms of interpretation and reading, described by Rita Felski as an attempt to map networks of readers and texts, "a matter of attaching, collating, negotiating, assembling—of forging links between things that were previously unconnected" (173). The point Felski is making should be well taken—she is arguing for a more pragmatic and performative understanding of textuality, a focus on what a text *does* rather than what a text *means*, which reorients and reimagines the very use of truth in literary interpretation. But the mapping of networks—of forging links between things previously unconnected—has *almost always been a paranoid act*. The problem here is probably with the very idea of truth emerging from a mapping of totality. Reframing paranoia as complexity does little to transform the structural and formal elements of networks that undergird practices of reading and interpretation. Instead, it just highlights how the mapping of networks has long been one way of being critical, one way of distinguishing true from false. The generation and identification of conspiracy has become collectivized within digital culture, which demonstrates how the willingness to engage in particular reading and interpretive practices, to make particular connections sensible, can serve as a form of politics by differentiating and policing the boundaries between who has the ability to identify and speak truth, and who can be ignored as speaking falsity, regardless of the actual evidence that grounds claims of truth and falsity.

My ultimate claim, then, is that mapping or producing networked connections is less an alternative to paranoid critical practices but fully commensurate with the structure and form of paranoid connectivity. More concerning is that a range of cultural texts actively encourage these interpretive methods, and that—especially as paranoia becomes collectivized through the complexity of transmedia texts—the ability to see or map particular networks serves to differentiate the ability to see and speak truth from seeing and speaking falsity, making fact and fiction into aesthetic judgments with a politics that is aesthetic, above all.

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Biography

Grant Bollmer is an Assistant Professor of Media Studies at North Carolina State University and is an Honorary Associate of the Department of Media and Communications at the University of Sydney. He is the author of two books, *Inhuman Networks: Social Media and the Archaeology of Connection* (Bloomsbury, 2016) and *Theorizing Digital Cultures* (SAGE, 2018).