Hannibal's Hungry Tumblr Fandom

By Dana Hayes

After walking into a New York City Apple store last July, Catherine Boyd searched for an open seat in the front row, specifically the one being held by a friend she knew only through Twitter and recognized only through photos shared online. At the end of a long Q&A for the store’s Meet the Filmmaker series, Boyd was finally able to speak to one of her newest TV idols: Mads Mikkelsen, the star of NBC’s television series, Hannibal.

"I humbly asked Mads to thank the International [Hannibal fans]," Boyd said. "So, many International Fannibals now feel that Mads spoke directly to them."

While participating in the Q&A to promote a Danish film, The Hunt, in which he also starred, Mikkelsen did not hesitate to thank Hannibal fans across the globe.

"I know the fan group has been a tremendous participant in making Hannibal's second season happen," Mikkselsen said in the interview, which has since been viewed in its entirety more than 23,000 times on YouTube. "We will buy you all a beer."

Buying a round for Boyd and her fellow "Fannibals" — devotees of the television drama detailing the life of human-eating psychologist Hannibal Lecter — may be difficult, as the show's fans worked from countries around the world to make Hannibal's second season a reality.

With their active Twitter presence and prolific Tumblr feeds, Fannibals have commanded a powerful social media campaign since its premiere in April 2013, dedicated to keeping the low-rated show on air. These Fannibals have been a significant part of NBC's decision to renew the series for another season, as television executives begin to shift the way they evaluate programming, giving less weight to traditional markers of a show's popularity, such as Nielsen ratings, and more to the online presence of fans like Boyd.

"I think we are in the middle of a transitional period in the way other metrics [for judging television viewership] are being used in relation to [Nielsen] ratings," Hannibal Associate Producer Loretta Ramos said. "We definitely struggled in the ratings on NBC – we did really well internationally – but we had some obstacles to overcome and obviously our core fan base found us quickly."

In its first season, Hannibal averaged a lackluster 2.0 Nielsen rating, dropping from a 2.7 to a 1.6 between its season premiere and finale.

Contrary to these decreasing ratings was the huge growth in the show's popularity on social media, particularly Twitter and Tumblr, as fans like Tumblr user Stephanie Edwards began creating blogs about the show.

"As of the premiere, I knew of only us and nbchannibal [the show's official Tumblr page, run by NBC employees]," Edwards said. "And by the end of that week I was seeing new blogs all over Tumblr, with people even changing their original URLs to reflect the show."

Since Hannibal's 13-episode first season ended in June, blogs like Edwards' have proliferated, with more than 50 devoted Tumblr accounts posting memes, gifs, original artwork, long-form commentary and other content related to the show.
While Edwards credits her love of previous shows by cult-favorite writer/producer Bryan Fuller, the creator of Hannibal, with inspiring her to create the blog, other fans, such as Vikki Gamier, created Hannibal Tumbrls after years of following the Hannibal Lecter novels by Thomas Harris and their film adaptations, most notably The Silence of the Lambs.

"My first experience with a fan community was probably with Tom Petty in the mid 2000s," Gamier, a first-time Tumblr user said. "This is so much more involved now."

One dominant aspect of Hannibal fan culture is fan-produced media, which is especially present on Tumblr. Blog-runners, including user hannidollcrush, upload "original graphics everyday...[or] whenever inspiration strikes," and reblog or comment on other fans' work. These graphics frequently poke fun at the show, explore its complex characters and utilize its precise, cinematic style. With a limited amount of material to draw on in only 13 episodes, Tumblr Fannibals rely on their own creativity to continue creating new media and digging deeper into the show.

"I add my own spice to everything I post...such as words, quotes, ways of me editing the pictures," Tumblr user hannidollcrush said. "I can only hope that [a post will] be different and cross my fingers that it won’t offended any fellow Fannibals."

Edwards similarly injects her own personality into her media, relying on skills she developed before she created her Tumblr.

"I really have a love for Photoshop outside of this fandom anyway, so I’m constantly making things," she said. "But the beauty of this show makes it really fun and very easy to make great looking things. Some shows are just awful color-wise, so I don’t even bother with those."

Tumblr’s base in visual media makes it "the perfect medium" for artistically-inclined Fannibals, according to Ramos. She refers to the show’s carefully crafted aesthetic as part of what draws artistic fans to the show.

"Everything is so purposeful – the cinematography, the production design, the costume design," Ramos said. "The creative team has really strived to make the show look cinematic."

Ramos also notes the high quality of this fan-produced art.

"I can't even fathom how much time and effort it takes for these fans to create these amazing images," she said. "They're beautiful and not just off-the-cuff things. It's fully realized, well thought-out art."

In response, the show's official Tumblr, nbchannibal, has become an active source of direct engagement with fans, posting exclusive content and behind-the-scenes media for fans to reblog, remix and share.

"The NBC Digital Team has done an amazing job [with Hannibal's social media presence], above and beyond what most TV shows get from them," Ramos said. "The way they interact with fans is so in the spirit of the show: They can be dark and macabre, but they also have a lot of fun with it. They can be cheeky; there’s a winking aspect to their posts, which people respond to so much."

Much like the fan Tumbrls, nbchannibal remains active through the show's hiatus, capitalizing on holidays like Halloween and Thanksgiving through memes and gifs. One meme posted by the
Digital Team on Thanksgiving Day, which was reblogged by more than 10,000 fans, features an image of Mikkelsen as Hannibal standing behind a turkey dinner and is captioned "Happy Thanksgiving...the turkey is people."

While *Hannibal* may have struggled in traditional ratings, Ramos also notes that *Hannibal* was the most downloaded show on the file-sharing site BitTorrent during its first season, a metric that NBC does not take into account because illegal streaming and downloading does not generate ad revenue.

"Right now, everyone is trying to figure out how to incorporate DVR, online, and other ancillary statistics in their overall numbers," she said.

As this evaluation process goes into flux, Ramos credits a core group of leaders in the online fan community, including Boyd, with having a significant impact on the show's visibility.

"I have been told by two production teams – both *Community* and *Hannibal* – that my efforts were a direct factor in keeping the show on the air," Boyd said, "particularly with the focus on Twitter trending and thanking ad sponsors."

For Edwards, the ability to connect with members of the creative team is "quite rare in some fandoms." She specifically credits Fuller and the main cast members, many of whom live-tweet episodes as they air on TV, as well as the show's staff for reaching out to fans.

"I'd probably be a bit disheartened by now if the cast, crew and the NBC team weren't as active as they are," she said.

So when *Hannibal* appeared to be "on the bubble" of cancellation due to low ratings back in June, Fannibals reacted.

"I felt like I needed to keep a baby off the train tracks, or rescue it off the side of a freezing mountain," Boyd said. "NBC had put my beloved show, that I watched on Hulu on my laptop, out to die. I couldn't help myself."

Boyd knew the next steps in activating a fan community due to her involvement with *Community*, another low-rated NBC show currently in its fifth season. Using its strong Twitter following, *Community* united fans through its viral "Six Seasons and a Movie" slogan, which began as a line of dialogue on the show.

"I connected to other fans on Twitter with #savemycourse," Boyd said. "And I started a blog, and stayed up every night until 4 a.m., just brainstorming how to help the show."

According to Boyd and Edwards, the strategic push from Fannibals to keep Hannibal on the air included organizing Hashtags of the Week, encouraging fans to use the show's most popular iconography, like flower crowns, in fan art and connecting with TV critics who could publicize the show on more traditional media platforms.

"I am proud to be the free PR for a thing I love," Boyd said. "I just want to keep giggling over hot boys on Tumblr with the global fans, who absolutely crack me up."

These global fans are also a key piece of the renewal puzzle, according to Ramos, as *Hannibal* airs in over 70 countries through international cable networks like Sony AXN.
"We’ve tried really hard to make our outreach a global one, she said. "Hannibal has a lot of international fans, so on our side, we try to include the worldwide fan community."

Ramos describes this ability to connect with the international community through social media as one major difference between Hannibal and Fuller’s last cult TV hit, Pushing Daisies, which ran for one season back in 2008.

"In that short span of time [between 2008 and today], the importance and vitality of online fan communities has obviously exploded," Ramos said. "Even when Pushing Daisies was on, that really loyal following didn’t have the same online fan presence that Hannibal does."

In addition to a presence across social media platforms, Hannibal’s dark, violent tone and focus on psychologically complex characters leads fans to perform deep character analysis and plot dissections, placing the show into a category that television scholar Jason Mittell terms "drillable media."

The opposite of "spreadable media," like YouTube videos and memes that are able to reach a wide audience without background knowledge, the rise of narrative complexity in shows like Hannibal has united fans who look to decipher plot points and unpack character motivations or risk not understanding an aspect of the show.

"This is really the first [fandom] where I feel like, if I wanted to, I could really go into depth and debate these characters with people who would give intelligent discussion back," Edwards said. "For most other fandoms, I'll watch the show, I'll make and reblog a few posts...but that's really where my involvement ends. I have made friends because of [Hannibal], but they're not what's keeping me interested in it."

This camaraderie is nonetheless a key component of the Fannibals, a community that Gamier refers to as "pretty tight."

"I’ve been on Tumblr for three-plus years now and I’ve never seen a community as united as the Fannibals," one Tumblr user said. "My fellow Fannibals are some of the kindest, most generous, hilarious and fiercely intelligent people I’ve ever met."

When Fannibals do disagree, however, it frequently is over character analysis, in particular which characters make the best romantic couple, a common dialogue within Tumblr and other Internet fan communities. A wide variety of jargon has emerged for the purpose of such debates, including "One True Pairing," or a fan’s favorite couple, and "shipping," or the act of putting a couple together in fan-fiction or other fan media.

For Hannibal, Mikkelsen’s Lecter is often paired in romantic relationships with the series other protagonist, FBI consultant Will Graham, as well as female characters like fellow psychologist Alana Bloom or Abigail Hobbs, a possibly sociopathic teenager under Lecter’s care.

"I know there’s a lot of Hannigram shipping out there," Gamier said, referring to the Lecter-Graham pairing. "That’s not my bag, but I get it and respect them. I am more of a Hannigail or Hannibloom shipper."

Despite such disagreements, Edwards agrees that the overall fandom has been a positive community.
"We definitely seem to be a welcoming bunch," she said. "There are debates about certain characters, but I think for the most part people are quite respectful of the fact that just because they see it one way, it doesn’t mean everyone has to. I hope that attitude continues."

Boyd feels this type of camaraderie among the fan leaders as well.

"There’s always some jealousy and weirdness in any fandom, and I find there are always people on the sidelines who try to take a top worker down in jealousy and de-throne them," she said. "But I surround myself with a team of very good people and work from a spirit of love and service. A bully can’t take a whole group down, and love conquers all."