

The pleasure of spoiling: The spectrum of toxicity behind spoilers in Brazil

Melina Meimaridis,
Federal Fluminense University, Niterói, Brazil

Thaiane Oliveira,
Federal Fluminense University, Niterói, Brazil

Abstract:

In the current media landscape, spoilers have become a major issue of contention for fans and consumers of television series. This paper sheds some light on an unexplored facet of the topic by focusing on the act of spoiling rather than on the decision to engage with spoilers that already exist. By applying a survey with Brazilian fans of American television series (n=1805), we found that spoiling is a profoundly context-sensitive and deeply variable practice that is more nuanced than the popular discussions on the topic reveal. Due to Brazilians' limited access to American series and to the way fans from Brazil engage with this paratext, spoiling has become a source of sociability, knowledge exchange and empowerment, and pleasure. Having in mind that fans' spoiling practices are made up of discourses rooted in cultural capital or subcultural capital, and in particular power negotiations inside each community, we seek to understand the spectrum of toxicity behind the practice of spoiling. The results indicate that through vengeance and social capital fans take advantage of showing off more knowledge among each other, culminating in conflict in fandoms and revealing the toxic potential behind the circulation of spoilers.

Keywords: Spoilers, television, fans, toxic practices, Brazil.

Introduction

In the current media environment, spoilers have become a relevant issue for fans and consumers of audiovisual narratives, specifically television series. Simply put, spoilers are defined as 'any information that gives away essential plot details prematurely' (Rosenbaum and Johnson 2014, 1069). Although the topic has been subject of other studies (Gray and Mittell 2007; Gürsimsck and Drotner 2014; Perks and McElrath-Hart 2016a, 2016b), most of

the scholarly literature is focused on the reception and consumption of this paratext. However, here we have chosen to center our analysis on a less explored facet of the problem: the practice of spoiling, which can be seen as the production and circulation of spoilers.

The preponderance of academic studies centered on the reception of spoilers is related to the fact that it is culturally accepted that the consumption of this paratext can take away from the enjoyment of consuming a text, mainly because this action will lead to a rupture in expectation and suspense (Johnson and Rosenbaum 2014). Recently, this negative view has been questioned by some authors who propose the possibility of a positive engagement with spoilers (Gray and Mittell 2007; Hassoun 2013; Perks and McElrath-Hart 2016a).

At the same time, the issue has become more complex with the rise of social networks that allow fans to collectively congregate and share information online without boundaries, unlike the forums or message boards from the past where a fan could choose to visit specific spoilery threads.¹ The lack of spoiler tags on Facebook and Twitter changes the dynamics around the discussion of spoilers in ways past studies may not have been able to address. These online communities heighten the dichotomy between people who love or hate spoilers, because they are forced to interact with each other in these online spaces. This creates a place of disputes and contention between the two perspectives as Williams (2004) and Castellano et al. (2017) have argued. The situation becomes very volatile when one understands that part of the pleasure of consuming television series is in talking and sharing experiences with other viewers about said productions (Baym 2000; Jenkins 2006; Nee and Drozier 2015).

Recognizing that the practice of spoiling is just as important as the paratext's reception, we conducted a survey with Brazilian fans of American television series (n=1805). These shows have become extremely popular in Brazil in the last decade, despite the difficulties certain individuals encounter to obtain access to them. Most fans still have to rely frequently on online pirated links and wait days for fan-made Portuguese subtitles. All the while, Brazil has the fourth highest number of internet users, and has the sixth largest number of active Twitter users.² This growing interest in foreign television series and their presence online allows Brazilian fans to become exposed to spoilers on their social media profiles from American fans and other Brazilian fans who consume these narratives through live pirated feeds, thus generating countless frictions.

Having in mind that fan-spoiler practices are made up of discourses rooted in cultural capital or subcultural capital (Thornton 1995; Castellano, Meimaridis, and Dos Santos 2017) and in the negotiations of power within fan communities (Williams 2004; Perks and McElrath-Hart 2016a), we seek to understand the spectrum of toxicity behind the practice of spoiling. The results indicate that, although a large majority claim to provide spoilers only when requested, a relatively significant portion take advantage of the possibility of showing off more knowledge among each other. Therefore, spoiling can be configured as a mechanism used in the struggle for power, as well as social and subcultural capital within

fandoms of television fictional series. At the same time, we argue that due to Brazilians' particular cultural interpretation and translation of the practice of spoiling, these individuals make a specific use of the paratext by taking delight in spoiling someone's experience for their own personal pleasure or even to reveal the access to a good, expensive pay TV. The possibility that there is pleasure within the process of spoiling reshapes our understanding of this practice and allows us to think about the cultural capital of spoilers as deeply variable and context-sensitive.

Spoilers: Definition, Reception and Function

In recent years, the debate over spoilers has become recurring in the media (VanDerWerff 2014; Abad-Santos & Zarracina 2016; Jones 2017) and in fan communities. Although they are culturally accepted as paratexts that have the possibility to ruin the enjoyment of a given narrative, spoilers are still overlooked by scholars. The existing body of literature emphasizes empirical studies that mostly have inconclusive or discordant results. Spoilers have become an extremely complex issue, mainly because of the rise of time-shifting technologies (Gray 2010), the asynchronous distribution of global television content (Newman 2011), and the technological advances of the last decades that allowed viewers the opportunity of (re)watching content after it has ended (Perks and McElrath-Hart 2016a). In order to best approach the issue, we will shed light on three main points that we believe will highlight the paratext's complexity: definition, reception, and function.

Because spoilers have varying definitions, addressing this issue becomes a difficult task. While analyzing fans of *Lost* (ABC, 2004-2010), Gray and Mittell (2007, 2) argue that the definition of a spoiler varies somewhat from person to person. Some would believe that any information, from the smallest detail, would be a spoiler, whereas for other fans spoilers would only be information pertinent to narrative outcomes. Meanwhile, scholars themselves have different definitions for what they consider a spoiler. Perks and McElrath-Hart (2016a) point out that for many years researchers thought spoilers would be any relevant information released prior to the release of an episode. With that in mind, after the episode aired this information would no longer be considered a spoiler. With the emergence of new technologies and the popularization of time-shifting practices this view has become obsolete, since narratives can be consumed for the first time days, weeks, months, and even years after their original release.

In recent years, other definitions have appeared in academic works. Jones et al. define spoilers as any 'information that gives away key plot points before the intended time of the show's writers' (2016, 1). Imbued in this point of view is the classical notion of a hierarchy between the creator of a text and its consumer. Thus, consuming a spoiler would be, in a way, breaking an 'unspoken' contract between the viewer and the show's writers or producers, since the latter chose to present the narrative in a certain order. With all these discrepancies in mind, the current media environment is prone to contentions and disputes, both vertical (between screenwriters and viewers) and horizontal (between fans and other viewers), since there is no clear delineation of what is or should qualify as a spoiler.

Secondly, scholars have focused their attention mainly on the reception of spoilers and on the possible negative consequences of their consumption for narrative enjoyment (Baym 2000; Leavitt and Christenfeld 2011; Johnson and Rosenbaum 2017). Recently, from a multidimensional perspective, scholars have argued that spoilers can be consumed voluntarily and that their consumption may even be pleasurable (Gray and Mittell 2007; Hassoun 2013). Perks and McElrath-Hart (2016a) go further pointing to an ambivalence in the consumption of spoilers. According to the authors, the greater the investment a viewer has with a narrative, the greater their desire to avoid spoilers. Thus, a single viewer can receive the paratext in a favorable and unfavorable way depending on their investment in a given narrative. Alternatively, in Gray and Mittell's (2007) study, the authors propose the need for spoilers is tied to the increase of the viewer's interest in the series, in this case the drama *Lost*.³ The apparent contradiction between the two studies reveals the complexity and ambivalence behind the reception of spoilers.

Finally, it should be noted that spoilers have different functions. Hassoun (2013) argues that these paratexts can satisfy fans' curiosity and intensify their anxiety. Gray and Mittell (2007) point to a preparatory role played by spoilers, since knowing what would happen in an episode of *Lost* allowed fans to focus their attention on how the action played out on screen. At the same time, Williams (2004, 7), while analyzing fans of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (WB, 1997-2001 / UPN, 2001-2003), proposed that fans consumed spoilers as a way to prepare emotionally for future events in the show, such as the death of a beloved character. This function was also corroborated in the study conducted by Perks and McElrath-Hart (2016a).

In view of this brief overview and considering that most of the analyses only focus on spoilers and its reception, we understand that the academic discussion around the issue has to look for new analytical avenues, not being limited to the paratext, while the act of spoiling remains relatively overlooked. Yet the issue goes beyond spoilers itself, since the practice of spoiling involves disputes for power and hierarchy in fandoms.

Spoiling, Power and Disputes

Knowledge, like money, is always a source of power. (Fiske 1992, 43)

Since scholars have already proposed answers to the question 'why do people consume spoilers' (Baym 2000; Gray and Mittell 2007; Hassoun 2013; Perks and McElrath-Hart 2016a), the question that motivated this work is why do individuals tell spoilers? To understand this issue, we must first identify the various kinds and agents of spoiling; however, because the practice has been mostly ignored, there are no existing typologies or categorizations of the practice. Here, inspired by the two-step flow theory (Lazarsfeld et al. 1948), we can identify three different kinds of spoiling.⁴ The first type refers to the spoiling done by agents involved in the production of the series- that is, the creator, producer, studio representatives, etc. Spoilers circulate in the show's social media sites or through

other media platforms such as websites, blogs, and magazines. This type of spoiling, although it can be accidental, might have a clear function: it serves as marketing bait that attracts the fan, feeding his or her curiosity and anxiety, especially during the time gaps between weekly episodes and other production hiatuses throughout the year. This was the main form of spoiling for many years and was connected to the traditional hierarchy of power, in which the producers of the show have control over the information and choose which details to disclose to the public (Gürsimsck and Drotner 2014).

The second type has a more informative quality and is carried out by opinion makers such as journalists, critics, and, in some cases, fans on recognized blogs like *Série Maníacos* in Brazil. These opinion makers are often tasked with the job of producing weekly reviews of TV shows. The difficulty faced by these agents was addressed by Perks and McElrath-Hart (2016b), in which the authors present the thin line between talking about a show and disclosing a spoiler. Many of these agents choose to alert their readers of the presence of spoilers in their texts as a way of avoiding conflicts.

Finally, the third type refers to the spoiling done by the viewers/consumers of narratives, who operate outside some kind of formal institution such as the network, studio, or newspaper in the examples above. Although we can identify this type of spoiling, the motivation behind interpersonal spoiling is still not clearly established.

In order to understand fans' motivations to take part in the practice of spoiling, it is important to point out that since spoilers have inherent individual quality and meaning (Hills 2012), Brazilian fans may have a different interpretation of the practice and may thus possess distinct motivations. In Brazil and in other countries, it is common to come across the issue of temporal disparity as the main motivation behind interpersonal spoiling because the circulation of spoilers has always been driven by temporal issues (Jenkins 2006, 30). While online file sharing in the 'Peer to Peer' (P2P) model has solved some of the temporal issues related to the asynchronous global content distribution (Newman 2011), this practice has also fueled the debate surrounding spoiling throughout the world.

For many years, Brazilian people have depended on expensive subscriptions to cable television in order to consume foreign series because free-to-air channels often air only a couple of shows, with episodes out of order and at inconvenient hours. Despite the recent popularization of cable television in Brazil, it still only reaches a relatively small amount of the population. In a country with 200 million people, the number of individuals with access to pay television in 2016 is approximately 19 million (Lópes and Gómez 2016). For this reason, Brazilian fans often rely on pirated downloads or access to streaming services like Netflix to consume their favorite shows. Meanwhile, the time it takes to gain access to new episodes can vary from a few hours to months depending on the show. Due to the fact that only a limited amount of the population has access to pay-television, and, therefore, access to American television series, these productions have gained certain status and prestige in the country. This is relevant because it will influence the particular relationship Brazilians have with spoilers and how they interpret and translate the practice of spoiling.

Although temporal disparity is a justifiable reason for spoiling, we can't accept it as the only reason for interpersonal spoiling. Since each individual has distinct behaviors due to his or her nationality (Chau et al. 2002), it is also necessary to look at cultural behaviors to understand the social dynamics of spoiling practices in Brazil. To achieve this, one must understand culture as a collective phenomenon defined by a social environment which is typified by a country. Different Brazilian toxic behaviors in online environments have been described by Fragoso (2014), like *Huehuhue Br*, which can be understood as a carnivalesque tone of Brazilian nationality, in a Bakhtinian sense. According to Bakhtin (1984), the Carnival is an event which eccentricities are accepted and power relations are inverted. The *Huehuhue Br* behavior is more intense in multicultural environments of online interactions, mainly in which different nationalities are confronted. According to Fragoso's definition of *Huehuhue Br*, this toxic behavior is an opportunity to invert forces and disturb the mainstream group, as they see themselves as a minority in these digital spaces. Also, there is a singularity in this behavior that is spread in other online interactions and is reflected by the carnivalesque tone of national identity: the *zoeira*. In other words, the *zoeira* includes jokes that increase amusement even to an offensive level and can be considered a toxic practice, not to alleviate stereotypes and disguise violence, in a Bakhtin perspective of Carnival, but to feel pleasure through irony and humor. These are practices that Brazilians have been producing and consuming on the Internet in general and that are based on social dynamics previously established by the users.⁵

On the other hand, the cultural context is not the only important factor for analyzing spoiling practices, one should also look at the online communities. It should be noted that '[w]ithin the informational economy of the net, knowledge equals prestige, reputation, power [...] so there is a compulsion to be the first to circulate new information and to be among the first to possess it' (Jenkins 2006, 125). Despite the aforementioned difficulties in defining spoilers, it is uncontroversial to think of spoilers as information about a particular text. Given that '[c]ontrol of knowledge is a major form of social power' (Brown 1994, 132) and that the fan's power is 'discursive rather than institutional' (Tulloch 1995, 148), it can be said that the accumulation of information through the consumption of spoilers demonstrates a concentration of knowledge that gives the individual a greater subcultural capital within a given fandom. A notable example is how fans of popular adaptations, such as *Game of Thrones*, divide themselves as 'book readers' and 'non-readers', with the first possessing more subcultural capital than the latter (Castellano, Meimaridis, and Dos Santos 2017, 83).

The term subcultural capital was coined by Sarah Thornton (1995) and approaches the notion of cultural capital theorized by Bourdieu (1989). While cultural capital is accumulated through the concentration of knowledge, subcultural capital works in a similar way; however, instead of going through erudition, the individual who accumulates this capital possesses a specific knowledge valued by a particular subculture. In television fan communities, individuals can take advantage of demonstrating subcultural capital and accumulate power over less knowledgeable fans by sharing spoilers (Williams 2004).

In this sense, when a fan publishes spoilers in the community he or she acquires power, since he becomes a source of information. For Williams (2004, 8) savvy *Buffy* fans were considered 'more knowledgeable' than fans who did not consume and/or spread spoilers. Thus, the author stipulates that information = control = power (11-13). Alternatively, Perks and McElrath-Hart have argued that in the post-network era information isolation is also a form of conversational control and therefore power (2016a, 6-7). Based on Jenkins' (2006) discussion of 'individual rights' in *Survivor's* fan community (CBS, 2000-) the authors argue that many viewers are assertive about the amount of information they want to gain access to and demand rules and ethical codes to protect them from spoilers. Brazilian fan pages and TV fan groups on Facebook seek to create alternatives in order to control the 'flow' of spoilers in the community, such as the elaboration of policies for posting a spoiler and even 'more elaborate rules such as a ban on screengrabs from important moments or the requirement to post the unfailing warning "spoiler alert" at the beginning of text' (Castellano, Meimaridis, and Dos Santos 2017, 81).

Taking into account that temporal disparity and power disputes are just some of the possible reasons for spoiling, we seek to investigate the issue further by analyzing other motivations behind the practice, and having in mind the specific use Brazilians make of spoiling.

Methodology

A survey with twenty-three open and closed questions was distributed in Brazilian Facebook groups of fans of American television series of different formats and genres. We sought to reach a wide public and obtain a greater degree of variability of the sample. It is important to emphasize that in this survey we chose not to restrict the analysis to a certain group of fans, but rather we conducted a study with a wide group of avid consumers and viewers of American television series in Brazil.⁶ The idea behind this choice, unlike other studies (Williams 2004; Völcker 2017), is due to the fact that fans of different productions may have different relationships with spoilers.

In total, 1805 validated responses were collected.⁷ The survey was answered over a period of ten days between April 30th and May 10th, 2016. Questions were divided into: (i) the respondent's profile, with requests for demographic data, nationality and geographical information and questions about the consumption of television fictional series, (ii) voluntary consumption of spoilers, (iii) involuntary consumption of spoilers, and (iv) production of spoilers.⁸ In the total sample, 71.6% (n = 1293) were female, 28% (n = 506) male and 0.3% (n = 06) non-binary. The minimum age among the respondents was eleven and the maximum sixty-two years old. Regarding the consumption of series, the majority (41.7%) watch up to five TV series simultaneously and spend between one and two hours watching TV series every day (36.5%). Among the multiple options on how these fans watch these productions, streaming appeared as the favorite (n = 1540), followed by Internet downloads (n = 1019).

We focused on the respondents who said they usually provide spoilers to others, a central question for this paper. There was a total of 787 (n = 787) interviewees, representing

43.6% of the total collected responses. In this sample, a lexical and semantic categorization was performed for content analysis (Bardin 1977), based on the type of response given. The authors analyzed the answers separately, noting the repetition of words and themes. They then compared their notes and indicated seven broad categories, divided into 'non-toxic practices' and 'toxic practices'. The non-toxic practices were divided into the following categories: accidental (26.3%), politically correct (37.9%), sociable (23.8%), informational (8.76%), and others (4.06%). The toxic practices were divided in pleasure (17.9%) and vengeance (5.46%). At the same time, it should be noted that since there were open-ended questions some answers could fit in two or more categories, such as Susan's response: 'Sometimes it's involuntary, sometimes it's just for fun and sometimes because the person asks' (female, twenty-nine years old).⁹

Discussion / Analysis of the results

The word 'toxic' comes from the expression developed by John Suler (2004), in which he describes different effects of disinhibition in the online environment. According to Suler, anonymity, invisibility, asynchrony, introjection and diminished authority are elements that affect an uninhibited behavior in online environments. These elements can affect behavior in both positive and negative ways: positively, a benign behavior based on acts of kindness and generosity; negatively, as a toxic behavior of interactional practices. As appointed by Suler (2004, 321), toxic behavior in online environments could be understood as a cathartic act of pleasure motivated by unpleasant needs and desires without any personal growth.

Although disinhibition is not the only element which explains toxic behaviors in online environments, as we will show during the analysis, we divided the data into two categories based on Suler's definition: non-toxic practices and toxic practices. Non-toxic practices are understood by us as an activity in which there isn't an intent to generate conflicts in an interpersonal relationship and/or within a given community, specifically, the unintentional circulation of spoilers and/or the circulation of desired spoilers. Toxic practices are understood here as an activity that will intentionally lead to conflicts within an interpersonal relationship and/or a particular community, specifically, the intentional circulation of unwanted spoilers. Both categories offer valuable answers for this paper's main question: why do individuals share spoilers? Despite representing a smaller number of responses, we found that toxic practices are performed by 23.37% of the interviewees, a relatively significant portion.

Non-Toxic Practices

Accidental

Many respondents (n = 207) reported that they provided spoilers 'accidentally' or 'unintentionally' as can be seen in Monica's response: 'It is usually unintentional, an accident' (female, twenty-three years old) or Rachel's: 'It is usually not intentional, it

happens because I think the person has already seen this episode' (female, twenty years old). There were also individuals who claimed they weren't paying attention and ended up letting a spoiler slip in their conversation like Phoebe: 'sometimes it just slips into the conversation about certain series and I forget that I have friends who haven't watched that season or who don't like spoilers' (female, twenty-four years old). It is observed that some respondents pointed to the existence of a 'validity period' for spoilers, a quality already indicated by Castellano et al. (2017), such as Ursula's response: 'They just come out. But sometimes I assume the person saw something from five years ago and she didn't' (female, twenty-six years old). Despite the fact that over 25% of the respondents answered that their spoiling is accidental, Carol states it is an intentional national practice: 'Brazilians really like to spoil, rarely it's an accident' (female, nineteen years old).

Politically correct

The category with the highest number of responses was that of the 'politically correct' (n = 299) respondents, who indicated that they only provided spoilers when someone requested the paratext, as evidenced by Jack's response: 'When people ask only' (male, twenty-eight years old), or Kate's: 'Because people ask. I wouldn't spoil without the other's consent' (female, twenty-six years old). In some cases, the respondent reaffirmed their status as 'more knowledgeable' as in Claire's answer: 'Because I know a lot about the series so people ask me' (female, thirty years old). This indicates the existence of a dispute over information concerning subcultural capital present among fans of TV series, to be analyzed in future works.

Even despite the policy of releasing spoilers only at the request of others, Shannon implies that there would be 'ineffable' spoilers, as in the case of a character's death: 'If the person asks me what happened, I end up providing a spoiler, however when it comes to death spoilers, I don't comment' (female, twenty-three years old). At the same time, some respondents corroborate the 'spatial perspective' of spoilers (Castellano, Meimaridis, and Dos Santos, 2017), in which certain spaces exist where the paratext should flow freely, as in Elizabeth's answer: 'I always make it clear to people that I have watched a film/series, if you want a spoiler call me on WhatsApp or via inbox, if the person contacts me and asks, I will reply!' (female, twenty-two years old).

Sociable

The 'sociable' category encompasses the responses (n = 188) that indicated the need/anxiety to talk about the events of a given series, as in Rose's answer: 'I am so happy with the news [spoilers concerning the plot] that I have to tell someone' (female, fifteen years old) or Sawyer's: 'Because of the anxiety that there is in commenting on some event that has occurred in a show' (male, twenty-six years old). Many respondents indicated a difficulty in restraining their 'excitement' as in Charlie's response: 'Because I can't keep a secret' (male, twenty-six years old), and Charlotte's:

In most cases, I am ahead in the series. So, I am happy certain events have happened or frustrated if they are against my will, however, I like to share my happiness about something that has happened. When it's a bad thing, I want to see if the person would feel the same indignation as myself. I try my hardest not to disclose spoilers, but sometimes I talk so passionately that some friends just give in. (female, nineteen years old).

With this said, Charlotte indicates a need for an audience or an outlet for her thoughts about the show she is watching.

Along these lines, some interviewees pointed out that they took part in spoiling because they had a need to talk about the series, exchanging theories, ideas, and assumptions about what would happen in the show, as in Danielle's statement: 'I provide spoilers to those who wish to listen. That is, I provide them for the purpose of discussing and formulating hypotheses about situations' (female, twenty-two years old). In other cases, the respondents claimed that spoilers are a basic part of talking about television series, as can be seen in the following statements:

Because the subject arises in conversations and it is natural to talk about. Ilana (female, fifty-four years old)

Well, I want to talk about the series and you can't discuss certain issues without providing spoilers. Nadia (female, twenty years old)

The need for an audience can, at times, lead a fan to more extreme measures, with respondents indicating that they sometimes threaten their friends and acquaintances with spoilers so they can 'keep up' and consume the series at the same rhythm. This can be observed in Jacob's answer: 'I threaten more than I actually spoil, with the intent to motivate my friends to watch as soon as possible so we can talk about the series' (male, twenty-four years old). and Hugo's: 'As a joke, who knows this way the person might watch on the day it airs and, thus, stay updated, so we can talk about the whole episode' (male, sixteen years old). These 'threats' again bring up the question of sociability, invariably associated with television consumption. However, here, a fan takes advantage of possessing 'more knowledge' than the other and uses spoilers as 'blackmail' so that their friends will consume the series at the same rhythm. The information present among this group integrates a tangled web of power relations in which different subjects act from distinct social dynamics in which the negotiation of information has some kind of value and interest, especially social interest. But rather than being a result of wanting to be one of the first to circulate information, as pointed out by Jenkins (2006), spoilers are also seen as a sociability mechanism built on its own specific dynamics beyond the prestige of its social group.

There were also individuals who see spoiling as a form of ‘solidarity’ like Sarah: ‘To warn about possible disappointment of what is expected’ (female, twenty-two years old) and Diane: ‘So that people do not suffer as I suffered’ (female, sixteen years old). This idea resonates with findings present in the works of Williams (2004), Hills (2012), and Perks and McElrath-Hart (2016a), that some fans would consume spoilers as a way of preparing emotionally for future events in TV series. In this sense this particular paratext could ‘insulate viewers against negative emotions such as anxiety’ (Perks and McElrath-Hart 2016a, 10). However, in our survey individuals don’t choose to consume spoilers, but rather are fans who consider themselves ‘sympathetic’ by sharing these spoilers with their friends, thus, helping them to prepare emotionally.

Informative

The ‘informative’ category (n = 69) covers the responses that tied spoiling to the notion of informing and transmitting information about some particular show to other individuals, as can be observed in Phil’s answer: ‘I usually spoil some event of the series to increase the person’s curiosity about the show. In my circle of friendship this is something common, whenever we recommend a series to each other we share a spoiler’ (male, nineteen years old). Meanwhile, many of the respondents indicated providing spoilers as a way to ‘entice’ the curiosity of their friends, encouraging them to start or continue to watch some series, as indicated in the statements below:

Usually the person is behind on a show, and maybe a spoiler can entice their curiosity to catch up with it. Haley (female, twenty-four years old)

To influence the person to watch the following episodes. Luke (male, twenty-one years old).

Often to encourage people to watch the episode. ‘This happened. Watch it soon’. Alex (female, twenty-one years old)

Other

The category ‘other’ (n = 32) contained a small percentage (4.06%) of responses that were generally individuals who did not know exactly why they produced spoilers, as can be seen in Juliet’s response: ‘because, I do not know’ (female, twenty-eight years old) and Greta’s: ‘No reason’ (female, thirty-three years old). On the other hand, Tom indicated telling ‘fake spoilers’ so that the ‘person will be upset and later, when watching the show, surprised!’ (male, eighteen years old). Others, however, stated that they did not care about spoilers, and for that reason they assumed that others didn’t care as well, like Colleen: ‘I always think people don’t care, because I don’t care’ (female, twenty-one years old) and Horace: ‘Usually people don’t care as much about it, like me, so I don’t mind giving them, as well as, don’t

mind not giving them' (male, twenty-one years old). Richard claims to provide spoilers because he can 'offer a better experience with the spoiler rather than the series' surprise' (male, twenty-six years old). Finally, Ben considers it's acceptable to take part in spoiling 'when the show really isn't very good and the person I'm talking to does not mind knowing what happens next' (male, eighteen years old).

Toxic Practices

Pleasure

Among the toxic practices, the category that received the highest number of responses was 'pleasure' (n = 141) in which the respondents tied to spoiling feelings such as 'amusement' and 'enjoyment', as can be observed in Jason's answer: 'Just for fun' (male, twenty-two years old) and Eleanor's: 'It's nice to see your friends angry' (female, fifteen years old). Vicky goes a little further when she states: 'Because it's good to see people suffering!' (female, sixteen years old). Similarly, some interviewees indicated that there's a pleasure in frustrating someone else's experience, as can be seen in Janet's response: 'Because it feels good to take away someone's pleasure of being surprised by what they're watching' (women, fifteen years old) and Mindy's: 'To spoil the expectation of a colleague' (female, thirty-seven years old). As we can see, it is not a behavior instigated by disinhibition or anonymity, as presented by John Suler (2004) when analyzing psychological dynamics in cyberspace, but a practice that reinforces the distinction in possessing knowledge among peers through pleasure. Demonstrating that this pleasure is both a psychological phenomenon and a context-sensitive practice subjugated to a cultural behavior of the Brazilian people, some of the respondents used the Brazilian expression *zoeira*, meaning they would practice spoiling just to make fun of their friends. It should be noted that among the 141 answers in this category, the individuals who chose to use the expression *zoeira* were all teenagers, suggesting a possible generational divide to be investigated in future works.

The idea that pleasure can be tied to a fan's greater knowledge can be observed in Michael's answer: 'It is pleasurable to show that you have information that the other fan does not know yet' (male, thirty-three years old). The fact that pay TV in Brazil is still restricted to a small portion of the population that can afford it contributes to the idea that those who have access to such content would have 'more rights' than other fans, as can be seen in Shawn's response: 'To enhance my ego, and show my poor friends that I have pay-tv with premium channels' (male, nineteen years old). The young man certainly seeks to distinguish himself from his friends because he had access to this service in Brazil. In this case, the distinction isn't restricted to economic capital but to a multi-dimensional space in which different forms of capital (social, economic, symbolic) are manifested by the social reaffirmation of the appropriation of different goods. As Bourdieu points out,

The social world can be conceived as a multi-dimensional space that can be constructed empirically by discovering the main factors of differentiation which account for the differences observed in a given social universe, or, in other words, by discovering the powers or forms of capital which are or can become efficient, like aces in a game of cards, in this particular universe, that is, in the struggle (or competition) for the appropriation of scarce goods (1987, 3-4).

Although expressing pleasure in revealing spoilers, Trevor's response demonstrates his friends' negative reactions against the manifestation of social capital while also establishing a hierarchy of knowledge among them: 'I like to tell friends who have not watched yet, just to see them angry. I am often reprimanded' (male, thirty years old). What we can perceive from these responses is that disputes over subcultural capital are not restricted solely to status or prestige within a social group (Bourdieu 1984) but also refer to a dynamic in which hierarchical distinctions are built in the informational domain. The practice of spoiling is for some fans independent from being recognized favorably among their peers, and this contradicts a belief that points to the subject's legitimation within a fandom. Spoiling is, therefore, not a question of legitimacy between the subjects (Bourdieu 1987) but disputes over information as a valuable asset and instrument of power, corroborating the works developed by Williams (2004) and Perks and McElrath-Hart (2016a).

Vengeance

Because information is an instrument of distinction, social dynamics are built in a constant negotiation between fandoms, establishing political relations between knowledge. The 'vengeance' category (n = 43) is considered by us the one that demonstrates the greatest toxic potential behind spoiling. In this category, respondents indicated that they use spoiling as a way of getting revenge on other individuals who have already shared unwanted spoilers in the past, as in Emily's answer: 'I usually return spoilers to someone who released a spoiler to me when I didn't want it' (female, twenty-four years old age); Lydia's: 'Generally as a form of revenge for having received some other spoiler previously' (female, twenty years old); and Victoria's: 'My friends always tell me a spoiler just to annoy me, I just return the favor' (female, fifteen years old).

In this sense, spoiling becomes some sort of justice mechanism wherein people who were 'wronged' by spoilers see fit to 'return the favor'. However, spoiling can be more than just retribution for previous spoiling incidents. Some interviewees went further and claimed to provide spoilers for other reasons that were not related to the text itself, as in Daniel's response:

I usually share a spoiler I received or of something I've seen when the person is very boring or I do not like them very much. When I feel angry for getting an unwanted spoiler I need to tell someone, because, in this way, the anger will be shared (do not judge me, thanks). (male, twenty-two years old).

It is implicit in the young man's response that he considers his actions toxic, and even might be ashamed of them – 'do not judge me' – but still feels comfortable enough to use spoilers as a way to generate conflict in social relationships.

The practice of spoiling, in this way, is used as a social mechanism, not just for justice but even to punish others, as can be noticed in Ashley's answer: 'Because sometimes friends who do not like spoilers do or say things that are unpleasant to us' (female, twenty-six years old); Louise's: 'Sometimes the person just deserves it, hahaha' (female, twenty-three years old); and Aiden's: 'Only when a friend commits some kind of action I do not like!' (male, sixteen years old). Nolan shares a specific view of the practice: 'Nowadays, spoilers have become a valuable bargaining chip. Or a means of retaliation, if you want something from a person who sees a show that you've seen, it costs nothing to bluff. The same goes for when they 'drop the ball' with you' (male, eighteen years old). The social capital is also understood as a bargaining chip for other intents in a negotiation, not just to acquire prestige or to demonstrate dominion of knowledge. This capital could be used to negotiate things outside the dynamics around the consumption of the television series, a distasteful act without personal growth (Suler, 2004). Understanding that behaviors in online environments are a reflection of personal, interpersonal, and cultural manifestations, we can also see the cultural representation of toxic behaviors as part of Brazilian's cultural identity, as reflected in David's answer when he uses his nationality as a way to justify his vengeful spoiling: 'Because I am a typical Brazilian who, when a victim of something, victimizes someone else' (male, sixteen years old).

Amanda's response is particularly elucidating about how the practice of spoiling can be used as a mechanism for revenge and punishment:

Revenge. When someone does this to me I just return the "favor". Seeing the expression on the person's face when you tell a spoiler like 'Glenn dies' is priceless. Or when my boyfriend does something wrong, sometimes it's not even worth a fight, I just tell a huge *Game of Thrones* spoiler and that's it. (female, twenty-four years old).

Through Amanda's quote we can also observe that the possession of knowledge is not just an important element of social capital but is used as a bargaining chip in the vengeance category. This bargaining is not restricted only to the dynamics of consumption of the television series, but it can be used to contribute to other daily squabbles.

We verified that in this category spoilers are not bounded by the narrative. In this case, spoilers are not seen only as paratexts of a television series. Spoiling does not only pertain to experiences related to contemporary narratives and textuality in the digital age (Gray and Mittell 2007) but to a set of social practices and dynamics in which information is central to disputes over the exchange of subcultural knowledge.

Conclusion

At a time when American television series have reached great popularity in Brazil (Silva 2014), spoilers have generated heated debates within and outside academic circles. This paper sheds some light on an unexplored facet of the topic by focusing on the act of spoiling rather than on the decision to engage with spoilers that already exist. Based on an extensive review of the literature on the subject and using a survey, the research concluded that among the multiple motivations for interpersonal spoiling there would be practices that could be configured as non-toxic – accidental disclosure of a spoiler or intentional when one is solicited – and toxic practices – the intentional disclosure of a spoiler when it is unwanted. We observed that spoiling, as an interpersonal communication practice based on knowledge exchange and intentionality, can provide social and cultural disputes when the possession of knowledge is more than just a means to gain prestige among peers but also used as a bargaining chip in social relationships.

Studies that indicated the use of spoilers as a symbolic capital of distinction in negotiations within the fandoms were corroborated, while the category of toxic practices and the peculiar use that the Brazilian fans make of spoilers are revealed as true empirical findings in our analysis. Although they represent only 23.37% (n = 184) of the analyzed sample, the category of toxic practices demonstrates the use of spoiling as a form of amusement by Brazilian fans, who take advantage of the fact that only a limited few have access to pay TV and use spoiling as a way to distinguish themselves in fandoms. Concurrently, these fans use spoiling as a social mechanism for justice, punishment, and revenge in interpersonal relationships that can be used for reasons related or not to televising productions, and related or not to their participation in a fandom.

Again, it is important to point out that spoiling is also a manifestation of social and cultural behavior tied to the dynamics established through the practice of spoiling. At an interpersonal level, we observed differences in behaviors among different age groups. For example, although the respondents of our survey were from many age groups, it was noticeable that most of the individuals over thirty years old were less prone to practice spoiling, suggesting a possible generational divide, to be investigated in future works.

Furthermore, from a macro level perspective, we contend that spoilers are context-sensitive and can be a manifestation of Brazilian behavior, the *zoeira*. There might be some similarities between the *zoeira* and the German concept of *schadenfreude*, both tied to a pleasure in witnessing another's troubles or humiliation. This parallel still needs to be analyzed further in future works, but it could be a good starting point for researches focused on how other Western cultures interact with spoilers. It is still important to note that the practice of spoiling also generates social capital tied to the possession of knowledge and can be used to distinguish those who have access to pay-cable television in Brazil. It is important to reinforce that spoiler literature should not generalize online behaviors without considering the complexity of each cultural background, especially when the issue of distribution and access to content differs from the countries that produce these TV shows.

It is also observed that among the non-toxic practices spoiling demonstrated the positive potential of spoilers in interpersonal relations within fan communities in which fans exchange information and motivate each other to continue consuming television series. Similarly, the 'politically correct' category still shows a certain 'restraint' on the part of the fan who 'respects' the will of other fans who wish to remain 'ignorant' to certain spoilers. Of course, it is necessary to emphasize that the methodology applied here needs to be validated in other studies that provide a more in-depth analysis of TV fans' motivations for spoiling, since despite the anonymity of the survey, more complex feelings may not be verbalized through this method of analysis.

At the same time, the sample presented here doesn't comprise the totality of viewers and consumers of television fictional series in Brazil but points out ways to unpack issues that contribute to the scarce production of knowledge on the subject of spoilers in both national and international literature. Further studies that comprehend the practice of spoiling as a cultural and social phenomenon are needed to see if fans from other countries share the same motivations for spoiling as Brazilian fans revealed in this paper. This study made an empirical analysis of the motivations of Brazilian fans for spoiling TV series, shedding light on the complex relationship fans have with spoilers, indicating new questions and perspectives beyond the already evidenced ones in research mentioned in this work.

Bibliographical notes:

Melina Meimaridis is a PhD student at the Federal Fluminense University in Brazil. She analyzes 'comfort television series' in American TV. Currently her interests include television industries, TV series, Netflix, spoilers, and the representation of fictional institutions in television. Contact: melmaridis@hotmail.com.

Thaiane Oliveira is a professor in the Department of Cultural and Media Studies and the Postgraduate Program in Communication at the Federal Fluminense University in Brazil. She is the editor for the Brazilian Journal *Contracampo: Brazilian Journal of Communication*. Currently her interests include circuits and circulation of knowledge, strategic communication, scientific dissemination, and scientific policy evaluation indicators. Contact: thaianeoliveira@id.uff.br.

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Notes:

¹ There are still many forums that discuss television shows online; however, with the rise of social networks fans now have other spaces to engage and talk about their favorite productions with fewer limitations and restrictions.

² <http://www.internetworldstats.com/top20.htm>;
<https://www.statista.com/statistics/242606/number-of-active-twitter-users-in-selected-countries/>

³ One of the possible explanations for this contradiction is the fact that these authors are writing in different technological contexts, in Mittell and Gray’s case before social media had fully taken hold.

⁴ We comprehend interpersonal communication as more complex than the two-step flow model proposed in the 1940s by Paul Lazarsfeld and influence theory, presented by Robert Merton (1949), drawing upon the work of Weimann (1982). We used this traditional model of communication theory to categorize three important agents that are still valid in the communicative process: the official agents of mass communication; opinions leaders who have influence in the communicative process, such as journalists and bloggers; and the audience in general, the final receptor of the communication model. We acknowledge that our typology does not include all of the possible spoiling types and suggest that this is a gap in which future studies can make contributions.

⁵ It is important to distinguish *zoeira* and trolls’ practices. While trolls are associated with negative online behaviors (Hardaker 2010), disruptive attitudes (Dahlberg 2001), personal insults (Naraine 2007), with the intention to goad others into conflict (Bradel 2007), *zoeira* is a practice based only in pleasure and humor that might activate further toxic responses or not.

⁶ Most respondents stated that they consumed between one and two hours of TV series daily (36.5%) while another 26.9% indicated watching between two and four hours a day. Another 19.1% reported watching up to one hour per day. A smaller portion (7.6%) marked the option between four and six hours per day, and 4.6% reported seeing more than six hours daily.

⁷ The more general results on this research, such as a profile analysis of the respondents, as well as circulation, consumption, and production of spoilers by these fans, were published in the annals of *Jornada Internacional Geminis* (Oliveira, Meimaridis, and Melo 2016).

⁸ In this work, we focus solely on the practice of spoiling by Brazilian fans, since it presents an ample set of issues that interests us in the discussion about toxic practices related to the act of spoiling.

⁹ All respondents were given pseudonyms. We have included gender and age to refine any patterns related to the condition of the subject.