

Nerdfighteria's Literary Salon:

Understanding the Social Networks in an Online Community of Readers and Authors

Alaine Martaus, Graduate School of Library and Information Science, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Introduction

In January 2007, brothers John and Hank Green began a year-long experiment in which they would communicate only through alternating videos posted to their Vlogbrothers YouTube channel. Their witty, fast-talking video letters gradually collected a significant fan-base, especially amongst teen and young adult self-proclaimed nerds, and **spawned a tight-knit community of followers who call themselves the Nerdfighters**. For those interested in youth culture and online fan communities, the Nerdfighters provide an opportunity to observe **a unique kind of active fandom in which adults take on a distinctive role**.

As objects of fandom who are also participants in the fan community, **the Vlogbrothers guide community values**, covertly cultivating their position as experts/advisors and encouraging their fans to adopt a particular kind of engagement with the larger world. The intention of this research is to explore one aspect of this fandom-based value system, tracing the rhetoric used **to promote reading, critical and imaginative engagement with texts, and a form of multi-literacy that connects new media and books in intriguing new ways**.

Central Figures



Vlogbrothers: John and Hank Green



Young Adult Authors:
David Levithan,, Libba Bray,
(Secret Sister) Maureen Johnson,
Scott Westerfeld (filming)



Nerdfighters/YouTube Stars:
Charlie McDonnell & Alex Day

A Social Network of Engaged Readers

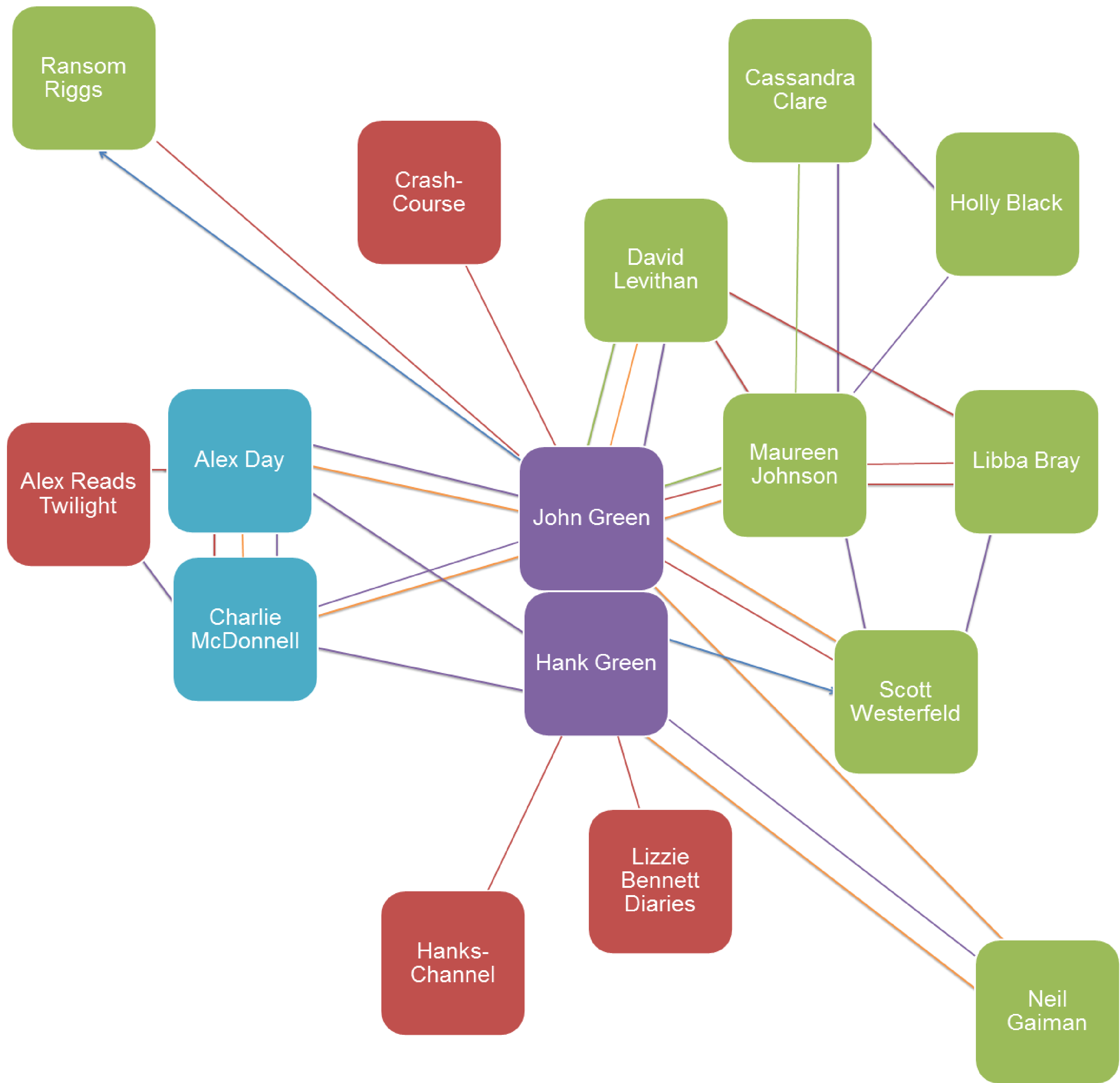
The Nerdfighter community is a social network with the Vlogbrothers' videos at its center, but John and Hank Green are not its only important voices. Through online and offline connections between authors, artists, and various other content creators, **a core group of influential figures becomes discernible**. Many of these people are adults like John and Hank Green, but a few significant figures are young adults who started as Nerdfighters themselves and who have over time established their own fandoms and their own sphere of influence. **These social media-driven connections result in a kind of online literary salon**, in which central voices of the community engage in a conversation about books and reading in full view of, and with the sometime participation of, a predominantly young adult audience.

YouTube: Vlogbrothers' videos often feature popular young adult authors and online content creators, several of whom maintain channels of their own. The network is reinforced as they work on special projects together.

Other Social Media: Communication and content sharing within the Nerdfighter network extend into other social media formats, including Twitter, Tumblr, and personal blogs, and often involve inter-referential content.

Offline Connections: YouTube videos provide evidence of offline relationships between central figures of the community, including sharing live appearances, hanging out together, and visiting each other's homes.

Visualizing the Nerdfighter Network



Network Key			
Vlogbrothers	References in Online Content	Featured Video Appearances	Co-Authors
Authors	Shared Live Appearances	Project Collaborators	
YouTube Stars			
Special YouTube Projects			

Quotes About Reading

"You don't read a book to appease an author. **You read a book because you want to.** And it is my strongly held opinion that a book becomes richer and more vibrant **when we read closely and think hard about it.**"
– John Green

"**When we read books, we are able to try on other personas**, to test-drive new ideas and philosophies and examine other lives, which we may find mirror our own in surprising ways."
– Libba Bray

"I guess it's pretty normal for adults to write books for kids, **but is it normal for adults to read books for kids?**"
– Hank Green

"Bella Swan is not a real teenager. If she was, **she'd be reading Twilight.**"
– Alex Day

"That's why I went to New York. Because of this book [Paper Towns]. **So you should probably buy this book...** It's funny actually because the Queen of England recently came to Google Headquarters, and I was invited to go to Google Headquarters to meet the Queen of England. **But instead of meeting the Queen, I decided to meet John Green.**"
– Charlie McDonnell

Implications of Research

The purpose of my research is **to analyze the on-going conversation about the reading experience within the Nerdfighter community**, exploring the way that it intersects with current theories about the relationship between books and new media.

By mapping the increasingly complex networked connections between influential content-creators across multiple social and new media environments, I hope to gain insights into a variety of important questions: **how online communities of authors and readers are created and maintained**, how influential voices in the community are established and recognized, and how these voices present a collective idea about the value of the reading experience.

Answers to these questions may in turn provide those interested in **the intersection of traditional, new media, and 21st-century literacies** with a new lens through which to consider how young people **negotiate reading through new media formats** in ways that have broader theoretical implications for the study of **critical and creative engagement** with texts.