

## 7. Queer and Mainstream: Tracing *Heartstopper's* Reception via Digital Tools

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### ◀ ABSTRACT

Netflix's *Heartstopper* (2022) raises a paradox for queer television: does the series present, radically, a queer utopia, or does it merely serve commercial imperatives? Exploring this phenomenon with the help of digital tools, I will put forward a methodological discussion centered on the need of uncertainty as a core feature of the contemporary structure of feeling, as well as a crucial caveat for any foray into the analysis of television.

### KEYWORDS

TV studies; digital humanities; LGBTQIA+; queer.

## Introduction

This paper is part of a set of considerations in the field of digital humanities. It stems from the belief that the alliance between media studies and digital humanities is more necessary than ever in a context where media production and consumption are done through computer screens, and in a networked landscape. It is now easier than ever to be confronted with mass amounts of data. However, it is imperative to make room for emotional elements, which are always present in these aggregates of data. The question is: can a data-driven perspective offer us a new way of reading television phenomena and, more broadly, the audiovisual?

We can justify the interest in using data-driven perspectives for television analysis, given the very nature of the televisual medium itself. This is true for at least two reasons: first, a TV program is often a serial object, comprised of a plurality of episodes and, oftentimes, seasons. Second, the contemporary landscape produces an impressive amount of content, making it impossible to understand local or general trends without some strategy for mapping it.

Some scholars in media studies apply data-driven perspectives, often placing them within the discussion of Franco Moretti's distant reading, a project of studying literature "from a distance" by compiling large quantities of data. Unlike the traditional close reading, apt for analyzing large corpora (Moretti 2005, 2013), such an all-encompassing approach simplifies certain analytical duties. For example, counting discrete elements of a film or a show, like Yuri Tsivian's *Cinematics* or Jeremy Butler's *Shot Logger* ("Cinematics n.d., Butler [2014] 2020), or visualizing them differently (the *Distant Viewing Project* by Taylor Arnold and Lauren Tilton and their use of algorithms for the analysis of face detection in American sitcoms (Tilton 2019); examples of network analysis can be found in the *Narrative Ecosystems* projects (Pescatore et al. 2014, De Pascalis 2015, Innocenti and Pescatore 2017).

These approaches revolve around formal or narrative features of TV shows. They are informed by a theorization of the series as structures, in which links and patterns reveal specific, meaningful features. Such “distant reading” or “distant viewing” practices are grounded in structuralist rigor and a certain optimism, or even positivism, about the idea of seeing better from afar, thanks to the use of big data. Taking a step back as a way of seeing differently, of seeing better, rests on a certitude: the exactitude of numbers leads to exportable results, which should be more “objective” and less biased than a single set of close analyses or idiosyncratically constituted corpora. Taking Moretti’s position as a starting point for new methods in the analysis of film and television may seem like a way of trading the impossible task of analyzing every element of a long, perhaps never-ending TV show, with the option of obtaining a clear, broad view of it. Yet, even if such a perspective was presented by Moretti as groundbreaking, such a view does not disrupt the norm. It is a “strong” strategy, constructed in clearly defined settings, using specific software.

Digital cartography and data visualization can benefit from the “quantitative condition” of our times but, as I argue, it should be done knowing there will be an inevitable amount of uncertainty. Therefore, a queer approach enables a critical view towards our methods. This is particularly true because television shows are phenomena composed of multiple, transmedial, and often anonymous contributions, which go beyond the boundaries of official textuality. Fan discourse, for example, creates a tangle of official texts, paratexts and grassroots readings, prompting a need to adopt more “uncertain” queer practices, able to display such disorder, but without necessarily trying to organize it. We can therefore ask: “what might it mean to do the work of the digital humanities queerly?” (Ruberg, Boyd, Howe 2019, chap. 8, page 2)

When dealing with the queer, a digital humanities perspective is particularly useful. It allows intimate discourses to emerge, it foregrounds conversations that only take place online due to the delicate nature of the subject matter, and helps us display fragments of discourses that would otherwise remain inaccessible. Doing queer research in digital humanities can mean tackling queer issues, and building and dismantling tactics to adapt them to queer sensibilities. Television is a particularly appropriate terrain for such work. Traditionally, it is a space where social values are discussed. According to John Fiske, television is a

[b]earer/provoker of meaning and pleasures, and of culture as the generation and circulation of this variety of meanings and pleasures within society.

Television-as-culture is a crucial part of the social dynamics by which the social structure maintains itself in a constant process of production and reproduction: meanings, popular pleasures, and their circulation are therefore part and parcel of this social structure (Fiske 1994:1).

Thus, as we consume online, we leave fragments, whether it is feeding the algorithm of the video-on-demand platforms, liking content, sharing an image or leaving a comment. Other fragments include the heterogeneous operations of fans, from the manufacturing of visual art to fanfiction, fanvid, cosplay, etc. I will suggest, while developing strategies based on quantitative tools for assessing discourse analysis, that our answers need to address the issue of uncertainty contained in an abundance of online traces, yet without trying to fix it. Moreover, our answers may promote social justice by bringing into view the entanglement of forms of oppression. It is therefore particularly important for anyone who deals with these practices to commit deeply to the studied sensibilities.

Far from wanting to merely expose them, the aim is to let traces of discourse appear that can be helpful in highlighting a show's nuances. As we will see, we can highlight the relevance of queer issues in mainstream media, such as the presence of what we will call "queer melancholia." In applying a queer approach, which embraces imperfection, the limits of our knowledge, and the "weakness" of our practices, what perspectives and methodologies are possible in digital humanities?

A TV series is built up from its official texts, but also from its "digital traces" (Merzeau 2012). My perspective, rooted in cultural studies, aims to highlight the relevance of what I call "traces of reception" (Boni 2017). Audiences discuss television shows online and use their life experience to make sense of a series, and vice versa (they make sense of their lives by using TV texts as indicators, guides, or environments to explore). Like tracks along a path, such data can lead to a hypothesis and findings, but they probably won't be sufficient to describe the entire phenomenon. They will only tell us where *we are* within the phenomenon itself. And therefore, such attempts lay bare the impossibility of an orderly typology, of a precise track to follow. Embracing a queer episteme (keeping in mind that queer practices center on deviations from the norm, and the questioning of the norm itself), I find myself happily working with a fuzzy infrastructure. And I develop a queer praxis, assembled with recursive explorations of a territory and from a series of attempts.

The heuristic concept of emergence, found in Morin's work on complex systems, is particularly relevant here (Morin 2005). The idea that disruptions of a system can appear and lead to unforeseen results is compatible with an approach that questions the norm. Yet, questioning the norm is not possible unless we scrutinize the methods themselves. It is my aim to discuss further the use of data-driven approaches for the analysis of television shows. The chosen example points towards a bricolage of data-gathering techniques, and to the relative success of digital tools that unveil one singular feature of the observed phenomenon, which, far from offering a clear answer, leads to a more uncertain one, an answer "in-between."

And to find a path in the "messiness" or "playfulness" of queer digital practices, instead of the cleanliness and rigor of traditional work, I am suggesting a mixed methodology, a perspective that uses both close reading and its potential to reveal poignant details in the show, and the potential of quantitative analysis to reveal patterns, to adopt a queer perspective. In other words, analytical tools that make room for disruptive, non-normative, unlabeled feelings to appear on the map.

The logic of television – the fact that it is a mass medium, crossed by incessant reformulations, mutations, stops, failures, and intervals – also justifies the use of a queer approach. It generates a need to borrow from queer theory its particularly unique instruments that can help us better understand television. TV intended as a "cultural forum" (Newcomb and Hirsch 1983) has always been a space for resistant sensibilities, just think of the queer fandom highlighted by a consistent literature since the '90s (Jenkins 1992, Stein 2015, Lothian 2018). So, beyond the "negative" perspective that the queer rift can bring, we can envision, with José Esteban Muñoz, a "utopia," a possibility of reworking the present from a queer "not yet" envisaged in the future, evoking surprising and unexpected alternatives (Muñoz 2009). As we will see, when we enter such a heterogeneous space, uncertainty, disorientation, and even failure are at the core of our methodological discussions.

## ***Heartstopper***

While LGBTQIA+ characters have always had a rather uneasy life on the small screen (think of the cliché of gay characters condemned to secondary parts or to the role of the villain, destined to suffer and die, or to disappear because of the series' cancellation), today there is a greater, more nuanced

presence of minorities in serial productions. Since *Orange is the New Black* (Netflix, 2013-2019), digital platforms and, more timidly, linear television, produce stories featuring more overtly LGBTQIA+ characters, responding to a need for representation expressed by an increasingly visible audience (and creators). Netflix's algorithms also contain information on diversity, with title descriptions incorporating "non-normative identities," and the company is said to be actively working to be more inclusive both behind and in front of the camera. The renewal of content goes hand in hand with access to production, writing and directing that is slowly becoming more equitable for women, racialized people, and members of the LGBTQIA+ community. Gradually, the reconfiguration of norms and the appropriation of issues of "identity" are in turn becoming a standard in the creation of scripts that are increasingly labeled as "queer."

Netflix's *Heartstopper* (2022) is an adaptation of Alice Oseman's light and romantic graphic novel for young adults, "where just a blush or a smiley-face emoji convey so much more than words" (Martaus 2020). The story focuses on the budding romance between two young boys. Charlie and Nick are teenage friends who attend a British school. Charlie, a bit isolated and nerdy, has been openly gay some time, whereas Nick, athletic and popular, doesn't know how to label his orientation, or hasn't questioned it yet. The series follows, over eight episodes, the stages of a discovery: the crush, the development of their love, and the moments when their hearts crack or stop for a moment. The presence of homophobic judgment or violence from classmates does not prevent the show from being optimistic.

The episodes follow the wonder, doubt, and enthusiasm of Charlie and Nick, and offer glimpses into the lives of secondary characters who also experience moments of transformation or who face their feelings for another person. At the core of the show, vulnerability and even benevolence – elements still underestimated in prestige serial productions – take a leading role. It appears through a staging of ordinary situations, touching because seen through a proximity to the two protagonists. We find it in Charlie and Nick's hesitations and clumsiness, as well as in their reciprocal interactions and in their relationships with family and friends. The adult world, on the other hand, remains free of the judgment and conflict that other teen series typically reserve for it. Charlie's father, for example, appears only when he picks up his son at night after a party or movie screening, and in those rare moments he conveys a great gentleness, carried mostly by apprehension for the bullying Charlie may experience. Nick's mother (Olivia Colman, who

wept with emotion at the set during the final sequence) also remains in the background of the action, but plays a reassuring, welcoming role.

*Heartstopper* poignantly – and minimally – dramatizes some classic moments of a queer adolescence: falling in love with a straight person, the fear of judgment from others, the pain of dating someone who is ashamed of the relationship, homophobic bullying, the deep silence that precedes every coming out. The style attempts to correspond with the original comic book, in that it insists not on the virtuosity of the camera, but rather on drawn elements inserted into the image, conveying the characters' feelings in an almost literal or playful way. For example, when the two boys have butterflies in their stomachs, we see small butterflies appear around them. Leaves, sparks, or hearts drawn with pastel colors appear in the shot, adding a surplus of emotions, facilitating the approach to the characters' sensibilities.

The series does not propose the well-known stereotypes about gay characters who suffer through uncomfortable moments or painfully come out of the closet. Instead, it establishes the elements for a happy ending, offering a fair, optimistic, and non-pedagogical view of the relationship between people of the same sex and their experiences as young folks:

*Heartstopper* is the anti-*Euphoria* [...] They are sweet, chronically polite and partial to an early night – a world away from the contemporary teen TV stereotype. [...] a comfortingly escapist, binge-worthy beacon of loveliness and love (Aroesti 2022).

It makes the positive parts feel real, and it shows that they *can* be real (Wickman 2022).

And yet, such cheerfulness (which never interjects in sexual moments) could be easily taken for an oversimplification. If it appears devoid of any radical claim, it is obviously a positivist representation:

It's curious that in an age of unprecedented visibility for LGBTQ communities, the queer teens chosen for the cinematic spotlight appear so allergic to, well, seeming gay... Whether the implied assimilationist impulse reflects the filmmakers' or the characters' caution is up for debate. Either way, coming-out stories tend to be told with straight audiences in mind (Li 2022).

## The Paradox of Queer Television

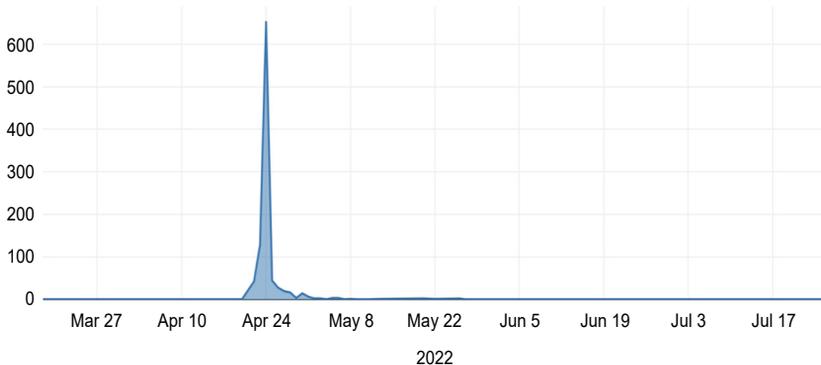
While an openness to new themes is somewhat satisfying for marginalized communities, it is double-edged. This is part of the paradox, as Lynn Joyrich and Julia Himberg underlined in a seminal contribution (Joyrich 2014). Being queer means, among other things, taking a step back from the “normative productivity” typical of industrial contexts. Namely, it refers to the refusal of an idea of the future as a space of reproduction (Edelman 2005). The approach is incompatible with the expected progression of a series, a commercial product, within an established media. Indeed, the queer corresponds to the “subversion of the ordinary, the strange, the irregular, what would seem to require a disruption of some kind of our ‘regular programming’ (Joyrich 2014: 134).” The fact that the depiction of queer characters is becoming more and more frequent represents, for Joyrich and Himberg, a confirmation of “negativity” raised in queer theory. The “mainstream” does its best to absorb any possible queer disturbance by suffocating it under its business strategies. Striving for integration leads to a softening of everything radical or rebellious.

Within a landscape where inclusiveness matches market imperatives, television producers aim to reduce uncertainty, to control the unknown. Consequently, this creates a binary separation between the reason and the wild (Halberstam 2020), even when addressing troubling characters or features. Indeed, representing LGBTQIA+ characters on television does not automatically equate to the expression of a queer sensibility. Moreover, it is not necessary for oblique and queer paths to represent characters belonging to this community: queerness can be found in shows that display heterosexual characters looking for an alternative to the dominant patriarchal culture. As a matter of fact, it can boost the establishment of new forms of homogeneity. As Jack Halberstam well says, “queerness without wildness is just white homosexual desire out of the closet and in synchrony with a new normal” (Halberstam 2020: 39). This is also the starting point of Joëlle Rouleau, who states... “that signifier [LGBTQ+] becomes a placeholder for neoliberal, value-hungry strategies to reify the inclusion of sexual diversity, in particular in media representations” (Rouleau 2021).

By analyzing the reception of this series, we will get closer to understanding the nuances of this paradox. At the same time we can ask a methodological question about the fragile, fiddled nature of digital humanities, as well as the political issues linked to extracting, mapping, and visualizing data. Can our tools be queer?

## Queering our Methods

Viewers streamed it for almost 24 million hours in the week between April 25 and May 1 (“Heartstopper News on Twitter” 2022). *Heartstopper* is “100% fresh” according to the aggregator Rotten Tomatoes. We can see a relevant consensus in the main anglophone and occidental spaces. In order to gather more details about this consensus, I analyzed the online reception of the series as it emerges from a web scraping of the microblogging platform Twitter and Reddit, the social news aggregator and discussion website.



**FIGURE 1**  
Twitter conversation about *Heartstopper* around the release date.

Each data pulling session allowed me to extract 1,000 tweets (due to the constraints of the account – Pro account on Communitastic, trial version). I carried out 3 extractions: 2 on Reddit (over three consecutive days, twice), one on Twitter. Plus, as we will see, I explored the francophone space through a tool developed by the Institut National de l’Audiovisuel. These data allow me to paint a picture (a limited, biased one) of *Heartstopper*’s reception, or one of its possible readings. This is to be understood within a larger observation to define a few constants, a few “objective pieces of evidence”: the fact that the show “functioned”, for example.

Reddit is an online community where registered users share links, images, videos, and comments about any cultural item. Contributions are organized by subject into user-created boards called “communities” or “subreddits”, and each is voted “up” or “down” by the community. Such a space functions as an intermediary between the viewers’ experience and the series as a collective object.

To extract data, I used the Commanalytic EDU Subreddit Historical Data Collector, which collects available posts (including submissions, comments and replies to comments) from a public subreddit for up to 7 consecutive days. Then I ran some of the results through Voyant, an open-source, web-based application for text analysis. Such tools are open access, and do not require coding expertise. They are the result of a bricolage, driven by the need to follow a show's digital traces. It should be noted, as mentioned before, that my exploration follows a more recursive path rather than a linear one. I alternate between different sources and platforms, and collect results over multiple sessions, then use historical data to pick specific moments of the show's life to observe their relevance.

I already pointed out how pertinent it is to consider visualizations and digital cartography as heuristic practices (Boni 2018), and to stress the constructed nature of our findings. The use of data-driven perspectives does not replace the subjectivity of close analysis. Indeed, the material we gather, even when considering big data, changes shape according to the point of view used. According to Johanna Drucker, information is not naturally present in any online space (Drucker 2014). Instead, it is always *capta*; in other words, the result of a gathering process originating from the application of a hypothesis, or a research question. It is the product of how information is organized depending on the platforms we use. Far from being a structured environment, a series is a scattered, ever-expanding space whose scope and properties depend on the adopted perspective as well as the tools selected. Our observations are dependant on the tools we use, too. Most of the time, a quantitative web analysis / web ethnography relies much more on the shape of the platform than on a real phenomenon (Taurino and Boni 2018).

For example, on Twitter, we notice a spike in conversations about the show two days after its release. Unsurprisingly, this shows the relevance of binge-watching practices and gives a sense of just how the release of a show can be seen as an event. This is particularly true in the case of a series which already had a fan base due to it existing in another medium. For *Heartstopper*, it was the graphic novel. In the comments, we can observe the merging of the two media. The spike in comments around the release date also means that viewers could watch the whole show in a relatively short period of time. This also stresses the effectiveness of short series with short episodes (a contemporary trend) employing an efficient marketing strategy focused on the release. There is a precipitous drop in density after the second week. It is also apparent that we are facing a short-lived attention to the series; the show is

not a “big” phenomenon in the media sphere, despite an enthusiastic ongoing discussion about its success in portraying queer characters.

Still, when we compare such a limited time frame to the French INA web archive tool WebMédia we see the debate about HS does not stop at all. Fan chatter persists, making many different links to other media, especially the graphic novel.

Quantitative analysis of the phenomenon also facilitates, on Twitter, the extraction of frequently used terms (word cloud) or emojis, which is specific to Twitter conversations but also to *Heartstopper*'s target demographic (the use of emojis directly inspired from the show's graphics).

Network analysis, made possible also via Commanalytic, allows us to inquire about the shape of the conversation. We can focus on the link between some accounts and the replies they get. Alice Oseman, the author, is placed at the center of the network. When we visualize the amount and density of nodes, of interactions, many small, disconnected interactions appear.

When we use the sentiment analysis tool, something interesting emerges. The vast majority is positive, another big chunk neutral, while only some posts are negative. And that's where the element of uncertainty emerges: the impossibility to measure, only by quantitative data, one of the show's specificities. What could be negative within a sphere of discourse that, as the media relate, is homogeneously satisfied with the show?

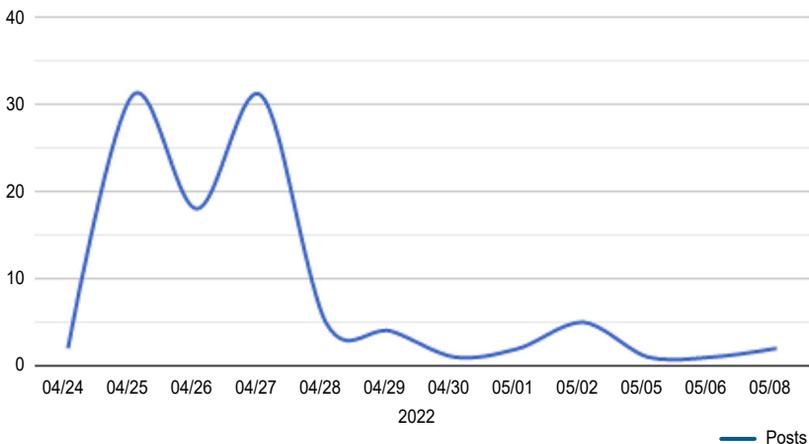


FIGURE 2  
Reddit posts over time (via Netlytic).

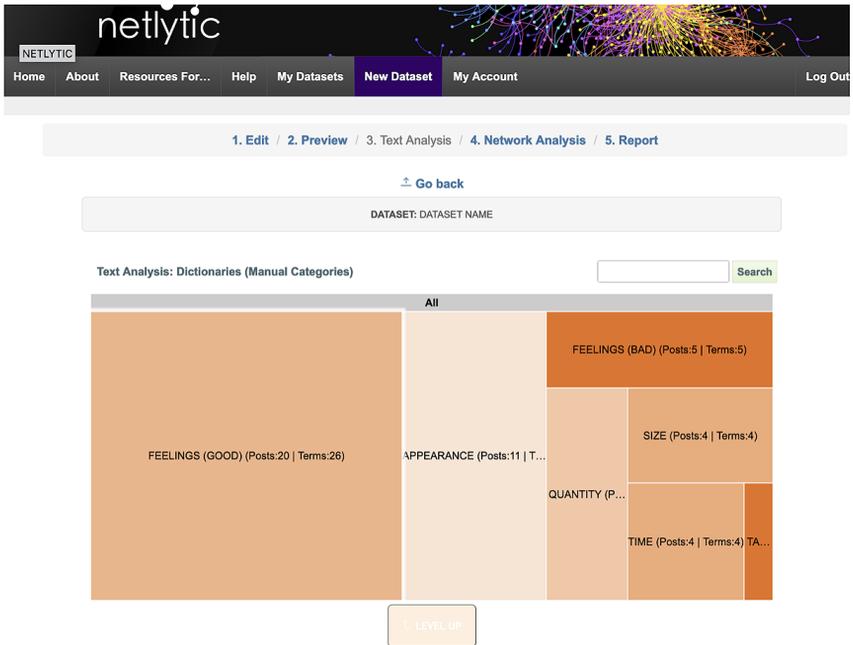


FIGURE 3  
Reddit: sentiment analysis (via Netlytic).

Allowing space for technical bias, we can still look for this negativity, treating it as one of the *emergences* of the system, something that we can observe better from afar. What could be negative about HS? Without a precise term or clue, our corpus does not tell it yet. We must analyze another corpus, and progress deeper in our experience of the fan community to find some evidence of this “negativity.” Let’s consider this comment: “Seeing Nick and Charlie’s story on screen was saddening because I never got to be in love in my teenage years and I wish I could’ve been (Cleal n.d).”

This raises the relevance of a “queer negativity” within the overall extremely positive reception. We think of Lee Edelman and his claim about the impossibility for queers to look forward to a future, and towards the reproducibility typical of heteronormative, patriarchal routes. Such queer negativity is also explored by Love, when she talks about queer backwardness, or the feeling of melancholy which accompanies queer people having suffered in the past and who still feel it’s impossible to “fit,” or satisfy their desires (Love 2009).

So, on Reddit, I found, as would be expected, several enthusiastic posts about the show on subreddit *0/heartstopper*. Yet, upon closer inspection, there was a significant number of posts focused on a very peculiar feeling: a mix of melancholy, nostalgia, and mourning. Many users expressed their admiration for the show and the pleasure they derived from its happy ending and positive relationships, a situation that, during their teen years, they never experienced. As queers, or even as straight people who declare themselves currently in a satisfying relationship, they find themselves grieving their past. Rewatching the series many times, or reading the graphic novel is the solution they find to get over what the community now calls the “HS syndrome.”

Watching these grinning teens throw themselves into love with abandon prompted a twinge of melancholy. Was this even a possibility for me at that age? Would I have jumped at this opportunity like they do or was I too tied up in self-conscious knots to let myself leap?  
It's hard to be a human in the year 2022, and so we all need our little treats.<sup>1</sup>

## Conclusions

This dive into digital tools has shown the potential for developing a queer praxis for studying a series/media content as a space of discourse. The tools used are open access, do not require coding skills, and allow us to display traits of a series' reception and its circulation. Over the years I've noticed that using an approach tailored to the phenomenon we want to observe gives us a more holistic view of the cultural dimension of the media, and their status as a commodity in the current economy. Quantitative analysis, matched with qualitative, highlights several interesting features that a close reading wouldn't reveal: a conversation's time frame and therefore its link to specific moments of a show's life; the frequency, density and variability of such discourse; the most used keywords; and networks of relations. Of course, such a method is fragmentary, or even rudimentary. Many adjustments could be made. We have also seen the limits of using third part apps. I also suggested the possibility of comparing results of different tools without any expectation of finding one that would be better than the others. More than anything, the outcome is a methodology based on bricolage, a

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.reddit.com/user/Next-Ordinary-2491>

relativism that is not a renunciation of scientific rigor, but instead, it is the acknowledgment of the situated nature of each observation. Digital humanities will remain human precisely because it welcomes trial and error. We keep testing tactics (as De Certeau would say: the “strategies” of the weak (Certeau 1980)) and adapting them to our objects, surrendering the ideal of recreating the “real” image of the phenomenon. But maybe, by following some traces we find across the path, we will better understand our relationship to our objects, and raise different questions, embracing uncertainty, crisis. And choosing to answer them without a clear, defined, strong answer.

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## QUEER AND MAINSTREAM: TRACING HEARTSTOPPER’S RECEPTION VIA DIGITAL TOOLS



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