

## **Killing off Lexa: ‘Dead Lesbian Syndrome’ and intra-fandom management of toxic fan practices in an online queer community**

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### **Abstract:**

This article contributes to the debates around toxic fan practices by focusing on the regulation and management strategies activated intra-fandom in order to combat fan toxicity. In particular, the social media boycott campaign against the teen series *The 100* (The CW, 2014-) is examined after the death of a popular lesbian character in March 2016. This event propelled an online movement termed ‘LGBT Fans Deserve Better’, dedicated to improving the representation of lesbian and bisexual women on television and of characters infamously subjected to the occurrence of the ‘Dead Lesbian Syndrome’ trope. To frame this study, we discuss television representation of lesbian love and its effects on young queer females, and draw some necessary conceptual distinctions within what we call the spectrum of conflict formed by fan-tagonism, anti-fandom, and toxic fan practices, and how that spectrum relates to current research on fan activism. Then we apply a qualitative methodology based on grounded theory, discourse analysis, and reception studies to the study of *The 100* fans’ online interactions in a lesbian forum and on Twitter in the wake of the character’s death. The results confirm the existence of a toxic fan faction that harassed producers on social media. However, three key self-regulation strategies are exemplified at the same time. First, fear of industry retaliation based on internalised social prejudices towards LGBTQ individuals; second, strategic thinking; and third, the common good of achieving a positive LGBTQ representation over time.

**Keywords:** toxic fandom; fan activism; anti-fandom; fan-tagonism; LGBTQ representation; *The 100*

## Introduction

In a social context whereby positive representations can equip LGBTQ adolescents with the tools to deal with harassment and rejection in their communities and families, television fans and producers are at the centre of a controversy over the distorted and overly dramatic treatment of LGBTQ characters in television series. From only a 4% level of representation in US television programs in the 2015-2016 season (GLAAD 2016), we must add the recurrence of the so-called 'Bury Your Gays' trope which, as its name suggests, involves LGBTQ characters dying in tragic circumstances (murder, suicides, accidents, cancer, etc.). These deaths usually take place after these characters are able to identify themselves as LGBTQ individuals or reach a state of fulfillment in the diegesis that is usually associated with a non-heteronormative love interest (Millward, Dodd, and Fubara-Manuel 2017). As we will see throughout this article, 'Bury Your Gays' has had a particularly noticeable impact on lesbian and bisexual characters, which have their own name for the trope: 'Dead Lesbian Syndrome'. Faced with this situation, lesbian fans have launched a variety of actions ranging from fundraising campaigns for organisations that support young people at risk of suicide or, more often, boycotts of television series by either refusing to watch the series live or vehemently criticising producers on social media. However, such demonstrations of fan antagonism may develop into toxic fan practices (Zubernis and Larsen 2012; Proctor 2017), conceptualised here as those fannish discourses and actions that constitute harassment and *ad hominem* attacks on media producers or that promote racism, sexism, homophobia, and other reactionary currents by exploiting fan discontent about television or, as the case may be, across media windows.

This article explores toxic fan practices by focusing on fans' self-regulation and self-management mechanisms in order to combat such fan toxicity in controversies between fans and producers, triggered by the unfair treatment that queer female characters receive on television shows. In particular, the social media boycott campaign against the teen series *The 100* (The CW, 2014-) is examined after the death of popular lesbian character, Commander Lexa, in March 2016 that sparked an online movement, 'LGBT Fans Deserve Better'. The movement aims to confront and recalibrate the representation of LGBTQ minorities on television, and, specifically, to redress the representation of lesbian and bisexual women. The campaign was characterised by its broad impact in mainstream media discourse (Butler 2016; Ryan 2016) and the fiery response of the lesbian and bisexual fans that led to the series' creative staff being harassed on Twitter. Thus, the theoretical review of the article will revolve around two main axes. First, we will review the representation of lesbian love in television and its effects on young lesbians for which *The 100* provides a valuable case study due to its teenage and young adult target audience. Second, we will interrogate the spectrum of conflict formed by 'fan-tagonism' (Johnson 2007), anti-fandom, and toxic fan practices in relation to fan activism. Based on a methodology that combines grounded theory, reception studies, and discourse analysis, various (fan) self-regulation strategies will be analysed by first drawing upon a sample from one of the threads dedicated to *The 100* in the lesbian forum 'The L Chat', and, second, by examining 1,930

tweets that used the hashtag #LGBTFansDeserveBetter. The analysis confirms the existence of a toxic fan faction that harassed producers on social media. However, three key self-regulation strategies are exemplified at the same time: first, fear of industry retaliation based on internalised social prejudices towards LGBTQ individuals; second, strategic thinking; and third, the common good of achieving a positive LGBTQ representation over time.

### **Theoretical Framework: Television Representation of Lesbian Love and Its Effects on Young Lesbians**

After suffering a historical ‘invisibilisation’, the representation of gay men and lesbian women in TV is becoming more common (Gross 1991). One of the core objectives of the LGBTQ movement has been to gain visibility in the media (Fejes and Petrich 1993). The progressive recognition of LGBTQ rights and the changes in the social attitudes towards sexual/gender diversity have brought about a favorable context for this to occur, especially in the last decade. However, Raley and Lucas (2006) question these types of visibility, asking whether an uptick in representation has been positive or more akin to Kristen Warner’s concept of ‘plastic representation’ (2017). Indeed, although there has been an increase in visibility in recent years, in many cases this has also led to an influx of negative stereotypes and institutional forms of ‘queerbaiting’, that is, a tactic whereby media producers suggest a homoerotic subtext between characters as a means to improve or maintain a show’s ratings without actualizing or consummating such a relationship beyond suggestion and innuendo (Brennan 2016; Romano 2014; Ng 2017; see also Scott in this themed section). Given that certain queer representations are inexplicit or subtextual, it is necessary for fans themselves to perform cultural work and interpret them in LGBTQ terms (Dhaenens 2013). In an era increasingly defined by audience fragmentation, this queer context could in some ways account for the multi-casting strategies used by producers in order to create media that appeals to a broader audience demographic (Ng 2017). Moving beyond subtext, Ng (2017) has expanded the use and conceptualisation of the term ‘queerbaiting’ to also describe a manipulation of queer viewers involving canonically queer characters and not just implied ones. In TV news content, for instance, LGBTQ representation has been linked to prominently negative issues, such as the link between HIV and homosexual men, queer youth suicide, and LGBTQ-phobic murders (Ventura 2016). Although lesbian representation is often less visible than male homosexuality, it does seem to occur more frequently in TV fiction. The fact that lesbian plots and characters are more developed in TV fiction than in other TV content might be also linked to the construction of an object of desire — the ‘hot lesbian’ trope (Jackson and Gilbertson 2009) — which is more aimed at pleasing a heterosexual male gaze than to provide a model of reference for lesbian women to identify with. In addition, explicit lesbian characters are recurrently ‘punished’ in fiction narratives for openly showing their homosexuality. The so-called ‘Dead Lesbian Syndrome’, a lesbian subsection of the more general ‘Bury Your Gays’ trope, indicates a tragic ending for non-

heteronormative female characters. In the 2015-2016 season of US scripted broadcast TV, 26.5% of lesbian/bisexual women characters (17 out of 64) were killed off, according to data from 'LGBT Fans Deserve Better' (2016). Considering the data collected from the appearance of the first explicitly lesbian character in the history of television on *Executive Suite* (CBS, 1976-77) in 1976 until 2016, the website Autostraddle finds that lesbian/bisexual women characters achieve a happy ending only in 16% of the cases in the 192 series that included them (from a total of 1,586 series with heterosexual characters) (Hogan 2016).<sup>1</sup> In this same issue, Kelsey Cameron considers the historical television industry as setting the conditions for 'Dead Lesbian Syndrome'. One of the main outcomes of this phenomenon that we argue warrants further investigation is the effect it might have on the audience, especially considering the high rates of depression and suicidality that LGBTQ youth report (Marshal et al. 2011).

The influence of serial fiction on LGBTQ people has been widely discussed with regard to the construction of their own sexual identities. Collier et al. (2009) point out that many lesbian fans incorporate their experiences as audience members into their own sexual identity to normalise and affirm their lesbian experience and to reduce negative feelings about their lesbian identities and to lessen social isolation. In particular, the importance of LGBTQ representation in youth-targeted content is based on the potential pro-social benefits it can have on the development of self-esteem, self-understanding, identity formation, and the 'coming-out' process. LGBTQ representation provides media models that serve as sources of pride, inspiration, and comfort (Gomillion and Giuliano 2011; Masanet and Buckingham 2015) against minority stress (Meyer 2003; Kelleher 2009). In this sense, serial fiction can act as agents of socialisation for LGBTQ people, mainly through the observation of mannerisms and behaviours of characters. Social cognitive theory explains how through the observation of role models with whom they can self-identify, people may develop their own identity in a positive way (Bandura 2011). In fact, many LGBTQ young people obtain, through media, the role models and referents for self-identification that they could not normally obtain in their everyday lives (Evans 2007; Bird, Kuhns, and Garofalo 2012). This observational learning works according to whether its referents are rewarded or punished for their behaviour or the outcomes of those behaviours.

On the other hand, even though media serve as an important source of role models for LGBTQ people, traditional mass media do not always play the function as a primary information source for LGBTQ individuals, mainly due to a lack of self-identification and a lack of contexts of validation. For this reason, the internet becomes the primary source of information for such purposes in many cases (Bond et al. 2009). Thus, lesbian fans find, on the internet, a space to explore their lesbian identities, which also supports the development of alternative discourses and lesbian political activism (Hanmer 2014).

### **Fan-tagonist and Anti-Fan Activism vs. Toxic Fan Practices**

Faced with the impact of the 'Dead Lesbian Syndrome' in television fiction, fans have responded with a number of actions, including organised boycotts of series that perpetuate

the trope, and donation campaigns to organisations that support LGBTQ adolescents at risk of suicide (Aalto 2016). These initiatives can initially be framed within a long tradition of activism by television series fans although they are usually focused on protesting and avoiding the cancellation of their favourite shows due to low ratings (Brower 1992; Jenkins 1992; Sabal 1992; Scardaville 2005). The advent of a participatory and transmedia media ecosystem (Jenkins 2006) and the transformations in television measurement techniques with the incorporation of fan activity in social media (Napoli and Kosterich 2017) have provided a collaborative aspect to the relationship between fans and producers that was uncommon in previous decades of 'Save Our Show' activism (Jenkins 1992). Today, fan activists make strategic use of social media to request the renewal of TV series (Establés-Heras and Rivera-Pinto 2015; Scolari and Establés 2017; Baker-Whitelaw 2017), and they are able to do so by cooperating with producers (understood as television executives, showrunners, and staff writers), abandoning hostilities, and advocating from a more legitimised position (Savage 2014) that even brings indirect benefits to producers' work and advertisers' investment.<sup>2</sup>

However, the tensions between fans and producers for symbolic control of the television text are still visible in areas other than the cancellation of a series. Indeed, they present a complex scenario that demands further interrogation of anti-fan and toxic fan practices because they shatter the idyllic theorisation of a communal fandom promoted by early fan scholarship (Jenkins 1992; Bacon-Smith 1992), and challenge the macroanalysis of fandom as a generally accepted constituent of mainstream discourse (Jenkins 2006; Gray, Sandvoss, and Harrington 2017). In this way, the rejection of questionable creative decisions, often linked to negative or utilitarian representation (e.g., queerbaiting in sweeps season) of women and sexual minorities in television fiction, makes up an important pillar of fan activism. Or perhaps we should refer to it rather as fan-tagonist or anti-fan activism.

In order to map out the characteristics of anti-fan activism, Gray's (2003) landmark article, 'New Audiences, New Textualities: Anti-Fans and Non-Fans', provides a mandatory source. Gray defines anti-fans as 'those who strongly dislike a given text or genre, considering it inane, stupid, morally bankrupt and/or aesthetic drivel' (2003, 70), highlighting the textual and moral dimensions in which anti-fandom operates. Gray also suggests that regular viewing is not a precondition for the anti-fan to emerge as dislike can also be informed by consuming the paratextual production around the show. This position is disputed by Johnson (2007) in his account of 'fan-tagonism' and internal/external interpretive hegemonic struggles among fan factions and producers. Johnson advises that anti-fans '(who without necessarily viewing it) must be differentiated from disgruntled fan factions who hate episodes, eras, or producers because they perceive a violation of the larger text they still love' (2007, 293). However, Gray does contemplate the conversion of a fan into an anti-fan when the show fails to meet the fan's textual and moral expectations (2003, 73). Yet Johnson's observation is pertinent in that it requires clarification of Gray's idea of fan-to-anti-fan conversion. Both fan-tagonist and anti-fan dissatisfaction (or hate) stems from a fan's love for the television text, but, unlike fan-tagonists, anti-fans do not

remain ultimately supportive of the television text despite their interests colliding with the producers', and therefore they might seek the cancellation of the television text (e.g., a boycott campaign). Put in simpler terms, the thing that may activate fan-tagonism is love for the television text and, as Johnson suggests, this rationale originates 'in pleasurable engagement with the diegetic past' (2007, 294) in a way that it compartmentalises dislike in a sort of 'cut off the rotten parts and keep the good ones'. Thus, fan-tagonists enact a conscious fan-amnesia when it comes to some dislikable aspects of the television text that, like bad memories, tend to be suppressed. However, when fans take a more radical stance by rejecting the entirety of the television text because they deem it beyond salvation despite their feelings of attachment or fandom, then they become anti-fans.

It can be argued, then, that fan-tagonism and anti-fandom occur across a spectrum of conflict where dislike is born from affective (and also distant) readings of television texts; is developed at both textual and extratextual level (critique towards the narrative characters or producers, respectively); and is expressed through similar practices and mobilisations as fandom. Notwithstanding, additional revision of Gray's original concept of anti-fandom should be made when he notes that 'in a particularly extreme example of the productivity and depth of textual engagement of anti-fandom, numerous artists worldwide face death threats as a result of their textual output' (2007, 842). Anti-fandom and thus anti-fan activism can indeed be performed at an extratextual level by showing dislike, disapproval, or disappointment towards producers, whereas *ad hominem* criticism is mainly based on narrative or representational shortcomings that link back to failed expectations in the television text. In the same vein, Goodman (2015) explains that fans 'are hard on creators and source texts because the fannish impulse is to maintain the integrity of the fictional universe at the expense of the integrity of the creator(s) and text itself'. However, an important line must be drawn when ethical standards, such as integrity and dignity, are in play. Such necessity is not new, as Jane's (2014) recent research on anti-fandom based on vitriolic comments targeted at cheerleaders attests. Nevertheless, it is time to clean up the conceptual slate so that anti-fan activist efforts, especially those in social media platforms, are not dragged into the same theoretical realm as those we deem as toxic fan practices. Following Proctor's (2017) examination of the issue, we consider toxic fan practices to include fannish discourses and actions that constitute harassment and *ad hominem* attacks on media producers or that promote racist, sexist, homophobic, and other reactionary values by exploiting fan discontent over television or any other media texts.

However, such conceptual borders in the spectrum of conflict formed by fan-tagonism, anti-fandom and toxic fandom turn fuzzy when translated to daily fan praxis where these concepts overlap considerably at times, with some fans performing anti-fandom, fan-tagonism, and toxic fandom simultaneously (but not exclusively). Fan-tagonism may lead to anti-fandom and thus anti-fandom to toxicity. However, there are subtle distinctions between the performative attributes of each and, therefore, it is important to clearly define theoretical distinctions so as to more fully understand the operations of contemporary fandom. Conflict and combat is not necessarily toxic; neither is hate,

dissatisfaction, or disapproval. Toxicity, though, is set apart by the aforementioned defining characteristics.

Fan-tagonists or anti-fans use social media to denounce unfair and stereotypical representation or what they view as poor narrative development although unethical toxic fan practices (e.g., cyberbullying the producers) can pose a threat to the ultimate social mission of fan activism as a whole (Jenkins 2012). Besides looking at the intricacies of fan-producer interactions in this convoluted landscape, scholarly attention should be drawn to how fandoms are internally negotiating and policing toxic fan practices. A clear example of the self-regulation strategies used by lesbian fan activists to mitigate against toxic fan practices is shown in the campaign against the decision made by the producers and writers of *The 100* to kill a popular lesbian character, as discussed in the next section of this article.

### ***The 100*, a Trail of Dead Lesbians and a Fan-Producer Mess: the Toxic Fodder**

*The 100* (The CW, 2014-) is set in a dystopian future where humanity has been forced to abandon Earth and live in a space superstation after a nuclear apocalypse. The fiction follows the story of a group of young delinquents, led by Clarke Griffiths (Eliza Taylor), sent back to the planet on a reconnaissance mission. On Earth, they come into conflict with the 'Grounders', those humans who remained on the planet after the cataclysm and who have developed their own language and social structures. At the top of Grounder society is Commander Lexa (Alycia Debnam-Carey), a warrior leader venerated by her people. The character appears for the first time in the second season, attracting the attention of the protagonist Clarke, with whom, after a series of initial disagreements, she begins a romantic relationship marked by the obligations of both characters to their respective groups.

The relevance of *The 100* for the present study lies precisely in the relationship between Clarke and Lexa, dubbed by fans as 'Clexa', and how the decision to kill Lexa triggered lesbian fan-tagonism against the showrunner Jason Rothenberg and the rest of the writers' room who were accused of queerbaiting and marshalling ignorance about the collateral issues of lesbian representation. While other studies have reviewed the general fan activist response to Lexa's death and accounted for the dynamics of the fan-producer binary (Aalto 2016; Waggoner 2017; Ng 2017; Bourdaa 2018), we are specifically interested in those reactions and practices that fall into the realm of fan toxicity and how other factions of the fandom internally negotiated and attempted to contain them. However, before exploring that further, we will next frame the particularities of the controversy.

After introducing the Clexa pairing in the latter half of the second season, the producers received the unanimous support of critics and audiences: first, for an organic and normalised representation of non-heteronormative female sexuality; second, by having an LGBTQ character as their protagonist; and third, by the multidimensional and non-stereotypical portrayal of their female characters. These are particularly significant merits taking into account the youth segment (16-24 years), at which the series is ostensibly targeted.

However, this stream of praise changed drastically on 3rd March, 2016, during the broadcast of the seventh episode of the third season ('Thirteen', 3.07), when Lexa dies from a stray bullet fired by her collaborator, Titus, minutes after having sex with Clarke in a scene highly promoted by The CW in the days before the episode's release. Although the decision to kill Lexa was due to Alycia Debnam-Carey's contractual obligations with another series in which she appears as a regular character (*Fear the Walking Dead*, AMC, 2015- ), fans soon added Lexa to the growing list of LGBTQ female victims of the 'Dead Lesbian Syndrome' ('LGBT Fans Deserve Better' 2016). In addition to Lexa, in March 2016 three more lesbian characters were killed in Western TV series, namely: Kira in *The Magician* (14th March), Denise in *The Walking Dead* (20th March) and Ash in *Janet King* (24th March). Of those deaths, one was quite similar to Lexa's – Denise was killed by a stray arrow that was meant for another character.<sup>3</sup> The four deaths sparked outrage in fan quarters, as many believed that the deaths were not fair or proportionate to the number of lesbian characters featured in those series. The backlash also extended to entertainment media outlets that also criticised television producers' use of the trope (Levin Russo 2017).

The indignation was particularly heated in the case of *The 100* lesbian fans when considering developments in the fan-producer relationship in the year prior to the airing of 'Thirteen'. Upon hearing the news of Debnam-Carey's series regular contract with *Fear the Walking Dead* after *The 100*'s second season finale and drawing on queer contextuality shaped in the form of TV lesbians' infamously bleak fate and on the show's ruthless diegetic reality, fans started expressing their anxieties centred on Lexa's potential demise. Such concerns were soothed by the producers themselves who would often respond to worried fans on social media with messages that strongly pointed towards the survival of both Lexa and her romance with Clarke, as well as showing support for LGBTQ causes (Ng 2017). Social media was not the only locale in which fans and producers interacted. In order to placate the rumours circulating in relation to Lexa's fate during the filming of the third season, one of the staff writers, Shawna Benson, participated in a popular anonymous lesbian forum, 'The L Chat' (more on this site below) throughout August 2015 under the alias 'Your Friendly Neighbourhood Lurker (YFNL)'.<sup>4</sup> Benson answered questions about the plot and steered away the deathly speculation that was later revealed to be correct ('We Deserved Better' 2016). However, this intervention did not seem to halt the rumours for long as reports started circulating that Debnam-Carey had not been seen on set since the filming of 3.07 was finished in October 2015. In the midst of a heavy promotional tour for the show in January 2016, and coinciding with the filming of the third season finale ('Perverse Instantiation', 3.16), Rothenberg invited fans to the set where they could see Debnam-Carey and Taylor in their character costumes, speaking to a concerned fan to reassure her that Lexa was safe ('We Deserved Better' 2016). Fans took this as the ultimate proof that Lexa would live only to discover the exact opposite within the following two months and thus entered into fan-tagonist or anti-fan or, in the most extreme cases, toxic fan practices.

In the wake of the airing of 'Thirteen' and the first demonstrations of anti-fan discontent, a boycott campaign against *The 100* to force its cancellation began on Twitter

under the hashtag #LGBTFansDeserveBetter. This resulted in the creation of an online movement bearing the same name ([www.lgbtfansdeservebetter.com](http://www.lgbtfansdeservebetter.com)), with the aim to provide ‘information, statistics and resources to enable media creators, production staff, critics and viewers to learn about the history of representation, the tropes encountered, and the current state of representation on TV’ (op cit., 2016). The campaign aimed to achieve three objectives: 1) to lower the audience ratings of *The 100* and its presence in social media to force its cancellation; 2) to attract donations for The Trevor Project, an organisation that supports LGBTQ youth at risk of suicide; 3) to draw attention to the inadequate representation of LGBTQ women in mass media. And, as a socio-political backdrop to this initiative, to draw attention to the passage of homophobic and transphobic decrees in a dozen states in the United States (Hogan 2016).

The boycott protocol included a widespread ‘unfollowing’ campaign centred on Jason Rothenberg whose Twitter account went from 121,000 to 107,000 followers in the five days following the death of Lexa (Roth 2016). The overall fan strategy implemented here sought to capitalise on Twitter metrics’ affordances to ‘blackout’ #The100 or related hashtags in trending topic lists. As shown in cases of fans applying Twitter strategies for show renewal (Guerrero-Pico 2017), trending topics are based on a sudden spike in hashtag usage at a specific moment in time (e.g., just during the airing of an episode and not during the whole week) in conjunction with the number and location of participants using said hashtag. Thus, activist Clexa fans sought the opposite of this logic by refusing to tag *The 100* or the crew during the airing of the episodes following 3.07. However, the boycott campaign did not fulfil the goal of cancelling the series – the CW announced the renewal of the show for a fourth season on the 11th of March, 2016.

On a more positive note, two years after the start of the action (10 March, 2018), the campaign was close to achieving its goal of raising \$200,000 for The Trevor Project (LGBT Fans Deserve Better n.d.). Nonetheless, lesbian and bisexual fan activists of *The 100* have done work that goes beyond convincing their peers and heterosexual fans of the importance of positive portrayals of LGBTQ women on television. Easy access to producers through social media can become a poisoned chalice for the cause defended by fans, especially in a situation favourable to the outpouring of emotion and affect such as the death of a popular character.

307 REASONS TO FIGHT one of them being that @JRothenbergTV is an arrogant little prick have a bit of respect you fucking cunt (Twitter, 22/04/2016)

Reasoned debates and campaigning efforts by fan-tagonists and newly converted anti-fans coexisted with examples of toxic fan practices, such as defamatory and vexatious messages, as well as death threats against Jason Rothenberg, forcing him to abandon his interaction on social media. As shown in the tweet above sent by a female fan, it is important to remark that toxic fan practices are not necessarily gendered, which goes against the tide of widespread discourses about a ‘toxic geek masculinity’ (Salter and Blodgett 2017) taking

over popular culture and that, in fact, erases established forms of toxicity performed by fangirls. In this sense, Zubernis and Larsen (2012) provide an invaluable precedent with their comprehensive account of the *Supernatural* fandom depicting situations of personal attacks by fangirls on other fangirls: 'The consequences are sometimes devastating for the victims, some of whom withdraw from fandom completely rather than risk further bullying' (120). At the same time, a reflection on the limits of actions performed by fans, about what is considered 'normal' and 'acceptable', is common in the daily running of any fandom as explained in Zubernis and Larsen (2012) and successive studies (Busse 2013; Stanfill 2013; Gonzalez 2016) although specific self-control rules and strategies vary depending on the characteristics of each community and the activities that are carried out.

## **Methodology**

The main objective of this article is to analyse the mechanisms of self-management and self-regulation implemented by lesbian fan activists to police toxic fan practices amid controversies with the producers of their favourite series related to the unfair treatment received by the lesbian and bisexual characters. Therefore, our research aims to answer the following research question: what strategies do the lesbian fans of *The 100* use in order to stop the propagation of toxic messages and attitudes, and to fulfill the objectives of their campaign for raising awareness of inadequate media representation?

## **Sample and Method**

The qualitative research has been carried out following an approach that combines reception studies (Van den Bulck et al. 2015) from a queer perspective (Jackson and Gilbertson 2009) with discourse analysis (Francisco et al. 2016) and grounded theory (Andréu et al. 2007; Charmaz 2006; Leurs 2015). Specifically, we have analysed the content of one thread focused on *The 100* in the 'The L Chat' forum in March 2016. Functioning since 2009, and with about 17 million published posts (1 June, 2017), 'The L Chat' is an anonymous forum in the English language in which issues relating to current affairs and popular culture are discussed and speculated upon from a lesbian perspective, especially the threads about media products with lesbian or bisexual characters, or gossip about the sexual orientation of celebrities. Because of its anonymity, the forum enjoys popularity and influence among lesbian users worldwide who consider it a safe place on the internet, and it is frequented by so-called industry insiders to share private information and scoops, gauge reactions from fans, and generally monitor speculation. Indeed, as explained above, 'The L Chat' was chosen by writer Shawna Benson – albeit under a nickname – to quash rumours about Lexa's potential fate. Despite the facetious tone of many of the posts, the pseudonymous/anonymous nature of the forum and public accessibility also enable trolling, hostile interactions among its users, and hate speech towards other individuals of the LGBTQ spectrum (chiefly, transgender or non-binary people) and heterosexuals. Such a complex user environment, along with its open access structure, were key in selecting this

forum for analysis of toxic fan practices. The thread (the sixth out of a total of seventeen created at the time of writing of this article) has 2,000 pages and a total of 69,957 published posts. In addition, 1,930 tweets to the official Twitter accounts of the series (@cwthe100), Jason Rothenberg (@JRothenbergTV), Eliza Taylor (@MisElizaTaylor), and Alycia Debnam-Carey @DebnamCarey) using the #LGBTFansDeserveBetter tag or the phrase 'LGBT Fans Deserve Better' were analysed. For gathering data from Twitter, we used the browser tool NCapture which relies on the Twitter API to provide a sample of tweets. This application facilitated a dataset that we sorted, filtered and coded using NVivo 11 Pro, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS). All the anonymous 'The L Chat' posts quoted in this study have been edited for clarity and identified by their post number within their specific thread while the user accounts of quoted tweets have been anonymised to preserve author identities.

The analysis was conducted following an inductive approach based on grounded theory in order to generate meaningful patterns from the data gathered. The aim of grounded theory is the development of 'specific-context' theories based on the data offered by the context itself, that is, from the information that emerges from the data collected by the researchers (Glaser and Strauss 1967). This methodological approach allowed us to set apart three recurrent or frequent themes or issues emerging from the 'Clexa' fan discussions examined in this article.

In this sense, all three co-authors analysed the posts and tweets by classifying them into the various discursive categories with the aim of increasing as much as possible the neutrality in the treatment of those posts at the moment of their codification, therefore boosting the objectivity and validity of the results. To ensure inter-coder reliability, the coding criteria were agreed upon through meetings and training sessions, and the codifications made by each of the coders were revised and adjusted according to the operational definitions of each category.

At the beginning of the analysis of both forum posts and tweets, two basic categories corresponding to the two contexts around Lexa's death in *The 100* were differentiated between activism and fan reception. Other subcategories were added by means of condensation of meaning and identification of patterns according to the theoretical framework and the research question, thus revealing different discursive structures underlying the interaction of fans. These subcategories include mechanisms of self-regulation, hostilities, queerbaiting, homophobia, harassment, and lesbian representation tropes, among others.

This approach did entail some limitations; it is not transferable to other kinds of data analysis even drawing from the same case study because it depends on the characteristics of both the analysis and the researchers (data and source samples and the coder's interpretation), and the fans' background (age, ethnic origin, occupation, socioeconomic status). Nonetheless, we believe that the methods used here would be a valuable mechanism with which to detect meaningful trends about the issues and situations occurring and being negotiated inside fandoms.

## **Analysis**

In relation to the activist context, the analysis of the 'self-regulation mechanisms' category gave rise to three major argumentative strategies used by fans to discourage toxic fan practices that deviated from the campaign's objectives: fear of retaliation from the media industry, appeal to strategic thinking and the long-term, and appealing to the common good: achieving positive LGBTQ representation on television.

### ***Fear of Retaliation***

Regarding fear of retaliation from the industry, it was observed how some of the fans within 'The L Chat' departed from the vulnerable situation of women and sexual/racial minorities in an industry dominated by heterosexual men to take a critical stance, to the point of virtually censoring all the actions led by fans. Paradoxically, while recognising the disadvantaged position of LGBTQ women, the fear of those in a position to be able to re-address LGBTQ characters was alluded to, precisely because of the vehemence shown by fans in the campaign:

All of these death threats, suicide claims, attempts to boycott and fundraise in retaliation against a show that has, unlike many other TV shows, sought to represent LGBTQ characters and has a very rare bisexual lead will backfire, I guarantee it. I can't speak for hetero males because I'm not one, but as a rising African American lesbian writer in this industry (a triple burden – black, female, and gay) I wouldn't be surprised if this fallout caused hetero males (who are the vast majority in this business) to shy away from ever featuring another LGBTQ character in such a prominent role. I would suspect some may be too afraid of writing about one lest they unwittingly stumble into a trope (...) Because the message you're sending every writer and every producer is that if you take on LGBTQ character and choose an unpopular, and by many accounts insensitive, plot point, we will tear you down, we will tear your show down, and we will lobby for your show to be cancelled and everyone on it to lose their jobs. For some, that price may be too high to even consider venturing into LGBTQ territory (*The 100* Part VI, 9/3/2016, #48731).

On the one hand, it can be observed how the producers of the series are victimised (mentioning a possible job loss that connects with the identity of this fan as a screenwriter). On the other, fans are blamed regardless of whether they act ethically or not (declaring them to be responsible for a hypothetical disappearance of LGBTQ characters). This tension is an implicit recognition of the influence of fan-activist-lobbying despite their initial position of weakness. Other fans, however, are aware of this process of producer-victimisation, thus making calls to be careful with the language used to avoid being seen as aggressive and

intolerant towards other minorities, as can be seen in this discussion regarding anti-Semitic insults directed at Jason Rothenberg:

ANONYMOUS 1:

Daily reminder to not refer to JR as Jrat as it comes off as anti-Semitic because JR IS JEWISH. Regardless of your personal feelings, please use something else like JRot.<sup>5</sup>

ANONYMOUS 2:

Yes, no matter how angry we are to the show's producer, we should watch also our words and actions. We wouldn't want to be called bullies or aggressive.

ANONYMOUS 3:

Furthermore, HE IS ALREADY PAINTING HIMSELF AS A VICTIM and gaslighting us – not use a slur and give him more ammunition (*The 100* Part VI, 11/3/2016, #68660)

A similar train of thought is observed in regard to vicious criticism directed at Shawna Benson, whose name was repeatedly referenced in the threads' posts in light of her previous history of direct interaction with fans in the forum. Implying once again the uncertain working conditions of budding screenwriters in the industry and wielding lack of experience and medical reasons as arguments, Benson is also constructed as a potential victim for fans to polish their critique as a contrast to the customary scathing posts that can be found in 'The L Chat':

ANONYMOUS 1:

Can you guys please stop attacking people personally, at least the writers... people like Shawna, they're total newbies, they're not even senior writer staff like Kim [Shumway]. They're only starting up their careers. This is not their fault. Did Shawna make a mistake of speaking up here? Yes, but there's no reason to be this horrid against them, especially considering she spoke up about suffering from clinical depression. If you have issues, take it up with JRoth, but I wish people wouldn't attack the staff who don't control dick.

ANONYMOUS 2:

Agree. We don't want them to be seen as victims and describing us as bullies. We can do better.

ANONYMOUS 3:

I should quote this, always.

Let's stop targeting Shawna & others yeah? Let's just focus and shade JRoth, but nevertheless, we should not be the BULLIES.

ANONYMOUS 4:

How about this, we keep reminding people to not look like bullies but we understand that when Shawna decides to do a periscope with her sister where she further invalidates people than seemingly fake cries and then randomly starts singing, people are going to grill her. It's okay for people to grill her. It's okay for people to ask her, 'Hey, you said you didn't know, but you went to our safe space a month after all of the others admitted to having known'. It's not okay for people to say, 'you fucking lying bitch, you knew damn well about her death in August because Layne [Morgan, personal assistant on the show] knew about it in June!' Urge people to be polite or at least not brutal like we are in here, but they're still going to message and tweet whoever they want to. I almost tweeted as some people insisting on asking Jason for an apology to stop tweeting at him, but I figured they wouldn't listen (*The 100*, Part VI, 11/3/2016, #66923).

### **Strategic Thinking**

As for the second mechanism of appealing to strategic thinking, the activist fans of *The 100* deployed a series of tips and hints to their peers to maximise the scope of the campaign and lessen the effects of fangirls' harassment to the creative leaders of the series. During this process, and similar to what was observed in the *Xena: Warrior Princess* fandom (Standfill 2013), the fan activists participating in 'The L Chat' recognised the stereotype of 'the emotionally stunted fangirl' and then used it, often condescendingly and aggressively, against other fans on Twitter. In their opinion, such fangirls do not make a significant contribution to the campaign and tarnish the reputation of it:

The fandom on Twitter is making us look bad. Bullying is never the answer. (*The 100* Part VI, 6/3/2016, #31099)

Girls (...) why the hell would you email 'MALE' executives you think they will defend the Lesbians they are egotistic, pessimistic assholes that rarely allow any type of scenes on their network. If they do is because of the LGBT speaking their voices yet we only get the limited specs. They will look at us like we are psycho and fan girl crazy over what happen and to make it worse the Twitter threats and comments from people do you really think we will be heard because of some people doing crazy shit like that. You have to remember in order to hit the target you must be smart about it and go about it the quiet way. As far as the 100 show there is a way in 'The Blackout' but you must push hard to get the word out. Hit TUMBLR, TWITTER get the Brazilians, Europeans

and everyone else committed and angry about what happened and push, push, push until we shut the ratings off. Instead of sitting here angry and sobbing and posting about shit get the ball rolling and get as many as people as you can to join the Blackout. You have to remember the 'PUBLIC' is the one who makes the network money without 'us' ratings will sky rocket down and it will be a complete chaos. They make money of the viewers if they have none guess what 'Network' gets blacklisted. Everything is about competition and money. It's about time the LGBT community riots against TV shows that lack the LGBT representation (*The 100* Part VI, 8/3/2016, #41399).

The calls to act in an intelligent and sensible way, emphasising the condition of *The 100* fan network as a valuable audience that networks sell to advertisers and, therefore, as a collective with the capacity to change the rules of the game, are frequent in this type of self-regulating strategy. This strategy also highlights the transcultural and transnational side of fandom (Chin and Hitchcock Morimoto 2013) as a factor in the formation of a critical fan base that supports the campaign. Similar arguments are repeated in the following post in 'The L Chat' about the wars between the shippers of the heterosexual pair of Clarke and Bellamy (Bellarke) and the shippers of Clarke and Lexa (Clexa), revived shortly after the death of Lexa and the renewal of the series:

OK! Stop putting the focus on the series and in the words of the actors. It is a sunken ship and its sailors trying to rise to the surface while drown. The boats that interest us are those who are sailing or being at sea without defining its destination. Do not miss our true goal of view and remember that Bellarke are your straws. They MUST hold onto it because they have nothing else, whether or not endgame. We want to change mentalities. It does not help answer your strategic attacks with anger, because we are giving alibi. We do not want to look like a simple fandom angered by the death of Lexa. WE ARE MUCH MORE THAN THIS. (...) Do not fall into provocations. We knew they would undermine the character of Lexa sooner rather than later. Do not let use our feelings to make us look like idiots. We need to be cold, restrained and more calculating than ever. Someone said yesterday that it would turn even 'if it was not even a lesbian!' We cannot change what they have done or what they are saying. THIS IS A LONG TERM. Do not fall. Pay attention to what we have under control, OUR decisions, OUR actions. BE SMART. MORE THAN EVER (*The 100* Part VII, 13/3/2016, #12213).

Once again, as if it were a military campaign, fans are urged to sacrifice their emotions and act in a calculated way to protect the message of the campaign, a slogan that goes beyond the death of a character whom fans considered a role model:

#Lexa was more than just a character. She was a beacon of hope and inspiration. LGBT FANS DESERVE BETTER (Twitter, 10/3/2016)

LEXA FOR ME is my hero, who I strive to be (Twitter, 18/3/2016)

As the 'The L Chat' post mentioned above points out, the work of Clexa fans is bound to 'change mentalities' in a 'long-term' effort. In this way, the Bellarke shippers and their attacks on Lexa are despised, praising the value of the shippers of Clarke and Lexa.

### **The Common Good: For a Positive LGBTQ Representation**

After the series renewal by The CW, numerous messages were posted in the forum and on Twitter by fans who expressed their disappointment at this news, accompanied by the fear that Clarke's definitive romantic interest was Bellamy. This exemplifies yet another media representation trope, the 'Bisexual Erasure', in which the bisexual character returns to heterosexuality after a homosexual experience and never again makes mention of this experience, reducing it to merely 'a phase'. The activists then reacted by arguing that cancelling the series was never the main objective of the campaign, but, rather, denouncing the mistreatment of LGBTQ characters on television is a task that transcends *The 100* and Commander Lexa's death. Through this third mechanism, fan activists not only managed to reshape the campaign's purpose to lift up followers' morale after a setback, but also continued to discourage the stream of negative comments towards those in charge of the series:

Come on, Leskru. We are stronger and better than this. Our MAIN purpose wasn't to get the show cancelled. The show is beneath us now. NOW we have a bigger purpose: raise awareness of the mistreatment LGBT characters on television (*The 100* Part VI, 11/3/2016, #69736).

Ladies - this is bigger than *The 100* [sic] and its showrunner/writing team.<sup>6</sup> Nothing can be done now to correct the damage killing Lexa did as far as the show goes. Either you are still a fan of the show and will watch it or you are not. Yay for the actors and crew who get another year of making money. What CAN be done however is continue raising awareness of the continued use of lesbian tropes and exploiting the queer community for professional gain without repercussions. We've made the most noise with this fundraiser and should continue keeping that type of positive pushback the focus. That should be the focus (*The 100* Part VI, 11/3/2016, #69933).

The second post highlights the economic exploitation of the LGBTQ community as one of the issues to raise awareness about, besides the recurrence of lesbian tropes. Following this line, some of the analysed tweets also point towards the inclusion of LGBTQ storylines in

shows with the sole aim of improving ratings, which would imply queerbaiting by the producers:

LGBT fans deserve better because we don't further a demographic, or to spike ratings. We want to find real stories that we relate to. Okay? (Twitter, 11/3/2016)

LGBT FANS DESERVE BETTER because we want well written characters and arc and not just baiting for ratings (Twitter, 11/3/2016)

LGBT FANS DESERVE BETTER because I won't watch a show that uses us to boost ratings but they tell us we don't matter... (Twitter, 13/3/2016)

This is what happens when you think we are hip for ratings, yet you ignore our struggles. LGBT fans deserve better. (Twitter, 13/3/2016)

Queerbaiting is perceived, therefore, as a commercial trivialisation of the problems that affect lesbian and bisexual fans, who do not find a normalised and healthy representation of their affective and sexual identities in hegemonic discourses.

## **Conclusions**

*The 100* controversy highlights the complexity of fan-producer and intra-fandom relationships within broader television studies, where fan-friendly approaches are more common, as a contrast to the negative context in which the first wave of fan scholarship flourished (Jenkins 1992). Still, much like in the early days of fan scholarship, intra- and inter-fandom negotiation processes and conflicts are often minimised in favour of more monolithic and bucolic views on fandom, largely built on the classic notion of community despite recent research questioning such a monolithic construction (Linden and Linden 2017; Hills 2017). It can be argued, then, that mainstream fandom has enabled views in which the value of fans as active consumers is associated with vast capital and social structures that altruistically ensure the survival and expansion of media products or brands in a highly competitive market. In other words, the practices of the fans, including activism anchored to the fan object on social media, tend to be understood as promotion for media products (Lozano Delmar, Hernández-Santaollalla, and Ramos-Serrano 2013) although some concerns have been raised regarding the (free) labour implications of said practices (Milner 2009; Stanfill and Condis 2014; Guerrero-Pico 2017). But the inner fannish tensions and controversies about the symbolic dominance of the products and online spaces that interpolate the identity of the fans are still rather underexplored despite significant steps towards that direction in the last decade (e.g., Johnson 2007; Theodoropoulou 2007; Alters 2007; McCudden 2011; Zubernis and Larsen 2012; Busse 2013; Stanfill 2013). This is in spite

of increasing media attention towards toxic fan practices (Proctor 2017) that, as we have argued here, are placed at the most extreme end of the spectrum of conflict.

The internal struggle for the control of the television text is clear in the case of *The 100*. In this regard, fans participating in the ‘LGBT Fans Deserve Better’ campaign used social media to denounce the distorted and harmful representation of lesbians and bisexuals. Fueled by their newly developed fan-tagonism or anti-fandom, the actions and initiatives of the fan activists were not only directed towards the producers of the series and towards the actors in the industry, but also to other fans, specifically toxic fans, within their own community. The comments analysed reveal a constant negotiation for the ultimate goal of the campaign and the means to achieve it at a time when the hostilities towards the producers by toxic fans threatened to damage the ethos of fan activists and the whole campaign. Therefore, the self-regulation strategies deployed by fan activists on ‘The L Chat’ illustrate the tensions that are intrinsic to most, if not all, fan cultures.

The method and sample used for this research have not allowed for the comparison of the mechanisms of self-regulation and its content with variables such as age, ethnic origin, occupation, or socioeconomic status of the fans that employed them. In this sense, further development in the study of the different realities that make up the LGBTQ community and fandom is seen as a goal that must be incorporated into both queer and fan studies agendas.

From a queer perspective, some of the arguments put forward by lesbian and bisexual fans, especially regarding the use of the discourse of fear, are about the internalisation of social prejudices linked to LGBTQ individuals (Kelleher 2009), on the one hand, and about the idea of collective vulnerability as something irreversible (Schmidt, Miles, and Welsh 2010), on the other. While attempting to control the types of messages that fans articulate on social media on behalf of the campaign, the adoption of this discourse would imply the danger of promoting a policy of minimums in which the way of representing LGBTQ people would become a secondary matter to the detriment of its visibility.

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## Notes:

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<sup>1</sup> The character of Julie Solkin, played by Geraldine Brooks, in *Executive Suite* is hit by a car while chasing after her love interest, Leona, who had run out after reciprocating Julie's feelings.

<sup>2</sup> According to Guerrero-Pico (2017), this increase in the fandom's ability to influence could entail new forms of exploitation and commodification that are in conflict with the fan's conception as a consumer resistant to the dictates of hegemonic discourses (Jenkins 1992; Bacon-Smith 1992).

<sup>3</sup> In fact, it could be said that both deaths echo the infamous demise of Tara on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* by means of another stray bull.

<sup>4</sup> Note the wordplay with *rot*.

<sup>5</sup> Some fans took the boycott further than Twitter and tweaked *The 100's* title also in message board interactions in order to negatively impact Google results. Alternatives styles such as *The 100* or *The 100* are still among the most popular ones.