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Are people inspired by *The Big Bang Theory* to find out more about science? Results from focus group-based audience research

ABSTRACT

*In this paper we report some results of focus group research run with regular viewers of American sitcom *The Big Bang Theory* (2007-ongoing), regarding the representation of science and scientists in the program. Specifically we report evidence that *The Big Bang Theory* has stimulated audience members to find out more about science. The show stimulated just over a quarter of our focus group participants to find out more about the scientific concepts discussed by its characters, mainly through internet searching and browsing. In some cases the show encouraged people to feel less intimidated about engaging actively with science-related public media such as YouTube videos and public lectures about physics.*

KEYWORDS

science
communication
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science engagement

INTRODUCTION

In the field of science communication, a major focus of research is to find out how people respond to different forms of science popularisation, as one of the discipline's aims is to inspire public interest in science. In 2010 the Australian Government's Department of Innovation, Industry, Science and Research produced a document entitled Inspiring Australia (DIISR, 2010), which was directed at reviewing the current situation of science communication in Australia and recommending strategies for science engagement over the next five years. One of its recommendations was that the media's role in communicating science be strengthened. While the report's focus was on news media and Australian-

produced science-themed programming, it was this recommendation that inspired the research project on which the present study is based. An expert working group that was brought together to make further recommendations for Inspiring Australia offered one particular recommendation, suggesting ‘a general programming supplementary fund be established to encourage television and film content that includes factual science, fictional science (i.e. superhero science), science concepts or characters’ (Science and Media Expert Working Group 2011: 11). However, there is a relative paucity of research about whether fictional science and fiction characters do inspire public interest in science.

This present paper aims to contribute to redressing that lack, through a study of audience responses to US sitcom *The Big Bang Theory* (hereafter, *TBBT*). *TBBT* is popular on the world scale, with 15.5 million viewers in the US alone for the season finale of season 6 (TV-aholic, 2013). It is also very popular with Australian viewers. An estimate of 1.3 million Australians watched the same episode (OzTAM, 2013), therefore making it a promising vehicle for delivering the kind of service the Inspiring Australia program seeks for stimulating Australians’ interest in science. In addition, *TBBT* has a science consultant working with the program’s crew during the taping of each episode, who helps by including accurate and up-to-date science in the scripts (Heyman 2008). This suggests that *TBBT*, more than many other popular fiction texts about science, is consistent with Inspiring Australia’s aims.

There is anecdotal evidence that science-themed fiction television programs can inspire interest in science. For example, NASA astronaut Mae Jemison was famously inspired to pursue her career by watching Lt. Uhura (Nichelle Nichols) on the original series of *Star Trek* (1966-69) (Penley 1997), the anonymous scientist authors of the website ‘Sci-Fi Science: The True Science Behind Science Fiction’ state ‘it was science fiction that sparked our interest in science fact’ (<http://www.scifiscience.co.uk/>), and Dhingra (2003) noted that some of the school students she studied considered scientist Dr. Dana Scully (Gillian Anderson) from *The X-Files* (1993-2002) to be a positive role model. In the present study we wished to more formally investigate such links. Many of the formal studies that have been conducted into the relationship between fiction and public engagement with science have focused on the public understanding of science facts (e.g. Barnett et al. 2006) or attitudinal and behavioural changes regarding health or environmental matters (e.g. Brodie et al. 2001, Lowe et al. 2006), rather than more purely interest in science. While, in a small study, we would not expect to find anything as striking as people inspired to become scientists by

TBBT, we did seek to know whether *TBBT* inspired its audience members to find out more about aspects of science. We defined ‘science’ broadly to include any aspects of mathematics, engineering and medicine as well as traditional science disciplines.

METHOD

To gauge audience responses to the science and scientist characters in *TBBT*, one of us (RL) conducted focus groups with regular viewers, after gaining ethics approval (ANU HREC protocol 2011/177). We recruited participants from the Canberra region but including interstate and international visitors, through publicity mainly within a university and by word of mouth. The participants’ ages ranged between 18 and 59, and the gender split was 39 women and 35 men. The total number of participants was 74, distributed among 18 focus groups. For the purposes of analysis the focus group participants were organised into two main categories: those with a science background (defined as a university degree in a science-related field) and those with a non-science background (no such degree). We further subdivided each of these into three occupational categories: undergraduate students, postgraduate students or academics, and people who worked outside academia and were not students (‘non-academics’). The 74 participants were distributed among these categories as follows:

	Science background	Non-science background
Undergraduates	8	10
Postgraduates or Academics	22	-
Non-academics	10	24

Each focus group ran for about 2 hours. A set of pre-written questions was asked, which predominantly focused on what the participants thought about various aspects of the science and the scientists in *TBBT*, and whether their knowledge or behaviours regarding science had changed as a result of watching it. The questions also inquired into participants’ personal opinions about science and experiences with it, including whether they had previously engaged in information-seeking activity about science.

An approach inspired by grounded theory was used to analyse the data for the project as a whole, since it ‘results in the generation of new knowledge in the form of theory; therefore areas where little is known about a particular topic are most deserving of research effort’ (Birks and Mills 2011: 16-17). The grounded theory approach demands that data be analysed in such a way that the conclusions are built upon the participant’s responses, rather than analysing data to test *a priori* determined hypotheses based on existing theory. Accordingly, our approach was first to draw out core concepts from the responses to each of the pre-written questions, and in subsequent iterations of analysis, to explore themes and trends emerging from the data.

The present study focused on just one of the core concepts that emerged from the research, answering the question: does *TBBT* stimulate its audiences to find out more about science? The focus group data were analysed for participant responses that provided answers to this question, starting with a broad interpretation of the question then refining it somewhat. Some of the relevant data came from questions directly posed to focus groups (‘Is there a scientific concept, experiment or theory that you came to know of from the show rather than in school or through other educational means?’ and ‘Has the information given in the show stimulated you to do more in depth research on your own?’) while other data came from elsewhere in the focus group conversations. We were guided by the twin goals of, first, quantifying ‘yes’ and ‘no’ answers to our research question, and second, investigating participants’ experiences qualitatively within each of these answers. To achieve the latter we identified common themes through iterative readings of the data, and then classified responses according to them.

RESULTS

Out of the 74 participants, 54 answered this question directly. Twenty-two of these had a science background, and of them, 8 revealed that *TBBT* had stimulated them to find out more about science (classified as a ‘yes’ answer), while 14 said it had not (‘no’). Among the 32 participants with a non-science background, 12 gave a ‘yes’ answer, 14 gave a ‘no’, and 6 gave answers that we classified as ‘maybe’. Those classified as ‘maybe’ were mostly participants who couldn’t remember whether they had engaged in information seeking activities because of *TBBT* but had a feeling they did.

The majority of the 20 participants who did not answer this question directly didn’t answer because they felt they had previously indicated that the show had not inspired them to

engage in information seeking activities. Most of these participants (18) had a science background. We do not discuss their answers below, but they can potentially be considered additional ‘no’ answers, suggesting the total percentage of ‘yes’ answers was about 27%.

‘YES’ ANSWERS

We identified three categories of response for those who gave a ‘yes’ answer:

1. Participants who indicated that they already knew about a particular aspect of science, and when it was mentioned on *TBBT* they were stimulated to find out more. For example, one participant said that she wouldn’t look it up unless she already had a vague understanding of it, because otherwise she wouldn’t know how to spell some of the words used in the show, like ‘Schrödinger’s cat’ (female, 26, non-science non-academic). Another said:

There [have] been a couple of times when I’ve been unsure of what they’ve been talking about, I’ve heard of it and I have sort of Googled it to try find a bit more (male, 59, science non-academic).

2. Participants who thought the science in *TBBT* sounded interesting and it made them want to understand what the characters were talking about. For example:

I understand what the joke would be about but I would have no clue about the physics part of it, so it makes me more interested to look it up and study (male, 26, science postgraduate or academic).

3. Participants who were sceptical about the completeness of the science being presented and their doubts made them check up on the accuracy. For example:

It’s always sort of doubtful when I watch it. I’m like ‘do they sort of dumb it down for people and not have all the facts there’ so if I’m confused about something I’ll always try to look it up later (female, 20, non-science undergraduate).

Most of the participants who we classified as giving a ‘yes’ answer expressed that the science sounded interesting and it made them want to find out what the characters were talking about, especially when the science was a key theme that the humour revolved around. Participants often indicated that they wanted to understand the science because it opens up a whole new level of humour to the jokes, allowing them to appreciate them more.

Two participants made comments that demonstrated they had gone beyond searching on Google or Wikipedia:

I recently subscribed to a You tuber who does minute physics where he actually draws and talks about physics, science concepts... *The Big Bang Theory* has definitely edged me towards the science, the interest in science like I've always been interested but it's probably pushed me to learn more about them (male, 25, non-science undergraduate).

You know, one thing I have noticed since I've started watching this show, if there's lectures and if they interest me, especially for example solar flares, or even creationism versus scientific origins of the world, I would actually pause and give a look and think 'do I have the time to attend it? 'And I think that's something that I don't think I would have done prior to watching the show so I think that's one behavioural change I've noticed in myself since watching...I wouldn't walk in thinking 'oh my god, I'm not going to understand anything 'because it's ok if I don't understand everything (female, 34, non-science non-academic).

From these positive responses it seems that *TBBT* has been successful in stimulating interest in science for some members of the audience.

'NO' ANSWERS

While the 'yes' answers easily fell into three categories, the 'no' answers were far more diverse: we identified numerous kinds of reasons people did not look up the science in *TBBT*. However, we grouped the majority of responses into three main categories:

1. Participants who were either already in a science field or had a working knowledge of the science presented. For example, one participant said, 'it's the field that I work in already so a lot of the stuff they're talking about I'll know of at some point throughout my academic career' (female, 30, science postgraduate or academic).
2. Participants who didn't have time to look up the science. Some people indicated that they sit in front of a computer all day at work so they didn't want to sit in front of a computer at home. For example: 'Most of the time I've watched it I wasn't near internet access so there was a time lapse' (female, 29, non-science non-academic).

3. Participants who were not particularly interested in physics, but were more interested in other aspects of science such as environmental science. For example, one participant said: 'I'm not confident in my ability to understand it basically and I don't have enough of a drive to learn more about physics' (female, 28, science postgraduate or academic).

One participant commented that while *TBBT* did not stimulate him to look further into the science, it did stimulate the interest of his children: 'No, but it has stimulated my kids to ask questions so it certainly, there's a certain amount of 'what's that' which comes out of it' (male, 48, science non-academic). He also indicated that he was able to explain the concept of lunar ranging to them with the help of an experiment presented on *TBBT*.

Another participant's response revealed that the perceived accuracy of science on the show makes a difference to those who are watching it:

It's funny you mention that because I've never had the impulse to look up something I've found on *The Big Bang Theory*. I think *The Big Bang Theory* has done enough for me to establish its credibility, like it doesn't make outrageous claims ... I basically assume that if it's on *The Big Bang Theory* it's probably right (male, 26, non-science non-academic).

This is the converse of the third category of 'yes' answer, in which some participants were sceptical about the science presented so looked it up to check it. Both kinds of answer indicate an appreciation for accurate science among *TBBT* audience members, which is something that the Inspiring Australia program seeks to foster.

'MAYBE' ANSWERS

Many of the responses we classified as 'maybe' answers had elements in common with 'no' responses. Notably, the time lapse between watching the episodes and getting to the internet was a factor contributing to participants' uncertainty about whether they had looked up some of the show's science or had just thought about doing it.

Some participants said that although they did not actively seek more information about the science in the show, they had become more sensitive to it, and picked up more information when they saw it in the news or magazines:

They went to [the] Large Hadron Collider...so having seen that on the show, I might pick up a bit more if I heard something about it on the news...but I wouldn't actually go out and then look up on it (female, 33, science postgraduate or academic).

This resonates with the first kind of 'yes' answer, in which participants who already had a vague understanding of the science could pick up more information when watching *TBBT* and do further research if they wished. Essentially, *TBBT* has the potential to plant a seed of a science concept, which builds upon previous knowledge and upon which further knowledge can be built.

INFLUENCE OF SCIENCE BACKGROUND AND OCCUPATION ON RESPONSE

There was no particularly clear relationship between participants' response type ('yes', 'no' or 'maybe') and their science background or occupation (Table 1), though it should be noted that the small sample size prevents us from drawing any rigorous quantitative conclusions or conducting more formal statistical tests. It may be notable that all the responses we classified as 'maybe' were from people without a science background, but nothing in the participants' responses explains why this might be the case.

Table 1: Response types by science background and occupation for the 54 participants who directly answered the question.

	Sciencebackground	Non-sciencebackground
Undergraduates	Yes 1 No 7	Yes 5 No 4 Maybe 2
Postgraduates or academics	Yes 3 No 7	-
Non-academics	Yes 3 No 3	Yes 6 No 9 Maybe 4

DICSUSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This study suggests that *The Big Bang Theory* does have the potential to stimulate interest in science, among scientists and non-scientists alike. Many of the participants expressed that

they had been stimulated by *TBBT* to find out more about science, and while not all of them took action as a result, over a quarter of participants did. Many of those who were not stimulated to seek more information already knew something about the science being discussed, or trusted that the information was true, and so felt no need to look into it further. For some participants the program planted a seed of interest, and/or made science seem less intimidating or alienating, both of which may enable future science engagement to develop. This is consistent with many of the previous studies on public responses to science-themed fiction, which mostly demonstrate that people process the science they see or read in fiction in complex and diverse ways that vary with innumerable contextual factors (a constructivist model of ‘learning’), rather than merely ‘learning’ it in a linear fashion (reviewed by Orthia et al., 2012). These results are promising with respect to the aims of the Inspiring Australia program, affirming that including science in popular media including entertainment television can have the desired effect of engaging Australians with science.

What is not clear from this study is whether other popular media would achieve the same result as *TBBT*. Some of the participants’ responses suggest that the science-based humour of the program is an important driver of information-seeking behaviour, because finding out more about science increases the entertainment value of the show. Other responses suggest that an interest in scientific accuracy is another driver that can encourage information seeking behaviour, and can also promote viewership, but there was no consistency among participants about whether they thought *TBBT* was accurate or not. It may be that people with an inherent interest in scientific accuracy are drawn to watching *TBBT*, rather than the show itself encouraging this interest, though certainly some participants watched *TBBT* despite not having an inherent interest in its scientific subject matter.

This study provides evidence that at least some science-themed popular fiction television has a role to play in inspiring public interest in science. This confirms, with a broader population sample, anecdotal evidence that has previously suggested a link between television fiction and science engagement.

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CONTENTS

EDITORIAL:

- viii-xi ['To boldly go...': an overview of proceedings](#)
PAUL MOUNTFORT

ANIMATION

- 1-10 [The morphological riddle of a cartoon hand](#)
MARTINE COROMPT
- 11-20 [Character acting: a case for better animation reference](#)
JASON KENNEDY

FICTION, BIOGRAPHY AND LIFE WRITING

- 21-30 ['Mum, what is a blow queen?': tracking the emergence of the Steamies genre](#)
DENISE BECKTON
- 31-40 [Sleuths and spies: the rise of the 'Everywoman' in detective and thriller fiction of the 1920s](#)
JILLENE BYDDER and RACHEL FRANKS
- 41-51 [Murder, they cooked: the role of food in crime fiction](#)
RACHEL FRANKS, DONNA LEE BRIEN and MARTA USIEKNIOWICZ
- 52-61 [The Outsider within:
a reflection on notions of alienation within life writing](#)
ULRIKE STURM
- 62-70 [Altruism. Lights, camera, action!](#)
KIM D. WEINERT

FILM

- 71-79 [Tragedy and comedy in Lars von Trier's *The Boss of It All*](#)
ALEKSANDR ANDREAS WANSBROUGH

FOOD

80-90 [American and Australian post-war culinary culture: Betty Crocker and Betty King — her Australian lookalike](#)
JILL ADAMS

91-102 [Reading the eating disorder memoir as food writing](#)
DONNA LEE BRIEN

103-117 [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cookbooks: promoting Indigenous foodways or reinforcing Western traditions?](#)
BRONWYN FREDERICKS and MARGARET ANDERSON

GAMING

118-128 [The barrel and the monkey: application of auteur theory to digital games designers](#)
BRENDON SZUCS

GENDER AND QUEER

129-137 [Bronzed buffed and tattooed: the new brand of soldier shaped and shipped by popular culture](#)
RICHARD GEHRMANN and HEATHER SMITH

138-146 ['He's gonna be a little gay': redneckognising the queer American family in *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* and the implications for cultural studies](#)
GEOFFREY PARKES

147-157 [A piggy boob and a cocky bomb-hole: the anus and its metaphors in contemporary Australian political cartoons](#)
SIMON ASTLEY SCOLFIELD

GOTHIC

158-167 ['You only have to turn your back on nature...': valorising posthuman desire in Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight Saga*](#)
SAMUEL FINEGAN

168-178 [Sensational storytelling meets social networking: a Gothic romance](#)
ASHLEIGH PYKE

GRAPHIC NOVELS AND MANGA

178-187 [Tintin as a metonym of the twentieth century](#)
PAUL MOUNTFORT

- 188-194 [Childish transgressions in *Doraemon*: the moral voids of Nobita Nobi](#)
KEITH RUSSEL
- HISTORY**
- 195-205 [Australian history: online and insatiable](#)
GEORGIA-LEE HOE
- 206-216 [Who isn't that masked man: the absence of re-Authoring in *The Lone Ranger*](#)
NICHOLAS WILLIAM MOLL
- LAW**
- 217-227 [Sex, violence and the law: new approaches to popular visual media](#)
JASON BAINBRIDGE
- 228-236 [Laughing at the law: the authenticity consultant and James Ellroy's *LA Confidential*](#)
CAROLYN BEASLEY
- 237-248 [Authenticating Wentworth: the prison consultant from cell to screen](#)
KERRY TUCKER
- 249-258 [Prince Harry: performing princeliness](#)
OLIVER WATTS
- MUSIC**
- 259-273 [Bluesfest crushes: an exploration of fandom at a regional blues festival](#)
JEANTI St CLAIR and DENISE N. RALL
- PERFORMANCE**
- 274-286 [The trouble with writing reality](#)
DUSK DUNDLER and SCOTT WELSH
- 287-299 [Influences on contemporary rehearsal practices in educational settings](#)
SIMON DWYER
- SCIENCE**
- 300-310 [Are people inspired by *The Big Bang Theory* to find out more about science? Results from focus group-based audience research](#)
RASHEL LI and LINDY A. ORTHIA

VISUAL ARTS

311-320 [Transgressive eroticism in the music videos of Madonna, Rihanna and Lady Gaga](#)

AMELIA KELLY

321-329 [Drawing the Apocalypse: a biological imperative](#)

JONATHAN McBURNIE

330-338 [The appropriation of Edvard Munch's *The Scream* in popular culture](#)

MARKELA PANEGYRES

EDITORIAL

Paul Mountfort

‘To boldly go...’: an overview of proceedings

The study of popular culture encompasses such a heterodox set of practices that it is difficult to identify a discipline area that stands outside its compass, let alone one which defines it. This sheer scope is witnessed in the diverse areas covered at the 4th Annual Conference of the Popular Culture Association of Australia and New Zealand (PopCAANZ) in Brisbane, Queensland, 2013: animation, architecture, business, creative writing, comics and graphic novels, cyber culture, design, entertainment, fashion, fiction, biography and life writing, film, food studies, girlhood studies, gothic, history, law, manga and anime, music, performance, radio and audio media, religion, science, sound and voice, sports, television, textiles, toys and games, and visual arts. Yet, for all that, academic snobbishness – and perhaps a lack of modishness – can still conspire to marginalize and balkanize practitioners working from popular culture studies’ many disciplinary bases.

PopCAANZ was established to provide such practitioners with a progressive regional forum. It grew out of conversations with the (American) Popular Culture Association in San Francisco in 2008 and New Orleans in 2009. With their national conferences bursting over state lines like William Gibson’s *Sprawl* – in San Antonio, Texas, in 2010 there were over 4000 presentations – the idea was to seed the study of pop culture more globally within a kind of loose federation of regional branches. From this was born not only PopCAANZ (inaugural conference Sydney 2010) but the East Asian Popular Culture Association (EAPCA, Taipei 2011), the European Popular Culture Association (EUPOP, London 2012) and the Popular Culture Association of Canada (PCAC, Calgary, 2014).

The popular culture ethos has always been worlds apart from many academic associations, as is reflected in the American PCA annual conference brief. Rather than cultivating only established scholars, the PCA favours a mix of Faculty and emerging researchers, professors and postgraduates. Instead of canonizing academic superstars as keynote speakers, you are as likely to bump into an actor from a cult tv series such as the classic *Star Trek*. Some participants walk the line between the scholarly and fandom, and

there is indeed an emphasis on the performative, from round table discussions to movie screenings. However, let there be no mistake: the scope of scholarship on show is breathtaking and second in scale only to the MLA within the humanities globally.

PopCAANZ has both followed in the footsteps of this mission and boldly gone its own way. In four short years (Sydney 2010, Auckland 2011, Melbourne 2012, Brisbane 2013) it has grown a constituency of around 30 areas and 150 papers. It has forged a close link with one of the most vibrant and exciting independent academic publishers in the world, Intellect Books (UK), in a partnership that has seen not only three volumes of tri-annual issues of *The Australasian Journal of Popular Culture*, but a number of full-length book publications, including a co-authored work by current and former PopCAANZ presidents Vicki Karaminas and Toni Johnson Woods, *Shanghai Street Style* (Intellect, 2013). In providing a dedicated space for the performance and publication of such research it is transforming the landscape of popular culture studies in Australasia, as well as helping promote regional practitioners within a global community of practice.

The review process for the papers included in this volume has been no less rigorous than for the journal: the vetting by area chairs, double-blind review, and editorial oversight is modelled on the Intellect template. 32 papers have made it into the final compilation. At around 3,500-4,500 words a piece, these represent crystallizations of some key insights from the diverse fields of animation; fiction, biography and life writing; film; food; gaming; gender and queer; gothic; comics and manga, history, law, music, performance, science, and visual arts. 32 papers is beyond the scope of a Proceedings editorial to address in detail, and the connecting threads I chart below may be more a matter of fortuitous constellations than a guide to some overarching *mise en scène*, but they certainly provide some pointers as to where it's at right now in this most cosmopolitan interdisciplinary nexus.

Under **Animation**, Corompt looks at the representation of character type through the 'morphological riddle' of the caricatured cartoon hand, while Kennedy alleges a 'caricature of emotion' in the way animators often simulate character acting. In the **Fiction** area we find a triangulation of sex, crime and food: Beckton tracks the emergence of the 'Steamies' genre, while Bydder investigates the rise of the 'everywoman' in detective and thriller fiction in the 1920s, and Franks et al. look at the sometimes poisonous role of food in a popular crime novel series. The two **Biography and Life Writing** papers reflect on alienation in life writing (Sturm) and the application of ethical egoism theory to Jane Bussmann's autobiographical *The Worst Date Ever* (Weinert), while the sole film paper applies Hegel and

Steiner's notions of comedy and tragedy to the topical von Trier's *The Boss of it All*. The cross-over of cuisine and fiction continues in the **Food** area with Brien's consideration of the eating disorder memoir as food writing; identity politics are interrogated in Adams' study of the impact of America on post-war Australian food culture as mirrored in Betty Crocker's lookalike Aussie clone, Betty King, and Fredericks and Anderson questioning of whether Aboriginal cookbooks promote indigenous foodways or reinforce western culinary traditions.

Szuk applies auteur theory to the arena of digital **Gaming**, while it's all wargames for Gehrman and Smith, who under **Gender** interrogate the reification of the soldier as a model of new masculinity in mass media constructions. Along similar lines of critique vis-à-vis gender construction, Parkes looks at challenges to the representation of the white trash family through the 'prism of queerness' in *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, while Scholfield goes where few others have gone before in 'examin[ing] the imagery of the anus' in selected Australian artwork and cartoons. **Gothic** is another stellar – and dare we say sexy – emerging field of popular culture studies, with Finegan viewing the *Twilight Saga* franchise as a site for valorizing posthuman desire while Pyke frames the emergence of the genre in the context of print production and distribution technologies. Under **Graphic Novels and Manga** Russell enters the asteroid belt of the 'panty glimpse' and associated moral voids in Doreamon, while Mountfort subjects the Tintin franchise to an uncompromising post-Situationist reading ('great snakes!').

Hoe is concerned with an up-to-the minute consideration of how online digital **History** is transforming how Australians relate to information. Moll makes the point that amid the endless recycling of popular cultural heroes, *The Lone Ranger* remains yet-to-be re-authored – perhaps explaining why the masked hero has also been relegated to history (the 2013 Verbinski movie notwithstanding). Talking of lawmen, given the popularity of law and order or crime shows, it is no surprise that **Law** is another strongly emergent pop cultural area. Bainbridge charts the rise of *vernacular jurisprudence* in tv series *Boston Legal*, *Dexter* and *24*. As if in reply, Beasley and Tucker independently track down the behind-the-scenes roles of the 'authenticity consultant' and 'prison consultant' in *LA Confidential* and Foxtel's *Wentworth*, respectively. Meanwhile, Watts investigates another area of jurisprudence: representations of the princely body following the fear and loathing provoked by Prince's Harry's night in Las Vegas. In their **Performance** paper, Dundler and Welsh briefly evoke the ghost of Hunter S. Thompson in suggesting why the next time a character jumps off the page of one of their plays and tries to strangle you, you'd better have a shotgun ready (and

perhaps subsequently a lawyer) while Dwyer investigates rehearsal practices in educational setting, but not before Jeanti St Clair and Denise N. Rall explore the Bluesfest **Music** festival through the eyes of fandom.

Li and Orthia consider representations of science in *The Big Bang*, and how against the odds the show has stimulated viewer-interest in something as deeply unfashionable as... **Science**. It's a universe away, perhaps, from **Visual Arts** and Kelly's specular investigation of transgressive eroticism in music videos from Madonna to Lady Gaga, McBurnie's excision of the strange taboo against artistic representations of 9/11 (and study of the rare exception of Gary Panter's drawings), and Panegyre's charting of the appropriation of Munch's *The Scream* in popular cultural representations – but no less weird and wonderful for that.

For those who participated in, as well as those who missed, the 4th Annual Conference in Brisbane, the 2014 port of call in this first five years of PopCAANZ's mission is Hobart, Tasmania. We look forward to witnessing similarly diverse and inspiring pop culture flora and fauna within – to borrow a phrase from Roland Barthes – the 'galaxy of signs' that is the study of contemporary popular culture there, 18-20th June 2014,

Auckland

20 December, 2013

