

## **BitTorrents and *Family Guy*: teenage peer group interactions around a peer-to-peer Internet download community**

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### **Abstract**

*One of the cultural innovations enabled by broadband services, if expressly prohibited by copyright laws, is the downloading of films and television programs via the Internet. Such downloading activities have been made more feasible by the development of the BitTorrent protocol, which makes it comparatively simple to source large multimedia files using peer-to-peer networks. This paper examines the interactions within and justifications offered by a face-to-face community built around the BitTorrent-facilitated collection of *Family Guy*, an animated US television series. Like many others, this BitTorrent community overlaps with a LAN community. LANs use cables and a local area network to transfer materials from hard-drive to hard-drive within a face-to-face peer group. Within LAN communities, a high download capacity (as determined by the member's family's Internet account) coupled with a large storage capacity confers a highly-valued status as a key member able to supply a range of materials to the group including broadcast film and television content as well as other products such as pornography. Although the activity has some of the hallmarks of fandom, the overarching model used here is that of consumption linked to the practice of collecting. Some members of this BitTorrent community used the technology to consume multiple series of different genred-television programs and complete collections of directors' films, such as all the works by *Quentin Tarantino*. In arguing that a consumption model is appropriate here, reference is made to the ways in which*

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*members convert the products they consume into a social currency by trading jokes and sayings from within the Family Guy collection.*

## **Keywords**

*BitTorrent, collector, online community, LAN clan, Family Guy, P2P downloads*

## **Introduction**

This paper examines the interaction of a teenage peer group of young adult males, mainly Years 11-12 and still at school, built around a peer-to-peer (P2P) community all with a common interest in BitTorrent-facilitated Internet downloads. In so doing, a number of issues surrounding this form of copyleft consumption are raised and briefly explored.

Many of the group studied are also members of a Local Area Network (LAN) clan, whereby they build Local Area Networks linking their computer hard-drives to download material from each other as well as playing interactive and collaborative online games. LANs multiply the benefits enjoyed by that minority of members who have generous Internet download capacities and large hard drives. The LAN allows the transfer of pre-recorded materials without the requirement for each individual to be able to engage separately in the BitTorrent sites. Although this community of Internet users download a range of materials, the paper here focuses on the downloading of *Family Guy*, a US animated series. The paper argues that the *Family Guy* series is collected and consumed as a way of building group cohesiveness and identity.

## **Key Terms**

Peer-to-peer (P2P) communities came to public notice in the early days of the 21<sup>st</sup> century following the accelerating domestication of the Internet, as a way of sharing MP3 files, typically music. Saroiu et al (2002, p. 1) argue that definitions of P2P communities are debatable but they “typically lack dedicated, centralized infrastructure, but rather depend on the voluntary participation of peers to contribute resources out of which the infrastructure is constructed. Membership in a peer-to-peer system is ad-hoc and dynamic.” Early P2P systems, including those facilitated by Napster and Gnutella, were hamstrung by the difficulty of finding hosts willing to share content, partly because accessing content from hosts consumed some of the available bandwidth that the host might otherwise be using to download materials. Based on work in 2001, Saroiu et al comment that (2002, p. 12) “26% of

Gnutella users shared no data; these users are clearly participating on the network to download data and *not* to share. Similarly, in Napster we observed that on average 60-80% of the users share 80-100% of the files, implying that between 20-40% of users share little or no files.” (Italics in original) Although P2P networks do rely upon collaboration, this collaboration is not always equal and some P2P members are ‘free-riders’ or ‘leeches’.

The BitTorrent protocol overcame some of the problems associated with the early P2P file-sharing systems. First, they let users upload and download “files that are hundreds or thousands of times bigger than a single MP3 [...] It takes hours to download a ripped episode of Alias or Monk off Kazaa, but BitTorrent can do it in minutes.” (Thompson 2005) It does this by harnessing multiple providers of files, each of which furnish a segment of the whole, thus overcoming the slow upload speeds. This collection of BitTorrent users is called ‘a swarm’. It becomes increasingly difficult for a download-only user to continue downloading since the protocol overwhelmingly requires a two-way direction. Further, the more content a provider offers, the quicker they are able to download, thus creating incentives to overcome the leeching behaviours of the earlier P2P networks: “Give and ye shall receive” is BitTorrent’s creator, Bram Cohen’s, motto. A mechanism termed ‘optimistic unchoking’ allows distribution to unknown peers (rather than purely compliant members) and this permits entry by new members who are yet to acquire .torrent files the opportunity to gain some that they can use as a trading start-up.

BitTorrent was launched in 2002 “as a free, open source project aimed at geeks who need a cheap way to swap their Linux software online.” (Thompson 2005) A 2001 beta-program had been tested on porn files, and by 2004 people had begun using it for film and television programs. In February and March 2006, not long after the case study reported here, Bieber et al (2006) spent some weeks logging 35 BitTorrent sites serving “a wide range of content to nearly 4 million users at any moment.” There are hundreds of such BitTorrent sites. In February 2009, the BitTorrent community included over 160 million users who had downloaded the protocol worldwide (BitTorrent n.d.)

LAN clans are built around groups of computer users who form face-to-face (F2F) local area networks (LANs) to facilitate online game play and file-sharing. Named after the early local computer networks that characterised an office or a small group of people (as opposed to WANs, wide area networks), LAN clans benefit from having one or more members who are BitTorrent users since these users are continually accessing new material which can seed the collections of other LAN members in F2F contexts. Harnessing the collaborative aspects of

P2P and F2F online communities, members who get together predominantly to play online games (Green & Guinery 2006), also share files including, for example, those of *Family Guy*.

Described in 2005 as a “cult cartoon” by *Entertainment Weekly*, *Family Guy* provides adult content in the form of a subversive sit-com which is aimed at predominantly young male viewers. At the point that it was brought back to life in 2005, after a 2002 cancellation following series 3, re-runs were airing on Fox’s Adult Swim cartoon channel and attracting a nightly audience of over 500,000 predominantly male viewers aged 18-34. (Wolk 2005).

The communities of program downloaders which had kept the fan base alive had not seriously impacted upon program sales, however. Following the series 3 cancellation, Fox had released DVDs in an attempt to recoup the production costs of the early series from the fan base. Instead of tapping into a minor income stream, Fox discovered it had a major success. “[T]he show’s fans demonstrated just how much they missed *Family Guy*’s poop jokes, sex gags, racial insults, religious takedowns, and general nonstop sacrilege by buying 2.2 million copies of the *Family Guy: Volume One* DVD, making it the second-highest-selling TV DVD ever.” (Wolk 2005) Even so, it was not self-evident that a program that was a hit with 18-34 year old US males would appeal to Year 11-12 Australian online gamers. Indeed, the LAN clan in the study were outside the ‘target’ age group, while the many American-centric references made in episodes often revolve around commercials etcetera not broadcast in Australia. Arguably, full understanding of the jokes and cultural references in the program requires a prolonged and detailed exposure to US popular culture, so the popularity of *Family Guy* for this cohort seemed worth investigating.

## **Methodology**

The full research project involved both a focus group, which met three times, and an online survey. This paper will concentrate on the focus group research which was originally undertaken to inform the development of the online survey. The overall research project is written up in Knight (2006). A key area of interest for the research was the social aspect of the download community, thus focus groups were an appropriate research method as they provided an insight into the social interaction of participants. Further, this methodology is one that is recommended for media research with groups of children who know each other, for example, “Often, media use and content is selected, assigned significance and interpreted through social interaction within groups. The dynamics of children’s peer groups can be at least partly captured and reproduced within focus groups.” (EU Kids Online n.d.)

Members recruited to the focus group were part of an affinity network and comprised an opportunistic sample. Among other aspects, they had shared a common current or past school and were part of a LAN clan. They all lived in Western Australia. The focus group research continued to the point where themes appeared to be repeating and the participants' energy was flagging. This took three separate meetings. There were six participants for the first session and five for sessions two and three. During the first session an episode of *Family Guy* was shown to the group to establish what elements of the program they enjoyed the most, and to see whether or not they, as an Australian audience, understood/recognized all the inter-textual, historical and popular culture references that are a key part of the program's comedy and arguably, its US popularity.

The focus group discussions were transcribed and key points of interest identified. The method used allowed for largely discursive sessions permitting participants to direct the issues covered in a semi-structured manner, with prompting only when a topic was exhausted or to engage the more silent members of the group in the discussion. The nature of the focus groups, which were highly voluble, meant that designated questions were all answered fully and adequately.

While the focus group participants were clearly not representative of the overall *Family Guy* audience, they did demonstrate some of the incentives for engaging in BitTorrent collecting and consumption since *Family Guy* screened at 11.30pm in their television market place and would have not been readily viewable by a school-age audience. The transcribed material was analysed for themes which were then (in the original project) integrated with material from the online survey. Comments made by the focus group participants have been re-interpreted here to reflect upon their experience of engaging in a television program-based collector community enabled by BitTorrent activity.

### **Interests**

Focus group participants were asked where their media interests stemmed from, with the general consensus being that while they had family members who shared their interests, they had also developed interests for themselves: "we pretty much like...just by ourselves go off and watch things". *Family Guy* was generally a 'discovered' program and as a result of this there is a feeling that a program such as *Family Guy* 'belongs' to them, leading to a sense of ownership. Certainly, some of the participants' parents would have disapproved of the content which is targeted at a mature adult audience.

### **Consuming *Family Guy***

While most papers on this subject might take the perspective that the LAN clan were ‘fans’ and use ‘fandom’ as an organising principal, for the purposes of this paper collecting is considered as a form of consumption, despite the potential for elements of fandom to be present. Fandom, as the name suggests, denotes an element of fanaticism or dedication that is not necessarily required to become a collector, particularly given the ease of collecting digital media. The collection-based dynamic here is that participants consume an episode and are driven to not only retain it for future use, but search out more episodes to have the full set. Each participant might do this without necessarily being a fan of the show, but because it forms a point of contact with others in the LAN. Indeed, *Family Guy* was only one of a range of programs collected and consumed by the group. In no sense was there a collective decision to know everything about the program or individual episodes, instead the collecting culture shared by the group served as a way to bind it together.

The digital resources available to the LAN members were not standard or equally shared. Some focus group participants lamented their lack of computer power as it excluded them from some activities within the group, including playing particular games. On the other hand, *Family Guy* audience membership provided a social glue, renewed on a weekly basis, that was accessible to all. As Douglas and Isherwood have argued (1979, cited in Corrigan, 1997, p. 17), “consumers use goods to construct an intelligent universe and to make and maintain social relationships.” There is a beneficial cycle of anticipation and reward that centres around the *Family Guy* broadcast date, with discussion building up to the episode and then following from the episode in a manner analogous to the anticipation and analysis of a footy team’s performance.

*Family Guy* is a complex show and not readily accessible, especially to non-US audiences. Nonetheless, this group of school-aged Australian males were committed consumers of the show. Steven Johnson (2005) argues against dismissing the benefits of television viewing and suggests that viewers/consumers are increasingly required to use “systems analysis, probability theory, pattern recognition, and...*patience*” (2005, p. 9). For television, elements such as: ‘multi-threading’, that is, multi-thread or layered plot lines; the absence of ‘flashing arrows’, requiring viewers to fill in the gaps in a story; and ‘absences’, where clues to the plot or the punch lines to jokes are alluded to, but not explicitly presented; all make reading a show such as *Family Guy* a challenging process. All of these elements add to the complexity and the cognitive demands placed upon the viewer, and also to the ‘reward’ and satisfaction

as a result of accomplishing these cognitive requirements (Johnson 2005, p. 77). Arguably, these rewards are enhanced when the viewing is combined with group bonding.

### **Engagement with Technology**

Partly because the meanings and references are not transparent, the complexity of *Family Guy* requires extensive discussion between the viewing group to speculate about and make sense of some aspects of the 'story line'. During the focus group they explained how they used one program in particular to communicate with one another underlining the importance placed by the group upon continuous, seamless communication. Some members of the LAN also used forums to stay in touch with one another and with the developing *Family Guy* saga.

Focus group members' engagement is overwhelmingly with online and digital activities: "gradually it's just like...that's what you do and you just pretty much don't do anything else". When participants of the focus group were asked to provide an approximation of the total number of hours they spend per week using audio-visual/televisual entertainment, there was not a single member of the group that was able to quantify their usage. This may be partly explained by the picture they painted of being continually multi-tasking online; using messenger software, accessing websites, carrying out homework, torrenting, and watching broadcast and downloaded content. They saw themselves as being at school, asleep or online. Some members had two or more inter-related monitors to manage the viewing of multiple channels of information. Given the example of alternative social pursuits, such as "kicking a ball in the park" the focus group respondents were most dismissive. They did not see informal sport as an acceptable hobby and considered it as something undertaken by those without many friends.

### **Downloading *Family Guy* and other Digital Media**

Asked about downloading television programs in general and *Family Guy* in particular, the general consensus of the focus group was that they would not be willing to pay for television episode downloads from, for example, the Apple iTunes store; partly because of the write protection placed upon these files. Participants saw these protections as too limiting, and said they wanted to be able to use purchased files as they saw fit. They listed a number of programs that they were interested in, and which they downloaded, but did not purchase. This may have been as a result of the costs and limitations imposed upon commercially released DVD copies of programs: although some had extensive DVD collections, especially of *South Park*.

Focus group participants had a particularly robust attitude towards defending the practices of downloading; as if the download was itself a mark of respect to the producers and artists. They took significant pride in their download collections. This seemed similar to the pride associated with other forms of collector culture (Belk 1995, p. 76). Members rationalised that there was benefit accruing to the program producers in that the group engaged with the product through focussed attention; learning the dialogue, discussing the plot line and bringing the series to the attention of others.

They saw no moral issue over having downloads, citing that the show screens free to air and could be recorded and kept on a videotape, even though they appreciated that this effectively divorced the content from its commercial carrier and associated advertising revenue. Far from breaching the trust between producers and audience members, focus group participants saw downloads as the only way in which they could engage with the show as the alpha-consumers they were. It was a matter of absolute agreement that free-to-air Australian broadcasters had failed their core *Family Guy* audience since the series, as screened domestically, was way behind the programs airing for the first time in the United States. Internet discussions were full of plot spoilers if the current shows weren't downloaded and consumed as they became available. Further, the focus group did not like being forced to watch a program when a television network deemed it should be aired: especially in this case, just before midnight, where parental permission would not have been forthcoming. The benefits of digital access via BitTorrent communities in terms of a when/where required consumption, and the fact that most focus group members had Internet-connected computers in their bedrooms, meant that online downloads had become the medium of choice. As Director of ABC (Australian Broadcasting Corporation) TV, Kim Dalton (2008) put the situation concerning today's audience: "We are the 'what, when and how we want it' generation."

*Family Guy* is clearly not for children, and in most instances is barely suitable for primetime viewing. It has often received criticism for subject matter and has been featured in the Parents' Television Council's (PTC's) 'worst prime-time shows for family viewing' list. The PTC rate *Family Guy* red/'stop' for sex, language, violence and 'overall', and recommend that no one under 18 watch it (PTC n.d.). This may provide the first indication of why it is popular with an adolescent audience: there is something illicit about it; it's a 'naughty' cartoon show, similar to how *South Park* had been positioned as illegitimate in the focus group's primary school years. Another reason why *Family Guy* might be popular is because the imagined community (Anderson 2006) of audience members had been given an extra sense of reality as a by-product of successfully bringing the show back from cancellation. There's a sense in

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which members of the audience claim ownership of the show, as if it were a more-than-usual co-creation between the producers and the viewers.

All members of the focus group participated in trading digital files of *Family Guy* episodes. One or two of the focus group participants would usually download a past series and distribute it amongst the others, thus amassing valuable social capital. The sharing of dialogue, talking in quotes from *Family Guy*, was also a universal practice among focus group members, all of whom claimed to participate. In this discursive quote-style, one fan cues a *Family Guy* quote by feeding a prompt statement while the second speaker completes the quotation. Some respondents to the research claimed to have met friends by hearing people quote lines, or via quoting lines themselves.

This quote-practice has the potential to build in-group boundaries and separate in-group members from out-group members, especially when it was almost impossible for school pupils to see the show 'legitimately', except via staying up till midnight or employing complex record-and-time-shift strategies in the face of potential parental disapproval of the content. Even so, members of the focus group commented that as many as 50% of students in some of their school classes were not only aware of the program, but knew and responded to significant in-jokes. They assumed that this was an indication of a pervasive download culture in relation to the series. Apart from sharing files and quotes, the only other information shared by the focus group related to the on-air dates, so that focus group members knew when to expect new episodes to be available for download.

### **Collecting Digital Media**

Participants of the focus group said they did collect, and would always collect, digital files by virtue of the fact that they have fast Internet connections and large computer hard drives. The group's response suggests not so much a concentrated and focused form of collecting, but one that is more akin to hoarding, where viewers collect simply because they do not dispose of downloads. As members of torrent sites they have downloads "spoon fed" to them as one participant put it, resulting in an ad-hoc, 'try before you buy' form of collecting. For those intending to download large digital media files, torrents have obvious advantages and disadvantages. Focus group participants all viewed torrents as being superior to public file sharing software such as Kazaa mainly, in their view, due to torrent files being available earlier, and of better quality. As with most collectors (Belk 1995, pp. 66, 90), these collectors of digital media appeared primarily concerned with completing their collections and ensuring that what they have is of the best possible quality.

Opportunistic collecting is a behaviour that appears to occur broadly within the digital download collecting community. Participants of the focus group said that in some instances they had become interested in a television program after they had the opportunity to download a whole series. They didn't 'collect' the series because they wanted it; they collected it because they had the opportunity to do so. Some focus group participants became fans of the series *Lost* after this sort of opportunistic collecting, rating it subsequently as one of their favourite shows. Arguably, such behaviour begs the question: does this constitute collecting? Torrent sites often allow users to download an entire series in one hit, so could someone be said to have 'collected' a television series when they acquired their whole collection at one time? Normally a collection requires some degree of searching to make a complete set (Belk 1995, p. 67), although this lack of searching does not diminish the passion that may be attached to the program download.

Other than collecting for enjoyment and opportunistic or accidental collecting, there is collecting for the sake of ego or reputation (Belk 1995, p.68; McIntosh & Schmeichel 2004, p. 93). Focus group participants said they felt a sense of satisfaction at being able to distribute files to others, though they could not clearly articulate why, as they suggested that what they were doing could be done by anyone and required no particular skill set. As with other forms of collecting (Belk 1995, p. 68), collectors of digital media appear to take great pleasure in having a larger collection than their peers. Members of the focus group were aware of the term *e-penis* which, in this case, refers to the ego boost collectors of digital media get from having a large collection. It is possible that there are some collectors who amass a collection not so much for their own pleasure but to impress others, though this was not identified as an impetus for members of the focus group. According to Belk, a collector needs to be discerning in what items they collect (1995, pp. 66-67) or, at least, retain within their collection. This is not the case with collectors of digital media files as space limitations are arguably less of an issue than for collectors of physical items. Collectors of digital files have the opportunity to store very nearly everything they acquire, although it is likely that some degree of selection is involved at the outset.

### **Collecting *Family Guy***

The impetus to collect *Family Guy* episodes may be the result of two phenomena that do not affect other collectibles; that *Family Guy* has a history of unexpectedly being cancelled, and that *Family Guy* fans are required to know the show well, for the sake of being able to converse in *Family Guy*-speak with their friends, and in some instances, just to understand the

jokes. The way that *Family Guy* has been treated by various networks has perhaps made fans of the show acutely aware of the tenuous commitment of network television in terms of scheduling and production. It is possible that they have been shocked into collecting *Family Guy* by having it repeatedly taken away from them at short notice. They may believe that if they amass their own set of episodes, they no longer have to rely on untrustworthy network broadcasts: they have their collected series of *Family Guy* to sustain them.

It may be, however, that *Family Guy* is an indicator of a sea-change in attitudes towards broadcast copyright; Internet downloads; media consumption; audience membership and DVD ownership. An experiment by ABC TV with their satirical mockumentary *Summer Heights High* saw the channel offer free digital video downloads immediately after the screening of each program in the 8-part series. In doing this, they were arguably embracing a 'copyleft' approach, whereby the copying of digital content is constructed as creating greater value to be shared around, rather than compromising and removing intellectual property. In ABC TV executive Kevin Dalton's own words:

Let me tell you about *Summer Heights High*. We had a pretty fair idea about the potential of this program [...] So in addition to the usual marketing approach, we launched a viral campaign on YouTube and Ja'mie [the 'school girl' star...] soon had 50,000 friends on MySpace. We hooked into social networking sites and allowed the people there to share content. And we worked very closely with the co-producers to ensure that we could deliver free, full downloads of the program after each week's broadcast. We knew this was highly commercially desirable content, but we went with a counter-intuitive strategy to the standard restrictive distribution policy. And what happened? [...] *The Summer Heights High* website was one of the most popular ABC TV program sites. 1.2 million downloads were recorded for the program in 2007 and interactive games were available. And how did this affect the viability of the DVD? After two months in release, *Summer Heights High* had the highest sales of any individual Australian title in the last four years. Clearly, the paradigm is shifting. Our online on-demand offering does not erode our audiences; it strengthens their engagement and enjoyment. (Dalton 2008)

The fact that the DVD collection of the *Summer Heights High* series was an ABC best seller, suggests that possessing digital files of a program is not seen by a large proportion of today's consumer audience as collecting the series. Additional value is derived from owning hard copies of the relevant programs in their consumer packaging. For some products, and *Family Guy* may be one of these, the BitTorrent sites have the potential to deliver significant benefit in increasing audience numbers and sustained viewership.

## Conclusion

The use of the Internet to discuss *Family Guy*, and to share/collect information and episodes, has influenced the way in which the program is viewed and consumed as well as influencing its success. It is unlikely that the creators of *Family Guy* intended this to occur in the way in which it has. Nor might the creators have imagined the specific kinds of BitTorrent-enabled, LAN-grounded under-18 school-based communities in urban Australia developing shared cultural practices around their collection and celebration of the series. Even so, internationally, the download culture has been clearly advantageous for *Family Guy* in marshalling public opinion behind the show and bringing it back from cancellation. While few intellectual property owners choose to make their work publicly available without charge for BitTorrent download, the models determining these parameters need further exploration since the implications of copyright, and copyleft, continue to develop in response to changes in public attitudes and behaviours. Clearly this brief case study raises more questions than it resolves but is an indicator that further research in this field is warranted.

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