

“The Day of the Doctor”: A Case Study

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For over 50 years, the British science fiction television series *Doctor Who* has been taking its audience on journeys through time and space. It has also been spreading around the world, gaining new audiences and new fans wherever it lands. Here I look at how *Doctor Who* has used spreadable media, as defined in *Spreadable Media* by Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green, throughout its production run. I focus on how it culminates in the year-long celebration of the 50th anniversary of the series premiere, which is celebrated by the largest global simulcast to date, reaching over 90 countries at once.

Keywords: *Doctor Who*, British television, science fiction, sci-fi, BBC, popular culture, spreadable media, social media, fans, fandom, international, cross-platform, multi-media

In 2013, the British science fiction series *Doctor Who* celebrated 50 years on television with a transnational, transmedia celebration: the simulcast of the special, “The Day of the Doctor”, in over 90 countries. But it was more than that; it was a year-long celebration of the 50 years the show has been in production, as well as the fans who have been there through it all. This essay looks at that celebration, and how it successfully used spreadable media in the process.

Spreadable Media by Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green (2013) is the work that inspired this close look at the anniversary celebration. According to the authors, “spreadability” refers to the potential—both technical and cultural—for audiences to share content for their own purposes, sometimes with the permission of rights holders, sometimes against their wishes. Throughout the book, they look at how media producers and fans are—or are not—using technology to share content and gain new viewers across various platforms. What struck me repeatedly is how *Doctor Who* has been doing this since soon after its debut.

Fifty Years of Spreadability

Doctor Who debuted on Saturday, November 23, 1963, on the BBC. The episode “An Unearthly Child” introduced Britain to the Doctor—a Time Lord from the planet Gallifrey—and his TARDIS—Time and Relative Dimension in Space—which he uses to travel through time and space with his granddaughter (Chapman, 2014; Sullivan, 2015; Haslop, 2016). The original intent was for the show to provide scientific and historical fact within family-friendly science fiction. They wanted to distinguish themselves from the American science fiction reliance on “bug-eyed monsters” (Chapman, 2014; Sullivan, 2015; Haslop, 2016). The second serial took on a distinctly science fiction flavor, introducing what has become the iconic enemy of the Doctor: the Daleks. It was this second serial that caught the attention and devotion of the British people, who promptly made *Doctor Who* a regular part of their Saturday evenings (Chapman, 2014; Haslop, 2016).

Initially, *Doctor Who* was created for a British audience. A year after its debut, broadcasts began in New Zealand. A year after that, Australia and Canada joined in regular broadcasts (Sullivan, 2015, p. 350). But these countries were a part of the British Commonwealth, and watching British television was not foreign to these audiences. Since then, the viewing audience has expanded to over two-hundred countries, including the United States (Sullivan, 2015, p. 344). The spread of the show and the reception it has received has differed depending on which era was being shown and where.

In terms reception, how the show was distributed at the time plays an important role. In Britain, it quickly became a part of mainstream culture. Viewers across the country would gather around the television to watch *Doctor Who* every week. Children and adults alike watched, and it was more unusual for someone to not be a regular viewer than to be one. It was a part of British culture, even after it left the airwaves (Booy, 2012, p. 7).

Partly because of this, fandom took a distinct form in Britain. In 1965, a formal *Doctor Who* fandom began to take shape with the creation of *The Doctor Who Fan Club*. In 1972 there was an increase in publications that took fans behind the scenes and gave them insights into the making of the show (Booy, 2012, p. 22). 1975 saw the creation of the Doctor Who Appreciation Society (p. 2) who, among other things, published fan zines. Soon they began publishing *Doctor Who Weekly*, which has since been renamed *Doctor Who Magazine*, which is still published today. The magazine was, and still is, full of interviews with production staff—from writers to actors—who are happy to talk with fans (p. 2). It gave fans an inside look into the making of the series, something that was a rarity at the time.

In the United States, it was a different experience. In the early 1970s, the BBC decided to try exporting some episodes to the US in order to expand their viewing audience and increase their profits from the show (Sullivan, 2015, p. 352). In 1972, 16 stations across the US began to show episodes of the Third and Fourth Doctors, reaching a very small audience. In 1978, they moved *Doctor Who* predominantly to PBS, where it was shown on over 90 stations across the country (p. 353) until the early 1990s after the show was put on hiatus in Britain (p. 360).

PBS proved to be a natural home for *Doctor Who* for a few reasons. First, it had set a precedent for showing British television soon after it was created in 1969. At the time, it was cheaper to bring existing “quality programming” over from Britain instead of producing it themselves (Sullivan, 2015, pp. 349-350). Second, they already had an audience that enjoyed British programming and the culture that comes with it. But it remained a limited audience, though not as limited as before.

The fandom in America developed quite differently than in Britain. First, due to the limited broadcasting range of the show, it developed a cult following rather than being a part of the mainstream culture; second, because *Doctor Who* was aired after the success of franchises like *Star Trek* and *Star Wars*, media fan culture already (Booy, 2012, p. 74). This culture included holding conventions dedicated to the genre or the franchise, and creating costumes from the show to wear to them (Sullivan, 2015, p. 359). US fans quickly followed this formula and held the first *Doctor Who* convention in LA in 1979. Since then other *Doctor Who* conventions, like Gallifrey One, Chicago TARDIS, and WHOlanta, have been held, inviting actors, writers, producers, costumers, prop makers, et al. to come and interact more directly with the fans. Even more general fan conventions like San Diego Comic Con and Dragon Con have programming featuring individuals from the show.

Due to low ratings, *Doctor Who* was “rested” in December 1989 (Chapman, 2014, p. 53). The series made a brief reappearance in 1996 with a television movie. It was an attempt at bringing back the series as an American continuation. It was not successful (Chapman, 2014, p. 54). During those periods of “rest”, fans still had each

other, the episodes they had taped from television, *Doctor Who Magazine*, novelizations of the episodes published by the BBC, as well as full-cast audio dramas of more recent Doctors telling new stories produced by Big Finish and the BBC. *Doctor Who* had only disappeared from one platform, not everywhere. Fans consumed whatever they could, keeping the hope alive that the show would come back. It was not until 2005 that the series began again, and has continued since (Chapman, 2014, p. 55).

In Britain, it resumed its place as a part of mainstream culture. In America, it was a different story. Due to its more cult-like following and limited viewing schedule, the existing audience for *Doctor Who* was much smaller. But this time, instead of only airing on certain PBS stations, it aired nationally on the cable channel the Sci-Fi Channel. This meant a much larger audience, which was already watching science fiction, could tune in and watch. After four years, it moved to the newer channel BBC America. It was still a more targeted audience than in Britain, but it was the audience that either was already interested or would be interested. Without a doubt, *Doctor Who* has consistently had a transmedia presence that is well-supported by its fans. A presence not only grew over time, but played an important part in the 15th anniversary celebration.

Transmedia Celebration

During the year-long celebration, there were events and specials put on by the BBC as well as the fans. Conventions focused on and celebrated the series. The usual merchandising of toys and clothing focused on the anniversary. It was announced that Peter Capaldi would be the next actor to portray the Doctor during a live global simulcast. *Doctor Who Magazine* devoted most of the issues in the year leading up to the anniversary to the history of the series as well as the upcoming events. Big Finish produced an audio drama, “The Light at the End” with the five living “Classic Who” Doctors. (“Classic Who” refers to the series through the television movie, while “New Who” refers to the series since its return.) All of this and more occurred leading up to the airing of the special. But for the sake of time, my focus is on the three televisual spaces that the celebration occurred: YouTube, Red Button/iPlayer, and television and theaters.

YouTube

On YouTube, there were two official minisodes produced by BBC One, written by head writer and executive producer Steven Moffat, and released prior to the anniversary special. The first minisode was titled “The Last Day”. It was told from the perspective of a Gallifreyan soldier on the front lines of the Time War. It gave viewers an idea of what was happening in the time leading directly up to the special. The Time War is an event that had been mentioned throughout the series to this point, but has never been shown. It had also been revealed in the last episode of the series prior to this that it would be a main plot point in the special (Moffat, 2013).

The second minisode was titled “The Night of the Doctor”. It features the Eighth Doctor—Paul McGann—in his second on-screen appearance and his regeneration into the War Doctor, played by Sir John Hurt. It gave viewers background about how the Doctor became involved in the Time War, as well as a sense of how long he had been involved by including the image of a very young John Hurt at the end after his regeneration (Moffat, 2013). This minisode made many fans very happy because it gave Paul McGann and the Eighth Doctor more screen time as well as closure. Most of his story has happened in the Big Finish audio dramas. Another reason why fans were happy is the scene where he toasts his companions, listing all his companions from the audio dramas. This scene brought the audio dramas and their stories into official *Doctor Who* cannon.

Both minisodes provide information for the fans, especially those who know “Classic Who”, that is supplemental to the special. Not viewing the specials does not have any impact on watching the special. But it allows fans to engage with the show on yet another platform—YouTube—as well as being able to legally share it on other social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter. A feat is not very common in the media.

Television and Theaters

Fifty years to the minute from when the first episode aired, using the original opening visual and music, “The Day of the Doctor” was simulcast around the globe to over 90 countries in movie theaters, on television, or both. Over 10-million viewers watched in Britain, over three-million watched in the United States, and untold millions watched in the remaining countries. It was a transnational event, becoming the largest simulcast of any televised event in the history of television (Tartaglione, 2013; Tabrys, 2013; Plunkett, 2013).

“The Day of the Doctor” followed in the tradition of anniversary episodes and featured the Eleventh Doctor—Matt Smith, who was also the current Doctor—the Tenth Doctor—David Tennant—and the War Doctor—Sir John Hurt. The three were brought together by an outside force and worked together for most of the special. At a crucial plot point in the story, they used archival footage to “bring together” all the previous incarnations of the Doctor and their TARDISEs. They even included a quick cameo of the Twelfth Doctor, with the camera only focusing on his eyes so not reveal much. But because of the use of the footage, these Doctors do not interact with one another, despite five of the original eight actors being alive and well. In the end, each Doctor goes their separate way, returning to his timeline and the existing story (Tartaglione, 2013; Tabrys, 2013; Plunkett, 2013). But that was not the end of the celebration.

BBC Red Button/iPlayer

What happened after the special aired depended on where you were watching it. In America, BBC America showed it again, but with commercial breaks and interviews with Matt Smith and David Tennant about making the special, which were fun, but not included in my scope.

In Britain, however, BBC viewers had the option to view “The Five(ish) Doctors Reboot” via the BBC Red Button service (Wikipedia, 2017). Red Button provides extras like interviews, behind-the-scenes clips, and other items typically seen on DVDs (“BBC—Red Button”). “The Five(ish) Doctors Reboot” followed the Fifth, Sixth, and Seventh Doctors—Peter Davison, Colin Baker, and Sylvester McCoy respectively—as they campaign for the BBC to include “Classic” Doctors in the special, a campaign we know failed having just watched the special. During the film, Tom Baker—the Fourth Doctor, and the eldest of the living Doctors—makes a cameo via his voicemail message and through archival footage, and Paul McGann appears with the other three at a convention, hence five(ish).

Eventually Peter devises a plan to sneak into the production, via his connection through his son-in-law, David Tennant, and get into the special in disguise. They succeed, disguised as Daleks, and make their way back out without being caught in the act. During the credits, there are two additional scenes. The first shows the Dalek scene being cut by Moffat for time, which makes sense because those Daleks were never seen during the special. More of the credits are shown and then the second scene comes. It too takes place during the editing process. The editor finds footage that shows while the three were trying to escape; they were mistaken for actors and ended up included—in disguise—in the special after all (Davison, 2013). Later at a convention, one of the three—possibly Colin Baker—confirmed that they were in the scene in the special.

The entire film has a feeling of subterfuge and unofficial-ness, with hand-held camera footage, the three sneaking around, and so on. But it was a BBC production and many people officially involved in the show—including Moffat, Smith, and Tennant—were involved in the film. But, despite being an official production, it was limited to what audiences could watch it. Originally it was limited to those living in Britain via the Red Button service or iPlayer on the BBC’s website. Later, the restriction was lifted so anyone could watch the film on their site. But before that, a fan had recorded themselves watching it and uploaded the file to YouTube, allowing more fans to gain access to the film. Yet another example of spreadable media in action.

Ultimately, this is, the entire celebration was—as Peter, Colin, and Sylvester say in the film—for the fans.

“For the Fans”

These three productions not only celebrated the production’s 50-year anniversary, but were a bringing together of 20th century and 21st century *Doctor Who* and its transnational audience in ways that had never been seen before. This is what is argued to be the goal of spreadable media: keeping old fans while bringing in new. There are two ways this was achieved.

First is the high level of involvement in the production of the show by the people who grew up watching it. Russel T. Davies was responsible for bringing *Doctor Who* back in 2005 and was head writer and producer for the first five years of the show’s return. He is also a self-proclaimed *Doctor Who* fan having grown up with the show, and he brought that enthusiasm and knowledge with him (Chapman, 2014, p. 55). Many other individuals on the production side are fans of the show since they were young, including the latest head writer and producer, Steven Moffat (p. 56). Both David Tennant and Peter Capaldi grew up a part of *Doctor Who* fandom. David has said in multiple interviews that he grew up wanting to be the Doctor, with the Fifth Doctor—his now father-in-law—being his first and favorite Doctor. Peter Capaldi has been watching the show since the first episode and was president of the Official Doctor Who Fan Club when he was younger (Cox, 2013). This level of intimate knowledge and passion for the show has allowed the producers and actors to include references to the 20th century stories while keeping the show accessible to a general audience (Cox, 2013; Haslop, 2016, p. 220).

This knowledge and inclusion of references are the second way they effectively kept old fans while bringing in new. The stories told in “The Night of the Doctor” and “The Day of the Doctor” filled in the gap in the story between the 20th and 21st century eras. They included many little visuals and lines as nods to what came before them, while telling a new story that engages everyone.

One gap the celebration filled was regarding regenerations. In “The Night of the Doctor” the audience gets to see the Eighth Doctor’s regeneration into the War Doctor, something that had never been established (Moffat, 2013). The final piece of regeneration information comes at the end of “The Day of the Doctor” when the War Doctor regenerates into the Ninth Doctor due to his body simply “wearing a bit thin”—which is also a reference to the first regeneration scene in the series. The scene ends before the regeneration is complete, but we start to see the features of Christopher Eccleston’s face—the face of the Ninth Doctor—just before the scene ends (Moffat, 2013).

“The Day of the Doctor” is also full of visual references and mentions of previous adventures without being integral to understanding the story. They are there for the fans to notice and further enjoy how the story connects to previous adventures. For example, the special opens showing the sign for Coal Hill Secondary School and I. M. Foreman’s junk yard. These are references to key locations in the first episode of the series. Also, there are two names listed on the sign for the school: Ian Chesterton and W. Coburn (Moffat, 2013). Ian was a teacher who

became one of the Doctor’s first human companions. W. Coburn refers to the director and the writer of the original episode, respectively.

Near the end of the episode, The Curator comes to talk to the Doctor about the painting hanging in the gallery. The actor playing the Curator is Tom Baker, and his mannerisms are very reminiscent of his Doctor—the Fourth Doctor. In his chat with the Doctor, he implies that he might be a future incarnation, enjoying life and revisiting a few old looks. To their right in the scene, is another art installation (Moffat, 2013). This piece is very reminiscent of the walls inside the TARDIS during most of the “Classic Who” time period.

They even include a character that is an avatar for the fans. Osgood is an important supporting character who spends the episode wearing a homemade Fourth Doctor scarf over her lab coat and is consistently in awe of the Doctor (Moffat, 2013). Later, Steven Moffat explicitly states that is part of the purpose of the character: to literally include a fan in the show (Moffat, 2016).

Conclusions

For over 50 years, *Doctor Who* has been taking audiences through time and space on encounters with historical figures from Earth’s past, alien worlds, and the possibilities of Earth’s future. For most of that time, they have had an open relationship with and appreciation of their transnational fanbase. They have been bringing fans in on the process of making the series through *Doctor Who Magazine*, social media platforms, or attending conventions. They also encourage the fans to be creative in showing their love of the series through writing, artwork, videos, and costuming.

It amazes me that while some shows struggle to stay relevant, even rebooting their stories to bring in a new audience, *Doctor Who* has been able to adapt and change to the times, culture, and technologies it finds itself interacting with for over 50 years. *Doctor Who* is still spreading around the world like peanut butter. The fandom is a global one and continues to grow as the content becomes more easily spread and shared. Since the days of word of mouth and trading VHS tapes to today’s world of social media and online streaming, *Doctor Who* shows no signs of slowing down its global spread.

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