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Fan Entitlement or Fan Empowerment?

Fan Entitlement Discourse as Power Struggle in the Fan/Industry Relationship

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Abstract

Recent decades have seen fan and "geek" culture become widely popular as the science fiction, fantasy, and superhero stories that used to be the preserve of a smaller subculture of die-hard fans conquered the box office, our televisions, and the best-seller lists. In that same time period, the Internet has facilitated an explosion of online communities, many of which are fan communities, and these have gained visibility and value, both in popular culture and for the media and entertainment industries. While this narrative of the triumph of fan culture may seem like a welcome turn of events for groups that have often been marginalized and even ridiculed, the ascension of fans into the mainstream has been fraught with conflict and backlash. "Fandom is broken," wrote one film critic in a widely circulated think piece originally published in May 2016. The article drew a wave of responses from around the fan world, catalyzing a growing backlash discourse that identifies "fan entitlement" as the root cause of broken fandom. This discourse argues that fandom has become corrupted, with gains in prominence, power, and popularity leading to toxic behavior. On the surface, the fan entitlement discourse takes issue with the kind of anti-social behavior that is increasingly pervasive in today's Internet culture: harassment, bullying, trolling, and negativity. However, digging into the assumptions and language used, I argue that the discourse is rooted in anxiety about shifting power relations between fans and the media and entertainment industries and that it emphasizes and undermines the fan practices and attitudes that most challenge industry control. This project describes the fan entitlement discourse, traces its emergence within the larger dynamic of the fan/industry relationship, and analyzes the themes and rhetorical strategies that make up the discourse. Ultimately, the fan entitlement discourse complicates the popular and academic narrative of fan

triumph and empowerment and forces us to consider the contested and often antagonistic reality of contemporary fan culture.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In the spring of 2000, I sent a bottle of Tabasco hot sauce to the now-defunct Warner Brothers Television Network in an effort to save what was then my favorite television show, *Roswell,* from cancellation. *Roswell* was a teen drama that had built a fervent fan base but was lagging in the ratings. Towards the end of its first season, fans organized a campaign through various web sites and message boards to demonstrate their support and loyalty by sending bottles of Tabasco sauce – a favorite condiment of the show's main characters – to the network. Within a few weeks, the WB received thousands of bottles of the spicy condiment. Whether or not the fan campaign was truly instrumental in affecting the network's decision to renew the show for a second season is unclear, but the fans nevertheless felt victorious. The *Roswell* fan campaign was neither the first nor the most outrageous display of devotion from a dedicated, organized, and motivated fan base. However, it initiated my interest in media fandom, and specifically the relationship between fans and "the powers that be" — a fan term for the various creators, producers, and decision-makers within the media and entertainment industry systems. When I became a self-identified media fan in the late 1990s, fan culture was still considered a niche interest. However, the intervening years have seen two important changes: First, fan and "geek" culture has become widely popular as the science fiction, fantasy, and superhero stories that used to be the preserve of a smaller subculture of die-hard fans conquered the box office, our televisions, and the best-seller lists. Second, the Internet has facilitated an explosion of online communities, many of which are fan communities. Fan-like "engagement" is an important metric for brands in all industries and online activity has become the de-facto medium for marketing "buzz." Marketing firms advise that, "The most successful brands are powered by fans: highly

engaged, loyal [customers] that will return, day in and day out" (Troika 2017, par. 1).

While this "triumphal narrative" of fan and geek culture — whereby "the move from the margins to mainstream is … constructed as a 'triumph' [and] … has become the dominant way of framing geek culture today" (Woo 2018, 12) — may seem like a welcome turn of events for groups that have often been marginalized and even ridiculed, the ascension of fans into the mainstream has been fraught with conflict and backlash. "Fandom is broken," wrote film critic Devin Faraci in a widely-circulated think piece originally published in May 2016 on the film fan site *Birth.Movies.Death.* The article drew thousands of comments from readers, as well as numerous response pieces ranging from personal blog posts to essays on niche fan- and pop culture sites, to articles in mainstream news media outlets like the *LA Times* and *The Guardian*. Faraci's argument echoed similar sentiments that were circulating at the time, collectively forming a growing backlash discourse around "fan entitlement." This fan entitlement discourse argues that fan culture has become corrupted, a victim of its own success, with gains in prominence, power, and popularity leading to toxic behavior and a loss of authentic fandom.

The existence of the fan entitlement discourse is troubling and, in many ways, surprising. As a fan, I have cherished the ways that fan culture facilitates agency, connection, and creative expression. As a fan studies scholar, I have been steeped in literature that stems from a fundamental motivation to celebrate and recuperate fans from long-held stigma and the perception that they are "cultural dupes, social misfits, and mindless consumers" (Jenkins 1992, 23). Indeed, fan studies has made it its de-facto task to champion fans for their activity, participation, and productivity. From "exceptional readers" and "textual poachers" to "co-creators" and "producers of folk culture," fan studies has consistently showcased fans' drive for creativity and control in their interpretations and expressions (Jenkins 1992). In light of the

field's roots in cultural studies, the idea that fans do not just read texts but make them their own — emotionally, interpretively, and creatively — has been celebrated through a narrative of empowerment. And while fan studies has focused on celebrating fans' symbolic power over the text, fans have also gained very real, economic power as influencers and tastemakers. As fans' visibility, influence, and status within popular culture has continued to grow, an oft-quoted *Time Magazine* article proclaimed in 2005 that "The Geek Shall Inherit the Earth" (Grossman). By 2007, *Entertainment Weekly's* year-end issue named it "The Year the Geek was King."

However, now that the geeks (and nerds and fans) have arguably inherited the earth, the fan entitlement discourse has emerged to characterize contemporary fandom as problematic and "broken." On the surface, the fan entitlement discourse takes issue with the kind of anti-social behavior that is increasingly pervasive in today's Internet culture: harassment, bullying, trolling, and outrage. Much has also been written about the ways that fan entitlement discourse intersects with a backlash against growing diversity within fan culture (Stanfield 2019, Scott 2019, Proctor et al. 2018). However, digging into the language used and the assumptions inherent in the fan entitlement discourse, I argue that it is rooted in anxiety about shifting power relations between fans and the media and entertainment industries. The discourse champions authorial control and industry-approved fan practices and frames as harmful the fan practices and attitudes that often challenge industry control: active reading, creative transformation, emotional ownership, semiotic and textual productivity. What particularly struck me about the fan entitlement discourse is that it does not obviously originate from industry sources. Instead, many of the loudest voices are self-identified fans, and their arguments are articulated within fan spaces. This raises questions about the extent to which some fans have internalized an unequal fan/industry power dynamic and why they are so invested in maintaining this dynamic. In this project, my

aim is to describe the fan entitlement discourse, trace its emergence within the larger dynamic of the fan/industry relationship, analyze its underlying construction and assumptions, and consider how it complicates the dominant academic narrative of fan empowerment. To achieve this, I focus on Faraci's "Fandom is Broken" article as the epicenter of the fan entitlement discourse, and examine the comments and response pieces it inspired in order to discover how they construct a discourse around fan entitlement and, consequently, how they seek to define the boundaries of acceptable and unacceptable fan power in the fan/industry relationship.

Who are Fans?

Defining who fans are largely depends on who you ask: the entertainment industry defines its fans differently from how fans might define themselves, which is again different from how fans are represented in the media or in academia. The industry may see fans through the lens of business and marketing, operationalizing the idea of the "fan" in terms of a variety of behaviors, such as high engagement, loyalty, and interactivity. Fan studies has generally attempted to describe and theorize fans from their own perspective, using anthropological methods such as ethnography, interviews, and participant observation in order to describe a "fan culture" with its own norms, practices, vocabulary, and traditions. In the book *Fans,* Cornel Sandvoss (2005, 8) defines fans by drawing on "the lowest common denominator" of what fans do and why they do it, concluding that a fan is defined by "the regular, emotionally involved consumption of a given popular narrative or text." This definition suggests that being a fan does not require being part of a community, but merely describes the practice of regular consumption, with a dimension of emotional involvement. This definition mirrors the colloquial understanding of what makes a fan: a fan is someone who really, really likes something. Sandvoss's definition also emphasizes

that fans should be defined based on what they do — fan practices, in other words. This approach has become increasingly popular because it allows for a more general and wide-reaching understanding of what it means to be a fan. Instead of a "sharp dichotomy" in how we qualitatively differentiate fans from non-fans, fans can exist on "a spectrum in which a multiplicity of practices, groups, and motivations span between the polarities of the personal and the communal" (Grey at al. 2017, loc. 259). "Fandom," then, can range in meaning from the personal state of being a fan to the communal experience of being "in fandom," and participation in fandom can range from low-effort fan practices such as regular consumption to high-effort practices such as the creation of fan cultural artifacts.

To further complicate matters, in recent years, similar terms like "nerd" and "geek" have become effectively synonymous with "fan," both in popular usage and in fan studies. Just as the term "fan" evokes a certain historical stigma in its association with "fanaticism" ("fan" has historically been used as an abbreviation form of "fanatic," and the *Oxford English Dictionary* dates this use to 1682), "nerd" and "geek" used to signify social awkwardness and excessive interest in the trivial (Jenson 1992). At present, all three terms can indicate emotional investment in genre media (science fiction, fantasy, comic books, etc.). Of course, one can also be a fan in other areas of life, such as sports, music, celebrities, or even politics and scholarship is continually exploring the commonalities and differences of the fan experience in these spheres. However, just as the "lowest common denominator" of being a fan describes emotional investment and regular consumption, being a "nerd" has taken on the colloquial meaning of "loving something." In the words of Wil Wheaton (2013, par. 5), an actor who starred in *Star Trek: The Next Generation* and has since become a significant voice within nerd culture,

> The defining characteristic of [being a nerd] is that we love things. Some of us

> love *Firefly* and some of us love *Game of Thrones*, or *Star Trek*, or *Star Wars*, or anime, or games, or fantasy, or science fiction. Some of us love completely different things. But we all love those things SO much that we travel for thousands of miles … we come from all over the world, so that we can be around people who love the things the way that we love them. That's why being a nerd is awesome.

The way Wheaton deploys the word "nerd" emphasizes emotional investment and shared experience, both of which are significant elements of fandom. Standard definitions of "geek" usually include an interest in science and technology and, even in its contemporary fan-synonymous usage, the term retains a certain gendered element. As Busse (2013, 77) writes, "while general geek acceptance has also brought with it wider fan acceptance, it is often the less explicitly fannish (or, one might argue, the less explicitly *female* fannish) elements that have been accepted by mainstream." Similarly, the *Oxford English Dictionary* traces use of the terms "fanboy" and "fangirl" to 1919 and 1934, respectively, indicating that male fans and their activities often become accepted forms of cultural engagement and participation before more feminine forms of fandom. Thus, while "fan," "nerd," and "geek" can be read as synonyms in casual usage, the discourses around these terms also reflect a degree of hierarchy and stratification. How status and hierarchy work within fan culture is complex and intertwined with many factors, but it is inseparable from how we understand fan culture, from its earliest forms to its current incarnations.

How to Study Fans

Defining fans also goes hand-in-hand with how they are studied — that is to say, the object of study that fan scholars choose to center in their research. Which aspects of fan experience a researcher chooses to highlight, therefore, becomes integral to the research itself. Paul Booth (2015, 3) makes the point that studying fans "relies on understanding inherently unstable boundaries": the boundaries between fans and non-fans, between good fans and bad fans, between fans and creators, between fan communities, ways of being a fan, and more. Often times, the research itself works to draw and reinforce certain boundaries, just as it creates and reinforces certain definitions, and engages in an ongoing task of "reimagining the object of study" (Hills 2013, vi). Over the course of its history, fan studies has privileged different objects of study. Early fan studies tended to focus on the fan community, especially its function as an "interpretive community" to support oppositional readings (Fish 1980). These communities supported a variety of noteworthy fan practices, especially "exceptional" modes of reading and the production of fan cultural artifacts, notably derivative texts (i.e. fan fiction) and art (Jenkins 1992). Taken together, these communities and practices formed a shared fan culture, often understood as a "subculture," which conferred meaning and identity by virtue of being different from (and often, in opposition to) the "dominant" culture (Hebdige 1979).

One of the first canonical texts of the fledgling field of fan studies was Henry Jenkins's *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (1992). It takes up Michel de Certeau's terminology regarding the "poaching" practices of active readers and explores the practices and, more importantly, the social organizations of science fiction and fantasy fans. *Textual Poachers*, like similar work from this period (e.g. Camille Bacon-Smith's *Enterprising Women: Television Fandom and the Creation of Popular Myth* [1992] and Lisa Lewis's edited

volume *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media* [1992] including essays by Lawrence Grossberg, John Fiske, and Jolie Jenson), is heavily based on an understanding that fans connect with each other and build formal and informal networks to engage in subversive readings and to appropriate texts for their own cultural needs. Fandom, in this view, is "a collective strategy to form interpretive communities that in their subcultural cohesion evaded the meanings preferred by the 'power bloc'" (Gray, Sandviss and Harrington 2017, loc 119; Fiske 1989). This first wave of fan studies is based on the conviction that fans are part of subversive interpretive communities whose reading and participatory practices oppose the dominant ideology of the media industries. Much of the scholarship of this time took its cue from the theories and methods set out in British cultural studies, specifically the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies. Stuart Hall's (1980) "Encoding/Decoding" and David Morley's (1980) *The Nationwide Audience* laid a foundation for focusing on audiences as highly active participants in the process of "decoding" the meanings of media messages. Similarly, early fan studies scholars were heavily influenced by Michel de Certeau's (1984, 174) work *The Practice of Everyday Life*, especially his contention that readers are active, autonomous, and creative, like "nomads poaching their way across fields they did not write."

A key feature of this wave of research then, is to characterize fans as separate from and oppositional to the dominant culture and hegemonic industry forces. Their reading practices "poach" from texts "they did not write" in order to derive meaningful interpretations and create textual and artistic transformations that fit their personal needs and desires. One of the most extreme examples of this is Jenkins' (1992, 220) description of "slash" fandom in *Star Trek*. Now widely applied to any same-sex pairing that is not portrayed as such in the original media text, the original "slash" couple was Captain Kirk and his enigmatic, alien science officer, Spock.

Star Trek fans relished the dynamic between the hot-headed Kirk and the cooly rational Spock, as well as their deeply loyal and supportive friendship. Kirk/Spock fans (note the slash) imagined that this friendship had romantic and sexual undertones and engaged not just in speculation and discussion about this possibility, but also created fan fiction and art. Jenkins ventures that slash fandom “may be one of the few places in popular culture where questions of sexual identity can be explored,” at least at the time (221). Conversely, slash can also be regarded as one way that the predominantly female fan base Jenkins studied could fulfill their desire for a romantic relationship between two complex and equal characters in a media environment where female characters were, at best, scarce and underdeveloped or, at worst, objectified and dismissed. While fan practices like slash obviously existed and fan communities formed and came together to engage in these kinds of oppositional readings, an important point of note is that, by choosing to highlight and celebrate fan activities that diverged farthest from the source text, early fan studies work became a kind of “activist research.” It portrayed fandom as the “tactic of the disempowered” and celebrated the acts of subversion and cultural appropriation against the media power bloc that made fandom “beautiful” (Gray, Sandvoss and Harringon 2017, loc. 121).

More recent work has broadened the understanding of how to define and understand fans away from subcultural communities and exceptional reading practices and towards fandom as a spectrum of engagements and practices. This shift has been driven by large-scale technological and cultural changes, such as social media and the proliferation of entertainment options, that have broadened opportunities for and adoption of fan practices. By continuing to focus on exceptional fan communities, fan scholarship would increasingly be attending to only “the smallest subset of fan groups” (Gray Sandvoss and Harrington 2007, 8). The current wave of fan

studies seeks to widen the field's scope by focusing on ways that fan practices are becoming an increasingly normal and everyday part of our lives. Gray, Sandvoss and Harrington note that, both online and offline, "changing communication technologies and media texts contribute to and reflect the increasing entrenchment of fan [modes of] consumption in the structure of our everyday life" (ibid.). In other words, the ways that the average person consumes and uses media in daily life are moving ever closer to what has traditionally been understood as fandom. This convergence is not just driven by fans' increased visibility in the online public sphere and lower barriers to entry into fandom, but also by a general elevation of the role media plays in our everyday lives. Behaviors that were previously considered excessive are now normal and even expected ways of engaging with media; for example, binge-watching, seeking supplemental content and information, advertising one's interest through apparel or on social media, and engaging in online discussions. The visibility, ubiquity, and ease-of-entry of online fan culture also did much to decrease the stigma around being a fan. Francesca Coppa (2014, 79) explains, "technology now makes it much easier for people to engage in the networked, participatory behaviors which were once so difficult that to engage in them marked one as an obsessive personality." Researching a favorite media property online, joining a discussion on social media, or showing interest in behind-the-scenes information or upcoming movies or television programs is now no longer just for obsessive fans; it is an everyday part of how we consume and enjoy media.

This normalization of fan practices raises another important question for fan scholars today: Are terms like "fan" and "fandom" even meaningful anymore? When fan culture becomes popular culture, and when a larger part of the audience increasingly acts like fans, is there still a need to consider fans as a distinct subject of academic inquiry? My emphatic answer is yes.

There is, in fact, a greater need to understand fans today, to bring a historical perspective to contemporary fandom, and to attempt to understand the ways that fundamental concepts like power, agency, and identity are negotiated. In the introduction to their second edition of *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World,* Sandvoss, Gray, and Harrington (2017) ask a similar question: why still study fans? The authors suggest that the kind of behaviors that have been studied as part of media fandom have increasingly spilled over into other aspects of life, and that it is more important than ever that we really understand them. They cite a number of recent political campaigns that were essentially driven by fans, writing, for example, about Obama's 2008 campaign, which was marked by "the enthusiasm, emotion, and affective hope that his supporters, voters, *fans* invested in that campaign" (emphasis in original; Sandvoss, Gray, and Harrington 2017, loc 91). In their view, fandom has become a fundamental part of modern life, and "it is precisely *because* fan consumption has grown into a taken-for-granted aspect of modern communication and consumption that it warrants critical analysis and investigation" (Sandvoss, Gray, and Harrington 2007, 12).

History of Fans

While academic interest in fans hit its stride in the 1990s, various forms of fan culture existed long before then. Usage of the word "fan" to mean "devotee" dates to 1889, and even the word "fandom" as "the realm of avid enthusiasts" dates to 1903 (Online Etymology Dictionary). Widely considered the first media fandom, the followers of Arthur Conan Doyle's famous detective called themselves "Sherlockians" or "Holmesians" and even created early fan fiction around the turn of the 20th century (which, at the time, they called "parodies and pastiches") (Brown 2009, par. 2). While the emotional experience of being a fan has, in some form, probably

existed throughout human history, the roots of how we now understand media fandom (film, television, books, comics, etc.) lie in literary science fiction. Camille Bacon-Smith (1992, 9) calls this fandom the "*Ur*-form on which later communities shaped their own fan gatherings." Literary science fiction fandom is generally agreed to have developed around a magazine called *Amazing Stories*, first published in 1926 by Hugo Gernsback (Jenkins 1992, Coppa 2006). The magazine featured short science fiction stories and, most importantly, hosted a letter column that invited interested readers to write in and comment on the content. The letter column published readers' addresses and allowed them to contact each other outside the confines of the magazine to further discuss their shared interest in the topic of science fiction. During the depression days of the 1930s, readers even published their own fanzines to satisfy their appetite for new stories while the publication of "official" magazines was irregular. The first science fiction fanzine, *The Comet,* was published in 1930 (Coppa 2006, 42). The seeds of science fiction fandom that were planted in the *Amazing Stories* letter columns blossomed into an increasingly connected group of fans, who kept up regular correspondence and eventually organized in-person gatherings. Frederik Pohl, a science fiction writer and editor active in this emerging fan community, recalls a trip he and seven other New York area fans took to meet a similar group of fans in Philadelphia in 1936, an event that Pohl claims was the first science fiction fan convention (43). Similar meetings took place in that time and Gernsbeck and other magazine editors even organized local clubs and, eventually, regional conventions devoted to science fiction. On July 4, 1939, these groups hosted the first World Science Fiction Convention (WorldCon) in New York (Jenkins 1992, Coppa 2006). The convention continues to this day.

The main reason why science fiction is such an instrumental part of fan history is because it established an early blueprint for fan-initiated communities and interactions. Film fandom

developed in a similar way, dating back to the 1910s and the advent of popular motion pictures. However, film fandom was not integrated with science fiction fandom because early film fans were often seen as passive products of the culture industry, obsessed with movie stars and burying their heads in the pages of *Photoplay*, *Motion Picture*, and *Shadowland*. Samantha Barbas (2001), in her book *Movie Crazy*, researched early film fandom and movie fan clubs and revealed that early film fan culture actually had much in common with science fiction and media fan communities. Fans, not film studios, usually initiated fan clubs as a way to socialize, assert their opinions as a group, and forge more direct relationships with the actors (Barbas 2001, 110)

These various sub-groups of media fans continued in much the same way throughout the 1940s and 1950s. A major shift happened in the 1960s with the emergence of television fandom and heavy interest in two science fiction programs: *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* (1964-1968) and *Star Trek* (1966-1969). Even though the programs appealed to science fiction fans, the literary science fiction community dismissed these shows as "science fiction for nonreaders" (Coppa 2006, 45). Feeling unwelcome at science fiction conventions, *Star Trek* fans branched off and held their first separate convention in 1972 (ibid.). Coppa (2006, 46) argues that it was not just the medium of television that created a new kind of fan culture but, more importantly, the fact that these fans developed certain reading strategies that increased their enjoyment of media texts. Academics now call this type of fandom "media fandom," which Jenkins has defined as an "amorphous but still identifiable grouping of enthusiasts of film and television" that engages in particular communal and interpretive practices (Jenkins 1992, 1). The concept of "media fandom" continues to be used in contemporary scholarship as a way to differentiate media fans and their practices from other types of fandom (music, sports, celebrity, etc.).

The Geeks Shall Inherit The Earth

Up to the 1990s, media fandoms — while increasingly active and wide-ranging — still relied on ways of communicating and connecting that remained largely unchanged over several decades: official fan magazines; unofficial zines created, published, and distributed by fans; letters; official fan conventions; fan clubs; and unofficial, local meet-ups. The first online fandom emerged in 1992 with an e-mail list dedicated to a cult Canadian vampire-cop show, *Forever Knight* (Coppa 2006, 53). Fans, especially those with more niche interests, were understandably eager to use the emerging communication technology to connect with like-minded people around the globe. E-mail lists proliferated as home Internet technology was adopted more widely, and a dedicated online bulletin board called "Usenet" also became popular around this time. The primary use for these online technologies was for general discussion and sharing of fan fiction, and many fandoms developed specific mailing lists for each purpose. Online fan culture has been significantly shaped by the development of new platforms for communicating, socializing, and sharing. LiveJournal (a personal blogging and community platform founded in 1999) and Fanfiction.net (a fan fiction archive founded in 1998) were early platforms that found widespread adoption among fans, and subsequently shaped the ways fans participated in online fandoms (Coppa 2006, 57). Online, fan creations and interactions were largely public, thus searchable and discoverable by anyone with an Internet connection, a browser, and a search function. Exchanges were in the form of comments and replies, allowing for more immediate, casual, and wide-ranging conversations. People could also move between fandoms quickly and easily, and fan identity became more fluid and less bound to a specific text.

Today, people with all levels of media interest often stumble across fan communities and participate in fan activities in their everyday online browsing and socializing. Casey Fiesler

recently conducted a series of interviews to investigate how fans use online platforms and showed that the most popular fandom platforms of the moment are Tumblr, Twitter, and An Archive of Our Own (a dedicated fan fiction archive, abbreviated as AO3) (Schwedel 2018). All three platforms are largely public. Twitter does have a function to make an account private, and some stories on AO3 are only accessible to registered users. However, these platforms are still significantly different from early online fan groups, which were often confined to private mailing lists and closed forums. While such specialized and private fan groups still exist, Fiesler's study shows that fans now increasingly congregate in public spaces that mix the interests and activities of media users along the whole fan/non-fan spectrum and thus make fan culture much more visible, accessible, and consequently, influential. It was around the early- to mid-2000s that the media and entertainment industries really started to take note of this trend and began to explore ways to more effectively reach and mobilize fans. As fan activity increasingly moved online—and especially into shared social spaces where this activity was visible to a range of audiences, both current and potential—they gained value as a means of word-of-mouth and buzz marketing. Fans represented the "experimental prototype" of the kind of consumer that media companies were clamoring for: highly engaged, active, loyal, and passionate (Jenkins 2006, 359).

Current Conversations About Fans

One aspect of contemporary fandom that is increasingly taken for granted is the trajectory of fans from the margins of society into the mainstream. Benjamin Woo (2018, 11) calls this the "triumphal narrative" and explains,

> The conventional wisdom assumes a trajectory of geek culture from the periphery

> of contemporary culture to its centre. … Commentators typically cite the popularity of media forms and genres associated with geeks, ranging from billion-dollar debuts for new video game titles to blockbuster adaptations of fantasy epics like *The Lord of the Rings* and *Harry Potter*.

However, what does it mean to be in the "mainstream" of culture? Who decides what is mainstream? Jenkins (2007, 364) posits,

> At the end of the day, as fandom becomes such an elastic category, one starts to wonder—who isn't a fan? What doesn't constitute fan culture? Where does grassroots culture end and commercial culture begin? Where does niche media start to blend over into the mainstream?

As Jenkins uses the term, "the mainstream" signifies "commercial" popular culture, and exists in opposition to "grassroots culture" and "niche media." The former implies a top-down process driven by media companies, while the latter implies consumer-led activities that exist to challenge or provide an alternative to mainstream culture. However, the quotation also asserts that contemporary fandom increasingly "blends" the two categories. Studies that have historically focused on fan culture as separate from or opposed to mainstream culture have theorized it as a "subculture," based on the 1979 book *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* by Dick Hebdige. Hebdige (1979, 94) uses the term "mainstream culture" to mean "dominant culture," describing the normalized ways of being and thinking in a society. He argues that dominant culture seeks to assimilate the subculture through commodification ("the conversion of subcultural signs [dress, music, etc.] into mass-produced objects") and normalizing media coverage ("the 'labelling' and re-definition of deviant behaviour by dominant groups"). We can

see these processes of commodification and normalization happening today with, for example, the ubiquity of superhero branded apparel and the casual way in which popular media and news outlets cover previously obscure fan events. Ultimately, the "subculture [is] incorporated as a diverting spectacle within the dominant mythology" (94). In other words, the subculture is normalized, but often in ways that play up its quirks for entertainment value. The result is that the subcultural practices become mainstream and no longer serve or even represent the original needs and desires of the subculture. Many fan scholars argue that contemporary fan culture has been similarly assimilated into the mainstream, and, in the process, the values and practices of subcultural fandom have been compromised and misrepresented (Busse 2006, Coppa 2014, Hellekson 2009). However, the opposing argument is that, by becoming part of the dominant media culture, fans have gained commercial value and cultural influence (Jenkins 2006, Jenkins 2007, Sandvoss et al. 2007, Grey et al. 2017).

One thing is clear about fans' move into the mainstream of culture: There is always an element of invitation and acceptance (and, if Hedbige is to be believed, commodification and normalization) that is initiated and led by dominant cultural forces. Mel Stanfill (2019, 183) argues that mainstreaming provides "the benefits of inclusion," specifically the benefits of being seen and valued by the media industry system. This also means the industry increasingly controls what it means to be a fan, and how to engage as a fan. "The right way to be a fan," writes Stanfill, is "what is right for industry" (ibid.). Stanfill's characterization of the fan/industry relationship stems from an important conversation within recent fan scholarship: the fear that a closer fan/industry relationship undermines authentic fandom. This conversation also contains within it the larger question of what fan scholars consider "authentic" fandom, or more specifically, authentic fan culture. The distinction is important here, as "fan culture" gestures to

the subcultural roots and a sense that being a fan encompasses a particular identity, history, sense of community, often oppositional interpretive practices, and transformative cultural productions. However, as we have already seen, much academic work is moving towards a more inclusive and wide-ranging definition of fandom, which challenges notions of authenticity that are tied more closely to fan culture as a subculture. Instead, this work celebrates fans' elevated status after decades of stigma and struggle and specifically focuses on the positive influence of fan practices on producer/consumer relations. Jenkins's (2006, 3) *Convergence Culture*, an unofficial "sequel" to *Textual Poachers*, argues that fans have become so influential in the media production process that, "Rather than talking about media producers and consumers as occupying separate roles, we might now see them as participants who interact with each other according to a new set of rules that none of us fully understands." Jenkins describes "convergence" as the collision between old and new media, where the power of media producers and consumers "interact in unpredictable ways" (2). For Jenkins, the foundation of this convergence is "participatory culture," which emphasizes active participation in the circulation and creation of media content and "contrasts with older notions of media spectatorship" (3). Convergence is "both a top-down corporate-driven process and a bottom-up consumer-driven process": Corporations are looking for ways to utilize and activate participatory culture in order to expand their audiences and revenues, while consumers are using the platforms and technologies of participatory culture to interact with other consumers, share their own media creations, and even assert influence over content (18).

Jenkins (2006, 363) is quick to point out that there is still a power differential in this interaction, but fans can organize into something like "collective bargaining units for consumers" that can use fans' combined influence in both supportive (such as "save our show" campaigns)

and adversarial ways (backlash, criticism, boycotts). However, Jenkins cautions that there is a central paradox to this narrative of consumer power:

> to be desired by the [entertainment industry] is to have your tastes commodified. On the one hand, to be commodified expands a group's cultural visibility. Those groups that have no recognized economic value get ignored. That said, commodification is also a form of exploitation. Those groups that are commodified find themselves targeted more aggressively by marketers and often feel they have lost control over their own culture, since it is mass produced and mass marketed. (Jenkins 2006, 62-63)

In other words, Jenkins argues that fan practices, in order to be accepted as part of the mainstream, are often commodified, exploited, and thus alienated from fan culture's subcultural roots, which tended to celebrate various forms of productivity over mere consumption. The ways that fan practices have become commodified in mainstream culture includes high engagement with and sharing of content on social media, the production of fan cultural artifacts within industry-sanctioned spaces and/or for explicit marketing purposes (e.g. submitting fan art or videos as part of a contest), attending official for-profit fan events or attractions (e.g. branded conventions, exhibits, theme parks), or participating in official online fan communities. What is troubling to scholars is that these kinds of industry-driven fan practices limit the interpretive and expressive freedom that defined subcultural fandom. When fan practices take place in spaces that are endorsed by the industry, fans are inevitably limited to "coloring within the lines" (Busse and Gray 2011, 432).

Scholars who are more skeptical of a close fan/industry relationship fear that it is

detrimental to fan culture and dismissive of its history to equate industry-approved, mainstream fan practices with subcultural fandom. In the early days of fan scholarship, the key task was to rehabilitate the negative image of fans. This first wave of fan scholarship was based on the conviction that "the consumption of mass media was a site of power struggles" and that fan practices provided the "guerilla-style tactics of those with lesser resources to win this battle" (Gray, Sandvoss and Harringon 2007, 1-2). The focus, therefore, was often on those who felt fan culture was a refuge from oppressive power structures and who utilized fan practices as means of resistance against the media "power bloc," specifically through negotiated or oppositional readings, appropriation, and creative expression (Fiske 1989, Jenkins 1992). Mainstream fan practices, to many scholars, represent an industry-driven and commercial co-optation of fan culture. Busse and Gray (2011, 431) caution that "the similarity in terms of behavior and textual productions obscures the clear differences between traditional fan communities and new industry-driven fans: fandoms as specific social and cultural formations – as communities – have a history, a continuity, and a sense of identity that are at times profoundly distinct from contemporary convergence culture." Hellekson (2009, 6) similarly points out that industry-driven fan practices ignore fan culture's history by creating "insta-fans" who have "no understanding that they are engaging in a culture with a relatively long history, or that their behavior may offend or upset people in other fan communities." Anxiety over the impact of fan culture's mainstreaming has been part of the academic conversation for more than a decade now. Kristina Busse (2006) has articulated concerns that fan scholars were overly celebratory and deficiently critical of mainstream iterations of fan practices. She argues, "The mainstreaming of fannish behaviors is thus seen as advantageous even if (or maybe even because?) the industry clearly attempts to create such behavioral patterns in order to sell their products and/or supplementary

materials" (Busse 2006, par. 1). She cautions scholars against conflating such "recreations of fannish behavior with fandom per se" and expresses worry that the defining characteristics of being a fan — in her view, fandom as a self-defined identity and community — may get lost (par. 2). Stanfill (2019, 11), in her book *Exploiting Fandom*, makes a compelling case about what she calls the "domestication" of fans into industry practices: "Just as livestock are bred to be bigger and more docile, industry's invitations to fans seek to make them both more useful and more controllable, thus making fans a resource to exploit." Whether and how fans resist this domestication will "determine the future course of fandom" (ibid.).

Anxiety about the mainstreaming of fandom contains with it a number of important conversations that this project seeks to engage with. First, there is a conversation about the industry-driven "domestication" of fans and the mechanisms by which this is currently happening. My project seeks to show that one of the ways this is happening is through the fan entitlement discourse, which attempts to incite a backlash against excessive fan power in the fan/industry relationship, thus contributing to making fans "docile," "useful," and "controllable" (Stanfill 2019, 11). Second, there is a conversation about what constitutes authentic fandom. The fan entitlement discourse takes up this very same question, but does so in a way that directly challenges the dominant academic narrative that greater fan empowerment – whether that is in the form of opposition to the "power bloc" or as a result of fans' elevated status in convergence culture worthy – is good and praise-worthy (Fiske 1989, Jenkins 2006). Authenticity is clearly an important concept in all kinds of discourses about fans and it is vital to pay attention to how this concept is negotiated and deployed. Finally, this project contributes to a conversation about conflict, antagonism, and "ugliness" within fandom as fans are negotiating their newfound place in the mainstream (Proctor and Kies 2018, 138). When Jenkins (2007, 364) asks, "At the end of

the day, as fandom becomes such an elastic category, one starts to wonder—who isn't a fan?" it does not necessarily imply inclusivity and a celebration of the ubiquity of fan-like ways of interaction with media. "Who isn't a fan" is increasingly becoming a basis for exclusion. The fan entitlement discourse is, at its core, about disciplining bad fans and "broken" fandom. Wading into the waters of this kind of negativity is perhaps alarming and uncomfortable for many, but it is necessary in order to gain a clearer understanding of contemporary fan culture. Contrasting with traditional fan studies scholarship that proclaimed fandom "beautiful," William Proctor and Bridget Kies, in their introduction to the May 2018 special issue of *Participation: Journal of Audience & Reception Studies* on the topic of toxic fan practices, explain that they "do not expect to kick-start a new phase of fan studies that we could describe as 'fandom is ugly.'" They add, "Fandom may be beautiful, transformational, performative, and indeed, ugly, but we stand firm in our belief that fandom in all its many guises, warts and all, should be set on the table for examination and exegesis" (Proctor and Kies 2018, 138).

Introduction to Data & Analysis

"What if Annie Wilkes had the internet?" So begins Devin Faraci's widely read and shared piece "Fandom is Broken," posted on the film fan website *Birth.Movies.Death.* on May 30, 2016. Annie Wilkes, the antagonist of the 1990 film *Misery (*based on the 1987 book by Stephen King) is presented here as a representation of a particular kind of dangerously obsessed fan. After rescuing her favorite writer from a car accident and bringing him back to her cabin, she finds out that he plans to kill her favorite character and becomes increasingly controlling and violent in an effort to change the plot. "The story is a very, very thinly veiled metaphor for the relationship between pop fiction creators and their most dedicated, most rabid fanbases," Faraci (2016, par.1)

writes. He goes on to provide a multitude of examples from contemporary fandom that illustrate "the way the creators can be trapped, bullied and tortured by their own creations and the people who love them" (ibid.).

As an "Aca/Fan" — Jenkins's self-referential term for those of us whose identities as academics and fans are intertwined — I first came across Faraci's article as part of my fan life, reading blogs and news outlets targeted at fans, following prominent voices in fandom on Twitter, and subscribing to fandom-themed newsletters. Faraci's article is one of a number of articles about fan entitlement that have appeared in recent years and fueled a backlash against the triumphal narrative of fan culture. A discussion about the dark side of fandom had been bubbling underneath its utopian surface for years. I had observed, and felt, this shift myself, both in my online fan activities and in visiting San Diego Comic-Con (the biggest fan convention, dedicated to celebrating comic books and related popular culture, in the US) every year from 2011 to 2016. I had a definite sense that the idyllic days of fandom as a sheltered, welcoming, and accepting space were changing. However, I was taken aback by the fervor with which the emerging fan entitlement discourse was cheered and amplified. This project includes both an overview of the fan entitlement discourse and the context of its emergence (chapter 3) and takes a deep dive into a specific instance of this discourse by analyzing the discussion around Faraci's article (chapters 4 and 5). Faraci's article caught my attention because it appeared to be the most widely shared piece about fan entitlement at the time. It also inspired a particularly large number of responses, ranging from personal blog posts to mainstream media coverage. I am calling the constellation of comments and responses to Faraci's article a "discursive event," which, for the purpose of this project, comprises three parts:

- Faraci's "Fandom is Broken" article itself, which makes a strong claim about the state of

contemporary fandom and defines the core themes that are subsequently discussed

- Reader comments posted at *Birth.Movies.Death.* in direct response to Faraci's article (2,350 comments)
- Response pieces that were posted on other websites and personal blogs and directly referenced Faraci's article (40 response pieces, posted on personal blogs, niche fan-targeted websites, and mainstream news outlets)

I am not claiming that this discursive event perfectly represents all opinions and perspectives in the fan entitlement discourse. Instead, I see it as a snapshot through which to gain insight on the discursive themes and strategies taken up by those who participated in the fan entitlement discourse during this particular moment in time, when it took shape and rose to prominence.

Fan Spaces and Birth.Movies.Death.

In choosing to base my analysis on the discursive event around "Fandom is Broken," I am also centering the website *Birth.Movies.Death.* (*BMD*) as a key space in this discourse. *BMD* can, for the purpose of this project, be considered a "fan space" insofar as that it provides a platform to bring together and encourage participation among fans with shared interests in movies and related media. The concept of a "fan space" draws on James Paul Gee's (2004, 67) theory of "affinity space," which is "a place or set of places where people affiliate with others based primarily on shared activities, interests, and goals, not shared race, class culture, ethnicity, or gender." Gee (2004, 70) differentiates the concept of "space" from related ideas of community or culture, thus de-emphasizing notions of belonging and identity and allowing for the "ebbs and flows and differing levels of involvement and participation exhibited by members." Fan culture, both online and offline, exists in such spaces. These fan spaces facilitate participation, but they

also constrain it: through the kinds of interaction that are technically possible and the kinds of interactions that become normalized in the particular space. As such, it is important to take a brief step back and contextualize *BMD* as a particular fan space.

BMD was founded in 2010 by independent movie critic and blogger Devin Faraci, in association with the Alamo Drafthouse chain of cinemas. The original Alamo Drafthouse Cinema was founded in Austin, Texas in 1997 and has grown into a chain of 37 cult-favorite cinemas, famous for its strict etiquette rules and its special events. *BMD* similarly positions itself as a destination for serious movie lovers, explaining that the site's name "reflects the centrality of movies in our experience, in our lives" (About Birth.Movies.Death.). Most of the content on *BMD* consists of news and reviews, primarily film-related but occasionally also about television, video games, and other entertainment products. The site bills itself as "putting the fun back in being a nerd" through its devotion to "movie-loving culture" (ibid.). Thus, it positions itself as a site for nerds—a term which, as previously discussed, is often used synonymously with fans. *BMD* is also a slick and professional website with a staff of writers, an active social media presence, and a prolific publishing schedule of 2-3 substantial posts per day. There are frequent editorials written by staff writers that analyze trends and dynamics regarding the entertainment industry and its fans. The "Fandom is Broken" article was posted as an editorial, and in the same time period the site also posted editorials such as "Video Game Movies Can be Good (They Just Shouldn't be Adaptations)" (Todd, 10 June 2016) and "Maybe Audiences want Sagas, not Sequels" (Faraci, 6 June 2016).

The constraints, opportunities, and conventions of any online space create what Geert Lovink (2011, 53) has termed a "comment culture." This includes the technical features that enable commentary and conversation, how strictly rules and civility are enforced, and the

hierarchy between content and comments that encourages or chills debate and disagreement. My sense is that *BMD* attracts a kind of "meta-fan" audience, who not only enjoy talking about pop culture, but also about how media consumers relate to pop cultural products, to the media industry, and to each other. Several comments in my data set specifically remarked on the quality of discussion at *BMD,* noting, "the comments are a huge part of why BMD is my favorite nerd/news commentary site" and "I really enjoy the community here." Considering the cliché of the "internet comment section" as an aggressive and immature space, I was surprised at the overall quality of the comments, both in grammar and substance. Of course, there were still plenty of exchanges that devolved into sarcasm and name-calling. However, it seems that *BMD,* either by being carefully moderated and/or due to a certain amount of self-policing, maintains a relatively civilized, intelligent, and thoughtful level of discourse.

Collecting and Analyzing Article Comments

To begin working with the comments in response to Faraci's article, I downloaded all comments to a PDF file, which totaled 537 pages. I then highlighted comments that I felt were "about fandom" insofar as they addressed issues such as fan entitlement, the influence of social media on fandom, the role of fandom in the entertainment industry, and generally fit as part of a conversation about the commenter's experiences within or observations about fandom. These types of comments can be considered instances of "meta-fandom," using the prefix "meta," from the Latin for "beyond," in order to indicate a higher level of abstraction. Meta-fandom, then, is fans discussing their experience in and views of fandom itself, as opposed to discussions that are focused on a fan object. To this point, the comments also included frequent instances of the latter type, e.g. whether Marvel maintained narrative continuity between *Iron Man 3* and *The*

Avengers: Age of Ultron, or whether *Batman v. Superman: The Dawn of Justice* was a good film. The article also garnered many brief, non-substantive comments, such as "good article!" or "I agree!" Taken together, the latter two types of comment made up the bulk of the discussion. That being said, out of 2,350 comments, I coded 455 to be "meta-fandom" type comments. I noted the author, page number, and comment length (single sentence or less, paragraph, multiple paragraphs) in a spreadsheet. The comments in my "meta-fandom" selection were made by 238 unique users. Many of the comments were quite lengthy and substantial, contributing to the richness of the discussion. In fact, 187 comments in the set were multiple paragraphs in length, with the longest comments topping 500 words.

I was curious if I could draw demographic conclusions about the make-up of both the commenters in general, and the authors of the comments I had selected for my archive. Unfortunately, there is no way to verify demographic information on who these commenters are, but my impression based on screen names, user photos, and personal identifiers is that the majority are adult males and appeared to be regular contributors to comment discussions at *BMD*. However, several commenters did mention that they were first-time visitors to *BMD.* and that they came specifically to read and comment on the "Fandom is Broken" article because it was trending on social media or shared within their social circle. I made multiple coding passes in order to identify recurring themes in the discourse and abstract these themes into a workable analytical structure. I ultimately decided that it made sense to analyze the discourse on two levels: content and strategy. There were three content themes within the discourse that emerged as particularly fruitful: authorship, criticism, and ownership. In discussing authorship, the comments grapple with the appropriate relationship fans should have to the creators of media products as "authors." The comments also consider what comprises acceptable criticism, and the

role that fans should play as critics of media products in general. Finally, the comments consider the question of ownership and the degree to which fans' sense of ownership is a form of "possessiveness." In terms of discursive strategies, my analysis considers key rhetorical techniques that are deployed throughout the discourse in order to create and police boundaries of acceptable fandom. I focus on three rhetorical techniques: re-deployment of fan stigmas and stereotypes that were seemingly left behind with the triumph of fan culture, appeals to extremes in order to frame fans as bullies and creators as victims, and exaggerating fan power in order to invoke a sense of urgency around out-of-control fans. I also created a word cloud from all 2,350 comments to see if these themes could be gleaned through more quantitative means. It was satisfying to identify that the primary topic of discussion was indeed "fandom"! There was also a clear concern about the presence of "hate" speech and "threat[s]" that are the hallmark of much contemporary Internet culture, and likely the result of the fact that a death threat was prominently featured in Faraci's article.

Fig. 1. Word cloud created from all 2,350 comments posted to "Fandom is Broken"

Collecting and Analyzing Response Pieces

Faraci's article also inspired a significant number of response pieces, both by fans on their personal blogs and Tumblrs and by journalists (some of which also self-identify as fans) writing on entertainment news for niche and mainstream outlets. I subscribe to a newsletter called *The Rec Center*, which is a weekly collection of fandom news, fan works, and related links, by fans for fans. The week after Faraci's article was posted, *The Rec Center* highlighted it in a special section called "Responses to 'Fandom is Broken'":

> OK so this guy wrote this article. Neither of us have the strength to summarize it again. If you're unfamiliar with the "fandom is broken" thing or the ensuing ~discourse, start with Gav's response, which summarizes the controversies nicely: "Geek culture isn't 'broken,' but it does have a harassment problem." Once you're riled up, you may want to read more! Here are a few pieces we liked (or, er, wrote on our very own tumblrs.) Obviously it's not an exhaustive list! The problems in "Fandom is Broken" were myriad, so it's not surprising that people came at it from many different angles. (Minkel and Baker-Whitelaw §6)

I followed the links to 11 response pieces featured in the June 3, 2016 edition of *The Rec Center.* I then used Google to search specifically for pieces that could reasonably be considered a direct response to Faraci's article using three criteria: 1) they contributed to the debate around "Fandom is Broken," 2) they linked to Faraci's original article, and 3) they were posted within one month after the initial article. I ultimately collected 29 additional response pieces, drawn from a mix of authors' personal blogs and mainstream or fandom- and entertainment-related news sites (e.g. *Vox, The Daily Dot, Salon, Huffpost, The Geekiary, The Mary Sue*). As a set, these 40 response pieces comprise a lively and focused conversation from a variety of perspectives that engages with the themes and questions around fan entitlement.

It is interesting that the response pieces, specifically those on Tumblr or on personal blogs, did not post comments directly to the discussion at *BMD*. Considering that many of the comments at *BMD* were essay-length, these response pieces would not have been out of place in terms of length, tone, or substance. My sense is that many of these authors preferred to post in spaces where they felt safe and where they anticipated their argument would be met favorably. For example, issues around sexism, racism, and representation are recurring topics of discussion

throughout the fan entitlement discourse. Many of the response pieces celebrate a more egalitarian relationship between fans, media texts, and media creators, where emotional ownership and the transformation of source materials is celebrated and not derided as "entitled" or over-stepping the boundaries between art and audience. The fact that the response pieces to "Fandom is Broken" largely take a different perspective than Faraci's article and are posted in different spaces suggests a degree of self-segregation among fans into comfortable and supportive fan spaces based on different motivations, beliefs, and interests.

Research Ethics

The elements of this discursive event are all considered "public data" insofar as that they are posted on platforms or websites where they are visible to any visitor, without requiring additional registration, payment, or approval. I have chosen online sources (publicly posted articles, comments, blogs, and social media entries) because these are easily accessible for both the researcher and those audience members who wish to participate in the discussion, thus allowing for a wide variety of voices and perspectives. The type of data I am using in this project does not require review by the Institutional Review Board, nor require individual consent for scholarly use. This was determined by following the NU Human Subjects Research Determination Form, which categorizes the data used in this study as exempt because it was a) obtained after the data was already in existence, without intervention or interaction with the individuals and b) not explicitly private in the sense of being public data, as stated above.

However, because I use a variety of public data in my archive, I considered whether different ethical standards should apply. Articles or blog posts are intended for public consumption and do not present any ethical concerns. The comments posted in response to

Faraci's article present a slightly more complex ethical challenge. Fan scholars who rely on online sources have recently begun to raise some concerns over using online data, even when that data can reasonably be considered public (Busse 2018, Freund and Fielding 2013). The key question is whether, by posting publicly, subjects give implicit consent to have their conversations quoted, reprinted, or otherwise utilized. The NU Human Subjects Research Determination Form does describe private data as occurring "in a context in which an individual can reasonably expect that no observation … is taking place." In the case of online conversations, even when posting in a public forum, commenters may feel they are participating in a semi-private conversation, or at least one that is not intended for public consumption or alternate use (e.g. being quoted in a newspaper article or being used in academic research). Busse (2018, 12) describes this as "layered publics" and notes, "fans often understand a shared fan space to be private even when it is accessible and thus public." One solution would be to anonymize comments or to paraphrase so that they cannot be easily traced. However, the argument against this is that anonymizing comments also removes authorship and precludes giving those who posted comments credit for their ideas. Busse (2018, 11) argues that authorship should always be acknowledged when online texts are "artistic artifacts." Because the comments quoted in this project cannot reasonably be considered "artistic artifacts," and because this discussion may be, to some extent, sensitive and carry a perception of semi-privacy for the participants, I have chosen to mask usernames in order to anonymize the comments. However, I have not paraphrased comments because I felt it was important to the scope and impact of my findings to preserve the original tone and language.

Method: Netnography and Discourse Analysis

I consider this project to fit within emerging methodological considerations of "netnography." Netnography, more than simply being a mash-up of "Internet" and "ethnography," describes a specific set of research considerations, methods, and ethical guidelines, both for using archival online data and for conducting immersive research in online communities (Kozinets 2015). It emphasizes the cultural contextualization of online data and addresses the researcher's involvement in data selection, interpretation, and analysis. Even though my project is specifically a discourse analysis of online comments, it is rooted in an anthropological impulse to describe and understand a particular culture, in this case fan culture. I used archival data of public comments, but in coding and analyzing this data, I drew on my experience and expertise as a member of fan culture. Discourse analysis of the online articles, posts, and comments entailed close reading of the content as well as an examination of the context, that being the opportunities and constraints of the sites where discourse is taking place. I used word clouds to provide a broad overview of the content of the discourse, whereby the frequency of certain words and phrases is represented visually in order to give an initial impression of the scope of the debate. I also categorized comments by type (simple response to the article, detailed response to the article, response to another comment, etc.), tone, and length. These initial findings provided a rough framework to guide my closer reading and my subsequent conclusions about the themes and strategies in the fan entitlement discourse.

Discourse analysis as a method actually describes multiple styles of analysis, which share a core conviction that the language we use constructs our understanding and experience of social life. Discourse analysis is usually a qualitative method and is underpinned by an attention to ideology, narrative, semiotics, etymology, and the specific cultural, historical, and socio-

economic context of language. Three main forms of discourse analysis are semiotics, conversation analysis, and post-structuralist discourse analysis (Gill 2018). This project draws primarily on the third type of discourse analysis, which is widely regarded as being pioneered by Michel Foucault in his post-structuralist work on the construction of seemingly natural aspects of reality and human experience as "discursive" objects. He famously makes this case in his 1976 *History of Sexuality,* which builds on the previous year's *Discipline and Punish* to develop a relational theory of power as constituted through knowledge and accepted forms of truth. Discourse is a key way that truth, knowledge, and, consequently, power are established and maintained. Following Foucault, we can understand fandom itself as a discourse. Stanfill (2019, 7) argues that, "conceptualizing 'the fan' as a discourse" is useful insofar that it "reorients the question from how fans are to how cultural common sense imagines them." This is a methodological shift from an ethnographic approach that seeks to understand who fans are, what they do, and why they do it to a discourse analysis approach that looks to how "cultural common sense" — what is "correct, expected, desired; that is, normal" (Stanfill 2019, 8) — around fans is constructed in the conversations, debates, and clashes that happen in and around fandom.

In an overview of how discourse analysis can be deployed in media and communication studies, Rosalind Gill (2018, 26) writes,

> discourse analysis treats talk and texts as *organized rhetorically* [and] sees social life as being characterized by conflicts of various kinds. As such, much discourse is involved in establishing one version of the world in the face of competing versions (emphasis in original).

The process of discourse analysis begins by assembling a collection of artifacts and identifying

patterns by finding recurring themes, ideas, arguments, and/or phrases. The core of the analysis is to contextualize and historicize these patterns and the language used in order to discover their rhetorical (and often ideological) purpose and effect. It is, of course, impossible to analyze, or in fact, identify, the entirety of any discourse. I am also not making claims regarding the representativeness of the data I have chosen to analyze. While an important component of social scientific work, representativeness in discourse analysis is arguably not the point: the task is not to show that a part represents the whole, but that a particular discourse exists and that the instances that are analyzed show it to be constructed in a certain way. Another person may define the same discourse differently, and indeed see it working in different ways. Discourse analysis, in this sense, is inseparable from the person doing the analysis.

I am acutely aware of the need to examine my own standpoint and attend to the "hierarchy of privilege" to check the claims I can reasonably make as a white, female, heterosexual, Western, able-bodied, neuro-typical, economically secure person (Proctor et al. 2018, 379). While it is my aim in this project to represent the fan entitlement discourse from a variety of perspectives without interjecting my own moral judgments, standpoint theory reminds us that, "we're always talking from somewhere and to pretend that we're not is to treat our situatedness as neutrality" (Proctor et al. 2018, 378). The data I have selected to include in this project is therefore shaped by a number of biases and aims: It represents a Western, primarily American, perspective due to my personal limitations in terms of language and access. Furthermore, my stated aim to use the data set in order to illustrate and analyze a particular discourse necessarily means that I have selected those comments and articles that were particularly compelling from an academic perspective. However, I seek to avoid personally labeling any language as "broken," "toxic," or "entitled" and instead look at how these terms are deployed and constructed by

others. William Proctor (et al. 2018, 385) asks, “Should we, as researchers, be making claims about fan ‘toxicity’ ourselves, or addressing discursive instantiations whereby the term is marshalled by fans, journalists and bloggers, etc?” My project falls in the latter camp, as an attempt to investigate how the fan entitlement discourse is constructed and deployed in and around fandom.

Am I Gathering Data from Actual Fans?

Just as “fandom” has become a more porous and inclusive concept, conversations about fandom are drawing in a wider group of participants. Addressing this challenge, Mark Duffet (2013, 256) notes that fan studies researchers need to ask themselves, “am I gathering data from actual fans?” My response to the question of whether or not the participants in the fan entitlement discourse are “actual fans” is twofold: First, I apply the logic of interpellation, whereby individuals constitute themselves as subjects by responding to a particular address. Louis Althusser (1972) developed the concept of interpellation as part of his theorization of ideology. He gives the example of a police officer shouting out “Hey, you there!” in public, and an individual turning around in response, thus becoming a subject “by this mere one-hundred-and-eighty-degree physical conversion” (Althusser 1972, 174). In acknowledging the address, the individual becomes the intended subject. In the same way, it is reasonable to assume that those who take the time and effort to participate in a discussion that is conspicuously marked as being *about fandom* interpellate themselves as being a part of fandom in some way.

My second answer to the question of whether I am studying “actual fans” is more complex and draws on what Matt Hills (2017) has termed a “fan worlds” approach. Hills’ theory of fan worlds builds on Howard S. Becker’s work on art worlds and proposes a more inclusive and

participatory view on fandom: “Everyone who participates in making a work participates in making it,” writes Becker (quoted in Hills 2017, 873). Hills (2017, 873) expands on this idea to argue that a fan world approach means “recognizing how fandom is supported and enabled by a range of professional cultural intermediaries as well as people seemingly ‘outside’ a fan community also deserving and requiring fan studies’ analysis.” This contrasts with earlier fan studies approaches, which focused specifically on bounded communities of exceptional fans. However, Hills does not actually advocate making the fan world a new object of study. He writes,

> Rather than mapping the fan world, the point here is to recognize its fuzzy boundaries and openness, so that theorizing fandom can mean more than merely empirically studying self-declared fans (instead including “support personnel” along with those whose fandom may be disputed or unclaimed), as well as not erecting an a priori or misrecognized line separating the fan world “from other parts of a society.” (Hills 2017, 878, quoting Becker)

In other words, a fan world approach seeks to understand how the perception and experience of being a fan is increasingly shaped by a variety of participants who may or may not self-identify as fans but who nevertheless have a connection to and a vested interest in the fan world. A key feature of contemporary fandom is the broadening of the conversation around what fandom is and what it should be. Conversations that used to take place only in closed niche communities that were well outside mainstream awareness are now also being conducted in the public eye: on the front page of *The Huffington Post*, the cover of *Entertainment Weekly,* or even occasionally *The New York Times*. As such, it is difficult to demarcate where distinct discourses about

fandom—discourses by fans, or by the industry, or by the news media—begin and end. For fans themselves, their interest is in defining their own experience and identity. Media companies may want to shape and limit fan activities in ways that fit their corporate agenda. News outlets may be interested in representing fans in entertaining and sensationalist ways. A fan world approach seeks to incorporate and unpack these perspectives.

A fan world approach gestures once again to the idea that "fandom" itself is a discursive construct that is continually created and negotiated. I believe that spaces which are frequented by fans but also open to non-fans (thus making it difficult to ascertain whether subjects are "actual fans") are particularly interesting sites for a discourse analysis of fandom. These spaces bring debates and anxieties about the slippery nature of fandom in contemporary culture to the forefront as multiple types of fans with different interests, experiences, and intentions clash. These spaces can be termed "contact zones," which are "social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power" (Pratt 1991, 34). The data I draw on for this study comes from a variety of websites and platforms, some of which can reasonably be considered fan spaces (e.g. personal fan blogs or Tumblr pages), some of which are mainstream news outlets, but many of which (like *Birth.Movies.Death.*) can be considered "contact zones" and thus enable the kind of lively debate from across the spectrum of fandom that is represented in this data set.

Similar Studies

While fan studies has an established history of using ethnographic and qualitative research methods, the key questions have, as Stanfill (2019, 7) points out, historically been concerned with "how fans are" rather than "how cultural common sense imagines them" — that is, how

they are constructed within discourse. Methodologically, this study combines ethnographic methods, specifically netnography, and discourse analysis. Ethnographic methods, particularly observation (Whitman 2009, Gilbert 2017) and interviews, are a well-established way of gaining insight into fan communities (Radway 1984, Andrejevik 2008, Stanfill 2013, Williams 2015). Observation (with or without participation) has been very common, since many fan scholars are themselves fans and find it both convenient to gain access to their own fan communities and difficult to excise their own experience and perspective from their work (Jenkins 1992, Bacon-Smith 1992). With fan communities increasingly moving online, netnography that combines observation and personal experience with other types of online data has become a major source of insight. For example, Natasha Whitman (2009), in her study of how identity is articulated and negotiated within two online fan communities (one dedicated to the TV show *Angel*, the other to the video game *Silent Hill*) describes her approach as a combination of online observation and ethnography: "my observation of [these two online fan communities] was supplemented by a range of activities which informed my understanding of discussion on the sites including playing the Silent Hill games, watching *Angel* and my attendance at fan conventions and videogame events. These activities were a continuation of my own personal and more 'fannish' interest in these texts" (396). The most common ways to collect data for such studies are to collect online articles, comments, and blog posts without participation (Johnson 2007/2017, Hills 2012, Williams 2015, Van de Goor 2015) and to conduct surveys and interviews to gain specific insight into a particular fan community (Andrejevik 2008, Williams 2015, Busse 2013, Stanfill 2013). There is also a large body of work that looks at mainstream media representations of fans, both in mainstream news and entertainment coverage (Hills 2012, Scott 2019) and in the diegesis of entertainment media texts (Booth 2015, Johnson 2007/2017, Stanfill 2019).

Discourse analysis, though often not labeled as such, is becoming a more commonly used method for qualitative analysis of texts that seeks to draw conclusions about the way discourse is constructed to discipline its participants (and recipients) in certain ways (Van de Goor 2015, Proctor 2017, Stanfill 2019). For example, Sophie Van de Goor's (2015, 276) article "'You Must be New Here': Reinforcing the Good Fan" examines posts on the 4Chan Comics and Cartoons message board (4chan.org/co/) to illustrate how the phrase "you must be new here" is an "often-used reply to complaints or expressions on behaviour, taste, grammar, or unpopular opinions." She conducted a search for the phrase within this particular online community and chose four interactions where the phrase "you must be new here" was deployed in particularly interesting ways to discipline those who violate community norms and standards in order to demonstrate how the "boundaries [of good fandom] are determined by internal and external discourses" (Van de Goor 2015, 275). Discourse analysis also often mixes different types of sources and perspectives, including more mainstream media coverage, blog posts, online comments, and social media posts. For example, Matt Hills (2012, 115), in his book chapter "*Twilight* Fans Represented in Commercial Paratexts and Inter-Fandom: Resisting and Repurposing Negative Fan Stereotypes," looks at how *Twilight* fans are represented within two discourses: first, in official "paratexts," including DVD extras a documentary about the making and reception of the *Twilight* films, and second, in the "subcultural domain on inter-fandom," that is, discussions about *Twilight* fans in other, related fandoms (e.g. horror films, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*). This approach builds on previous work on *Twilight* fans that primarily drew on mass media coverage by mixing discourses by fans, for fans, and about fans in order to create an "analytical construct" of *Twilight* fans (Hills 2012, 114). Hills concludes that the two discourses construct *Twilight* fans in radically different ways. The commercial paratexts credit fans as the

"ultimate driving force" behind the films' successes, while inter-fandom discourse uses "devaluating discourses" and "pathologizing inter-fandom maneuvers" to dismiss *Twilight* fans as inauthentic, illegitimate, and deviant (Hills 2012, 126).

Similarly, William Proctor's (2017) article, "Bitches Ain't Gonna Hunt No Ghosts": Totemic Nostalgia, Toxic Fandom and the *Ghostbusters* Platonic," mixes a variety of data to examine the discourse around the 2016 all-female *Ghostbusters* remake, specifically fan backlash that claims the remake is "ruining" the precious childhood memories of fans of the original 1984 film. He draws from mainstream news outlets that report on the negative fan response and represent the producers' perspective, notably writer/director Paul Feig, on the controversy. He also cites fan responses quoted in mainstream news articles and pulls fan comments directly from the online message board Reddit. Furthermore, he draws on mainstream news articles by film critics analyzing the *Ghostbusters* backlash. Taken together, Proctor's study seeks to understand how a discourse of toxicity is constructed and deployed from a variety of perspectives around the *Ghostbusters* reboot and whether this discourse accurately represents fan reaction. Much discourse analysis uses mixed source material in order to get a big picture overview of the discourse. Stanfill (2019, 11) uses an approach she calls "big reading," that is "close reading on a large scale." In essence, big reading seeks to use a large and varied archive of data but apply qualitative methods of reading and analysis. In her book *Exploiting Fandom,* she combines mainstream news articles, interviews with industry professionals, and diegetic representations of fans in order to ask "not only whether or with what frequency fans or specific fan practices appear in the archive, but also how they appear" and discover how the discourse demonstrates "common sense about fans" (Stanfill 2019, 12). In my project, I think of this kind of multi-source approach as a "fan world" perspective – whereby the aim is to understand the

contemporary fan world as a product of "everyone who participates in making [it]" (Hills 2017, 873) – and a way to consider how fandom is itself a discursive construct.

Preview

This project will chart the rise of the fan entitlement discourse through the 2010s, with a specific focus on the discursive event around "Fandom is Broken" in May 2016. While the fan entitlement discourse has largely been understood as part of a larger "culture wars" perspective, wherein fan culture is just one battlefield in a backlash against greater inclusivity, diversity, and representation, I am specifically interested in the role the fan entitlement discourse plays in the ongoing fan/industry power struggle. In Chapter 2, I chart the evolution of the fan/industry relationship, especially in light of the "triumphal" narrative of fan culture. While the industry used to understand its audience as passive consumers, fans have shown that they are active in their reading practices and interpretations, creative in how they use and transform media texts to suit their needs, and increasingly productive in the ways they interact with media and each other. Fans add value to the media products they love and, by extension, to the media and entertainment industries' bottom lines. Fans add this value through their labor, their love, and even their visibility. However, value does not equal power, and in the various power struggles that define the fan/industry relationship, fans do not have much actual power. Industry forces retain the power to make decisions. Fans may have gained some power to *influence*, but they have little real power to make decisions throughout the process of media creation and distribution. There is also a struggle around the power of ownership. Fans claim a sense of shared or emotional ownership, but this often sits uneasily among existing ownership structures based on intellectual property and economic interest. Because so much of fan culture is built on community and a sense of belonging, the power to include and exclude is particularly meaningful. As part of the

fan/industry relationship, the power to include or exclude is really about bestowing or withholding the benefits of incorporation: Which fans get to be part of the industry system, to be visible and valuable, and which fans are ignored and disciplined? Of course, not all fans wish to be part of the industry system. In fact, current fan scholarship grapples with this process of incorporation and cautions against conflating industry-driven fans with traditional and often industry-resistant fan culture. This is where the final site of power struggle becomes important: the power to define. The fan entitlement discourse is ultimately an attempt to define good and bad fandom in a way that limits and polices fan power in the fan/industry relationship.

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 examine the fan entitlement discourse from multiple perspectives. Chapter 3 contextualizes the fan entitlement discourse by tracking its emergence in the early 2010s and situating the “Fandom is Broken” discursive event as part of wider cultural, technological, and social trends and specific catalyst events. Specifically, I argue that that the discourse emerged from growing concerns around Internet culture, toxic fandom, and culture wars and found its scapegoat in the figure of the entitled fan. Chapters 4 and 5 analyze the “Fandom is Broken” discursive event, drawing on the 2,350 reader comments and 40 articles that comprise my data set. Chapter 4 discusses themes that emerged from my analysis of the fan entitlement discourse and which address core concerns about the balance of power in the fan/industry relationship: Who owns the fan object? Who controls its meanings and uses? Who can make judgments about it, and how? Chapter 5 addresses the rhetorical strategies that are used in the fan entitlement discourse to argue that there is something fundamentally “broken” about contemporary fandom. These strategies include re-activating stigma around fans as fanatics, using black-and-white thinking to frame fans as bullies and creators as victims, and exaggerating the power that fans actually have in the fan/industry relationship. Taken as a whole, these

rhetorical strategies set up categories of good and bad fans that work to create and police new boundaries of appropriate fandom.

The conclusion in Chapter 6 shows how the fan entitlement discourse has evolved since 2016 and how the underlying claim that fans have too much power in the fan/industry relationship is becoming an increasingly taken-for-granted aspect of contemporary discourse about fans. As fan scholars, it is vital that we examine and question this discourse and do not remain stuck in past assumptions that fandom is necessarily progressive and celebratory of fan empowerment. Contemporary fandom may or may not be broken, but it is under threat, especially if the practices and behaviors that we associate with active, creative, productive, and transformative fandom are branded as excessive, dangerous, and inappropriate.

Chapter 2: The Fan/Industry Relationship

The fan/industry relationship is arguably at the center of the fan entitlement discourse. When Faraci writes that "fandom is broken" because fans are too demanding, too critical, and too outspoken in their interactions with the media industry, he is arguing that fans' sense of power in the contemporary fan/industry relationship is out of balance. In doing so, he uses nostalgia to hearken back to a time when fans, presumably, knew their place. However, the economic logic of today's fan/industry relationship has been significantly restructured as fans create more value for the entertainment industry and, by extension, play a more important role throughout the media creation and consumption process. This raises questions about fans' power and agency that the fan entitlement discourse grapples with: How much power should fans have in the fan/industry relationship? How should they enact this power? How much should the media/entertainment industry welcome and encourage fan activity? In this way, the fan entitlement discourse reflects a key tension in the contemporary fan/industry relationship: The media and entertainment industries increasingly depend on fans, both as a valuable market and as marketing tools. Consequently, these industries invite, celebrate, and increasingly attempt to understand fan activities and communities in order to maximize their impact and value. In a recent marketing report on the "The Power of Fandom," the advertising agency Troika (2017, 4) tells its potential clients,

> For brands, the benefits of fandom are clear. Fans are the most avid of all consumers – investing more time, spending more money, and sharing more of what they love. Fans can be a brand's greatest asset and the most genuine form of

> advertising there is. Fans evangelize with authentic passion. They build fervent communities and form tribes. They can bond one generation to the next, and they conspicuously display their fandoms with pride.

The report features findings from a yearlong, multi-modal study the agency undertook to help its clients "understand fans and fandom from the inside out" (Troika 2017, 7). It is notable that media companies now seek to "understand" fans, rather than just seeing them as an easy and eager market. This expanded role and sense of importance also increases the power — both real and perceived — that fans have in their relationship with the industry. The fan entitlement discourse takes issue with how fans understand and enact this power and constructs the excessive sense of influence and importance as broken fan behavior. This chapter will delve into these questions of power and the broader context of how the fan/industry relationship has evolved, utilizing an interdisciplinary approach that pulls from audience studies, cultural studies, and media production studies in order to understand audience agency and interactivity, the power structures that underlie cultural production and consumption, and how fans fit into the entertainment industry system.

From Passive to Active Audiences

The history of the fan/industry relationship contains within in a number of other relationships that range across academic disciplines. Going back to the ancient Greeks and the classical theories of rhetoric, the building blocks of communication — or, as Aristotle's *Rhetoric* terms them, "the means of persuasion" — are the *speaker*, the *message*, and the *audience*. There is also consideration of *place*, which at the time referred to the location or facility where the

communication was taking place, but can now be extended to the communication medium. Finally, classical rhetoric is concerned with the *purpose* of the communication act, specifically weather it is meant to inform, entertain, or persuade. Taking these fundamental building blocks sets up the idea of a relatively straight-forward, one-way flow of communication: the speaker delivers the message to the audience. Translated to the modern landscape of mass media communication technology, the "speaker" increasingly becomes an industrialized system of media producers, while the "message" encompasses an ever-growing range of media products, from news programs to Hollywood movies. The fields of mass communication and media studies began to form in the 1920s and 30s in light of this growing reach and complexity.

The first theories imagined the audience as completely passive recipients of media messages. Concerned with the effects of propaganda in World War I and II, mass communications researchers developed the "Hypodermic Needle" or "Magic Bullet" theory of communication that assumed media messages have direct (and usually harmful) effects on their recipients. Originating from Harold Lasswell's 1927 book, *Propaganda Technique in the World War*, this theory put forward the idea that mass media messages were "injected" or "shot" into the minds of defenseless and unsuspecting recipients who "react more or less uniformly to whatever 'stimuli' came along" (Lowery 1995, 400). As media research grew in scope and sophistication, the understanding of the relationships between sender, message, and receivers became more complex. In 1938, the radio drama anthology series *The Mercury Theatre on Air* featured a play that became an important turning point for the field of mass communication research. The now infamous incident concerns the Orson Welles-adapted and -narrated *War of the Worlds* broadcast, which was disguised as a factual radio broadcast for dramatic effect and went on to cause mass hysteria among its listeners who believed a real alien invasion was in

progress. Proponents of the Hypodermic Needle Theory saw this as proof that the audience was powerless to resist media messages. However, media researchers Paul Lazarsfeld and Herta Herzog and psychologist Albert Hadley Cantril Jr, as part of the Princeton Radio Research project, observed that reactions to the broadcast were varied. Cantril's (1940, 155-158) book on the subject, *The Invasion from Mars: A Study in the Psychology of Panic,* drew on 135 interviews with people who had listened to the broadcast and had a range of reactions, from those who panicked and believed the program throughout, to "those who did not remain frightened through the whole broadcast because they were able to discern that the program was fictitious," and "those who were 'suspicious' of the news they were getting … [and] simply thought the reports were too fantastic to believe." Many listeners also checked the "facts" presented in the broadcast against other news sources or by asking friends and neighbors: "I looked in the newspaper to see what program was supposed to be on and saw it was only a play" (Cantril 1940, 159).

Lazarsfeld built on this research and went on to develop a more sophisticated mass communication theory: the two-step flow model of communication. The model posited that media did not have "direct" but rather "limited" effects on the audience. As described in the 1955 book *Personal Influence*, which Lazarsfeld co-authored with Elihu Katz, the model was developed based on a study of 2,400 voters in Erie County, Ohio during the 1940 presidential election and further validated by a study of who or what influenced the decision-making of 800 women in Decatur, Illinois. Lazarsfeld and Katz concluded that mass media had limited effects due to two key audience behaviors: "selectivity" regarding messages individuals choose to consume in order to "protect" their existing beliefs and opinions, and "interpersonal relations," which is a "kind of selectivity, but at the group level" and refers to the filtering of messages

through chosen opinion leaders (Katz 2017, xviii). As Katz (2017, xv) concludes in the introduction to the updated edition of *Personal Influence*, "the 'two step' hypothesis points to a shift in the balance of power between media and audiences … and anticipation of the 'active audience.'" Research in mass communication went on to develop a more thorough understanding of audience activity through a "uses and gratifications model" (Katz et al. 1973). This model assumes the audience is "goal directed" in their media use and that the audience member shows "initiative in linking need gratification and media choice" (510). Furthermore, audience members are assumed to be "self-aware to be able to report their interests and motives" (511). In short, uses and gratifications research begins to show that audiences are deliberate in their media use, that the ways they choose and use media meets their needs in important ways, and that media content provides this gratification in a variety of ways, notably the content itself, the act and experience of media exposure, and the social context (514).

This shift from seeing the audience as passive media "dupes" to active in their selection, understanding, and use of media marks a watershed moment in the history of media and communication studies. In an overview of the development of this new discipline of "audience studies," James Webster (1998) characterizes early mass communication research as based on a model of the "audience-as-outcome," which encompasses the idea that the audience and its opinions are a direct result (i.e. outcome) of media messages. Cantor and Cantor (1980, 91) have called this the "powerless audience" model, in which the audience is "one-dimensional and passive" and media exists to "propagate ideology that represents capitalist interests." This perspective was also popular among Marxist scholars and the Frankfurt School, which were concerned with the ideological effects of mass communication on viewers' class consciousness and autonomy. Shifting towards an economic perspective, the media and entertainment industries

in recent decades have largely operated on, what Webster (1998) calls, the "audience-as-mass" model. This model is concerned with measuring audiences and assumes that, by aggregating audience behaviors into quantitative measures, audience wants and behaviors can be rendered predictable. Understandably, this model is useful to media creators because they rely on quantitative measures of audiences — it is the size of the audience that drives box office receipts, sales figures, and advertiser revenue. Cantor and Cantor (1980, 86) term this the "demand model," which assumes that, "producers, network officials, and others involved in the selection and creation of content … are dependent on consumers to approve of their product." This approval usually happens in the simplest terms: the audience tunes in or out, buys the ticket or not. The audience in this model is not necessarily active; it operates more as a market to accept or reject a final product and less as an active participant in the entertainment industry system. Webster's (1998) third model of the audience, the "audience-as-agent," goes on to describe more recent scholarship that does understand the audience as active participants in choosing what media to consume, how to consume and interpret it, and, increasingly, how the audience asserts power in their relationship to cultural products and producers. It is this distinction between the audience as recipient and as participant that represents a significant change in how we understand the fan/industry relationship today.

The audience-as-agent model has been explored most extensively within the field of cultural studies, and tends to focus on examining the extent to which audiences accept, negotiate, or reject the norms and values put forth in a text (Fiske 1987). As such, much work in this field is a celebration of audiences who resist intended media effects and meanings, or who interpret or appropriate a text in unexpected ways (Jenkins 1992). Cultural studies provides a number of theoretical models that illuminate how media producers and audiences are connected. One of the

foundational pieces in the field is Stuart Hall’s (1980) “Encoding/Decoding,” which also forms the basis of “reception theory.” In it, Hall proposes a theory of the production and reception of media messages, paying particular attention to the social and ideological conditions that shape media production and consumption. He emphasizes that the encoding/decoding process does not follow the familiar, linear sender/message/receiver model, but is a dynamic process shaped by both the institutions of production, the means of distribution, and the viewers. Hall (1980) proposes three hypothetical positions from which media discourses may be decoded: The dominant-hegemonic position takes the connoted meaning “full and straight, and decodes the message in terms of the reference code in which it has been encoded” (136). A negotiated position recognizes the dominant code as hegemonic (that is, defining “within its terms the mental horizon, the universe, of possible meanings” and carrying “the stamp of legitimacy” [137]) and “contains a mixture of adaptive and oppositional elements” and negotiates the privileged position of the dominant with “local conditions” (137). Finally, an oppositional position means the viewer “detotalizes the message in the preferred code in order to retotalize the message within some alternative framework of reference” (138).

From Readers to Authors

Hall's work on the encoding and decoding of media messages, and the general communication framework of speaker/message/audience, echoes similar work in the field of literary criticism regarding the relationships between authors, texts, and readers. In fact, there has been increasing overlap in how these concepts have been theorized and understood. Media messages are now frequently referred to as “texts” and the reception of these messages as “reading.” This theoretical overlap likely dates to the era of uses and gratifications research, as

communication studies required a more robust theoretical foundation for understanding the process of meaning-making. “Everything is text,” wrote Katz (2005, xix), “from a love letter to the Berlin Wall—and media are just another supplier of texts.” Theories of texts and reading play a useful role in understanding the evolution of the fan/industry relationship by providing tools to better understand the construction of media messages as complex, multi-layered, and polysemic “texts,” the process of making sense and use of these texts as “reading,” and the power dynamics between author and the reader. Ultimately, both literary criticism and media studies have developed to take seriously the role of the reader in constructing a text through his/her reading, thus complicating the balance of power between authors and readers.

In literary criticism, this evolution has meant a turn away from the idea that a text (and, by extension, its creator/author) dictates specific and intended meanings. The “death of the author” is a widely known concept that was introduced in a 1967 essay of the same name by the literary critic Roland Barthes. The essay is a post-structuralist argument against methods of reading and criticism that over-rely on a text’s structure and authorial intent, and suggests that an attempt to discover a singular textual interpretation “is to impose a limit on that text” (Barthes 1977, 147). Instead, Barthes (1977, 148) suggests that texts contain multiple layers and meanings, and that each reader makes the text through the act of reading: “a text’s unity lies not in its origins … but in its destination.” The argument is not that a text has no author, but that the author’s intention is one of many influences on how the text can be understood. The author (who Barthes pointedly renames the “scriptor” in order to disrupt the traditional power differential) and the reader are equal players in a perpetual cycle of interpretation and quotation so that the text is “eternally written here and now” (148). The ultimate outcome of the reading process, therefore, is unique and different for each reader, and even for each reading instance. Barthes

(1977, 155) further questions the supremacy of the text in his essay *From Work to Text*, which introduces the term “work” as the material counterpoint to the ephemeral text: “the work can be held in the hand, the text is held in language [and] only exists in the movement of a discourse.”

Media studies also made use of literary theories to better understand the process of reading. Robert Allen (1995), in an introduction to an edited volume devoted to the serious study of soap operas, argues that these texts establish a particular “interpretive contract” with their readers. This contract is based on fulfilling expectations and generic/narrative conventions while also leaving “gaps” to fill with the reader’s own thoughts, ideas, and inferences (Livingstone 2005, 14). To do so, Allen imports a number of concepts from literary criticism, notably Wayne Booth’s (1961) “implied reader.” The implied reader is essentially who the author imagined the reader to be (from the language they use to the values and aesthetic ideals they hold), and how this image is written into the text. Tamar Liebes and Elihu Katz (1990) conducted a famous study concerning the power struggles inherent in the creation and reading of media texts by examining how the American television program *Dallas* constructed an “implied reader” with a particular ideological orientation. The authors combined a textual analysis in order to identify this implied reader with a reception study in which an episode of the program was shown to a small group of international viewers. The concern was that the text implied a reader with American, consumerist values, thus contributing to a cultural imperialism. However, Liebes and Katz concluded that this was not the case, and that, while readings were “constrained” by the text, the viewers also “engaged with the openness of the text to draw on their diverse cultural resources, resulting in divergent readings of the ‘same’ programme” (Livingstone 2005, 15).

While much work as been done to put author and reader on equal footing, there are always constraints and limits to the audience’s ability and willingness to construct oppositional

readings. Celeste Condit (1989) introduced the concept of "polyvalence" in order to complicate the view that audiences have an unrestrained ability to shape their own readings. She points to the factors in any given rhetorical situation that influence viewers' decoding process: "These factors include audience members' access to oppositional codes, the ratio between the work required and pleasure produced in decoding a text, the repertoire of available texts and the historical occasion, especially with regard to the text's positioning of the pleasures of dominant and marginal audiences" (Condit 1989, 103-4). Condit suggest that television texts are rarely polysemic—in the sense that resistant readings are readily accessible—and more often polyvalent. She explains, "Polyvalence occurs when audience members share understandings of the denotations of a text but disagree about the valuation of those denotations to such a degree that they produce notably different interpretations" (106). Polyvalence, then, is a characteristic of the audience, and not dependent on the instability or openness of the text. To illustrate this distinction, Condit conducted an audience reception study with an episode of *Cagney & Lacey*, noting that, even though her viewers produced vastly different readings, the readings were based on their ideological position toward the program. The subjects generally agreed on a "basic understanding of the story line … [and] … what the story was trying to convey" (107). Condit concludes that, "It is not that texts routinely feature unstable denotation but that instability of connotation requires viewers to judge texts from their own value systems" (107). In other words, audiences view the text as rhetorical—as "urging positions upon them"—and make their own evaluation of the persuasive messages presented (108). Condit continues her examination of the limits of polysemy by considering the claims that oppositional readings are pleasurable and liberating. First, she notes that dominant readings are most pleasurable because they require the least amount of work in decoding a media text. Programs are produced for an elite, dominant

audience because it is most appealing to advertisers. Negotiated or oppositional readings require more work (the decoding is farther removed from the encoding), and thus pleasure is reduced. Second, oppositional readings have generally been explored within organized audiences, where "group leaders exist and where audience members have access to counter-rhetorics" (111). Group interaction and leadership are crucial in shaping strong oppositional readings because not all audience members are equally skilled in producing sophisticated, resistant decodings.

When Condit argues that oppositional readings tend to occur within organized audiences, she echoes the concept of "interpretive communities" that is at the heart of much early fan studies work and goes some way to explain the motivation behind why this scholarship was so concerned with finding, describing, and celebrating the fan communities that were supporting each other in the work of oppositional readings while also making this work inherently pleasurable (Gray, Sandvoss and Harringon 2007, 2). In his essay *Is There a Text in This Class?: The Authority of Interpretive Communities,* literary theorist Stanley Fish (1980) powerfully argued for a middle ground position between formalist textual authority and unlimited subjectivity and endless interpretations. This middle ground is the interpretive community, whereby the reader does not approach a text as an isolated reader but as part of a community of readers. He writes, "It is interpretive communities, rather than either the text or the reader, that produce meanings" (14). Fish argues that interpretive communities are "made up of those who share interpretive strategies," and that these strategies "exist prior to the act of reading and therefore determine the shape of what is read rather than, as is usually assumed, the other way around" (14). Fish believes that all readers are enmeshed in these communities at all times, and cannot usefully tell where they end, thus making his concept of the interpretive community more

akin to culture. However, the key point is that readings are not just individual, but also contextual and socio-cultural. And, as much fan scholarship demonstrates, interpretive (fan) communities can serve to enable and encourage oppositional readings (and, as we will see, their own texts) in ways that also produce pleasure, purpose, and a sense of belonging.

All Fans are Potential Writers

From the days of sending fan letters to *Amazing Stories*, to the production of fan zines, and the writing of fan fiction and other derivative works, fans are not just readers, but also authors of their own texts. Turning once again to *Textual Poachers*, Jenkins (1992, 279-280) extensively described the "particular forms of cultural production" that he found to be essential to fandom:

> Their works appropriate raw materials from the commercial culture but use them as the basis for the creation of a contemporary folk culture. … Fandom recognizes no clear-cut line between artists and consumers; all fans are potential writers…who may be able to make a contribution, however modest, to the cultural wealth of the larger community.

The claim that "all fans are potential writers" is particularly relevant to this discussion of authors and readers, as fan cultural production not only makes the blurring of these categories possible, but also encourages it.

Fan texts can be understood as broadly belonging to two (overlapping) categories: paratexts and transformative works. Paratexts, as theorized by Gérard Genette (1997), are "those semi-textual fragments that surround and position the work" (Gray 2003, 72). As Genette

imagined them, specifically pertaining to books, paratexts comprise "covers, prefaces, reviews, typeface and afterwords, none of which is truly independent of the work, but all of which stand to inflect our interpretation of a text substantially" (72). This original conception of paratexts positions them as coming from the author or, more broadly, the media industry. Jonathan Gray (2003) has argued that paratexts are increasingly produced by readers, especially fans, as the Internet has become an accessible medium for publicizing their reactions and opinions. While Genette saw paratexts as subservient to the text, Gray draws on Barthes' distinction between the "work" and the "text" to argue that, "we should see the paratext as outside the work, but when you put the work and paratexts together, you get the text" (Brookey and Gray 2017, 102). Paratexts, then, have their own kind of authority and, for some readers, they can become more important than the work itself. For those in particularly active and close-knit fan communities, the paratexts produced and shared in those communities may be more personal, meaningful, and, therefore, valuable than the official work. This is often the case in communities that center on transformative works (i.e. fan fiction).

While fan fiction is often referred to as "derivative fiction," the preferred language of those who produce it is "transformative works" or "fanworks" (Organization for Transformative Works). Derivative, in this case, implies imitation, deference, and lack of originality. Calling fan texts "transformative works" gestures towards the complexities of the author/text/reader relationship; it acknowledges that transformation is its own creative process, and its product no less significant or valuable than the source text. In terms of the fan/industry relationship, there has historically been some antagonism around transformative works and those who produce them. Fan fiction, especially when it diverges significantly from the source text (see: slash fiction), does not always sit easily with "the powers that be." Occasionally, the industry has even

attempted to mount legal challenges against transformative works in the name of protecting their intellectual property. In response to these challenges, a group of fans founded the non-profit advocacy group Organization for Transformative Works (OTW) in 2007 with the intention to "work toward a future in which all fannish works are recognized as legal and transformative, and accepted as legitimate creative activity" (OTW Frequently Asked Questions). The group provides legal counsel to fans and hosts a number of related sites: An Archive of Our Own (AO3), which is a popular and active fan fiction collection, Fanlore.com, which is a wiki of fan history, and even a peer-reviewed open-access academic journal called *Transformative Works and Cultures*. When the organization moved to its own servers, a blog post announcing the move articulated why its fan-owned infrastructure was so important:

> Historically, many sites that have hosted fanworks have not been interested in or capable of defending the legitimacy of fanworks and have therefore been quick to take down or delete fan content when challenged for whatever reason (copyright concerns, concerns over explicit material, business or advertising concerns etc). The OTW's goal has always been to host fanworks on nonprofit servers owned and maintained by fellow fans. ("Archive News #4" 2009, par. 3)

OTW provides many valuable resources to fans, but most importantly, it provides fan spaces that are independent and not owned or policed by larger media companies. "We own the goddamn servers!" is not just an issue of infrastructure but also a declaration of defiance.

With the help of organizations like OTW, along with growing industry acceptance of a wider range of fan practices (including transformative works), legal challenges claiming copyright infringement are becoming more rare. However, the industry continues to seek to

protect its intellectual property, which has recently evolved into attempts to co-opt fan works. One infamous example of such attempted co-optation is the now-defunct website FanLib.com. FanLib began in 2001 as a place for media companies to host fan fiction contests ("FanLib" 6). The company boasted successful collaborations with popular television shows *The L Word, Ghost Whisperer,* and others (1). In 2007, FanLib attempted to expand into a fan fiction archive by recruiting several hundred popular and well-rated fan fiction authors from around the web (2). The invitation letter enthused that the site's founders wanted to "create the greatest fan fiction site the web's ever seen!" (11). The backlash against the site was near unanimous. Fans objected to everything from the site's copyright policy (the site claimed ownership and right to edit and remove content as it saw it fit) to its leadership team (an all male team with no apparent roots in fan culture and an all-too-apparent profit motive) (1-2). However, at the root of fans' anger and lack of trust seemed to be a sense that they were being misunderstood. In its correspondence with fans and its marketing of the site, FanLib repeatedly put forward the intention to "bring fan creativity into the big leagues" (34). This idea that fans create anything with the intention or the motivation to make it into the "big leagues" was, and continues to be, problematic. Of course, some fans do write fiction or make videos or fan art or music as a way to hone their skills for a potential professional career. But for many fans, the call to the "big leagues" devalued fans' status as authors and creators in their own right, and diminished the value of their creations by attempting to co-opt them into an existing industry system. It is also worth noting that FanLib's business model did not include any monetary compensation for the labor fans put into their work — the implication being that acknowledgement by the industry would be compensation enough. This raises larger questions regarding fans' changing role and value in the industry system, and their evolution from consumers to producers.

From Consumers to Producers

Considering the fan/industry relationship through the lens of consumers and producers means foregrounding the economic logic of the media industry system. I use the term “industry system” as described by sociologist Paul Hirsch (2000, 356), who writes about cultural production as an “industry system” in order to draw attention to the “interconnections and interdependencies” between the various points along the “sequence of discovering, producing, and delivering a [cultural] product.” Audiences of all kinds are an integral part of this system and become a “critical point” in the “flow” of cultural production (358). The media industry business model has always relied on maximizing its audience’s economic value, both as direct consumers of the media product itself and as potential consumers for the products advertised within or associated with the film or TV show (Ang 1991, 28-29). Furthermore, fans have provided additional value to media companies as “an ancillary market” for spin-off goods and branded merchandise (Jenkins 1992, 48).

The consuming audience has long been an important point in the media industry system, specifically through audience measurement. In television, audience measurement has historically operated by sampling a portion of the total television viewing population in order to obtain a representative measure of what media people are consuming, how long and how often. For film and other media, audience measurement relies on actual box office or sales numbers. Audience measurements combined with producers’ knowledge of or intuition about hypothesized audiences and specialized or segmented audiences produces what James Ettema and D. Charles Whitney (1994, 5) call the “institutionally effective audience.” The institutionally effective audience does not describe a group of actual viewers but a construct of viewer tastes and desires.

In other words, it is an audience "whose particular interests are anticipated—or created—and then met by content producers" (5). Richard Peterson and N. Anand (2004, 317) include a similar notion of the audience as "market" in their model of the production process, arguing that "markets are constructed by producers to render the welter of consumer tastes comprehensible." The challenge for the media industry in light of fans' growing influence is that, while fans are potentially eager and lucrative consumers, they are not easily defined as a coherent and useful market. Many of the features that define fans — from emotional investment to community involvement to the creation of fan cultural products — are difficult to operationalize, to measure, or to utilize. Philip Napoli (2010) has argued that the types of audience measurements available and the ways the entertainment industry incorporates audience information is evolving to meet some of these challenges. Specifically, the industry is relying less on "exposure" to define its markets and more on "post-exposure" measurements (Napoli 2010, 192). Exposure, in this case, refers to consumption-centered metrics such as television ratings, readership numbers, or movie box office receipts that indicate how many people were "exposed" to a media product and, if applicable, its advertisements. Post-exposure refers to responses such as loyalty, attentiveness, appreciation, emotional investment, recall, and fan-like behaviors that reflect a deepened engagement with a media product (110-12).

The shift towards post-exposure measurement has been accompanied by dramatic changes in the fan/industry relationship that shifts attention towards measuring what the audience produces, not just how it consumes media. One key metric to measure fan response has become "chatter" and "buzz," especially online. Audience measurement companies now release weekly social media "ratings" that quantify which television show, film, or other entertainment property inspired the most tweets, posts, or shares in a given time period. Tumblr (one of the most popular

social media platforms among fan groups) maintains a dedicated "Fandom on Tumblr" site that provides weekly "fandometrics" in order to "compile a database of Tumblr's favorite entertainers and entertainments, and track the shifts in our users' collective affection" (fandom.tumblr.com/about). Because fan chatter is increasingly both encouraged and measured by the entertainment industry, fans also become a marketing tool. Fan discussion provides feedback during the production process (a form of market research), it shows qualitative engagement with the media product (post-exposure audience measurement), and it increases the visibility and reach of the media product (marketing). Often times, this kind of fan behavior happens organically. Increasingly, the media industry also encourages and enables these engagements.

Encouraging audience engagement often happens through what Sharon Marie Ross (2008) calls "invitational strategies." She argues that media texts increasingly "invite" their audience to participate in some ways, and these invitations range from overt, to organic, to obscure. Overt invitations are prominent in reality voting shows like *American Idol* or *The Voice,* where viewers are asked to participate and influence the outcome of the program in specific ways (Ross 2008, 8). Organic invitations are those that feed into an already occurring web of interaction and participation, such as when shows pay homage to their fans in narrative or when writers nod to fan discourse through in-jokes and shared references (40-41). Obscure invitations are based on the narrative structure of the text. Drawing on Jason Mittell's (2006) work on narrative complexity, obscure invitations to participate are, in effect, challenges to unravel the narrative mystery of a text. Both Mittell and Ross build their argument on the television show *Lost*, which was a popular American prime-time program on ABC from 2004 to 2010. Famous for its heavily serialized narrative, large ensemble cast, obscure clues and references, and

complicated temporal structure (utilizing flashbacks, flash-forwards, and alternate timelines), *Lost* inspired a particularly passionate cult following across numerous online fan spaces, all clamoring to solve the show's mysteries. Ross explains, "This narrative design in no small way demands the Internet as a site in which viewers can seek information, engage in their own theory-making, and … voice concerns and ideas to producers and writers" (9).

As the media system becomes more invitational and interactive, the lines between consumption and production blur. Jenkins (2006, 3) has described the rise of interactive media as a shift toward "participatory culture," which regards media consumers and producers less as occupying separate roles and more as "participants who interact with each other according to a new set of rules that none of us fully understands." Similarly, Yochai Benkler (2006, 275) argues that online information networks have contributed to making the process of cultural production more participatory, "in the sense that more of those who live within a culture can actively participate in its creation." It is important to note here that these concepts of participatory culture are not ignorant of existing power differentials between media producers and audiences. In fact, Jenkins (2006, 3) acknowledges that some actors in a participatory culture have more power than others: "Corporations—and even individuals within corporate media—still exert greater power than any individual consumer or even the aggregate consumers." Furthermore, while fans may gain pleasure, satisfaction, and at least an illusion of influence by responding to these invitations, the industry often gains significant economic value from such fan participation.

Fan Labor

The work that fans do to enhance their enjoyment of and, increasingly, the value of media products is called "fan labor." Fan scholars have long noted that fans "provide valuable free

feedback on market trends and preferences" (Fiske 1992, 47). Whether this relationship is one of exploitation or a mutually beneficial sense of influence is still unclear. Andrejevic (2008, 24), in a survey of 1,800 members of the popular *Television Without Pity* (TWoP) message board, has described how fans activities serve as a "form of value-enhancing labor for television producers." If the benefit to audiences is to have their opinions heard, the benefit to media companies is an ability to monitor audience response in great detail, free of charge. For example, fans' online presence can easily be exploited as an online marketing strategy for media companies and online viewer activity in the form of feedback, ideas, and criticisms generates valuable "buzz." Fans are often quite aware of their value as marketing tools. While they are not compensated for this labor, it does provide fans an outlet for expressing their emotional investment and a sense of shared ownership of their favored media products. However, as Andrejevic (2008, 42) points out, fan labor represents a different perspective on understanding the core motivations and practices of fandom, insofar as that,

> The exploitation of free labor represents the obverse of fan participation as the potentially subversive form of textual 'poaching' described by Jenkins. … Far from 'despoiling' the [media] text through their practices, [fans] enrich them, not just for themselves but for those who economically benefit from the 'added value' produced by the labor of viewers.

While fans and their activities now represent "added value" for the entertainment industry, it is important that we also recognize that this is not a reconstruction of fans or audiences as passive dupes or mere puppets of the powerful media industry. Fandom is not an *either/or* proposition: *either* fans are complicit and passive *or* they are subversive and hyper-active. Fandom, especially

its contemporary mainstream incarnations, is a *both/and* phenomenon where, in Andrejevik's (2008, 43) words, "the interactivity of viewers *doubles* as a form of labor" so that fans are *both* highly engaged and active media users *and* valuable participants in the industry system (emphasis in original). Similarly, while it is tempting to overstate the role of fans as producers, they still very much exist and participate in an economic system that situates them, first-and-foremost, as consumers. Hills (2002, 29) explains, "Conventional logic, seeking to construct a sustainable opposition between the 'fan' and the 'consumer', falsifies the fan's experience by positioning fan and consumer as separable cultural identities." For fans, engagement with a text is depicted as happening on their own terms—through creative appropriation and autonomous community discussion. Engagement with the text on the producer's terms—through official Web sites, supplementary content, or branded merchandise—is regarded as mere consumption. As Hills points out, this distinction misrepresents most fans' experience, which likely includes both types of interaction.

The issue of fan labor brings to the forefront the complexities of the contemporary fan/industry relationship and the blurring boundaries between fans as consumers and fans as producers and contributors. Attempting to theorize fan labor more specifically, Abigail DeKosnick (2012) has explored the ways that fan labor may be considered a part of the contemporary entertainment industry system. Drawing on Tiziana Terranova's (2000) assertion that media products in a digital economy require continuous updating in order to keep them "dynamic and fresh," DeKosnick argues that fan activity should be valued as an essential part of the processes of media-making, marketing, and enjoyment. In addition to fans' value in marketing and market research, they are also a fundamental part of the "social aspect to consuming" (DeKosnick 2012, 102). Without fans and their labor, "buyers of things would not

associate those things with the pleasures of joining and taking part in societies comprising people with similar tastes and values" (ibid.). It is the fans' impulse to shape, transform, and otherwise express a sense of ownership over the fan object that makes fan labor valuable and, in turn adds value to the fan object that is increasingly crucial in today's crowded media landscape:

> What gives commodities value beyond their initial sales price is what fans add to them — the new uses to which fans put old things and the emotional landscapes that fans construct around them. … We can say that without fan appropriations, many commodities would have much lower exchange-value, a much shorter shelf life of value, and a much smaller base of potential customers. (De Kosnik 2012, 104)

Unfortunately, neither the media industries nor other voices in the fan world easily accept the vital role that fans play in adding value to the media products they love. Indeed, increasing insistence that fans be acknowledged for their labor not only threatens the business models of the media and entertainment industries, but also raises uncomfortable questions about power, agency, and ownership in the fan/industry relationship.

Similarly, Mel Stanfill (2019) argues that fan interactivity can become a source of *data* for the industry, rather than a source of power for fans. She writes, "rather than moving fans into a new role as collaborators, as the optimistic interpretation says, interactivity makes the audience measurable" (Stanfill 2019, 140). Being visible is not the same as being heard — indeed the ways that fans are often visible becomes a form of promotional work for the industry, by "discussing the object of fandom publicly" (144), by "distributing industry-made promotional content" (145), or by "convincing others to like or participate in the object of fandom" (146). As

fan productions become normal and expected, the industry seeks to regulate this "content labor" into "docile, productive forms" (148). (The case of FanLib is again relevant here as a blatant attempt to co-opt fan work without appropriate monetary compensation.) In industry terms, this kind of fan labor is called "user-generated content." Stanfill (2019, 150) writes, "fans are invited to produce content so industry does not have to do as much labor, or so that the object of fandom is more expansive than would otherwise be possible." However, Stanfill does not necessarily advocate that fans should be compensated. Fans gain value from their activities. These "use values" (the needs that an activity fulfills for the individual) are distinct from "exchange value" (what something is worth in economic terms) (Stanfill 2019, 163). Participating in fandom creates social bonds, is a form of play that produces pleasure, and is a source of social capital — specifically "fan cultural capital," per Fiske (1992, 33). "At a variety of levels," writes Stanfill (2019, 170), "fan actions both serve fan motivations and happen on industry terms." What Stanfill wishes to make clear is that fans can enjoy their "work" even as the industry exploits them by extracting surplus economic value. More importantly, this dynamic of industry "domestication" and "exploitation" is a key part of understanding how power operates in the contemporary fan/industry relationship.

Power in the Fan/Industry Relationship

Power is at the root of the fan entitlement discourse, specifically the power relations between fans and the various aspects of the culture industry. I use the term "culture industry" deliberately here, to invoke two of the fundamental theorists whose work underpins our understanding of power in the fan/industry relationship, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkeimer. Members of the Frankfurt School who were heavily influenced by the work of Karl Marx,

Adorno and Horkheimer coined the term “culture industry” to associate cultural production with the standardized output of other kinds of factories, manufacturing and distributing the pleasures of amusement and entertainment with a design to distract and discipline the masses into submission. In their foundational chapter, “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception,” Adorno and Horkheimer write (1944, 116),

> Amusement always means putting things out of mind, forgetting suffering, even when it is on display. At its root is powerlessness. It is indeed escape, but not, as it claims, escape from bad reality but from the last thought of resisting that reality.

This perspective, that consuming culture situates the audience as fundamentally powerless, echoes similar work at the time regarding passive audiences and direct media effects. However, as we can see through the evolution of the audience – from passive to active, from readers to authors, from consumers to producers – questions of media power are now much more dynamic and multi-faceted. In this section, I aim to understand power in the fan/industry relationship through sites of struggle in order to get a better sense of what is driving the backlash against perceived fan power in the fan entitlement discourse. These struggles encompass the power to make decision, the power of ownership, the power to include and exclude, and, ultimately, the power to define.

Power to Make Decisions

Writing about different forms of media power, Nick Couldry and James Curran (2003, 4) argue that, “the media’s representational power is one of society’s main forces in its own right.” This representational power essentially refers to the power to decide which stories to tell and

how to tell them. Media companies have this power because they have “direct control of the means of media production,” which gives them “hard” power in economic terms and also “soft” power to set the cultural agenda (Couldry and Curran 2003, 4). The audience has always played a role in how the media industry makes it decisions, though not necessarily an active one. Herbert Gans (1957, 316), in his foundational essay “The Creator-Audience Relationship in the Mass Media,” formulates a concept of an “audience image” that creators develop and utilize during the production process: “This image, though projected by the creator, functions as an external observer-judge against which he unconsciously tests his product even while he is creating it.” The final media product, then, is a “negotiated synthesis” of the producers’ creative vision and their audience images (ibid.). In a way, the audience image is the source of producers’ “gut instinct” about what kind of programming will succeed. In fact, Gans (1957, 322) argued that all media producers, whatever their skill or experience level, are “to some degree dependent on the validity of [their] audience image for [their] status and standing in the industry.” However, organizations will always attempt to develop mechanisms, structures, and strategies to make the production process more manageable and rational and diminish the reliance on chance and guesswork.

How audience influence operates within the fan/industry relationship is one key site of power struggle: Is it a top-down process of incorporating audience information if and when it is useful for industry decision making? Or is it a bottom-up effort by highly engaged audience members (i.e. fans) to influence industry decision-making? Ettema and Whitney (1994, 5-6) call the former “audiencemaking,” whereby “actual receivers are constituted – or perhaps, reconstituted – not merely as audiences but as institutionally effective audiences that have social meaning and/or economic value within the system.” On the other hand, Jenkins (1992, 28) has

argued that, “The history of media fandom is at least in part the history of a series of organized efforts to influence programming decisions – some successful, most ending in failure.” I would offer that the answer is always both/and: the industry would prefer to engage with audience feedback on their terms, while fans are taking advantage of more widely accessible and visible communications technology to make their voices heard and demand to have their stories told, whether or not their feedback is invited or desired.

How do fans attempt to exert influence? Bielby et al. (1999) have discussed how, while audiences cannot contribute directly to the creation of a media product, they can participate in an ancillary discourse discussing and critiquing it. The authors focused their study on message boards as an effective site for fans to discuss and critique media products because they allow for fan opinions to be publicly shared and deliberated, thus conferring an air of validity and legitimacy. They conclude that “fans’ participation in public sites for discussion and criticism in effect make them co-authors or co-producers of the narrative” (Bielby et al. 1999, 47). Costello and Moore (2007) similarly interviewed a number of online television fans in order to explore if and how they attempt to influence writers and producers of favorite television shows. Like Bielby et al., Costello and Moore (2007, 137) observed that fans were motivated to go online to “participate in some sense with what they see as ‘their’ program.” The authors cite several accounts of fans who regularly interacted with members of the production staff. For example, one fan noted that the executive producer of a favorite show was a member of a fan e-mail list she subscribes to: “Having the opportunity to influence the storyline a bit by our instant feedback is exciting. This is the closest thing to interactive TV watching an adult can experience” (137-8). Costello and Moore (2007, 137) conclude that fans like these consider themselves, to an extent, “part of the creative team” and that their perceived participation in the production process is the

"ultimate power of internet fandom." This interaction with the production process often extends to fan campaigns that lobby for the renewal of a low-rated show. Exerting influence over the life or death of a show allows fans to develop a sense of control that negates the role of the audience as "powerless victims of the Hollywood production machine" (137). One fan writes, "For the first time in history, there is a vehicle that makes it easy for thousands of fans all over the world to band together against the previous omnipotence of television executives. It was very exciting to be part of it and to see it work" (138).

Similarly, Andrejevik's study of the *Television Without Pity* (TWOP) fan community explored the extent to which this perceived influence affected why members visited the site and how they watched television. Andrejevic (2008, 34) concludes that part of the "fun" of being a TWOP member comes from identifying with the position of the producer. By taking on the role of "production assistants," fans developed critical thinking and viewing skills (26). Interaction with producers is a perk for many fans, but not an expectation. Most survey respondents were adamant that they did not "have any illusions about transforming or improving the culture industry" (36). They were aware that producers have to attend to a variety of factors other than fan response, such as the broader commercial appeal of their product. Some respondents were also cognizant that producers could gain a "certain amount of public relations value" from overstating their attention to fan message boards such as TWOP, noting that, "it helps to foster the multi-platform marketing of the show and thus build[s] loyalty" (36).

Another way that fans can exert influence is to organize into something like "collective bargaining units for consumers," whereby they can use their combined influence for "viral marketing or to rally support behind an endangered series, but they can also turn against brands or production companies that act in ways that damage the fans' shared investment in the

property" (Jenkins 2007, 363). The reality of fighting for influence from a position of less power is that it can be effective to "go negative." One example of such negativity is the intense fan backlash in response to a pivotal episode of the TV drama *The 100,* which aired on the CW channel in March 2016. Since its premiere in 2014, the show has garnered a loyal and vocal fan audience, and the producers of the show had enthusiastically interacted with their fan base in order to build engagement and excitement. A significant portion of this audience was particularly invested in the lesbian relationship between two of the show's main characters. As this relationship progressed, the show's marketing played up the pairing in trailers, sneak-peeks, promotional images, and official tweets and social media posts. Then, one of the characters was suddenly killed. Fans, especially LGBTQ fans, were understandably upset over the loss of a complex and well-developed lesbian character. However, they were even more upset that the pairing was so heavily marketed and promoted in a way that suggested the characters would have a long and meaningful narrative. In an article for *Variety,* Maureen Ryan (2016, par. 5) quotes a fan comment on Twitter: "I feel like I'm being used to keep up their ratings." In the aftermath of the character's death, the show's producers were slow to admit that they had mishandled the situation. Where fans had previously organized in support of *The 100*, they now began to organize to show their disapproval, "passing around lists of ideas for how to lower the show's social media profile" and organizing a boycott that resulted in the following episode being the lowest-rated of the entire show (Ryan 2016, par. 11). The moral of the story, as Ryan (2016, par. 7) points out, is that, "What has occurred … is not just a problem for 'The 100' and the CW, it's a cautionary tale for all of television, which increasingly depends on fans to bang the drum for shows and increase their profiles." In addition to this mishap serving as a cautionary tale for television executives, it also serves as a cautionary tale for what happens when fan support is

taken for granted, and fans are regarded primarily as a marketing tool with little regard to their own sense of agency.

Power of Ownership

Ownership in the fan/industry relationship is a multi-faceted concept. Fandom and ownership, writes Woo (2018, 182), are "completely intertwined":

> Audiences are encouraged to develop intense investments in the products of the media industry and in their producers, but a corollary to these investments is a sense of ownership that may also destabilize professional media producers and rightsholders' ability to exercise authority over them.

When it comes to the question "who owns the media product?" the legal answer is the perhaps the simplest, although, as we have seen with copyright struggles around fan fiction, by no means easy. The economic answer is somewhat more complex, especially in light of the value fans and their labor add to a media product. Emotional ownership, however, can be considered one of the fundamental aspects of the fan experience.

Fans, by their very definition, are marked by their "emotionally involved" engagement with their fan object(s) (Sandvoss 2007, 8). Bielby et al. (1999, 36) have written about the concept of ownership as part of their study of how TV soap opera audiences in the 1990s used public message boards to express a sense of shared ownership toward their fan object. They define ownership in this case as "who is entitled to make evaluative judgments about the quality of the product." Soap operas are an interesting case study in this instance because they share certain features with the contemporary franchise-based media environment. First, in order to

maintain a sense of continuity, soap operas "must make the narrative appear authorial seamless, despite the fact that soaps are collaboratively authored by many different participants" (Bielby et al. 1999, 36). Second, both legal and organizational arrangements obscure authorship (e.g. writers do not own the copyrights to their stories, their creative rights are constrained) and thus contribute to a sense that "ownership of the narratives can be contested" (36). This is similar to contemporary blockbuster entertainment, insofar as that it is the product of a Hollywood "machine" that similarly obscures the authority of a single creator. As a result of this, Bielby et al. (1999, 37) argue that, "the dichotomy between production and consumption … breaks down." Fans' investment in their fan object fosters a sense of ownership, insofar that they feel "their responsibility is to prevent a narrative's aesthetic value from being squandered by those whose interest is largely economic" (37). Bielby et al. do not make any claims as to whether this sense of ownership is good or bad, although they do note that it presents challenges for how media creators should respond to such fan behaviors. Ultimately, they note that the expansion of the Internet "will continue to support an increasingly legitimated and empowered fan community that will vigorously press claims to the ownership over 'their' narrative" (Bielby et al. 1999, 49).

John Tulloch (1995, 145) characterizes fans in terms of their often frustrating position within the web of legal, economic, and emotional ownership as a "powerless elite," that is, a group "structurally situated between producers they have little control over and the 'wider public' whose continued following of the show can never be assured, but on whom the survival of the show depends." That is, fans may experience a sense of shared ownership very keenly – Tulloch describes it in terms of "expertise and intimacy with 'their' show" (169) – but the reality of their situation is that they are often at the mercy of two groups (producers and the wider audience) that they have little real control over. However, Tulloch argues that fans do have

"*discursive* power in establishing 'informed' exegesis for their subculture of fans" (150). In other words, fans may be powerless to control the means of production, but they are not powerless to influence the discourse about a certain media product, especially within their social network. And in the age of the Internet, fans' social networks are increasingly vast and far-reaching.

Power to Exclude

Nicholas Abercrombie and Brian Longhurst (1998) developed the idea of the Incorporation/Resistance Paradigm in order to describe the power struggle between audience and text. Scholarship in this paradigm spans the spectrum of passive and active audiences that I have already described. Audiences exist along a continuum where their interpretive activities are either incorporated into the dominant meaning and ideology of the text, or they resist the text's authority and revel in their personal, often oppositional, and occasionally transformational meaning-making practices and creations. The Incorporation/Resistance Paradigm can also be usefully applied to the fan/industry relationship and the diverging desires of being included in the industry system ("incorporated") or refusing such incorporation ("resistance") in order to maintain independent, oppositional, and subcultural fan communities and practices outside the reach and desires of the media industry system. When Stanfill (2019, 183) writes that becoming part of the mainstream confers the "benefits of inclusion," she means the benefits of being seen and valued by the media industry system.

One way to understand this dynamic is through the concept of "affirmational" and "transformational" fandom. Transformational fandom clearly connects to the ideals of the Organization for Transformative Works, whereby transformative work takes "something extant

and turns it into something with a new purpose, sensibility, or mode of expression" (OTW FAQ). The terms were further popularized on LiveJournal (a very popular blogging platform and fan space in the 2000s) when the user obsession_inc (2009) posted an essay on the difference between "affirmational" and "transformational" fandom, based on his/her personal experience in fandom. These terms have since gained traction within fan communities, and eventually crossed over into academic usage. As obsession_inc originally described them, affirmational fans are those who affirm the source material and the creator's authority. This type of fandom is about gaining deep knowledge of the "rules established on how the characters are and how the universe works" and "nailing down the details." Importantly, affirmational fans are "the sanctioned fans." Transformational fandom, on the other hand, "is all about laying hands upon the source and twisting it to the fans' own purposes." This kind of fandom is "largely a democracy of taste" that encourages wide-ranging interpretations and meeting individual fan needs, "whether that is to fix a disappointing issue [in the source material] or just to have a whale of a good time." According to obsession_inc, "These are, most definitely, the non-sanctioned fans." These concepts are not only useful because they stem from a fan's own experience, they also reflect an insightful understanding of the fan/industry relationship and how different fan practices and motivations interact with institutional systems to result in different types of fandom being perceived as "sanctioned" and "non-sanctioned."

The idea that some fans are sanctioned while others are not effectively means that some fans are more readily incorporated into the industry system than others. Kristina Busse's (2013) article "Geek Hierarchies, Boundary Policing, and the Gendering of the Good Fan" employs the concept of the "geek hierarchy" to discuss how different fan practices are valued and respected, both within fandom and within mainstream culture. She uses the terms "geek" and "fan" almost

interchangeably, but points out that "while general geek acceptance has also brought with it wider fan acceptance, it is often the less explicitly fannish … elements that have been accepted by mainstream" (Busse 2013, 77). The geek hierarchy, then, is established and maintained by both internal and external discourse about fandom. Some fans are welcomed and celebrated as part of the mainstream by media companies who value fans who are less excessive, less emotional, more socially acceptable, and easier to control: "Fans who read and comment occasionally on a network site are much more malleable and less contrary than those who are hypercritical or create transformative works that might compete with studio products or ideologies" (78). In other words, the fans who are allowed to become part of the mainstream are those who "aren't too fannish, too obsessive, too much" (78).

While the geek hierarchy has become more of a mental schema than a concrete ranking of fan practices, Busse (2013) does base much of her analysis on an actual geek hierarchy flowchart, which was created in 2002 by Lore Sjöberg and published on the now-defunct humor website, *Brunching Shuttlecocks*. Although the chart was created for entertainment purposes and does not literally dictate how fans position themselves or others, it captures something of the experience of how hierarchy, boundary policing, and othering function within fandom. The chart features a series of levels, whereby geeks on each level "consider themselves less geeky than…" the next level. As such, the geek hierarchy structures the othering process and

> showcases the dynamic of internal fan stereotypes as it replicates the stereotypes that popular culture points at fans: wherever one is situated in terms of mockable fannish behavior, there is clearly a fannish subgroup even more extreme than one's own, and it is that group that one can feel secure in not being a part of. (Busse 2013, 78)

Starting at the top with "Published Science Fiction/Fantasy Authors and Artists," the flowchart begins with a clear preference for science fiction and fantasy fandom (especially literary fandom) and professional and aspirational forms of production. The chart progresses downward towards increasingly ridiculed and conspicuous displays of fandom, such as "Trekkies Who Get Married in Klingon Garb." The chart ultimately reaches the lowest level — "People who write erotic versions of *Star Trek* where all the characters are furries, like Kirk is an ocelot or something, and they put a furry version of themselves as the star of the story" — which represents a comical exaggeration of a number of undesirable behaviors, ranging from social (specifically sexual) deviance, to conflating fiction and reality (putting themselves into fan fiction), to disrespecting the source text ("Kirk is an ocelot or something"). As such, being fan worthy of incorporation requires staying within very specific boundaries of good and appropriate fandom.

Power to Define

What most of these struggles around power in the fan/industry relationship come down to is the power to define — in other words, the power to control the discourse. What is good fandom? What is bad fandom? Which ways of being a fan are appropriate, and which are not? What is fan entitlement? What is toxic fandom? What should the future of fandom be? It makes intuitive sense that dominant industry discourses should attempt to define and discipline fans in ways that keep them controllable, useful, and valuable to the industry. The significance of the fan entitlement discourse, as examined in this project, is to discover some of the subtle and complex ways this process is happening. My aim is to demonstrate how the fan entitlement discourse works to maintain industry dominance — not just from the top down, but also from the bottom up. That is, the fan entitlement discourse has become part of the fan world, and is, to a significant

extent, being maintained and amplified by fans themselves.

Chapter 3: Emergence of the Fan Entitlement Discourse

A discourse around fan entitlement has long been swirling in conversations in and around fandom. However, “entitled” has become a particularly prominent way of describing fans in the last few years. Google search trends reveal that prior to May 1, 2016 there were about 150 results for the term “fan entitlement.” The related term “entitled fans” produced 163 results in the same time frame. From May 2016 to the present, there are now over 36,000 results for “fan entitlement” and over 15,000 results for “entitled fans.” Of course, some of these results are repetitive, self-referential, or just an accident of wording (e.g. “I’m reading a book entitled *Fans*”), but something clearly changed in 2016 that has led to an explosion of discourse around the concept of “fan entitlement.” The article I center my analysis on — “Fandom is Broken” by Devin Faraci — was published on May 30, 2016. While it may have contributed to the growing prominence of conversations around fan entitlement, it does not stand alone in launching this discourse. This chapter will explore the historical roots of the fan entitlement discourse, how it existed pre-2016, and the general trends and specific catalysts that led to its explosion in mid-2016.

Dictionary definitions of “entitlement” tend to describe it as the right to have or do something, whether that right is real or perceived. According to the Cambridge English Dictionary, the deciding factor is work: the disapproving version of the word is “the feeling that you have the right to do or have what you want without having to work for it or deserve it, just because of who you are.” Before the word “entitled” came into vogue, fans like this were described as “demanding.” To whit, the phrase “demanding fans” produces over 94,000 results in

Google. The idea that some fans are overly demanding dates back to the earliest days of fandom when writers like Charles Dickens, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, and George Eliot published their stories as serials in newspapers and magazines. Writing about the history of serials and their "demanding" fans, Stephanie Kraft (2009) shares a story about the Polish writer Bolesław Prus, author of the serial novels *The Doll* (1887-89) and *Emancipated Women* (1890-93). He had been publishing his latest work chapter-by-chapter in the Warsaw *Daily Courier* newspaper, and missed the deadline for the latest installment. A reader visited the publisher's office, and "berated him for not having written the chapter on time, because, he said, 'We want to know what happens next. We want to know what happens…'" (Kraft 2009, 2). A key difference between calling fans demanding and calling them entitled, however, is that "demand" derives from economics: supply and demand. Consumers fulfill demand, therefore they may, occasionally, be demanding. While demanding fans may be difficult or annoying, they are not overstepping the boundaries of their prescribed role in the same way that entitled fans are, since entitlement implies that something is expected without being earned or deserved.

The concept of entitlement starts to come into more frequent connection with fans around 2010. There are quite a few articles around this time that specifically describe fans of George R.R. Martin and his best-selling fantasy series *A Song of Ice and Fire* as entitled. Neil Gaiman, a celebrity fantasy author in own right, responded to a reader message about George R.R. Martin on his personal blog in a May 2009 post he called "Entitlement Issues." The reader, Gareth, explains that he recently subscribed to Martin's blog and has been disappointed that Martin is not communicating with his readers about the next novel's release date while also taking on a lot of other projects that potentially take time away from working on the series. Gareth asks,

> When writing a series of books, like Martin is with "A Song of Ice and Fire" what

> responsibility does he have to finish the story? Is it unrealistic to think that by not writing the next chapter Martin is letting me down, even though if and when the book gets written is completely up to him? (Gaiman 2009, 2)

The fact that Gaiman chose to call the blog post "Entitlement Issues" is already telling of his opinion that it is indeed "unrealistic" to think that Martin would be "letting down" his readers by not finishing the story or communicating his progress. However, he goes so far as to berate Gareth that, "*George R.R. Martin is not your bitch*" (Gaiman 2009, 2, emphasis in original). He elaborates,

> You're complaining about George doing other things than writing the books you want to read as if your buying the first book in the series was a contract with him: that you would pay over your ten dollars, and George for his part would spend every waking hour until the series was done, writing the rest of the books for you. No such contract existed. You were paying your ten dollars for the book you were reading, and I assume that you enjoyed it because you want to know what happens next. (Gaiman 2009, 2)

Of course, as a writer, Gaiman's reaction is, in many ways, personal. However, it is also telling that Gaiman echoes the "demanding" nature of those who have read and enjoyed serials throughout history: *We want to know what happens next!* I can only speculate what elevated Gareth's concerns to earn the label of "entitled" — perhaps it is his concern that Martin is personally "letting [him] down" or perhaps it is that blogging and social media platforms have created an illusion of intimacy whereby fans are able to know more about creators, their lives, and what they spend their time doing.

An April 2011 *New Yorker* article called "Just Write It!" tackles the same subject with much the same language and sentiment, indicating that "fan entitlement" was becoming an important issue in the fan/creator relationship, specifically as it was represented in the case of George R.R. Martin and his "impatient fans" (Miller 2011, 1). Written just as Martin's series was about to premiere in its big-budget adaptation *Game of Thrones* on HBO, the article paints Martin as a man devoted to his vision, and to "nurturing his audience, no matter how vast it gets" (Miller 2011, 2). It also paints Martin as besieged by "online attacks" by fans who "have a new idea about what an author owes them" (4). This "new idea" is that fans "see themselves as customers, not devotees, and they expect prompt, consistent service" (4). Martin's assistant called these "disaffected readers" the "Entitlement Generation": "He thinks they're all younger people, teens and twenties. And that their generation just wants what they want, and they want it now. If you don't give it to them, they're pissed off" (4). This perspective raises two important ideas: First, it suggests that the rise of entitlement might be a generational issue, perhaps exacerbated by larger cultural issues and technological change. Second, it introduces a connection between fan entitlement and a customer mindset, suggesting that entitlement corrupts the distinction between what is to be expected from art and what can be demanded from a product.

By 2013, fan entitlement was expanding from usage in a literary context into the pop cultural conversation at large. A *Forbes* magazine article put the issue front and center: "'Batfleck', 'Fifty Shades of Grey' and Fan Entitlement Syndrome" (Mendelson 2013). The article sets the tone from the first sentence: "Another week, another fandom freakout" (1). This particular week, the fandom "freakout" related to two casting announcements for a new Batman film (Ben Affleck's casting as Batman inspired the portmanteau "Batfleck") and for the

upcoming adaptation of the best-selling romance novel *Fifty Shades of Grey*. The announcements led to fans "throwing online temper tantrums" and creating online petitions to protest the casting choices, which collectively represented "extreme symptoms of a relatively new phenomenon: 'Fandom Entitlement Syndrome'" (1). The article explains that these fans "seemingly believe that they are entitled to approve of the casting of a major studio release and have the ability to influence those in power over such decisions" (2). This line of thought positions "fan entitlement syndrome" as part of a fan/industry power struggle, insofar as fans should not have any illusions about their "ability to influence those in power." Furthermore, entitled fans are framed as naive and uninformed, "damn the business logistics or any other logical obstacles in their way" (2). However, the fact that fans have increasingly influenced the industry's decision-making complicates this dynamic. The article explains, "Part of what's changed is that the entitled fans actually got their way a few times over the last couple years, which only creates the impression that such relentless complaining or demands may yield results" (2). Interestingly, the fact that fans have successfully influenced industry decision-making is framed as problematic when it becomes part of "fan entitlement syndrome": these fans are not framed as triumphant, they are framed as childish, accomplishing their goals through "relentless complaining." The article concludes,

> The constant barrage of entitled online outrage is frankly annoying. It's a symptom of fan entitlement, fueled by the notion that, because geek culture is now taken seriously by the mainstream media, their demands should be respected damn the consequences. (Mendelson 2013, 3)

What strikes me about this passage is that the article not only implies that the demands of

entitled fans should be dismissed by the industry; what it deems "annoying" is the suggestion that they are even "respected." What this illustrates is that, as the fan entitlement discourse developed, it became fundamentally loaded with a real sense of hostility towards certain fan behaviors and attitudes. The fan entitlement discourse was also beginning to paint with an increasingly broad brush: even fans who launched online petitions (a harmless and peaceful way of making their wishes heard) are described in extreme language, as "freaking out" and "throwing online temper tantrums" (1).

A year later, in 2014, *Birth.Movies.Death.* published an article on fan entitlement around the release of the much-anticipated video game *Mass Effect 3.* The article's subtitle proclaimed that "fan entitlement could now power a starship," both a nod to the presumed scale of the issue and a reference to the game, which is set in space (Todd 2014). While the game was commercially successful, a lot of fans were unhappy with the story. The article specifically addresses one fan's 500-plus-page rewrite to address the problems as he saw them in a document titled "Mass Effect 3 Vindication" (ME3V). The article offers this document as an example of fan entitlement, and situates it within the "bubbling cauldron of toxic internet rage" in the wake of the game's release (1). ME3V's author prefaced the document as his take on the original creator's artistic vision: "just because something is someone's true art, that doesn't mean it should be held immune to scrutiny and feelings of discontent from the public. [...] Well, *my* artistic vision contains a lot of stuff" (Todd 2014, 2, emphasis in original). Arguably, ME3V is fan fiction. At 500+ pages, it is certainly lengthy, though not even unusually so in the realm of fan fiction. However, the author does not position it as fan fiction; he presents it as both an artistic re-imaging and a critique. As such, his efforts are condemned as "a disquieting hubris" (2). The article posits that, "There's a sense that the opinions of fans mean more than those of

'journalists' or even the creators." (2) Entitlement, in this view, is about authority and hierarchy: Who has the authority to create art? To make judgments about it? To transform it? Entitled fans act above their station. The article continues, "When a normal person dislikes a piece of art, they move on, content to leave it as simply something they didn't like. They don't remake the thing in their own image and send it to the artists bearing a Post-It saying 'Hey, I fixed your sucky work!'" (3). Entitlement then, is also abnormal, excessive, and obsessive. As such, we start to see the fan entitlement discourse draw on the kinds of stigma that fans thought they had left behind — fans are weird, crazy, and potentially dangerous.

Why Now? Socio-Techno-Cultural Trends

The emergence of the fan entitlement discourse through the 2010s can be understood in relation to a number of wider trends in society, culture, and technology. In this section, I will situate the discourse within the development of "Internet culture," the rise of toxic fandom, and the belief that we are in the midst of "culture wars."

Internet Culture

Internet culture encompasses both the structures and conventions of how we interact online and the ways that the online world affects our sense of self and identity. A key feature of Internet culture is anonymity. The colloquial understanding is that this anonymity allows some users to completely disregard social conventions and civility and create an Internet culture that is hostile and combative. However, underpinning anonymity are more complex questions about the opportunity to separate or the challenge to reconcile one's "real" and "virtual" selves. In her

foundational book *Life on Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*, sociologist Sherry Turkle (1995) examines both how our perception of computers changes our understanding of what it means to be "alive" and "intelligent" and, more importantly for this project, how internet communities shape a sense of a real and a virtual self. Turkle bases her claims on personal encounters with online communities as a participant-observer, as well as on interviews with computer and Internet users at various levels of engagement. Her primary object of analysis was a type of online community called a multi-user dungeon or domain ("MUD"). Part chat room, part role-playing game, MUDs place users in an alternate reality (this reality could range from a virtual bar or coffee shop to an elaborate fantasy or science-fiction world) and allow them to interact (like a chat room), expand the reality, and work to achieve certain objectives (like a game). Turkle (1995, 12) emphasizes the social aspect of MUDs and centers her analysis on the hypothesis that, "The anonymity of MUDs…gives people the chance to express multiple and often unexplored aspects of the self, to play with their identity and to try out new ones." This anonymity is a double-edged sword in reality: On the one hand, it disconnects people from their "real" self and gives them the freedom to act in ways that are perhaps less civil or respectful as they would in real life. On the other hand, online anonymity can be therapeutic and provide a safe space to experiment and trial different kinds of identities. In fact, Turkle's work primarily focuses on the complex ways that a virtual identity enables "inventing ourselves as we go along" (10).

The online self can also be a way to escape from an unfulfilling life, insofar as virtual life not only becomes more real, but preferred. Turkle (1995, 239) writes about several young college graduates who saw their real life as "boring and without prospects" and who, in response, created virtual lives that are "rich and filled with promise." These virtual lives were intellectually

challenging, allowing them to interact with like-minded people, discuss politics, and pursue the goals that they cannot reach in real life. MUDs provided a social life that allowed them to "feel most like themselves" (240). As such, their online identity became a form of resistance. These young, unfulfilled college graduates felt alienated in real life. Economic downturns meant that they were denied the career opportunities their college education should have afforded them. They felt they have no political voice. MUDs allowed them to be heard, to meet their goals, and to feel empowered. In the years since Turkle's work, when our lives have moved increasingly online, there is perhaps less distinction between our real and online identities. Turkle (1995, 260) ultimately concludes that, "the many manifestations of multiplicity in our culture, including the adoption of online personae, are contributing to a general reconsideration of traditional, unitary notions of identity." In other words, computers are expanding the set of cultural practices by which we define ourselves, and, in doing so, they are redefining our understanding of identity.

In addition to expanding the way we invent, test, and experience our sense of identity, Internet culture has also changed the way we interact with others (and how we expect them to interact with us). As Jenkins (2006) has repeatedly argued, the Internet has facilitated "participatory culture" based on online communities and the ways we interact with and contribute to those communities. While fans may have been the "early adopters" of these behaviors and practices, they have widely changed the way we interact with others, with media products, and with media producers (Jenkins 2006, 15). For example, one prominent way that the evolution of the Internet, and Internet culture, has been talked about is from Web 1.0 to 2.0 and on. Web 1.0 refers to the "readable" phase, where interaction between sites and users was minimal and generally one-way. Web 2.0 is the "writable" phrase with increasingly interactive sites that enable participation, collaboration, and production; for example, Facebook, Twitter,

YouTube, or Wikipedia.

Much of contemporary online life is now lived through various forms of interactive community, which tend to establish their own community norms and standards and, consequently, shape how we interact with each other online. One important trend in fan culture is the way that technology has fundamentally altered the process of becoming part of a fan community. Coppa (2006) and Bacon-Smith (1992) both emphasize that, in pre-Internet fan culture, new fans were either brought into the community by established members—through an informal process of induction or mentoring—or by attending a convention. Both processes instilled a strong sense of history and continuity. Online fan culture, on the other hand, enables people to stumble on existing fandoms, join anonymously, or just read a public archive without interacting (Coppa 2006, 54). As such, online fan culture is often disconnected from the history and traditions of pre-Internet fan culture. In some ways, newer fans may not be part of a "culture" at all, at least not in the way that first wave fan studies scholars have understood the term. While pre-Internet fan culture was a subculture and an "alternative social community" (Jenkins 1992, 280), the Internet precipitated fandom's "postmodern moment" where "the rules are 'there ain't no rules' and traditions are made to be broken" (Coppa 2006, 57). Taken together, the landscape of post-Internet fan culture is ”something that older fans may barely recognize" (57).

Of course, Internet culture is also full of people who disrupt and antagonize online groups (not just fan communities) for their own amusement. The practice is known as "trolling" and has attracted increasing attention in fan studies. Suzanne Scott (2018, 45) in her article "Towards a Theory of Producer/Fan Trolling," defines trolling as "calculated efforts to upset and provoke an emotional response from a targeted group." She explains that trolling is rooted in a desire to

cause disruption and trigger conflict in an online group, usually for the purpose of the troll's amusement (144). Scott argues that trolling is often "predicated on a sort of performative detachment," thus distinguishing it from authentic displays of passion, anger, or disagreement (144). However, Scott cautions that many displays of anti-social online behavior (regardless of their political motivation) are being dismissed as trolling, and that this undermines productive conversation about the roots of toxicity within the fan world: "It is worth acknowledging how frequently instances of fan toxicity are written off or summarily dismissed as an exercise in trolling rather than genuine displays of fannish discontent and/or bigotry" (145). Scott's point implies that it is often difficult to distinguish between authentic anger, which may draw attention to important issues, hate speech, which should be addressed as both a systematic and specific problem, and trolling, which is a performance intended to disrupt and garner attention. By discursively marking certain interactions as trolling they can be more easily dismissed and larger conversations about potentially uncomfortable issues can be avoided.

Toxic Fandom

Recent years have also seen a sharp rise in discussions around "toxic" behavior within fandom, to the extent that it has arguably become a defining feature of contemporary fan culture and a key concern for many who are active or interested in fandom, particularly online. Essentially, it refers to negative, aggressive, anti-social, and threatening behavior within fandom. In its most extreme incarnation, toxic fandom extends to bullying, harassment, verbal abuse, and threats of physical or reputational harm. In popular use, "toxic fandom" has become shorthand for fan behavior that has gone too far and overstepped the bounds of appropriate and civil discourse within a fandom, a specific online fan community, or fan culture in general. A Google

trends search reveals that, similar to the trajectory of discourse around "fan entitlement," the term "toxic fandom" saw a spike in searches from late 2015 onwards. While the behaviors that make fandom toxic are not new or unique to fandom, the increasing use of the phrase in discourse by and about fans is of great interest. Etymologically, "toxic fandom" is likely a derivative of the more established concept of "toxic masculinity," which comes out of the fields of gender studies and psychology to describe harmfully masculine behaviors (both socially and personally) rooted in patriarchal values of male dominance (Proctor et al., "On toxic fan practices: A round-table" 2018, 9). Gamergate, a controversy that erupted within video game fandom in 2014, is considered a key crossover point in the broader conversation about toxic fandom. Gamergate began as a Twitter hashtag and exploded into a "hashtag movement," driven by predominantly male video game fans who attempted to discredit female gaming journalists and escalating into "a campaign of systematic harassment of female and minority game developers, journalists, and critics and their allies" (Massanari 2017, 330). Because of the sexist and discriminatory nature of the controversy, Gamergate sparked a lively discussion around toxic masculinity in video game fan culture—a discussion that eventually became a broader conversation about the presence and growth of toxic behaviors within fan culture in general. Mainstream use of the term "toxic fandom" likely began in November 2015, when a fan artist inspired by characters from the animated series *Steven Universe* was bullied to the point of attempting suicide. Both professional and amateur reporting on the incident began to feature the word "toxic" to describe the fandom, picking up on usage of the term within the fan community (Romano 2015).

The May 2018 issue of *Participations: Journal of Audience & Reception Studies* devoted a special themed section to examining and theorizing toxic fan practices, featuring 14 articles

and a round-table discussion. Introducing the section, editors William Proctor and Bridget Kies (2018, 135) frame the discussion around toxic fan practices in several key ways: First, while negativity and even harassment in online spaces is certainly not new, labeling certain behaviors and discourses as toxic, specifically within fandom, is a relatively new phenomenon. The task, they argue, is to theorize and understand how and why this labeling is happening, instead of merely chronicling and enumerating toxic fan practices. Second, the authors explicitly link toxicity in fandom to the current "socio-political climate," writing that, "we seek to understand how these toxic practices are instantiations of larger political and cultural polarization" (Proctor and Kies 2018, 133). This represents what can be termed the "culture wars" perspective, which places toxic fan practices within the larger framework of political and cultural conflicts.

Matt Hills (2017, 106) has attempted to theorize the political dimension of toxic fandom by drawing on Pierre Bordeau's concept of "doxa," or ways of thinking and acting that are "taken for granted as self-evident in any given field." Hills argues that toxic fandom is a result of destabilized doxa within particular fan communities, especially as it pertains to a perceived loss of fan cultural capital (107). Hills notes that, while the tactics used by some fans to defend their fan cultural capital may indeed be toxic, the perceived threat to doxa is accurate, as "dominant groups reactively fight to maintain their now-questioned dominance in a dramatically reconfigured field (whilst previously dominated groups are given a greater voice in just such a field)" (107). Furthermore, toxic fan practices may in themselves provide a route to "media meta-capital" as media attention becomes "a kind of prize for such activism, given that it moves its politicised stance out of restricted subcultural/fan-cultural circulation and into the domain of mainstream debate" (113). Hills sees toxic fandom as necessarily bound up with questions of

"fan boundaries and authenticities," especially as they relate to fan cultural capital (122). While fandom is not intrinsically toxic, he does suggest that, "it is always doxic in specific ways that tend to exclude certain kinds of fan" (111).

One of the ways that fandom is becoming increasingly "doxic" is through appeals to nostalgia. Discourse around toxic fandom (and Internet culture) often evokes a sense that the past was simpler, better, and less complicated. However, appeals to nostalgia often mask an undercurrent of privilege. Anastasia Salter and Bridget Blodgett (2017, 498), in their book *Toxic Geek Masculinity in Media*, explain that "toxic geekdom" stems from a "desire to 'save' the past: to preserve geek cultural spaces for participants who share [the] same set of values." Specifically, the nostalgic values that Salter and Blodgett refer to are rooted in the types of stories that have historically been popular in genre texts, about "a world in which young white men outside the traditional definitions of masculinity are victims turned heroes, entitled to their rewards" (499). Salter and Blodgett argue that, while this belief is a "constructed fantasy," the resulting practices of exclusion and boundary policing are very real and very toxic. Combined with the triumphal narrative, "geeks are now powerful enough as a subculture to make victims out of others, particularly those perceived as lacking the credential earned through suffering that makes one a 'true' outsider geek" (43). This boundary policing behavior seeks to discipline and exclude anyone who challenges the nostalgic fantasy of geek culture:

> If uncritical appreciation of the different geek media is retrospectively considered to be the atmosphere of geekdom, then feminists, social justice warriors, and anyone different becomes and easy target for painting as the bad guy. Women and minority groups can't be part of these communities because even thinking about them as participants breaks the image of the geek as solitary, disliked male.

(Salter and Blodgett 2017, 518).

Suzanne Scott (2019, 64) makes a similar argument in her book *Fake Geek Girls*, pointing out that articles "expressing growing concern about increasingly 'entitled' or 'toxic' fan communities" began to appear conspicuously, and, as Scott argues, not coincidentally, in time with the "supposed 'invasion' of female fans." Geeks may have inherited the earth but, more often than not, these geeks were fanboys, not fangirls. Tellingly, Scott points out that "fanboy" was added to the Merriam-Webster dictionary in 2008 while "fangirl" was not added for several years, thus contributing to a trend of normalizing and celebrating "the fanboy's growing cultural influence and demographic might," while fostering "misogyny and gendered boundary-policing practices within fan culture" by omitting fangirls and other minorities (66).

Discourses around fan entitlement have only deepened the fault lines between privileged fanboys and the "invasion" of unwanted fan demographics. Scott (2019, 71) writes, "minority fans are paradoxically disempowered and positioned as 'entitled' within this cycle by those who are legitimately empowered by the convergence culture industry." She points out "many of Faraci's examples of entitled and aggressive fans were male, but because he invoked the deranged fangirl protagonist of Stephen King's *Misery* from the outset, his critique of fan entitlement was inextricably linked to feminized fan 'excess'" (71). More troubling, much of the fan entitlement discourse equates activist efforts for more diversity with toxic fan practices and roots both in delusions of ownership and overzealous expressions of fan power. Such narratives, Scott argues, "both dramatically overstate the producorial power of fans within the convergence culture industry and dangerously collapse all forms of fannish criticism into one undifferentiated mass that does not adequately consider where the criticisms might be stemming from" (71). By taking aim at the tools that enable fans in non-privileged subject positions to interpret and

transform media texts to suit their needs, the fan entitlement discourse effectively demonizes those fans who have themselves long been the targets of toxic fan practices. Scott characterizes Faraci's article similarly, noting that "the bulk of his piece is spent critiquing the practices most associated with fangirls and fans of color in order to defend those who need the least defending: overwhelmingly white, straight, male media producers" (72).

Culture Wars

The "culture wars" perspective places the fan entitlement discourse within the larger framework of political and cultural conflicts, especially around identity politics (Proctor and Kies 2018, 135). Writing in "On Toxic Fan Practices and the New Culture Wars," Proctor and Kies (2018, 127) describe these "new culture wars" in "bald binary terms as a conflict between the 'politically correct' pro-diversity crowd — commonly referred to as 'social justice warriors' (SJWs) — and members of the so-called 'alt-right' hell-bent on hijacking progressive shifts in popular culture." The new culture wars, which are primarily carried out in online spaces, are the "post-millennial spin" to similar clashes in the 1980s and 90s, which emerged as a backlash against the gains achieved by 1960s counterculture (127). Similarly, the current culture wars are arguably a backlash against the socio-political gains of the Obama era (2008-2016), such as greater representation for minority groups, increased tolerance and acceptance of alternative lifestyles, and the legalization of gay marriage. In *Everybody Lies*, data scientist Seth Stephens-Davidowitz (2017) studied Google search data to try and discover how people's anonymous search habits may have predicted Donald Trump's win in the 2016 presidential election. He had already been working on tracking the location and volume of racist searches during the eight years of Obama's presidency, building a "map of racism" that suggested a significant and

growing underbelly of racist sentiment in locations that seemed, in many other ways, progressive (Stephens-Davidowitz 2017, 8). While the reasons for Trump's electoral victory are still being debated today, Stephens-Davidowitz points to the “secret racism” his research had uncovered: “The Google searches revealed a darkness and hatred among a meaningful number of Americans that pundits, for many years, missed. … It revealed a nasty, scary, and widespread rage that was waiting for a candidate to give voice to it” (11). The current culture wars then, may be an after-effect of a period of social progress. The proverbial genie is out of the bottle and those with racist, sexist, or otherwise discriminatory sentiments feel emboldened to speak out and to attempt to set right what, in their minds, the Obama era had corrupted. "Make America Great Again," Trump's election slogan, is a direct appeal to nostalgia and a fantasy of the good old days, when life was simple and progressivism was not threatening the long-established social order.

However, Hills (2017, 116) cautions that a culture wars frame — precisely because it is called a “war” — requires either taking sides or condemning both sides equally. He explains,

> The ‘plague on both their houses’ discursive move lends far too much credence to ‘culture war’, implying that both sides in such a ‘war’ must be equally morally suspect. It also fails to consider who is engaging in potentially toxic (fan) practices, and whether this involves ‘punching up’ at those who are more culturally powerful or ‘punching down’ at oppressed and marginalized social groups. (Hills 2017, 116)

Specifically, Hills wants to attend to the ways that toxic fan practices are a result of destabilized doxa and a loss of cultural capital. That is, “toxic (fan) practices operate in relation both to

unsettled privilege and struggles for cultural recognition" (123). Bourdieu (1984) described the types of capital as economic, social, and cultural. The first two forms of capital describe command over resources, either economic or social, in terms of money, property, or valuable relationships. Cultural capital, on the other hand, describes status gained through education and cultural knowledge. Fiske (1992, 33) applied Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital to fan culture and argued that, "fandom offers ways of filling cultural lack" by providing an opportunity to accumulate "fan cultural capital." He continued, "Fan cultural capital, like the official, lies in the appreciation and knowledge of texts, performers and events" (42). Fan cultural capital is particularly significant in Fiske's view because it is a route to "social prestige and self-esteem" for those who do not otherwise have easy access to other types of capital, particularly "those disempowered by any combination of gender, age, class and race" (33, 30). As such, developing fan cultural capital becomes a source of power and status. Ironically, as fandom itself becomes popular, the currency of fan cultural capital is at risk of being devalued. One way to prevent this is to redefine and re-limit the boundaries of appropriate fandom, as we increasingly see in the fan entitlement discourse.

Why Now? Catalysts for the Fan Entitlement Discourse

In addition to the wider socio-techno-cultural trends that situate the emergence of the fan entitlement discourse, there were a number of specific "catalysts" in the pop cultural landscape that effectively launched the fan entitlement discourse into prominence in 2016. These comprise a spate of high-profile controversies and conflicts within fandom, notably fan action around the films *Ghostbusters* (2016) and *Frozen* (2013) and Marvel Comic's *Steve Rogers: Captain America* (2016) that were cited as prime examples of fan entitlement. Taken together, these three

examples present fan entitlement as a wide-ranging issue that reaches across the political spectrum and ultimately becomes a way of disciplining the beliefs and behaviors that have "broken" fandom.

Ghostbusters

The original 1984 *Ghostbusters* film remains one of the most-beloved pieces of genre entertainment, and an important cultural touchstone for those who came of age in the 80s. Directed by Ivan Reitman, the fantasy comedy follows three eccentric paranormal psychologists (played by actors Bill Murray, Dan Akroyd, and Harold Ramis) as they hunt ghosts in New York City. The film was commercially successful, earning almost $300 million in box office receipts and becoming the second highest-grossing film of 1984 (Ellis-Peterson 2015, par. 6). The film inspired a sequel, *Ghostbusters II* released in 1989, which featured the same cast and was generally well received, though it did not perform as well as the original. The original film had significant cultural impact, propelling special effects heavy filmmaking into the mainstream and popularizing its unique blend of fantasy and comedy. In 2015, the Library of Congress added the film to its National Film Registry, marking it as "culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant" ("2015 National Film Registry" par. 1). The announcement describes *Ghostbusters* as "one of the most popular, quotable films from the past three decades and a touchstone of cultural reference" (ibid, par. 18).

In January 2015, comedy writer and director Paul Feig — who had worked on a number of hit films including *Bridesmaids* (2011), *The Heat* (2013), and *Spy* (2015) — posted on Twitter that he was writing and directing a *Ghostbusters* reboot with an all-female cast (Ellis-Peterson 2015, par. 5). Before Feig came on board, the project was originally envisioned as a sequel,

catching up with the characters 30 years on. However, when members of the original cast declined or were unable to participate, the project was passed on to Feig, who decided to re-imagine the story with a new cast (par. 7). Feig ultimately cast Melissa McCarthy, Kristin Wiig, Kate McKinnon, and Leslie Jones, all of whom are accomplished comedy actresses. McCarthy and Wiig had previously starred in a number of Feig's films, while Wiig, McKinnon, and Jones were long-time cast members of *Saturday Night Live*. The announcement initially drew praise for its creativity, diversity, and "its defiance of Hollywood stereotypes, with three of the four actors aged over 40" (par. 3). However, the reboot was not universally welcomed. Actor Ernie Hudson, who had played a supporting role in the 1984 film, asked, "If it has nothing to do with the other two movies, and it's all female, then why are you calling it *Ghostbusters*? … I hope that if they go that way at least they'll be funny, and if they're not funny at least hopefully it'll be sexy" (par. 8). Hudson added, "But all-female I think would be a bad idea. I don't think the fans want to see that" (par. 9).

As it turned out, a very vocal contingent of fans shared this sentiment. In a cultural landscape that is becoming increasingly rife with reboots and re-imaginings, the idea of an all-female version of *Ghostbusters* struck a nerve. It was not even a concern that the film would not be good, or funny, or even sexy, as Hudson hoped. It was the film's mere existence that fueled fan outrage many months before the film was released or anything was even known about it, beyond the cast and the concept. The rallying cry for discontented fans became that the *Ghostbusters* reboot was threatening to "ruin their childhood." Speaking about the fan backlash a few months after the announcement, Feig explains, "The biggest thing I've heard for the last four months is, 'Thanks for ruining my childhood.' It's going to be on my tombstone when I die" (Child 2015, par. 4). The battle lines were further drawn when Feig characterized the criticism as

"some of the most vile, misogynistic shit I've ever seen in my life" (par. 3).

As the film's release date in July 2016 approached and more marketing and promotional materials were released, the film's detractors grew louder. In May 2016, *The Atlantic* noted that, "things reached a fever pitch" (Sims 2016, par. 2). The film's trailer became the most "disliked" video of all time on YouTube, with over 800,000 down-votes, "indicating an organized campaign against the film" (par. 3). While the comments and fan reviews claimed that they were taking issue with the film's weak marketing or "the arrogance of remaking a classic," taken en masse, it became clear that that the *Ghostbusters* remake "has become a rallying cause for a swathe of fans who are beginning to resemble a movement not unlike the Gamergate nightmare that continues to plague the world of video games" (par. 4). When the new *Ghostbusters* film was subsequently evoked as part of the fan entitlement discourse, it tended to be cited as an example of a sexist backlash against greater diversity in entertainment. What made this reaction "entitled" is the sense that "certain fans of *Ghostbusters* … feel particularly possessive of that film" and based their objections not on the actual quality of the finished product but on the "presumption that [they] deserve to want to see it—that the movie is letting [them] down by not following his preferred template for a new *Ghostbusters* movie" (Hassenger 2016, par. 5).

Give Elsa a Girlfriend

The 2013 Disney film *Frozen* was a massive success for the company, becoming the highest grossing animated film to date and being heralded as an instant classic with extra "girl power" (Zuckerman 2013, par. 5). The story follows two princesses, Elsa and Anna, who are orphaned at a young age. Elsa is about to be crowned queen but she harbors a frightening secret that has heretofore kept her isolated from family and friends: her touch can turn things to ice.

The film follows Elsa coming to terms with her power and, ultimately, healing the rift with her sister. Audiences and critics responded to the film's positive message of "learning to embrace your own power" in a way that was "completely female-positive" (Zuckerman 2013, par. 5). It also became a significant point of note that Elsa ended the film without being saved by or betrothed to the ubiquitous Disney prince. On May 1, 2016, this simple fact inspired Twitter user Alexis Isabel to post a series of tweets, suggesting that Elsa should (or might) be a lesbian: "I hope Disney makes Elsa a lesbian princess imagine how iconic that would be." As *The Washington Post* recounts it, "You can see the 17-year-old's Aha! moment mounting, tweet by viral tweet" (Mettler 2016). The Aha! moment that kicked off a hash tag trend materializes in the final tweet: "Everyone tweet @Disney to #GiveElsaAGirlfriend."

Thousands of users liked, re-tweeted, and responded to the idea that Disney could "Give Elsa a Girlfriend." Users shared their own excitement about the possibility of seeing themselves represented on screen, writing heartfelt messages like, "A gay Disney princess would have helped me feel so much more normal when I was younger" and "To see the same story over and over about a girl and her prince charming, it's repetitive, and it leaves so many people out and makes so many people feel alone" (Mettler 2016, par. 3-4). The story was further propelled into public conversation because it coincided with the release of the GLAAD report on LGTBQ+ representation in Hollywood films. GLAAD analyzed the 126 major studio films released in 2015 and found that only 22 included characters identified as gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender, with those characters being disproportionately white and male (Mettler 2016, par. 8). To boot, "GLAAD's report notes that of the seven studios tracked over the past four years, the Mouse House has the weakest history of LGBT inclusion in its films" (Cowan 2016, par. 8). There was clearly a need for more diversity, and a lesbian Disney princess would certainly fit the

bill. However, “Give Elsa a Girlfriend” inspired concern that Disney films are not appropriate forums for LGBT content, or would confuse children. There were attempts to get “don’t ruin the innocence of Disney” trending as a counter hash tag, but, on the whole, the discourse around “Give Elsa a Girlfriend” maintained a generally positive tone, focusing on inclusion and celebration of diversity (Cowan 2016, par. 12).

That is, until “Give Elsa a Girlfriend” was cited as an example of fan entitlement. Citing “Give Elsa a Girlfriend” as an instance of fan entitlement is particularly interesting when it is mentioned in the same breath as the backlash against *Ghostbusters.* Whereas the entitlement around *Ghostbusters* had distinct sexist undertones, “Give Elsa a Girlfriend” promotes diversity, representation, and inclusivity. Calling this type of fan activism equally “entitled” is arguably an attempt to separate the fan entitlement discourse from identity politics, and instead present it as a fundamental issue of “broken” fandom: “While the intentions come from a better, more inclusive place, insisting that Elsa should be given a girlfriend by popular demand is not so different than insisting that ghostbusting ought to be a male profession” (Hassenger 2016, par. 7).

Steve Rogers: Captain America

Captain America is one of the most recognizable names in the comic book superhero pantheon. Created by Joe Simon and Jack Kirby for Timely Comics (a precursor of Marvel Comics), Captain America first appeared in a story bearing his own name in March 1941. The character’s origin story sees the scrappy but unqualified Steve Rogers be transformed into a scientifically enhanced super soldier with an unwavering moral commitment to fight for justice. Captain America premiered during World War II and was often portrayed as fighting Axis powers (often the fictional Nazi-affiliated organization, Hydra) and was an obviously patriotic

figure. When Marvel released the first issue of its new series, *Steve Rogers: Captain America,* on May 25, 2016, it came as an unpleasant surprise to long-time fans of the character when the issue's final frame (Fig. 2) has Captain America turning to the reader and saying, "Hail Hydra," thus revealing himself to be a double agent, secretly working for the enemy (Barnett 2016).

Fig. 2. An image from Steve Rogers: Captain America *#1.*

While the reveal was certainly designed to be shocking and perhaps even upsetting, the fan backlash was immediate and extreme: #SayNoToHydraCap began trending on Twitter, fans started petitions to implore Marvel to scrap the storyline, and the story's head writer, Nick Spender, was flooded with Twitter messages: "I can't respond to 9,000 tweets per second, but if I could, I would say I admire your passion" (Barnett 2016, par. 5).

Fans took issue with the fact that Captain America was created as an anti-fascist figure, "his very first appearance in 1941 depicted him socking it to Adolf Hitler, after all" (Barnett

2016, par. 6). They were also upset that having Captain America become a de-facto Nazi was disrespecting the character's creators, who were both Jewish. However, what set this incident apart was the extent to which some fans felt personally betrayed by the storytelling choices — and how extremely they reacted. As Faraci (2016) represents the reaction, the Internet "exploded in … fan outrage," as they "started calling [the comic book writers and Marvel executives] anti-Semites … and then the death threats came in" (Faraci par. 7). Death threats pop up occasionally online when passionate people voice their opinions online. They are usually dismissed as trolling and rarely become the defining feature of a fan/industry clash. However, Faraci's (2016) article reprinted, in its entirety, one particularly chilling death threat, which was posted on Tumblr and directed towards a Marvel executive. The man who penned this particular death threat explained that he had built his entire moral code on Captain America, and the new storyline had destroyed that code. "Is it bullshit?," asks Faraci. "Maybe. Trolls gotta troll. But man, there is something in there that just rings true to me. I recognize the broken nature of modern fandom in that death threat" (par. 9).

Fan Entitlement or Fan Empowerment?

The stage was set for the fan entitlement discourse to bubble over. It kicked off with an article published on *The AV Club* website on May 25, 2016 by Jesse Hassenger, titled "*Ghostbusters*, *Frozen*, and the Strange Entitlement of Fan Culture." Broadly defining entitlement as "ridiculous fan demands," the article cites *Ghostbusters* and *Frozen* as two examples of such entitlement, whereby fans expect media products to cater to their whims and desires (Hassenger 2016, par. 3). Equating fan behavior around the *Ghostbusters* remake and the "Give Elsa a Girlfriend" campaign seems difficult to reconcile at first glance. From the point of

view of identity politics they are diametrically opposed: One appears to be fueled by a desire to exclude new ideas and individuals in the name of nostalgia while the other seems to stem from a progressive call for greater inclusivity and representation. For Hassenger, however, the backlash against *Ghostbusters* and the call to "Give Elsa a Girlfriend" are incarnations of the same sense of entitlement that is becoming endemic in contemporary fandom: the "fannish delusion" which "threatens to turn creative endeavors into clunky Choose Your Own Adventures" (par. 4). Fan entitlement, then, is not just about individual fan behavior, it is a much more endemic problem, stemming from "the fanification of everything" (par. 5). What Hassenger means by this "fanification" is closely related to the triumphal narrative and the evolution of the fan/industry relationship from passive to active audiences and, increasingly, towards real opportunities for fan influence. Such influence is often described as "fan service" — what Ross (2008) might call an organic invitation to participate, i.e. including something in the story that is intended to please or otherwise address the fans. However, Hassenger (2016, par. 6) believes that "fan service has gotten almost too good of a rap as it has worked its way into mainstream film." In other words, while it may have initially seemed like a good idea to give fans what they want, it has now created a monster, an epidemic of entitled fans who have an inflated sense of their own power and descend into tantrums and "whining" when they do not get their way (par. 2). It is this link between power and entitlement that is particularly interesting. As Hassenger (2016, par. 8) explains,

> artists, especially genre artists, like to tell fans that they're the lifeblood of the operation—that they're the reason these movies get made, that these shows stay on the air, that these books keep getting published. … [This] provides a kind of false empowerment, which in turn can lead to a very real sense of entitlement.

Why is this “false empowerment”? Part of the answer lies in the very real power dynamics I have already discussed. Fans may have increased importance and value, but they still have very little real power — power to decide, power of ownership, power to define. Even in Hassenger’s (2016, par. 8) characterization, fan entitlement is initiated by the industry; it is creators telling fans that they matter, even though this is usually “PR line” or in the name of “fan service.” Is it the fans’ fault that they believed the line? Apparently so. What we increasingly see in the fan entitlement discourse, then, is an attempt to right the balance of power, to bring fans back in line, and to re-assert the authority of media creators. “Fans don’t need to get what they want, and much of the time, they probably shouldn’t,” writes Hassenger (par. 10). Specifically, “the more often movies can assert themselves as creative works made by directors and writers and editors and actors and cinematographers, not in service of fans—the better” (par. 11). Fan empowerment is false, then, because it is wrong.

Devin Faraci’s article “Fandom is Broken” burst on the scene a short few days later, on May 30, 2016. He takes forward Hassenger’s focus on fan entitlement as resulting from a power imbalance in the contemporary fan/industry relationship. Faraci (2016, par. 5) writes that, while there has always been “a push and a pull between creator and fan” it has historically been positive, with fans mostly discussing and “defending the stuff they love.” However, as the Internet has brought fans and creators closer together on a variety of platforms, fans have become increasingly involved in “trying to shape” their fan objects (par. 5). Faraci laments that fans today are treating media products not as art but as commercial products that should be tailored to their likes and dislikes, “like ordering at a restaurant - hold the pickles, please, and can I substitute kale for the lettuce?” (par. 6). For Faraci, social media has only amplified the problem of fan entitlement. He writes, “In a lot of ways fandom has always been a powder keg

just waiting for the right moment to explode, and that moment is the ubiquity of social media" (par. 13). While social media has given fans immediate access to those who create the things they love, it has also given "immediate access to spew any kind of hate at almost anyone instantly" (par. 10). The possibility of fan feedback was supposed to be a blessing for creators who have historically worked in relative isolation, but now they work in "some kind of a chamber of screams, where people can and do voice their immediate and often personal displeasure directly and horribly" (par. 11). Faraci also blames the corporatization of storytelling as a key factor in facilitating fan entitlement. As individual creators become subsumed into the production processes of media conglomerates, fans become increasingly protective and possessive of the stories they love. He argues, "the corporatized nature of the stories we consume has led fans - already having a hard time understanding the idea of an artist's vision - to assume almost total ownership of the stuff they love" (par. 15). Art, in Faraci's view, has truly become commerce. And fans, in turn, have become the ultimate (entitled) consumers; the customers who are "always right."

Chapter 4: Themes in the Fan Entitlement Discourse

The following chapters will analyze the discursive event around Faraci's "Fandom is Broken" article, including 2,350 comments and 40 response pieces. While I take a fan world approach and, therefore, do not claim that the comments, articles, and blog posts I am citing in this analysis are exclusively from "actual fans," it is my intention to describe this discourse from the inside out and not from the outside in. That is, there are many instances and platforms where the industry and other dominant cultural forces tell fans who they are and who they should be — from the panels at various fan conventions where writers, producers, and actors sit on stages in front of thousands of fans and tell them how important they are, to the diegetic, fictional representations of fans that nevertheless serve the dual purpose of modeling and disciplining good and bad fandom. These are straightforward examples of the industry's continuing power to define. However, the power to define also works more subtly through discourses like the one around fan entitlement. I take the conversations that are part of the "Fandom is Broken" discursive event as happening "inside" fandom. This perspective redirects the focus from seeing the fan entitlement discourse as an instance of a direct fan/industry power struggle to understanding it as part of a more complex negotiation of power and status wherein industry-dominant power structures are also internalized, policed, and maintained by fans themselves. This chapter will discuss themes that emerged from my analysis of the fan entitlement discourse and which address core quetions about the balance of power in the fan/industry relationship: Who owns the fan object? Who controls its meanings and uses? Who can make judgments about it, and how? First, the theme of authorship addresses the fan's relationship to the text and to the

author/creator, specifically the argument that entitled fans do not sufficiently respect the sacredness of the text and the authority of its creator(s). Second, the theme of criticism concerns the features of valid fan feedback and the point at which these cross the line into entitlement, while also considering how these discussions fit into larger issues of power and expertise. Finally, the theme of ownership asks the question of whether fans expressing emotional ownership of the fan object are appropriate, and how the fan entitlement discourse uses ideas like “possessiveness” and “symbiosis” to grapple with this question.

Authorship: In the Beginning, There Were the Creators

Authorship is an important concept within the fan entitlement discourse insofar as that entitlement is defined and deployed in a way that privileges authorship and constructs acceptable fandom as rooted in deference and appreciation. Faraci (2016, par. 2) writes,

> The entitlement of modern fan culture [is] all about demanding what you want out of the story, believing that the story should be tailored to your individual needs, not the expression of the creators. These fans are treating stories like ordering at a restaurant - hold the pickles, please, and can I substitute kale for the lettuce? But that isn't how art works, and that shouldn't be how art lovers react to art. They shouldn't be bringing a bucket of paint to the museum to take out some of the blue from those Picassos, you know?

Notably, this quotation contains the idea that “modern fan culture” should serve the “expression of the creators” over the needs and interpretations of the fans. This view not only shields creators from criticism, it also implies that good fans, as “art lovers,” should react to media texts in

particular and approved ways. Faraci implies that the proper way to read a media text is to uncover and appreciate the creator's vision, thus privileging authorial intent and positioning media creators as the source of meaning. The idea that meaning is primarily contained within the text, and is thus a product of the creator's intentions and artistic expression, predates most contemporary notions of audience activity and agency. A response article at *The Huffington Post,* titled "Are Fans Getting Too Entitled? Nah," humorously sums up this version of authorial control:

> In the beginning, there were the creators. The creators made movies, TV shows, and even actual comic books and novels. Audiences paid money and silently watched the movies, read the books. … The creators rested in the comfortable knowledge that they'd produced a piece of art. (Fallon 2016, par. 1)

Fallon casts media creators in the role of deity, and illustrates how this perspective places audiences in the role of passive and grateful recipients, paying money and watching "silently." The idea of creator-as-deity effectively seeks to close the media text to unwanted interpretation and usage, and to limit audience reaction to what is desirable and beneficial to the creators. Another response piece posted on a personal Tumblr fan blog expresses why attempts to control audience reaction are problematic:

> The problem is when people want to control the reaction to art. Whether it is the original artist themselves, or the company making money from the art, when people are told that they are responding wrong, stop, behave the way I want you do [sic] then things get problematic. … When we stifle creative reactions to art, we are stifling art. (agentfreewill 2016, par. 3)

The blog post is aptly titled “Creative Control” and puts forth the argument that attempting to “control the reaction to art” by limiting it according to the creator’s sense of correctness and propriety is “problematic.” Specifically, agentfreewill argues that a wide range of textual interpretations and transformations are, in themselves, forms of artistic expression that should be valued equally to the original text. This perspective echoes Barthes when he argues that the reader has just as much, if not more, power and control than the author in their interpretation. In fact, Barthes argues that it is the reader who ultimately creates the text through the process of reading.

Fan Texts as High Culture

The cultural status of fan texts brings up an important aspect of the fan entitlement discourse: By positioning media texts as works of art, the correct fan/industry relationship requires the text to be respected and admired and not consumed as a product, criticized, or — worst of all — co-authored. When the media text is framed as art, the media producers (in this view, the artists) should be treated with due deference and appreciation for their creative labors. Problematic fan responses — critical responses, unconventional interpretations, and creative transformations — are framed as violating this relationship. As Faraci (2016, par. 6) writes, “that isn't how art works, and that shouldn’t be how art lovers react to art. They shouldn't be bringing a bucket of paint to the museum to take out some of the blue from those Picassos, you know?” This line of thinking specifically attempts to define and police how the audience reads and reacts to the media text. As agentfreewill (2016, par. 3) laments in his/her Tumblr post about creative control, “The problem is when people want to control the reaction to art.” The implication of Faraci’s (2016, par. 6) argument is that good fans are “art lovers” and thus react in appreciative

and celebratory ways, instead of seeking to make the text their own by "bringing a bucket of paint to the museum."

Two useful theories can help us understand these arguments around media texts and art, and, consequently, fan culture's relationship to high culture, popular culture, and cultural capital. In *Popular Culture and High Culture: An Analysis and Evaluation Of Taste*, Herbert Gans (1974) explains how different kinds of cultural consumption are constructed and, more often than not, linked to class and status. High culture differs from popular culture insofar that the "users" of high culture routinely adopt the perspective of artists, authors, and other cultural producers: "While high culture is creator-oriented and its aesthetics and its principles of criticism are based on this orientation, popular culture remains, on the whole, user-oriented and [exists] to satisfy audience values and wishes" (Gans 1999, 62). When Faraci argues that fan texts should be appreciated as art, he marks them as products of high culture. Unsophisticated fans, on the other hand, do not appreciate these texts as high culture, but merely consume them as popular culture. Similarly, they do not seek to be enlightened or challenged, but to be entertained and pleased. Faraci's argument is an interesting inversion, insofar as fan culture has long been associated with popular culture. By arguing that fans should act like "art lovers" he associates good fandom with the reading and appreciation practices of high culture.

Broadly speaking, high culture refers to those cultural products that we think of as "serious" or "studied" culture: classical music, literature, poetry, opera, etc. Popular culture is generally synonymous with lowbrow and mass media products, and includes music, film, television, and various other "pulp" products produced for the masses. It is easy to see the socio-political undertones of these categories: high culture is for the wealthy and scholarly, popular culture for the uneducated and undiscerning. Writing in *Distinction,* one of the foundational

works on the subject of cultural stratification, Pierre Bourdieu (1979) explains how taste — and consequently, the power to determine the products and consumption practices associated with good taste — is an important example of cultural hegemony. The dominant classes both define which cultural products are considered valuable and worthwhile and, because they tend to have greater access to these products, accumulate more cultural capital. Fan studies, from its inception, has sought to complicate the idea of cultural capital and highlight the ways that fan culture could offer alternative ways of defining taste and gaining status. Fiske's (1992, 30-33) concept of fan cultural capital was conceived as a route to "social prestige and self-esteem" for those who do not otherwise have easy access to other types of capital, particularly "those disempowered by any combination of gender, age, class and race." Faraci's attempts to re-associate fan cultural capital with high culture may be a direct response to fans' increasing status in mainstream culture. As fandom becomes popular itself, the currency of fan cultural capital is at risk of being devalued. One way to prevent this is to redefine and re-limit the boundaries of good taste and appropriate reading and consumption practices.

Entitlement and the Commodification of Art

By establishing a connection between appropriate fandom, art, and the reading modes associated with high culture, appreciation, and connoisseurship, the fan entitlement discourse also constructs its counterpart: "Broken" fandom is rooted in excessive consumption and a view of the media text as product. Faraci (2016, par. 10) writes,

> The corporatized nature of the stories we consume has led fans - already having a hard time understanding the idea of an artist's vision - to assume almost total

> ownership of the stuff they love. And I use that word ownership in a very specific sense - these people see themselves as consumers as much as they see themselves as fans. … They see these stories as products. The old fan entitlement has been soldered onto the 'customer is always right' mindset that seems to motivate the people who make Yelp so shitty. I'm spending a dollar here, which makes me the lord and master of all, is the reasoning.

When Faraci writes of the “corporatized nature of the stories we consume,” he specifically means that many contemporary media texts, especially highly produced and marketed “blockbuster” fare, do not have a single identifiable author. This literal “death of the author” inspires some fans to “assume almost total ownership of the stuff they love” — specifically, emotional ownership that motivates them to interpret, critique, or transform the text to meet their specific needs. In the passage, Faraci constructs these fans as the ultimate consumers, problematizing both their sense of emotional ownership and, once again, their perceived disregard for “an artist’s vision.” Bad fans treat their fan object as a product instead of art. And, once again, an appropriate fan/industry relationship is framed as passive and limited, insofar as that a creator executes his/her vision and the recipient’s reaction is limited.

Taking up Faraci’s argument in the comments, a number of readers strongly agree about the problematic nature of “entitlement and the commodification of art”:

Yes, so much yes. And I really hope we can talk about the feedback between entitlement and commodification of art, because that's the crux of it for me. Because I think this shift in how the audience engages entertainment and art has not just reinforced entitlement, it has changed the nature of audience/art relationships.

There's always been an uneven balance between engaging entertainment as art (which makes you think and feel anew) and as commodity (which must conform to expectations). The feedback of consumerism and fandom has amped entitlement up to a critical mass that is tilting, dramatically, the scales to the "commodity" side. So now some people engage art and entertainment to have expectations met to such degree, any unpleasant surprises or petty disappointments are betrayals. Because the basic emotion at play is not love, it's enjoyment. This is magnified many times over by the Internet, but at the same time the Internet makes it increasingly easy and normal to have these reactions.

Fig. 3. The nature of the audience/art relationship.

The comment in Fig. 3 explores the difference between entertainment media as art and as commodity, and the extent to which fans have contributed to a shift from the former to the latter. The argument is that art "makes you think and feel anew," whereas a commodity "must conform to expectations." Fandom, according to the comment, has become more consumerist and, consequently, more entitled. Fans, in other words, have turned art into commodity because they now "engage art and entertainment to have expectations met." Interestingly, the comment associates art with "love" and commodity with "enjoyment" — this engages with one of the fundamental assumptions around the affective dimension of fandom, insofar as fandom is an expression of love and passion for the fan object. By positing that bad fans are more interested in consuming commodities for enjoyment, the comment questions the authenticity of these fans' emotional connection to the fan object. Furthermore, it implies that good fans, who "love" the fan object, respect and appreciate it as art and do not take a consumerist position.

You have to either trust the creator and their vision or, if you don't care for it go somewhere else. Getting angry or feeling betrayed shows a level of personal affront that is frankly just incorrect. It's not like anyone even knows who you are - they aren't doing this TO YOU, this is just their vision for the art. You don't have to like or support it but neither do you get to take it so personally without people giving you sidelong looks and wondering what's going on in your head.

Fig. 4. Trust the creator.

Another key way in which good fans approach the fan/text relationship is demonstrated in the comment in Fig. 4, which points to the importance of "trust[ing] the creator and their vision." This is an important way in which the media text is constructed as art: it reflects the creator's vision. Attempting to interfere with the creator's vision or impose unreasonable expectations is entitled fandom. Furthermore, as this comment argues, fans should control and moderate their reaction to art that they do not like or agree with, because "getting angry or feeling betrayed shows a level of personal affront that is frankly just incorrect." It is interesting that the comment frames this kind of reaction as "incorrect." The implication is two-fold: First, the comment suggests that any over-identification or excessive emotional response to the fan object is inappropriate, undesirable, and – in keeping with a construction of the media text as art — unrefined. Fans "don't have to like or support" the creator's vision, but they may not "take it so personally." The text is the result of the creator's vision and the fan's role is unimportant: "it's not like anyone even knows who you are." This view positions fans as recipients, and relatively passive ones at that: They may appreciate the artist's vision, or not, but they do not and should not have agency in how the text is created, nor be too personally invested or passionate in their

consumption.

Producerly Texts

An important critique of the idea that media texts are art — and therefore closed and sacred — comes from John Fiske's (1989) book *Television Culture.* He argues that there are three types of media texts: readerly, writerly, and producerly. The first two types were originally defined by Barthes in his 1973 book *The Pleasure of the Text* and map the spectrum of effort and openness of a text, whereby a readerly text is more closed with a particular and easy to ascertain meaning while a writerly text is both more open and more difficult to understand, thus requiring more interpretive effort. Fiske added the idea of the "producerly" text in order to describe the way that many contemporary media texts function; they are easy and pleasurable to consume like a readerly text, but as open to interpretation and personal meaning-making as a writerly text. Writing specifically about television, Fiske (1989, 2) explains,

> Television is a producerly medium: the work of the institutional producers of its programs requires the producerly work of the viewers and has only limited control over that work…The pleasure and power of making meanings, of participating in the mode of representation, of playing in the semiotic process – these are some of the most significant and empowering pleasures that television has to offer.

Part of the openness and producerly nature of contemporary media texts (not just television) may not only lie in their narrative structure but also in, what Faraci calls, the "corporatized nature" of their production. In this view, it is not fans who are overstepping the boundaries of the media text, but it is the machinations and processes of the entertainment industry that creates them as

producerly texts.

While I agree with a lot in the article, there is one bit I can't: the "creative expression argument".

Creative freedom is great and valuable. It should be protected. However, when a game or movie studio starts doing marketing research, focus groups, test audiences, etc. THEY are the ones making it into a product. So, sorry, if they're already making and selling a product, tailored for commercial success, then yes, the fans do have the right to consider themselves customers and expect certain changes from the studios.

They wouldn't have such an option with indie games or movies. But they do with the things the corporations themselves make into products.

Fig. 5. THEY are the ones making it into a product.

As the comment in Fig. 5 argues, the entertainment industry is “already making and selling a product, tailored for commercial success.” It is, therefore, unreasonable to label such media as art and protect it as a form of “creative expression.” The comment argues that, when Hollywood “starts doing marketing research, focus groups, test audiences, etc.,” their output is positioned as a product and, therefore, “fans have the right to consider themselves customers and expect certain changes from the studios.” The suggestion is that these films, shows, or games are created first and foremost as commercial products that are designed to appeal to, and satisfy, a specific consumer. The comment justifies fan expectations in two ways: First, as the target customer, fans are right to expect a product they enjoy. Second, because the industry has structures in place that specifically seek out audience input during the creative process, it is reasonable for fans to attempt to assert influence in this part of the process. Of course, it is still the industry that invites and controls this influence. However, the comment implies that the industry has, in a way, opened the door for these kinds of fan expectations.

I enjoyed the article, but I strongly disagree with a major point, that these highly budgeted, heavily marketed films aren't products first and foremost. I think art is inherently divisive and personal. Studios aren't going to fund a half a billion dollar marketing campaign for a film that may alienate part of its audience. These blockbusters are made to cater to their audiences, which empowers and help foster this toxic fan culture of entitlement.

Fig. 6. Products first and foremost.

The comment in Fig. 6 echoes a similar sentiment by taking issue with the argument that "these highly budgeted, heavily marketed films aren't products first and foremost." Again, the comment argues that the way the entertainment industry produces and markets its output inherently positions it as a producerly text and a product, and not as art. Art, as the comment defines it, is "inherently divisive and personal." The films, shows, books, and games that are at the center of much of these discussions do not serve this purpose — instead, they are intended to have broad appeal. The industry spends money to ensure its output does not "alienate part of its audience," thus shifting it from the realm of art and creative expression to the realm of product, which are "made to cater to their audience." However, even as the comment argues that fans are justified in their response and their expectations, it also frames the entire interaction as part of a "toxic fan culture of entitlement." Hollywood may "empower and help foster" this culture, but fandom is still ultimately broken, and fan entitlement lies at the root of it.

Criticism: Give an Inch, Take a Mile

An important way in which the audience has always interacted with media products is through criticism. Everyone is free to have their own reaction and opinion. However, shifts in

technology and in the fundamental balance of the fan/industry relationship have called the validity and propriety of criticism into question. The fan entitlement discourse is careful to construct a boundary around what constitutes valid criticism, and distinguishes it from an over-inflated sense of influence and inappropriate attempts at "co-creation." A primary feature of appropriate criticism is the timing of fans' interaction with media creators. The comment in Fig. 7 develops a boundary between criticism, which is defined as acceptable, and influence, which is generally regarded as unacceptable:

"what they should've done" is fine as part of the process after the fact and can function as valid criticism, I think. "change this now because I want it this way instead" said directly from a fan to a creator, is not. (I'm not saying that, in itself, is harassment by the way, but it is entitled because you are asking somebody else to accommodate your wishes. Which is not in the same ballpark as commenting in general that it could've been better if x,y,z).

Fig. 7. Valid criticism.

The comment in Fig. 7 sets up a boundary between "valid criticism" and invalid behavior depending on whether fans critique a story "after the fact" or try to influence creators to "accommodate [their] wishes." While the comment does not automatically condemn a desire for influence as "harassment," it does suggest that speaking "directly from a fan to a creator" with an intention to influence is crossing the line of acceptable behavior, whether or not it actually encompasses harassing or threatening behavior. The comment labels influencing behavior as "entitled," which, as we have seen throughout this discourse, is deployed as a disciplining term. The implication is that "valid criticism" is the only acceptable type of fan/industry interaction,

and a desire for influence is inappropriate, entitled, and potentially bordering on harassment.

People start confusing their role as critics with their imagined role as co-creators. I'm in total agreement that lack of diversity in the creator pool leads to some of these clumsy tropes continuing - but that should be where the demands are. And frankly - that's a serious issue about employment opportunities and hiring practices that has nothing to do with demanding your art and entertainment be what you want it to be.

Fig. 8. Imagined role as co-creators.

The comment in Fig. 8 introduces the language of fans as co-creators and turns it into a rebuke. It suggests that fans who believe themselves to be co-creators are not only “confusing their role” but also imagining their influence. By drawing on the ideas of confusion and imagination, the comment implies that these bad fans are out of touch with reality. Again, the comment defines options for valid and acceptable fan behavior, reinforcing fans’ “role as critics” and even condoning “demands” around “lack of diversity in the creator pool.” The latter behavior is acceptable when it is addressing a “serious issue about employment opportunities and hiring practices.” But this is clearly distinguished from less acceptable attempts at influence that are “demanding your art and entertainment be what you want it to be.”

Many comments grapple with defining the boundaries of appropriate “criticism” and distinguishing it from bad fan behavior and illusions of influence. Responding to a discussion around the backlash against the killing of a major lesbian character on the show *The 100,* one commenter writes:

I think a major difference here is that with The 100, fans are reacting to something and considering it thoughtfully, not necessarily (I don't think) angrily demanding that it be undone. Both Ghostbusters and Frozen 2 (with the latter obviously being less toxic overall than the former) are about things the fans in question haven't seen yet, and about what they WANT that experience to be like. Responding to a creative decision after the fact is criticism (I mean, ideally). Got no problem with criticism.

Fig. 9. Got no problem with criticism.

The comment in Fig. 9 again emphasizes two key points about appropriate criticism: First, criticism is a response. It should be "after the fact," and is therefore distinct from a request or demand ("what they WANT that experience to be like"). Second, appropriate criticism is the result of thoughtful consideration. It is not reactionary, "angrily demanding," or overly emotional. Even if fan response is negative, if it meets the criteria for criticism, it would not be considered entitled or toxic: "Got no problem with criticism." The underlying assumption is that creators should have the power and freedom to make a story that is consistent with their vision and desires and gives them full authorial control. Fans can react "after the fact" and their response should be "thoughtful" and rational, taking the position of amateur critics. Fan attempts at influence cross this boundary into attempts to assert power in ways that are either inappropriate and disrespectful or confused and delusional. Another comment uses the concept of the "death of the author" to further illustrate this boundary:

"Give an inch, take a mile". Modern fandom has taken "death of the author" to its extreme end. Once culture decided that what the creator intends is less important than how the consumer intreprets, the extreme end of the spectrum to that is yelling at the creator to give you what you want.

Not to say that is a good thing, just not really surprising.

Fig. 10. Death of the author.

The comment in Fig. 10 argues that the "death of the author" has found its "extreme end" in "modern fandom," suggesting that fans now completely disregard authorial intent. Instead of celebrating the power of the reader, this comment uses "death of the author" as a rebuke to denote lack of respect towards creators and an imbalance in the fan/creator relationship. Fans attempt to place their interpretations and desires above the creator, culminating in "extreme" attempts at influence and "yelling at the creator to give you what you want." Interestingly, the comment also utilizes the phrase "Give an inch, take a mile" to contextualize its argument, suggesting that any power (either interpretive or influential) fans have was "given" to them, presumably by the author/creator. Ironically, this is a misinterpretation of Barthes's concept of the "death of the author," not only because Barthes' idea addresses reading practices and not "yelling at the creator," but also because the "death of the author" celebrates the reader's interpretational authority.

Another important aspect of the fan entitlement discourse is that it suggests a historical evolution from a past when the fan/industry relationship was "generally positive" and based on fans "defending the stuff they love" to the present where fans' increasing involvement in "trying to shape" the fan object has become excessive and entitled (Faraci 2016, par. 5). As Faraci explains,

> There's always been a push and a pull between creator and fan, and while it can sometimes be negative it was, historically, generally positive. Fans used to raise their voices to save canceled TV shows or to support niche comic books. (ibid.)

Fan activity that is “generally positive” is acceptable and is framed to evoke nostalgia. Similarly, fans who engage in activities that “save” and “support” are praised — the flip side, of course, are those fans who criticize, question, or attempt to influence the creative process. However, as previously discussed in Chapter 2, the academic literature suggests that this evolution from “support” to “influence” is perhaps misrepresented and the impulse behind fan/creator communication has often been a desire to shape the creative process (Jenkins 1992, Bielby et al. 1999, Andrejevic 2008). The fan entitlement discourse, then, attempts to create a boundary whereby celebratory and supportive fan practices (“defending stuff they love”) are considered good and appropriate, and fan practices rooted in a desire to influence the story are negative and entitled. Faraci (2016, par. 3) offers the caveat that his critique of entitled fandom is less concerned with activities such as “writing or creating” and more concerned with “yelling and brigading and, more and more, threatening death.” Of course, performances of fan power that are rooted in threats and harassment are neither admirable nor desirable. However, Faraci uses the rhetorical strategy of false equivalence to define good and bad fan behavior, whereby good fan behavior supports and affirms the creator and bad fan behavior is critical, demanding, entitled, and toxic: “while the details change the general attitude is the same: this is what I want out of these stories, and if you don't give it to me you're anti-Semitic/ripping off the consumer/a dead man” (4).

Fans Expressing their Opinions is Not Entitlement

While many participants in the fan entitlement discourse are very invested in maintaining the fan/industry power dynamic, other voices challenge this belief and argue that greater balance can be good:

Fans expressing their opinions is not entitlement. The idea that we should just STFU and buy your thing is a truly toxic ideal. Creators have had complicated relationships with famous creations and fan expectations going back to Shakespeare at least. Creators can either listen to their fans or not. No one is stopping them. There are no more gatekeepers. Tell your story. Fans though, have just as much right to tell you what they think about it.

Fig. 11. Fans expressing their opinions is not entitlement.

The comment in Fig. 11 takes a firm position that “Fans expressing their opinions is not entitlement.” The comment uses strong language to oppose an interpretation of Faraci’s argument that fans should “just STFU [shut the f*ck up] and buy your thing.” The comment characterizes Faraci’s argument as “gatekeep[ing]” and dismisses the suggestion that fans should be passive and accepting as a “truly toxic ideal.” Interestingly, the comment deploys the term “toxic” and turns it away from previous associations of fan entitlement and negativity. In this instance, the comment associates toxicity with gatekeeping and silencing fans. As a whole, the comment suggests that greater equality in the fan/creator relationship is a good thing, insofar as that it allows both creators and fans to “tell [their] story.” Creators have the choice to “either listen to their fans or not,” and fans have “just as much right to tell [creators] what they think.”

Okay, but artists aren't a special breed that we have to approach like some medieval king on a throne, bowing and scraping and "if I could please, sir beg a moment of your lofty attention". I think the direct access is a great thing and I don't see why they should be spared opinions on the work that they do. They earn their living in a public medium so public opinion comes with the territory. I think they missed badly on this one (the Cap twist) and should expect to hear about it.

I DON'T support fans abusing them, using disparaging speech, focusing on anything personal and especially not making threats.

I started out trying to explain why I think it is very elitist to want people to admire and respect what you do but to feel that you're somehow above listening if they want to express their opinion. Or in Devin's case, a person who makes their entire living strongly expressing his opinions (read his X-Men review from last week) chastising others for doing the same. Making note of when and how they cross the line is fine and I appreciated that part of it, but to completely absolve himself (even through omission) of playing any part in this struck me as tone deaf.

Fig. 12. If I could please, sir beg a moment of your lofty attention.

This lengthy comment in Fig. 12 expresses a similar support of greater equality in the fan/creator relationship. By arguing that “artists aren’t a special breed that we have to approach like some medieval king of a throne, bowing and scraping,” the comment characterizes Faraci’s take on an appropriate fan/creator relationship as outdated and — judging by the use of humorous language, “if I could please, sir beg a moment of your lofty attention” — slightly ridiculous. The comment joins many others in strongly and definitively disavowing toxic fan behaviors. The author capitalizes the “DON’T” in order to signal clear disapproval of a number of bright-line bad fan behaviors that have been defined within this comment community, including abuse, “disparaging speech,” “anything personal,” and “making threats.” However, like the comment in Fig. 11, the

comment in Fig. 12 clearly argues that fan opinion is not entitlement. The comment suggests that it is "very elitist" for creators to "want people to admire and respect" their work but put themselves "above" fans who "want to express their opinion." The implication is twofold: First, positive and negative fan reactions should be taken together, especially since creators choose to "earn their living in a public medium." Second, creators should not put themselves "above" fans, and that greater equality in the fan/industry relationship is both appropriate and useful, insofar that, if creators do a bad job, they "should expect to hear about it." Expecting only positive feedback and praise is, therefore, "elitist" and goes against the values of an equal and fair society. The comment also argues that Faraci is being hypocritical and "tone deaf" in "chastising" fan entitlement while making his "entire living strongly expressing opinions." The implication is that, because Faraci is a professional critic, his own behavior, even when it is negative and antagonistic, escapes the label of entitlement. The comment not only critiques this hierarchy between fans and professionals, but also advocates that fans having "direct access" to creators "is a great thing."

Creative Expertise and the "Whims of Fans"

The struggle around appropriate fan feedback, criticism, and influence is also about protecting expertise. The implication in much of the fan entitlement discourse is that fans complain and demand without a) knowing how the process of making media products actually works and b) sufficiently appreciating the expertise required to create quality media products. Collectively, this leads to the undesired outcome that the quality of media products is diminished in order to serve fans. The comment in Fig. 13 describes this process:

"Fans" in general aren't aware of the work, be it by a whole team on a video game or movie or just an author spending all his/her time thinking about plot points, that goes behind the creation of something they love. There's a real expectation that everything has to be catered to their whims and wishes regardless of whether or not it's good for them to be tailored to specifically, like a small child being given candy for dinner because they think it's the best thing ever.

Fig. 13. Like a small child being given candy.

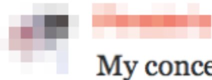
The comment in Fig. 13 builds an argument around fans' lack of expertise by contending that fans are ignorant of how the film- or TV-making process works: "'Fans' in general aren't aware of the work … that goes behind the creation of something they love." These fans — which the commenter pointedly refers to with quotation marks, thus implying that their lack of knowledge and resulting behavior marks them as inauthentic — expect "that everything has to be catered to their whims and wishes" and that the way they would want the story to develop would not be "good for them." The comment then disciplines fans who hold such illusions and expectations of influence by infantilizing them, "like a small child being given candy for dinner because they think it's the best thing ever." This marks fans who desire influence as not only naive and unskilled, but also as immature.

Anyway, I've noticed that a lot of the vitriolic reactions from fans come from a basic understanding of how the different industries work. Like all these people freaking out over the Captain America twist. Do they not understand how long narrative works, and that they have to establish things in order for them to pay off later? And especially about comics, where NOTHING is permanent and reversed by the end of the story arc? This has been happening a lot in TV to, where people don't seem to understand that actors have limited time and that leads to narrative decisions.

Fig. 14. Do they not understand.

The comment in Fig. 14 similarly posits that fans whose reactions are particularly "vitriolic" lack "a basic understanding of how the different industries work." This includes a lack of expertise in regards to narrative structure and the storytelling conventions of particular media, as in the case of fans who were upset by the *Steve Rogers: Captain America* plot development. The comment also references the negative fan reaction to *The 100* and the death of the show's major lesbian character. The actress was committed to start a new television show, so from a logistical standpoint, her character had to be written off. However, fans who were upset about the death had many reasons for feeling betrayed, misled, and let down. Arguing, as the comment in Fig. 14 does, that "people don't seem to understand that actors have limited time and that leads to narrative decisions" precludes valid fan criticism by framing negative reactions as naive and lacking industry knowledge.

The main way the fan entitlement discourse raises the theme of expertise, however, is as a slippery slope argument around the potentially harmful effects of unchecked fan influence. The reasoning is that creators should not give fans what they want or ask for because fans do not know how to create good art, and, if fans are listened to, the result will be "creativity by committee":



My concern is with authenticity, specifically emotional authenticity. Fans who want a certain thing done in their work are...missing the point, you can't force it. Media is created spontaneously, when you force shit in, it makes the work less natural. Sometimes that can be fine, but I think it detracts from the quality most of the time. Creativity by committee.

Fig. 15. Creativity by committee.

The comment in Fig. 15 argues that fans are “missing the point” if they want “a certain thing done” in the stories they love. The assumption is that the quality of a media work depends on its “emotional authenticity,” and that achieving this authenticity requires the work to be created “spontaneously” and “naturally.” The implication is that fans not only do not have the expertise to achieve this kind of authenticity, but that they actually interfere with the creative process. A response piece in *The Globe and Mail* characterizes the outcome as “a world of creative compromises”:

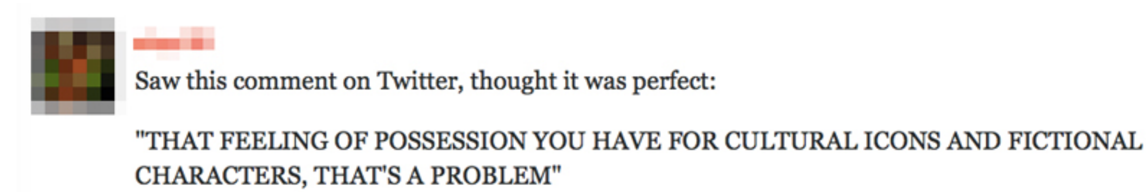
> Studios are now stuck. They can't be seen as completely capitulating to the whims of fans, but they also can't purposefully dampen the enthusiasm of their paying audience. Prepare, then, for a world of creative compromises. Until studios shake their franchise-first mentality (not likely) and until audiences realize that their opinions might not outweigh those tasked with actually creating the work (less likely every day), Hollywood will not be producing films so much as high-priced fan fiction. And when everyone has a say in how art is produced, no one does. (Hertz 2016, par. 11)

This take on fan entitlement positions the media and entertainment industries at an impasse with fans. Fans, and their “whims,” are becoming increasingly demanding and Hollywood cannot “purposefully dampen [their] enthusiasm” (ibid.). Therefore, the end result is a world in which Hollywood will no longer have the freedom to make art but rather will be “stuck” making “high-priced fan fiction” (ibid.). In this way, the fan entitlement discourse paints fans almost as tyrants, as they force their inexpert ideas of what they want from a story on beleaguered creators, who only wish to make art. Disciplining bad fans for holding and acting on illusions of influence and expertise is ultimately a question about the appropriate boundaries of the fan/industry relationship. The fan entitlement discourse suggests a key question in drawing these boundaries: Are fans engaging in “valid” and reasoned criticism “after the fact,” or are they attempting to shape the fan object as imagined “co-creators” according to their “whims and wishes”? The former is acceptable fan behavior; the latter is entitled (fans should not make demands of the creators), immature (fans do not know what is good for them and act like spoiled children), ignorant (fans do not understand how the industry works), and possibly delusional (fans are confused about their role in the media production/consumption process).

Ownership: That Feeling of Possession

Many aspects of the fan/industry relationship that are flagged as culprits in the fan entitlement discourse revolve around the idea of ownership. Following Bielby’s et al. (1999) study about soap fans discussing their favorite programs online and assuming a sense of shared ownership in order to make judgments and protect the quality of the program, their prediction about empowered fans increasingly claiming ownership of “their” stories in post-Internet fandom has largely come to pass. However, the fan entitlement discourse marks this sense of ownership

as inappropriate and problematic:

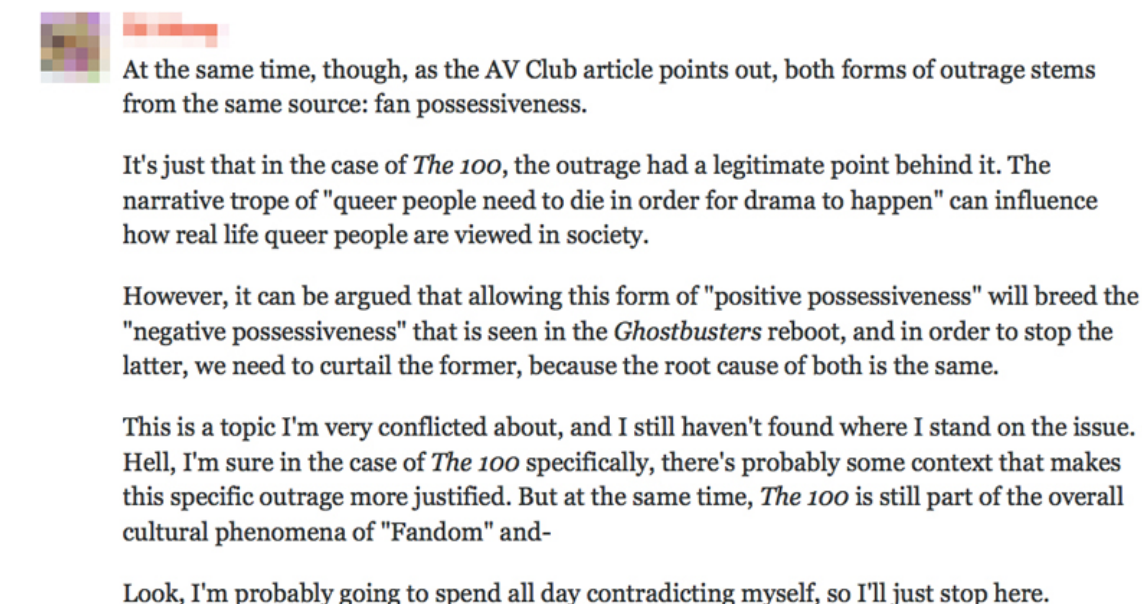


Saw this comment on Twitter, thought it was perfect:

"THAT FEELING OF POSSESSION YOU HAVE FOR CULTURAL ICONS AND FICTIONAL CHARACTERS, THAT'S A PROBLEM"

Fig. 16. That feeling of possession.

The comment in Fig. 16 introduces the concept of "possession" in order to mark certain displays of ownership as problematic. The term "possession" invokes the emotion/reason dichotomy, and suggests that excessive ownership is rooted in excessive emotional attachment that causes bad fans to act unreasonably. We also tend to associate negative and potentially abusive behavior with feelings of possessiveness. This language is taken up in other comments as well:



At the same time, though, as the AV Club article points out, both forms of outrage stems from the same source: fan possessiveness.

It's just that in the case of *The 100*, the outrage had a legitimate point behind it. The narrative trope of "queer people need to die in order for drama to happen" can influence how real life queer people are viewed in society.

However, it can be argued that allowing this form of "positive possessiveness" will breed the "negative possessiveness" that is seen in the *Ghostbusters* reboot, and in order to stop the latter, we need to curtail the former, because the root cause of both is the same.

This is a topic I'm very conflicted about, and I still haven't found where I stand on the issue. Hell, I'm sure in the case of *The 100* specifically, there's probably some context that makes this specific outrage more justified. But at the same time, *The 100* is still part of the overall cultural phenomena of "Fandom" and-

Look, I'm probably going to spend all day contradicting myself, so I'll just stop here.

Fig. 17. Fan posessiveness.

The comment in Fig. 17 specifically connects “outrage” — referring here to “both forms of outrage” from multiple sides of the political spectrum — to “fan possessiveness.” The comment attempts to draw a boundary between appropriate and inappropriate ownership through two examples: The response to the killing of a prominent lesbian character in the TV show *The 100* is marked as potentially “positive possessiveness” because of its aim for greater inclusivity and representation of queer characters. The pre-emptive rejection of the all-female *Ghostbusters* remake is marked as “negative possessiveness,” presumably because of its connection to sexism and misogyny. However, the author quickly concedes that s/he is “very conflicted” about the issue of “fan possessiveness” and unable to actually identify a clear boundary because “the root cause of both is the same.” Interestingly, the comment not only displays a sense of inner conflict with regard to this issue, but also a hesitation to disagree too strongly with Faraci’s original article. Even while attempting to introduce an argument that “context” could make “this specific outrage [from fans of *The 100*] more justified,” the author then reverses him/herself in order to echo the prevailing opinion of the comment section and condemn “the overall cultural phenomena of ‘Fandom.’” This demonstrates that, even within this comment section, there is a microcosm of good and bad fandom, whereby being a valued member of the community requires a general agreement with the thesis that “fandom is broken.”

One exchange between several commentators specifically illustrates the process by which the boundary around ownership is being contested. The first comment takes a position similar to what Bielby et al. (1999, 36-37) have described, whereby fans express ownership by assuming guardianship over the quality, aesthetic, and emotional authenticity of the program. The subsequent comments make it very clear that this position is inappropriate, problematic, and

pathological:

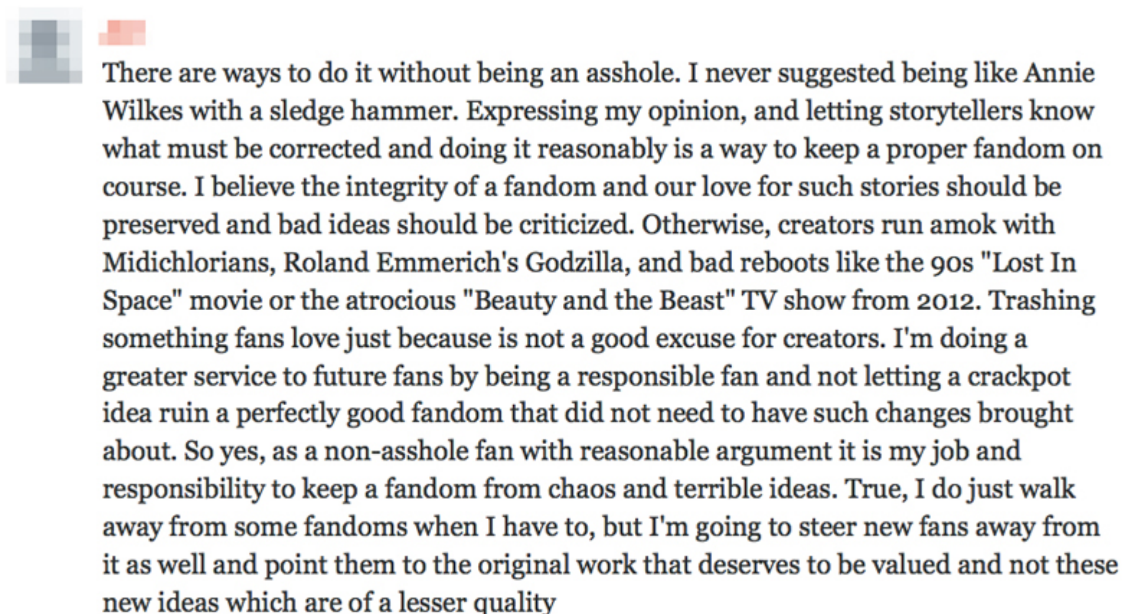


Fig. 18. It is my job and responsibility to keep a fandom from chaos and terrible ideas.

This lengthy comment in Fig. 18 already anticipates criticism — that "expressing my opinion" and "letting storytellers know what must be corrected" will be labeled as aggressive behavior and "being an asshole." However, the comment attempts to set up an argument that safeguarding "the integrity of fandom" by criticizing bad ideas is appropriate and justified. In fact, this type of behavior is "being a responsible fan" and a "non-asshole fan," as long as it is based on "love for such stories" and "reasonable argument." The commenter asserts that, "it is my job and responsibility to keep a fandom from chaos and terrible ideas," thus explicitly taking on the role of caretaker that Bielby et al. (1999) have described. The responses to this comment take an entirely different tone, and make it immediately clear that this kind of behavior is not tolerated:

I don't give a shit about bad ideas or good ideas. I have a problem with fans like you who think your glombing onto a property somehow gives you ownership. You deciding something is wrong, is where you're wrong. No one wants to hear what you think is bad or what you think needs to be fixed. This isn't you job, and you're not the authority. You have no ownership. You don't have to like the decisions being made, but you have to stop demanding that they be made to your approval. People like you are the problem with fandom.

Fig. 19. People like you are the problem with fandom.

The comment in Fig. 19 is clearly dismissive and condemning of the previous comment, using harsh language and dismissing any display of "ownership" as "glombing onto a property [sic]." The phrase "glomming on" suggests an unhealthy, immature, and inappropriate attachment to the fan object and echoes the language around "possession." The comment is cuttingly clear in its repudiation of any sense of ownership: "This isn't you job [sic], and you're not the authority. You have no ownership." The argument is that bad fans are the ones who claim to have authority and ownership and, thus, attempt to make judgments that "something is wrong" or demands that stories "be made to your approval." Feeling or acting on any sense of ownership, then, is inappropriate: "People like you are the problem with fandom."

A Sense of Symbiosis

In addition to framing a sense of emotional ownership as "possessiveness," the fan entitlement discourse also links ownership to an unhealthy "symbiosis" with the fan object. This takes us back to considering the fan's relationship with the media text and its author(s). As Barthes' theory of the death of the author already suggests, there is a key ideological divide

about who ultimately creates and, by extension, who owns the text. The fan entitlement discourse builds an argument around a problematic sense of ownership among fans on the basis that fans disregard the role of the creator to the extent that they "assume almost total ownership of the stuff they love" (Faraci 2016, par. 15). Noting that some fans already have a "hard time understanding the idea of an artist's vision," Faraci cautions that an inflated sense of ownership is causing fans to develop a "sense of symbiosis" with the text, to the extent that fans can no longer "tell where they ended and where the thing they loved began" (par. 15). This argument can, once again, be unpacked as privileging authorial intent and framing "symbiosis" with a text as excessive and undesired. However, in a post-structuralist view of readership, the reader and the text are always merging and intertwining, because the text is created through the process of reading and infused with the reader's own needs and perspectives. By condemning such symbiosis, Faraci implies that the text exists outside the reader, and that the process of reading should not encroach on the text's borders, as defined by its author(s). The text, in this view, is owned by its author(s) and has firm limits and boundaries. Any sense of ownership is framed as trespassing these boundaries.

By condemning ownership, the fan entitlement discourse likewise questions the value and propriety of fan practices and engagements that are inspired by this close connection with the text. A response piece that was posted on a personal Tumblr fan blog by the user bookshop (2016, par. 14) expresses this idea:

> Faraci thinks the current trend of fans to [sic] organize movements, actively participate in fan campaigns, and express discontent with plot points is all some sort of repudiation of a longstanding top-down pyramid of creation: one in which the creator dishes out plot points to an eager, hungry public who unquestioningly,

> passively consumes that narrative and then is simply grateful and eager for more.

This passage echoes previous characterizations of Faraci's arguments as supporting a "longstanding top-down pyramid of creation" that positions fans as "unquestioning" and "passive" consumers who are "simply grateful and eager for more." In order to uphold this view of authorial control, fans' sense of shared ownership is inherently harmful and threatening. The post specifically addresses transformative fan works as an expression of ownership, explaining that,

> A large part of [Faraci's] philosophy towards the relationship between fans and their canon seems to be that it's silly and entitled for fans to react to the text as a product of the problematic world we live in, with real-world consequences to certain types of tropes. Fanfiction and fan theories in particular disrupt his theory of the sacredness of the Text, and how he feels we are meant to interact with it — namely as passively as possible. (bookshop 2016, par. 13)

Referring to the "sacredness of the Text" reflects much of what has been said here about the ideal fan/industry relationship that is being constructed in the fan entitlement discourse.

Canon and Fanon

The post by bookshop references the relationship between "fans and their canon" to gesture towards a specific tension with regard to fans' sense of ownership: the idea of canon, who controls it, and how it relates to fans' own ideas and interpretations. Canon, in the literary

sense, describes the list of works that are considered genuine works of a particular author (e.g. Shakespearean canon) or, more generally, a group of works that are culturally significant and of the highest quality. In the religious sense, biblical canon comprises the books of the Bible that are considered the true word of God. In fan culture, the notion of canon describes the official, industry-produced and -sanctioned iterations of a fictional world (Sternbergh 2015, 2). This includes the original text (film, book, television show, game, etc.) and, increasingly, various transmedia additions or extensions. For example, the *Harry Potter* canon has grown from the original series of seven books to include the eight films, official tie-in books (the in-story classroom texts *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* and *Quidditch Through the Ages*, written and designed to look like characters' personal text books), a Broadway play, two theme parks, and, more recently, entries to the official "Wizarding World" web site, written by J.K Rowling herself to add international scope to the original story. Some of these additions worked as synergistic marketing materials: the Wizarding World content provided background information on magic in North America and was released to coincide with a slew of new Harry Potter films, starting in 2016 with a big screen adaptation of *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*. The concept of "transmedia storytelling" — meaning across media — was introduced by Henry Jenkins in his 2006 book *Convergence Culture*. He explains,

> Transmedia storytelling refers to a new aesthetic that has emerged in response to media convergence — one that places new demands on consumers and depends on the active participation of knowledge communities. Transmedia storytelling is the art of world making. To fully experience any fictional world, consumers must assume the role of hunters and gatherers, chasing down bits of the story across media channels. (Jenkins 2006, 20-21)

Because transmedia storytelling often requires a great degree of involvement and labor from fans as they "assume the role of hunters and gatherers" and piece together the fictional worlds being built across platforms and media, it contributes to the blurring of lines between fans as readers and authors, consumers and producers, canon and fanon.

Whereas canon comprises the stories, characters, and world-building by "official" authors, fanon is "the ideas and concepts that fan communities have collectively decided are part of an accepted storyline or character interpretation" (Chaney and Liebler 2007, 1). Fanon is built from fans' emotional attachment to a narrative world, it is built from their interpretations, expressions, and creations, and it is built from their labor. As such, fanon is often more meaningful and resonant to those who are deeply involved and invested in fan communities. And in a landscape that is increasingly marked by transmedia storytelling, fanon becomes as, if not more valid, than canon. Jenkins (1992, 36) references the story of "The Velveteen Rabbit" to illustrate the value that fans add through their love and their labor:

> "Real isn't how you are made. It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become real." … The boy's investment in the toy will give it a meaning that was unanticipated by the toymaker, a meaning that comes not from its intrinsic merits or economic value but rather from the significance the child bestows upon the commodity through its use.

Stanfill (2019, 115) calls this type of fan labor "lovebor," that is, "the work of loving the object of fandom and showing that love." Fanon becomes one important product of this "lovebor." Keidra Chaney and Raizel Liebler (2007, 2) explain, "The gradual process of debating and

establishing canon and creating fanon is the equivalent of the Velveteen Rabbit for pop culture fans, giving life to a static, fictional world and making it 'real.'" When it is fans who do the work to make pop culture products "real," it is only natural that they would develop a sense of shared ownership. Perhaps canon, then, can even be seen as "a kind of symbiotic process between a story's creators and its fans — one that, ideally, results in the richest possible narrative" (Sternbergh 2015, 3).

Threatened by the Whole Concept of Fan Ownership

The idea of meshing canon and fanon is unlikely to gain favor, however, among those who seek to maintain the traditional balance of power in the fan/industry relationship. Those who celebrate fanon and fan ownership argue that it adds value to media products and goes hand-in-hand with fan's "lovebor." It is also what drives many fan practices, including those that are a desired part of the fan/industry relationship. However, as we have seen in the fan entitlement discourse so far, ownership becomes a site of power struggle when it is labeled as an inappropriate expression of emotional attachment, as an incursion on authorial control, or as an unhealthy relationship to the fan object. The fan entitlement discourse argues that these problems are precipitated by changes in how media is produced and in how fans can interact with creators, especially on social media. However, as Tumblr user bookshop (2016, par. 16) writes in a personal blog post in response to Faraci's article, "Social media isn't exacerbating a rise in the level of ownership fans have over a text; it's just exacerbating Hollywood's longstanding inability to understand fan ownership over their texts." The post once again looks to the controversy around the death of a major lesbian character on *The 100* to illustrate how the negative fan reaction caused "genuine Hollywood shock surrounding the ability of a groundswell

of fans to so quickly mobilize, unify, and express unrelenting anger towards the show" (par. 20). The implication is that the fan entitlement discourse fixates on the negative expressions of ownership — through "unrelenting anger" — and therefore paints fans' impulse to develop and demonstrate a sense ownership as essentially toxic: "Rather than identifying specific kinds of fan ownership as being harmful, Faraci is threatened by the whole concept of fan ownership" (par. 25). The conclusion is twofold: First, expressions of ownership can be constructive or harmful, and there is nuance required in how ownership is discussed and labeled. Second, the fan entitlement discourse dismisses all ownership because it threatens a sense of an appropriate fan/industry relationship.

In an attempt to bring greater nuance to the discussion around ownership, there is an argument that expressions of ownership that are rooted in calls for greater equality and representation should be seen as justified and constructive, even though they may be aggressive. This argument effectively echoes first wave work in fan studies, which sees fandom as a "tactic of the disempowered" and celebrated acts of subversion and cultural appropriation against the media power bloc (Gray, Sandvoss and Harringon 2007, 1-2). Other expressions of ownership (Gamergate, the backlash against *Ghostbusters*) are represented as being rooted in sexism, racism, and gatekeeping against minority groups, and are thus seen as harmful and exclusionist. This distinction is often termed as "punching up" versus "punching down." Many other response pieces echo this perspective and argue that the fan entitlement discourse sets up a false equivalence between what they see as justified and harmful expressions of fan ownership. In the blog post "From Hydra To Ghostbusters: The False Equivalences Of Fan Culture," Celidhann (2016, par. 3 &6) writes,

> [Faraci's] article, which posits a generally agreeable hypothesis regarding the

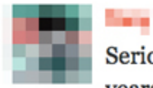
> toxicity that has begun to pervade that vaguely defined space known as "geek culture", draws a staggeringly inaccurate and willfully blind false equivalence to the fan opposition to Hydra Captain America and the orchestrated misogynistic hate campaign currently faced by the new *Ghostbusters* film. … I take particular umbrage with the way Faraci draws a line between these concerns over *Captain America* and the women *Ghostbusters* because of the implication that bigotry is the same as anti-bigotry. It's clearly not.

This argument echoes the "culture wars" perspective on toxic fandom, which places toxic fan practices within the larger framework of political and cultural conflicts (Proctor and Kies 2018, 135). However, what the response pieces I have quoted in this section draw attention to is that many of the ways the fan entitlement discourse marks fan practices as problematic is not interested in teasing out these nuances, but is instead rooted in defending established power structures: the author controls the text, media creators are making art not products, fans should not have influence or ownership. Of course, these power structures often intersect with sex, race, and status. These comments put the dynamic succinctly:

Suddenly there's a lot of outcry against "fan entitlement" and the toxic atmosphere that hateful "fans" perpetuate against both creators and other fans.

But now that that toxic wasteland of hate mongering and bullying that has been allowed to fester has finally spilled over enough to affect not just women but male creators/fan too-- suddenly now its a huge issue that we're all talking about.

Fig. 20. Suddenly there's a lot of outcry.



Seriously? women writers and creators have been getting death threats over nothing from men for years, but as soon as it happens to a dude a few times, fandom is "broken"?

Fig. 21. Seriously?

What the comments in Fig. 20 and Fig. 21 argue is that the key change in fandom becoming “toxic” and “broken” is not the presence of negative and harassing behavior, but whom this behavior is directed at. Both comments describe how fandom has often been a “toxic wasteland of hate mongering and bullying” to non-dominant groups, specifically women but other minority groups as well. When Harrington and Bielby (1999, 36) define ownership as “who is entitled to make evaluative judgments about the quality of the product,” there is an implication that not everyone is entitled to make these judgments. It is serendipitous that they also use the word “entitled,” since this concept is the cause of so much concern in this discourse. However, the point these comments make is that entitled behavior — as the fan entitlement discourse constructs it — is not the root of fandom’s brokenness. They argue that those in long-held positions of power frame entitled behavior, expressions of ownership, and judgments as problematic when it threatens their dominance: “as soon as it happens to a dude a few times, fandom is ‘broken’?”

Nobody can deny that anti-social behavior is a growing problem online. Harassment, bullying, and the various behaviors that have been cited as the building blocks of toxic fandom are real issues with serious consequences for the well-being and safety of those who participate in online communities. However, what the debates around authorship, criticism, and ownership have shown us is that we need to be mindful of how the problems within fandom are represented and where blame is being placed. The fan entitlement discourse constructs growing fan power as

the root of the fandom's brokenness. However, as I have argued, fan power is not the problem. It is, however, a threat. The comments cited above point to one way that fan power is threatening: under-represented groups have increasingly gained the means, tools, and techniques to make their voices heard. Anastasia Salter and Bridget Blodgett (2017, 498), in their book *Toxic Geek Masculinity in Media*, explain that those who used to control certain parts of fan (geek) culture now find themselves under siege by an influx of newcomers, giving urgency to their desire to "preserve geek cultural spaces for participants who share [the] same set of values." The nostalgic values that Salter and Blodgett refer to are rooted in the types of stories that have historically been popular in genre texts, about "a world in which young white men outside the traditional definitions of masculinity are victims turned heroes, entitled to their rewards" (499). Similarly, Suzanne Scott's (2019, 64) *Fake Geek Girls* points out that articles "expressing growing concern about increasingly 'entitled' or 'toxic' fan communities" began to appear conspicuously, and, as Scott argues, not coincidentally, in time with the "supposed 'invasion' of female fans." The crux of questions around fan power, then, is power for whom? The fan practices that are being marked as entitled are, to a significant extent, those that have long been associated with fans in the margins: fans who raise their voices to be seen and included, fans who engage in resistant reading practices in order to make texts meaningful for them, and fans who feel a sense of ownership based on the labor (and lovebor) they have contributed.

Chapter 5: Rhetorical Strategies in the Fan Entitlement Discourse

While the actual content of the fan entitlement discourse analyzed for this project ranges widely, there are certain rhetorical strategies that are used throughout the discourse in order to frame fan entitlement as a significant problem and, more importantly, to use fan entitlement as a way to create and police new boundaries of good and bad fandom. These rhetorical strategies include re-activating stigma around bad fans as fanatics, using black-and-white thinking to frame bad fans as bullies and creators as victims, and exaggerating the power that fans actually have in the fan/industry relationship.

Fanatics Again

While recent years have seen a breaking down of the stigma around media fandom, the ways that fans have historically been dismissed, distrusted, and ridiculed has had a lasting impact on fan culture. Writing in the 90s, Harrington and Bielby (1995, 1-2) note,

> The contemporary image of media fans is not a pretty picture. By reputation, fans cannot tell the difference between fiction and reality and are consumed with the minute detail of make-believe worlds. Fans are portrayed as either losers – love-struck teenagers or lonely housewives – or lunatics who pose serious threats to celebrities' physical safety. These images are so widely held and so rarely questioned that virtually all fan behavior – from the harmless to the violent – draws public ridicule and suspicion.

Harrington and Bielby outline many of the stereotypes that have long clung to public perception of fans: delusional, obsessive, loners, losers, lunatics, and potentially dangerous. Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998, 122), in their wide-ranging treatise *Audiences*, similarly write,

> We all probably have commonsensical images of the fan in our minds and they would perhaps be linked by the idea of some kind of excess of admiration of an activity or a star. Moreover, there has been a clear tendency for journalistic writing on fans to suggest that there is something wrong with being a fan.

These "commonsensical" images of fans were usually a product of negative media representation, rooted in a need to contain fan emotions and behavior a safe distance away from "normal" media use. However, the triumphal narrative of fan culture tells us that, as fans have moved into the mainstream of popular culture, they have been not just accepted but embraced and celebrated. As "normal" media use and fan culture have increasingly converged, it would seem that there is no longer a need for harsh stigmas and stereotypes. Unfortunately, turning to the fan entitlement discourse, this is not the case:

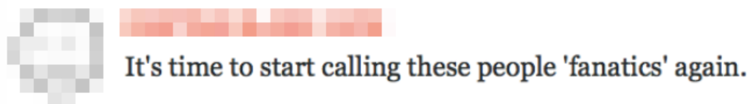


Fig. 22. Fanatics again

The comment in Fig. 22 illustrates two key features of how fans have historically been

stigmatized and stereotyped: 1) othering, in this case by describing bad fans as “these people,” and 2) the deployment of a harmful fan-specific stereotype, in this case the use of the word “fanatic.” By saying that it is time to consider the fan as fanatic “again,” the comment also mirrors a key argument in Faraci’s article about the evolution of fandom: from bad, to good, to bad again.

This comment is an instance of what Mel Stanfill (2013) calls “intra-fandom stereotyping,” insofar as that it is happening within fandom and not, as has historically been the prime case, as a way to establish boundaries between non-fans and fans. In “Fandom as Pathology” Joli Jenson (1992) discusses how popular writing about fans has “othered” fans by treating them as abnormal, socially deviant, and overly emotional. This characterization of fans stands in contrast to “normal” media users, who may “appreciate” or “admire” a cultural product but do so in a rational rather than emotional manner. Jenson (1992, 20) asks, “Is it the existence of passion that defines the distinction between fan and [non-fan], between dangerous and benign, between deviance and normalcy?” Containing dangerous emotions in “the other,” therefore, positions fans as scapegoats and relieves anxiety about our own deviance and emotionality: “Fans, when insistently characterized as ‘them,’ can be distinguished from ‘people like us’” (9). Furthermore, Jenson explains the importance of the term “fanatic”: Drawing on the original meaning of “fanatic” — which ranges from “insane person” in the 16th century usage to a “zealous person” who is “characterized by excessive enthusiasm” from the 17th century onward — she argues that the negative traits associated with fanaticism continued to shape a view of fandom as “excessive, bordering on deranged, behavior” (9). Disavowing certain elements of fandom by characterizing them as excessive and abnormal becomes a means of establishing and reinforcing boundaries between “us” and “them,” between normal and deviant behavior:

> Fandom, it seems, is not readily conceptualized as a general or shared trait, as a form of loyalty or attachment, as a mode of 'enacted affinity.' Fandom, instead, is what 'they' do; 'we,' on the other hand, have tastes and preferences, and select worthy people, beliefs and activities for our admiration and esteem. Furthermore, what 'they' do is deviant, and therefore dangerous, while what 'we' do is normal, and therefore safe. (Jenson 1992, 19)

Of course, the increased prominence and value of fan practices in mainstream culture means that more and more people do speak about fandom as something "we" do. However, this does not mean that stereotypes about fans have disappeared; it means that the boundaries have shifted and that it is not fans and fandom in general that is othered, but certain kinds of fans.

As such, while the first evolution from deviant to acceptable fandom refers primarily to its public perception, the more recent evolution from acceptable fandom back to deviance and pathology is depicted as a core problem inside fandom:

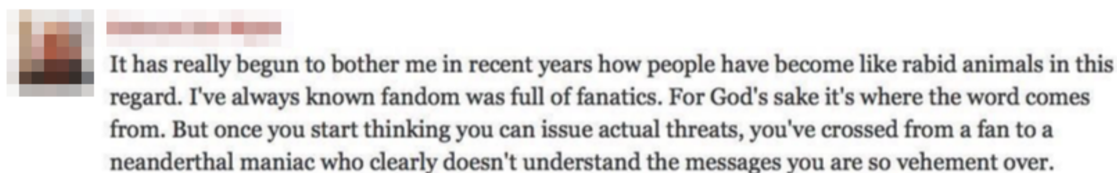
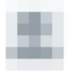


Fig. 23. Crossed from a fan to a neanderthal maniac

The comment in Fig. 23 introduces an important nuance in this discussion by both asserting that "fandom [is] full of fanatics" and by working to draw a boundary that marks certain behavior as "[crossing] from a fan to a neanderthal maniac." As such, it hints that good fans are measured

and well-behaved and bad fans act “like rabid animals.” The references to Neanderthals and rabies seem to imply a lack of cognitive development and control among the bad fans. The comment draws the boundary between good and bad fans fairly clearly at the point where “actual threats” are issued. However, other comments indicate that this boundary may not be quite that easily drawn:



In my opinion that is not fandom it is the work of lunatics. Although I guess the writer of this article would disagree and place me, as a man who greatly anticipates the game, in with them.

Fig. 24. Not fandom; it is the work of lunatics

The comment in Fig. 24 once again distinguishes between true and false fandom by marking the latter as “the work of lunatics.” The reference to “lunatics” draws on familiar fan stereotypes around mental pathology and thus reinforces a boundary around “crazy” fan behavior. However, what is interesting about this comment is that it expresses anxiety about where these boundaries are being drawn: “I guess the writer of this article would … place me, as a man who greatly anticipates the game, in with them.” While the author does use othering language by referring to bad fans as “them,” he also raises the question of whether less extreme instances of fandom, specifically his great anticipation of a particular video game, cross the line into bad fandom. It is unclear what kind of behavior the author’s great anticipation translates into, and whether this behavior would be considered inappropriate within the fan entitlement discourse. One possible reading is that the author is concerned his/her emotional investment is in itself inappropriate, thus connecting to the “fanatic” stereotype around excessive enthusiasm.

Get a Frickin' Life

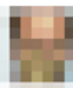
The stereotype that fans over-prioritize the fan object in their life, to the detriment of more worthwhile activities, is keenly captured in the admonishment that fans should "get a life." The phrase was made famous in a 1986 *Saturday Night Live* sketch, in which William Shatner (the actor portraying Captain Kirk on TV's original *Star Trek* and in multiple follow-up films) attends a *Star Trek* convention and faces a barrage of fan questions about minute details of the *Star Trek* narrative universe. Frustrated, Shatner shouts at the fans, "Get a life, will you people? I mean, I mean, for crying out loud, it's just a TV show!" (Jenkins 1992, 10). The phrase has since become part of "fanlore" and signals a general "insult to fans, suggesting that fandom is a waste of time and that fans are losers" (Fanlore n.d., par. 3). However, as with many aspects of fandom, the dedicated and passionate relationships to media products that inspired insults such as "get a life" have increasingly become part of mainstream media consumption. Interestingly, Shatner himself noted that his sketch was out of step with the changing perception of fandom in his 1999 autobiography, knowingly titled *Get a Life.* He wrote, "That now-infamous sketch was for me, at that time, equal parts comedy and catharsis. … I bought into the Trekkie stereotypes. In a nutshell, I was a dope" (quoted in Harrison 1999, par. 1). However, the "get a life" stereotype has not disappeared. While it is no longer fans in general who are told to "get a life," the rebuke has become part of the fan entitlement discourse. In fact, Proctor (2017, 1119) argues that, "Oftentimes, the way the 'toxic' or 'entitled' fan is represented is actually an updated stereotype of the fan who takes popular culture too seriously and needs to 'get a life.'"

The fan entitlement discourse references the "get a life" stereotype in ways that echo now familiar re-deployments of historical stereotypes and stigmas:

I honestly think they just want something to complain about. Being dissatisfied and raging at something is all they have in life. If they were ever satisfied and content with things, they wouldn't know what to do. They'd probably have to take stock of how shitty their lives are, and they can't have that. No sir.

Fig. 25. Take stock of how shitty their lives are.

The comment in Fig. 25 shows how a variation of "get a life" (the suggestion that bad fans have "shitty" lives outside fandom) can be connected to toxic fan behavior. It argues that such fans do not have well-rounded lives outside fandom, and that they find meaning and pleasure in being "dissatisfied and raging at something." The comment suggests that, if fandom were not "all they have in life," these fans would presumably not feel (or have the need to voice) such extreme emotions about the fan object.



This is why I warn people not to go too deep into a fandom.You CAN be passionate about something, but good lord, when you start getting stupid and sending death threats to people just because you don't like something- you definitely need to step away from the computer and rethink your priorities in life.

Fig. 26. Rethink your priorities in life.

The comment in Fig. 26 articulates a similar argument and suggests that bad fans are too involved in fandom and need to "rethink [their] priorities in life." However, there is also a suggestion that the boundary between being a good fan and a bad fan is slippery and is crossed at some point when people "go too deep into fandom." Echoing Busse's (2013, 78) argument that good fans "aren't too fannish, too obsessive, too much," the comment allows that fans "CAN be

passionate about something" but draws the line at "getting stupid and sending death threats to people just because you don't like something." The key implication here is that good fans moderate their emotions and react appropriately, while bad fans react in excessive ways to what should be a minor occurrence in a well-rounded life ("you don't like something").

> It's been a weird couple of years with media and social media. I see a lot of entitlement and a lot of people looking for offense where none is intended. I'm curious to see how creators will respond going forward, but death threats over a comic book..get a frickin' life.

Fig. 27. Get a frickin' life.

The comment in Fig. 27 specifically (and with added emphasis) deploys the phrase "get a frickin' life" in order to denounce toxic fan practices. Death threats are evoked as a bright line of unacceptable behavior (more on this later in this chapter). However, the comment further speculates about the motivation behind such behavior and suggests that toxic fan practices stem from "looking for offense where none is intended." The "get a life" comments echo the confusion over how to label — and, by extension, discipline — inappropriate behavior. Even Faraci, in considering the death threat he published in his article, asks, "Is it bullshit? Maybe. Trolls gotta troll." The comment in Fig. 27 similarly suggest that fans who "look for offense" and engage in fandom with the aim of "being dissatisfied and raging at something" may be trolling and stirring up conflict for their own amusement. As such, labeling certain fan behaviors and discourses as "trolling" often serves the same function as labeling them as "toxic." It is a way to construct bad fandom, either because these fans are not showing enough authenticity or

showing too much emotion and attachment, because they do not conform to community standards, or because they may be raising uncomfortable and unpopular issues. As such, the argument in Fig. 27 is similar to that in Fig. 25 in that bad fans seek out conflict around their fan object, either because they care too much about the fan object and cannot control their reaction or because they get pleasure from the act of stirring up conflict itself.

Can Fandom Still Be a Safe Space?

Historically, fans have tended to protect themselves from stigmas and stereotypes by withdrawing into separate and private spaces, insulated from judgment, from ridicule, and, most importantly, from misunderstanding. The separation between fans and non-fans was, in fact, maintained from both sides:

> [The] boundaries between the community of fans and the rest of the world are … strongly marked and patrolled. Both sides of the boundary invest in the difference; mundane viewers often wish to avoid what they see as the taint of fandom – 'I'm not really a fan, of course, but…' On the other side of the line, fans may argue about what characteristics allow someone to cross it and become a true fan, but they are clearly agreed on the existence of the line. (Fiske 1992, 35)

Fisk's argument points to the important role that stigma plays in the separation between fans and non-fans. Within dominant culture — echoing Jenson's argument in "Fandom as Pathology" — fans were othered and marked as deviant and different. Fiske highlights fans' desire to protect the authenticity of fan culture as a key reason why they "agree on the existence of the line" between fans and non-fans, whereby "true" fans seek to exclude those who do not qualify as

such. However, stigma plays equally as important a role in why fan communities may choose to segregate themselves and withdraw from mainstream culture. Bacon-Smith (1992, 3) writes about the role of fandom as a safe space that allows its members to express an identity and engage in a set of behaviors that might be ridiculed by society at large, explaining that, "The community is open to anyone willing to participate, but closed to anyone who might jeer, or worse, blow the whistle." Bacon-Smith wrote about *Star Trek* fans in the pre-Internet era, when a sense of community was primarily formed and maintained at conventions, in clubs, or through publications (8). Some fans may interact with the community very little and only do so for specific purposes, like collecting fanzines or writing fan fiction. Others may look to the community for "family" relationships. These members "actively work to create an ideal society for themselves and fellow community members through the medium of their work and through the social organization they build around it" (41). This "ideal society" provided its members an opportunity to cultivate a fan identity through their activity and productivity, knowing that they could express themselves freely and without judgment in a variety of ways, including folksongs, poetry, prose, illustrations, art, costumes, crafts, video art, bookmaking, photographs, and ephemera collecting (7).

Jenkins (1992, 280, 283) has similarly described fandom as an "alternative social community" and "a space … defined by its refusal of mundane values and practices, its celebration of deeply held emotions and passionately embraced pleasures." In the fan groups he describes, the sense of community fulfills its members' needs for affiliation, friendship, and shared enthusiasm in a space apart from the stresses and pressures of the ordinary world. However, it was crucial for these fans that their community remained just that: a space apart from the ordinary world. Fans were, in fact, quite happy to be outside the mainstream, as this

made them feel protected and connected. Jenkins quotes one fan who proclaims that she "gains power and identity from the time she spends within fan culture; fandom allows her to maintain her sanity in the face of the indignity and alienation of everyday life" (281). Choosing to be a part of such fan communities, then, was often a risky but highly rewarding and empowering choice. As Jenkins (1992, 23) writes,

> To speak as a fan is to accept what has been labeled a subordinated position within the cultural hierarchy, to accept an identity constantly belittled by institutional authorities. Yet it is also to speak from a position of collective identity, to forge an alliance with a community of others.

The rituals, protection, and sense of belonging of the fan community formed the basis of this kind of fan identity, which provided its members with a source of cultural status and self-esteem even as the dominant culture disregarded and ridiculed their passions and practices.

As fan culture has moved into more mainstream spaces and become more visible, more public, with fewer private fan spaces, the sense of fandom as a safe space has eroded for many fans. Importantly, even while dominant stereotypes and stigmas decrease in popular representations of fans, the fan entitlement discourse increasingly takes aim at its own. It engages in intra-fandom stereotyping in order to discipline fans who act and exist outside these new (and, often, old) boundaries of good and bad fandom. Specifically, the fans who represent "broken" fandom are disciplined for acting in ways that are constructed as emotionally excessive, over-invested, inappropriate, inauthentic. In another world, these fans might be celebrated for being passionate, committed to their fandom and/or the fan object, and eager to structure their lives and identities around it. As it stands, a good fan cannot be "too fannish, too obsessive, too much"

(Busse 2013, 73). Consequently, contemporary fan culture may once again see fan communities self-segregate and withdraw into safe spaces, especially those communities that do not fit the mold of what the fan entitlement discourse defines as good fandom.

Fans as Bullies, Creators as Victims

Faraci (2016, par. 2) chose Stephen King's *Misery* as the story (or cautionary tale) to introduce his argument, writing that it is "a very, very thinly veiled metaphor for the relationship between pop fiction creators and their most dedicated, most rabid fanbases and the way the creators can be trapped, bullied and tortured by their own creations and the people who love them." In the 1987 novel (as well as the 1990 film adaptation), the antagonist, Annie Wilkes, literally holds her favorite author hostage and goes so far as to *break his ankles with a sledgehammer* in order to prevent him from escaping and to ensure that he re-write his latest manuscript to spare her favorite character. To equate fans posting their opinions on the Internet with this degree of actual violence, even if only metaphorically, seems like an over-reaction. However, it does illustrate the rhetorical strategy of appealing to extremes, which is used throughout the fan entitlement discourse. This kind of black-and-white thinking uses particularly shocking examples in order to encourage its audience to think in over-simplified categories wherein fans are bullies, and creators are victims.

Mel Stanfill (2019, 184) argues that the process of framing the media industries as "victims of monstrous fans" has all the features of a moral panic. She explains that a moral panic causes people to be "disproportionately distressed … because the perception of danger is disproportionate to the actual threat" (185). That is, fan entitlement is framed as an existential threat to fandom (and perhaps even to the media industry system) when, in less alarmist terms, it

is merely "fans talking back to industry and wanting media made differently" (185). As such, the fan entitlement discourse creates a sense of threat and urgency by "emphasizing the most violent examples of fan behavior" (185). That "most violent example" is the death threat.

Because Faraci's article devotes significant space and attention to reprinting a letter that includes a death threat to a Marvel comic executive, the discussion is fundamentally framed in terms of extremes, and death threats subsequently become a slippery slope for unacceptable fan behavior. Of course, death threats, whether or not they are an act of Internet trolling, should be taken seriously and renounced accordingly. The point here is not that we should accept death threats in the interest of protecting fan empowerment; the point is how the death threats operate as a rhetorical device in order to advance an argument regarding fan entitlement. The argument works by attempting to erase ambiguity in what are appropriate and inappropriate fan responses. There is a spectrum in the tone, tenor, and content of critical fan responses. By framing the argument through the clearly unacceptable idea of the death threat, the idea is primed that a wider range of fan response should be considered hostile and potentially dangerous. No reasonable person is going to argue that death threats are acceptable, so the specter of all fan response potentially escalating to death threats effectively becomes a tool to shut down all negative fan responses. The comment in Fig. 28 illustrates this, as the commenter goes to great lengths to avoid being associated with any negativity that is too closely associated with death threats:

I think fan outrage over this was entirely predictable. AND NO ONE SHOUI MAKE DEATH THREATS TO ANYONE OR EVEN TALK DISPARAGINGLY TO OTHERS. NO. DEATH. THREATS. Civil Discussion. Yay, artistic freedom! Yay, a sense of proportion and obligation! Yay, considering the reactions of others. Yay, respect for those who came before you. NO DEATH THREATS. (Have I made clear where I stand on death threats or vicious ove reaction? I'm not certain.)

Fig. 28. NO. DEATH. THREATS.

The vehemence of this comment illustrates a strong desire to eliminate any confusion about where the author stands with respect to these kinds of personal attacks. However, it also hints at underlying nuance, notably the author's concern that seeking to justify "fan outrage" in any way might be construed as supporting anti-social behavior in its extremes. The comment is careful to draw a boundary not just around making threats, but around the more general idea of "disparaging" talk. It is not clear at this point what is meant by "disparaging talk," except that it is distinct from the acceptable "civil discussion" — which presumably includes a regard for "artistic freedom," "a sense of proportion and obligation," "considering the reactions of others," and showing "respect for those who came before you."

Other commenters also grappled with the question of "where [to set] the line between acceptable/reasonable expressions of fan dislike and going too far" (Fig. 29). Once again, the comment below is prefaced with the fact that "personal character attacks, violence and threats" are "absolutely wrong and over the line," but the question of where the line should be remains difficult:

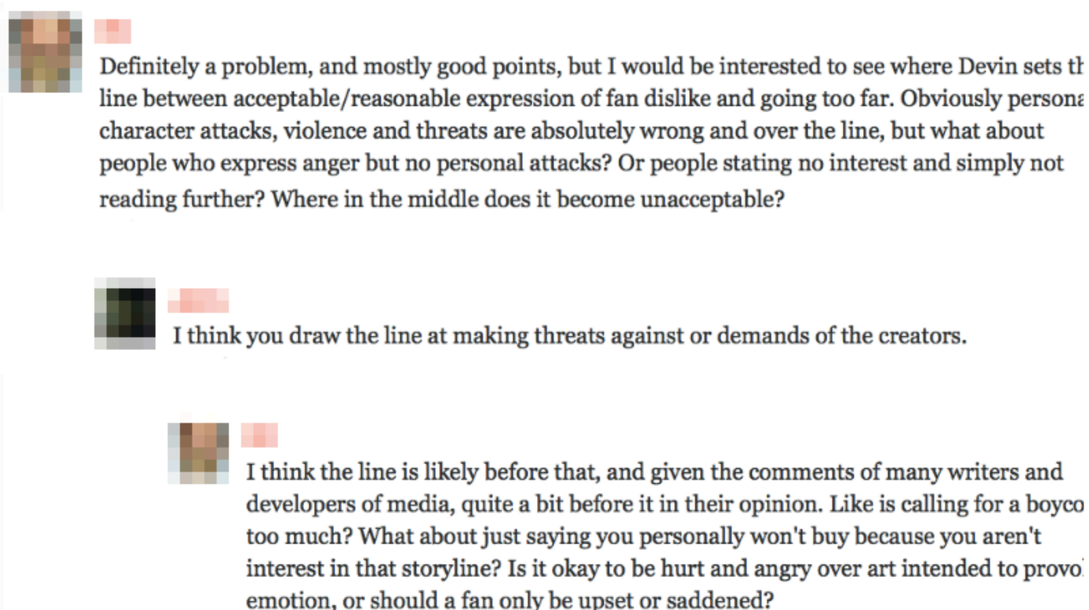


Fig. 29. Making threats or demands of the creators.

What is interesting in this short exchange is that “threats against … creators” is paired with “demands of the creators” as equivalent points on the spectrum of fan response. As I have previously discussed, the discourse around *entitled* fans shares many features (and parts of its history) with the idea of *demanding* fans. To suggest that making demands of media creators is comparable to threatening physical harm and violence is a clear instance of black-and-white thinking. The exchange continues with the suggestion that the line of appropriate fan behavior is “likely before that” — though how far before threats and demands is a matter of perspective. The comment points out that “many writers and developers of media” would draw the line of acceptability to exclude those fan reactions not in line with the industry’s desires in terms of consumption and emotional reaction: “calling for a boycott,” “saying you personally won’t buy,” or being “hurt and angry.”

The assumption that fan response should always be positive is an important aspect of the fan entitlement discourse: a positive reaction is uncritical, celebratory, affirmational. Much of what is "broken" in fandom, in fact, has been blamed on the growing negativity of fan reactions and interactions. For Faraci, this negativity represents a turn away from good and authentic fandom. His view of fandom is that it was "historically, generally positive," and many of the arguments around the brokenness of fandom blame this perceived turn from positive to negative (Faraci 2016, par. 7). Highlighting death threats becomes a way of vilifying negative fan reaction in general. However, Jonathan Gray's (2003) article "New Audiences, New Textualities: Anti-Fans and Non-Fans" persuasively argues that negativity is an integral part of fan culture. His argument is that there is a range of fan engagements and behaviors, and what we consider fandom should not be limited to the positive and harmonious end of the spectrum. He terms these critical fans "anti-fans" and, comparing them to atomic particles, fans are the "positively charged" protons while anti-fans are the "negatively charged" electrons (Gray 2003, 70). Anti-fans are still part of fandom, but their participation is motivated by a desire to express their strong dislike for a "given text or genre, considering it inane, stupid, morally bankrupt and/or aesthetic drivel" (70). However, the core of Gray's argument is that anti-fans' behavior is still rooted in passion rather than apathy:

> Studying the anti-fan could also provide further insight into the nature of affective involvement, for many of us care as deeply (if not more so) about those texts that we dislike as we do about those that we like. … Behind dislike, after all, there are always expectations – of what a text should be like, of what is a waste of media time and space, of what morality or aesthetics texts should adopt, and of what we would like to see others watch or read. (73)

Dismissing anti-fans, and negativity within fandom in general, dismisses many of the motivations, behaviors, and expectations that make up the fan experience.

While I am arguing that anti-fans, negative fan reactions, and even some frightening fan behaviors should not be excluded from what we consider “real” fandom, there is also a larger question, especially when it comes to behaviors like death threats: In order to protect tolerance, must we tolerate intolerance? On the one hand, troubling fan behavior is a little like free speech: We have to tolerate the instances when we disagree in order to protect the instances that are vital for positive change. However, my larger point is that we must pay attention how the discourse around this anti-social behavior is constructed: Why call it “entitlement” when it should, more accurately, be called online bullying, or personal harassment, or racism, or sexism, or homophobia, etc.? When a death threat is held forward as an instance of fan entitlement, rather than an instance of criminally threatening behavior, it serves a larger purpose: to discipline what is seen as excessive fan power in the fan/industry relationship.

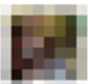
They Play up the Power of the Fan

If the fan entitlement discourse is to be believed, fans are now running the show and are using threats and intimidation to get their way. However, as I have previously discussed, fans may have limited power to influence and they may have some power to control the discourse around a fan object, but they have little to no real power: they do not make the ultimate decisions, they cannot assert legal or economic ownership, and they do not receive compensation for the labor they contribute. Exaggerating fan’s actual power in the fan/industry relationship is ultimately a rhetorical strategy that is intended to limit that power. As Stanfill (2019, 186) writes, “the worry is fans not being appropriately respectful—or subordinate.” The trajectory of fan’s

rise to power is represented in two ways in the fan entitlement discourse: First, the argument is that the industry made fans feel overly empowered through their marketing and publicity activities. Second, there is an argument that fans have developed an overzealous "the customer is always right" mindset. This argument implies that entitled fans think they should be served by their entertainment, when appropriate fandom works the other way around: fans should serve (and celebrate and appreciate) their fan objects and those who created them.

Any Publicity is Good Publicity

The entertainment industry engages fans in a variety of ways in order to drive the visibility of and engagement with its products. One dynamic that the fan entitlement discourse points to is that media companies encourage a high degree of "energy" and "hype" around their products, which "sets up bigger expectations for fulfilling promises" and ultimately makes fans feel too powerful:



I think the direct access to creators has also changed things in a big way because it sets up bigger expectations for fulfilling promises. A lot of production crew, particularly for television shows and franchise movies, are on Twitter and other platforms to "keep up the energy" by dropping little hints and teases everywhere, and while sometimes it's fun, it also can be quite agitating, particularly if the fans later feel they were actually misled by the information they were getting. This isn't a world of two or three years between one book/movie and the next, where people engage with the story and then it doesn't come back up again for a while. It's not even one night a week for television. It's night one is the show release, maybe with live-tweets by the cast and crew, night two is the online dissection and critique of the critics' reviews, night three is the start of graphics from the episode on tumblr, night four is the production company giving a "sneak peek", night five is dissecting the sneak peek and trying to figure out what's coming, night six is a crew member tweeting something that dangles in front of everyone like a carrot before a horse, and night seven is "OMG new eppy tomorrow!" before it starts ALL OVER AGAIN. The professionals prod all of this along with an attitude of "any good publicity is good publicity," then act surprised when it blows up in their faces. (Not saying they deserve it, but sometimes I really wonder how they didn't see it coming.)

Fig. 30. Keep up the energy.

One major marketing strategy is to ensure constant engagement with the media product, so that it consistently stays front of mind for its audience. The above comment in Fig. 30 describes a cycle of promotion that involves not just official marketing staff but also members of the "production crew" using social media in order to "keep up the energy" with a non-stop cycle of "hints and teases." While this process can be fun, the comment argues that "it can also be quite agitating, particularly if the fans later feel they were actually misled by the information they were getting." The comment cautions that this process not only raises the level of excitement and increases social media visibility, it also "sets up bigger expectations for fulfilling promises." It is these raised expectations, and the industry's "attitude of 'any publicity is good publicity'" that occasionally "blows up in their faces." The result is fan outrage, backlash, or, in the extreme, threats and harassment. While the comment clarifies that abuse is certainly not deserved, it does argue that it is a predictable result of the industry's high-energy, non-stop attempts to engage and activate its audience: "sometimes I really wonder how they didn't see it coming." In other words, the industry's marketing tactics create an emotionally charged environment that encourages and rewards a high degree of involvement and interaction.

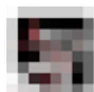
Not only has it spiraled out of control, but the media depends on this kind of off-the-handle reaction to help fuel it's "no publicity is bad publicity" paradigm. If hype can fuel an entire franchise, why not have outrage? It's bigger than hype and it's fingers are longer reaching.

Fig. 31. Hype can fuel an entire franchise.

The comment in Fig. 31 echoes a similar sentiment, and even goes so far as to suggest that the entertainment industry actively incites and "depends on this kind of off-the-handle reaction."

Taking the approach that "no publicity is bad publicity," the comment argues that the goal of fan-targeted marketing is not just "hype" (which implies a high-energy, but generally positive reaction) but "outrage." As such, the implication is that toxic fan behavior is not just an unintended consequence but an intended marketing strategy, as outrageous threats and harassment often garner additional media attention, and, thus, the impact of "outrage" can be "bigger than hype" and more far-reaching.

When taken to its extreme, the fan entitlement discourse raises the question of whether industry-encouraged "outrage" and "hype" is actually a root cause of fandom's current broken-ness. As the comment in Fig. 32 argues, "the industry was broken first and the offshoot effect was that it helped to break the fandom."



The article brings an incredible introspection at the mechanisms behind the broken fandom, but it is also to consider that the broken industry also helps to support this kind of behavior, as well as artisans who are merely cow towing to the current phenomena of "for ratings's sake".
Fandom is as broken as the industry. I might even be so bold to contest that the industry was broken first and the offshoot effect was that it helped to break the fandom; It was the industry who first invited the audience to participate in influencing content the moment it gave way to reality TV and shows like "American Idol" that prompted audiences to sway the outcome to their personal favor. This bred the entitlement in to the audience as a mandatory participation, rather than a passive contemplative observer.

Fig. 32. The industry was broken first.

The comment identifies several key features of broken fandom that are actually the result of changing entertainment business models, production processes, and marketing strategies: First, the industry "invited the audience to participate in influencing content," specifically through reality TV programs like *American Idol*, which placed the power to determine the outcome in the hands of the viewers. The comment argues that this new engagement model "bred the

entitlement" that shifted the default audience position from that of a "passive contemplative observer" towards "mandatory participation." However, the ways that fan/industry power dynamics are represented in this data set often mark an empowered audience as problematic. As the comment in Fig. 32 establishes, a highly active audience is seen as problematic and "broken," whether it was the entertainment industry that inspired this shift, or whether it was fans themselves who recognized and seized their greater power.

I am arguing that Hollywood has a part to play in this trend (besides the threats & disgusting comments/actions of fans). They play up the power of the fan, they beg the fan to get their show/game/movie trending, they beg the fan to get involved on the internet, they beg the fans to save their show by signing petitions and writing in to the studios.

If Hollywood kept up a firewall between their creative and the public (fans) then they wouldn't be playing any part in this trend, but they don't do that.

Fig. 33. They play up the power of the fan.

The comment in Fig. 33 extends the argument that "the power of the fan" has been the driving force in a troublesome "trend" towards toxic and entitled behavior. Again, the comment roots this process in how the entertainment industry has engaged and empowered audiences, pointing out that media companies "beg the fan" to promote their product on social media, to "get involved on the internet," and to "save their show by signing petitions and writing in to the studios." The fan practices this comment highlights (social media publicity, online engagement, targeted campaigns) can be considered as a form of marketing and "industry-driven fandom" (Busse and Gray 2011, 431). Specifically, the entertainment industry encourages and benefits

from certain fan practices in order to ensure a loyal audience base (430). This largely allows the entertainment industry to control these interactions, maintain the dominant position in the fan/creator power dynamic, and discipline fan behavior accordingly. Consequently, Busse and Gray argue that engaging in industry-driven fandom limits fans to "coloring within the lines," and it is the "very limitation of those 'lines' that has many members of traditional fan communities rejecting these more … endorsed" ways of being a fan (432). Perhaps the "trend" the comment in Fig. 33 and others are concerned with is rooted in such a rejection of the disciplined and structured fan/creator power dynamic. The comment calls for Hollywood to keep up "a firewall between their creative [sic] and the public (fans)." Presumably, doing so would dampen bad fan behavior because it would eliminate any illusion of access or influence. Read another way: keeping up a strong separation between fans and creators would remove any sense of power or agency fans may feel they have in the fan/industry relationship.

The "Fansumer"

Another way in which the fan entitlement discourse disciplines perceptions of fan power is by aligning them with excessive consumerism. The role of consumption within the fan experience has been subject to much academic discussion. In one sense, fans are "ideal consumers since their consumption habits can be very highly predicted by the culture industry, and are likely to remain stable" (Hills 2002, 29). However, fan studies, especially in its foundational texts, has tended to frame fans as "resistant" readers and, consequently, distinguish fans from consumers by focusing on creative and productive fan practices. Hills (2002, 29) critiques this distinction and argues that, "seeking to construct a sustainable opposition between the 'fan' and the 'consumer,' falsifies the fan's experience by positioning fan and consumer as

separable cultural entities." Fans are always consumers, and enthusiastic ones at that. However, in popular discourse, fan practices around consumption have often been marked as excessive and thus formed the basis for stereotypes. Stanfill (2013, 124) writes, "though consumption is culturally standard, fans violate its normativity through overindulgence." Stanfill recounts an interview with one *Xena* fan who linked excessive consumption to an inappropriate emotional attachment to the show, to the extent that these fans are

> more likely to feel (and express) that by spending $$ on merchandising, they have a greater connection to the show and importance for it than the casual viewer, that they (and people like them) are personally responsible for its success, and that the producers, actors, etc. therefore owe them something for their loyalty. (125-126)

This quote echoes Faraci's argument that excessive consumerism is bound up with illusions of influence, a greater feeling of ownership, and entitlement. As Faraci (2016, par. 6) writes, fans today are treating media products not as art but as commercial products that should be tailored to their likes and dislikes, "like ordering at a restaurant - hold the pickles, please, and can I substitute kale for the lettuce?"

The comments similarly express a belief that fan entitlement is rooted in excessive consumerism:

This is part of the consumerist problem Devin is talking about. It's absolutely bizarre by a real measure but makes perfect sense if you stop thinking of these fans as people (sorry, I feel gross even typing that) and start thinking about them as just consumers, beings who literally exist to consume product. Being selective about which entries in a franchise or which writers of a comic character or even which particular kind of story you're into requi stepping back and seeing both the work and your relationship to it as particular creative endeavors vs simply consumer/product.

Fig. 34. Start thinking about them as just consumers

The comment in Fig. 34 escalates the connection between bad fandom and consumerism by suggesting that we should "stop thinking of these fans as people … and start thinking about them as just consumers." The implication is that "these fans" are not discerning and not genuinely appreciative of their fan objects "as particular creative endeavors." Instead, they adopt a sort of robotic mindlessness, wherein they "literally exist to consume product." Ironically, this comment does not deploy the charge of deviant consumerism in the way that Stanfill (2013) observed in her interviews; specifically in its connection to excess emotion and attachment. The comment instead implies a lack of emotion and suggests that humanity ("stop thinking of these fans as people") and considered appreciation ("being selective about [what] you're into") have been replaced with an unfeeling and undiscerning consumerist mindset.

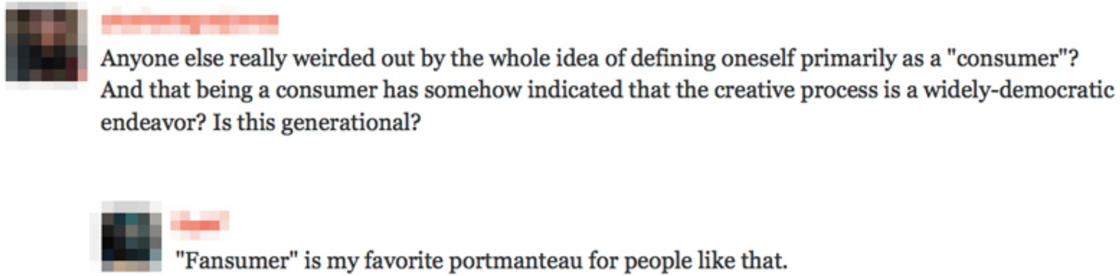


Fig. 35. "Fansumer"

This brief exchange in Fig. 35 introduces the term "fansumer" to describe "people like that" — i.e. entitled fans who use their consumer status to justify illusions of influence. The top comment in the exchange disciplines excess consumption in two ways: First, the author marks a consumerist identity as deviant and notes that s/he is "really weirded out" by some fans' excessive consumerism. Second, the commenter marks an overly consumerist mindset as childish and immature by asking, "Is this generational?" and thus implying that older and more mature fans would not hold such a mistaken belief. The main concern of these comments, however, is that "being a consumer has somehow indicated the creative process is a widely-democratic endeavor." The implication is that only bad fans who over-identify as consumers believe that they should have influence in the creative process. Good fans respect the sanctity of the text and the fan/industry hierarchy, they consume in moderation, and they do not expect to influence the creative process in any way.

I was baffled by that one too. In some ways I think it's simply a matter of social identity being tied into consumerism. For a group of individuals the latest release and the chance to consume it, is the prom. And I'm not saying that in a way like "look at these losers in their mom's basements who can't get dates," I'm saying that they've allowed their purchasing calendar to become their social calendar, to become their life's milestones in a very unhealthy way.

Fig. 36. Social identity being tied into consumerism.

The comment in Fig. 36 connects to the long-standing "get a life" stereotype, whereby fans are assumed to obsess about their fan objects to the exclusion of other, healthier past-times. The stereotype represents bad fans as those who have "allowed their purchasing calendar to become their social calendar, to become their life's milestones in a very unhealthy way." However, it offers an update of the "get a life" stereotype, in that the author is careful to point out that s/he is not invoking the stereotype in the traditional way: "I'm not saying that in a way like 'look at these losers in their mom's basement who can't get dates.'" Instead, the comment marks excitement for and anticipation of "the latest release and the chance to consume it" as excessive. Invoking the idea that release events are like "the prom" for such fans, the comment implies that this is not only deviant and "baffling," but also that bad fans should have more well-rounded lives and identities, perhaps prioritizing the actual prom over their attachment to the fan object.

What underpins these concerns around excessive fan power is a more fundamental question of power in the fan/industry relationship: is fan power granted from the top down, or do fans claim their power from the bottom up? Of course, the answer is always "both." The ways that fans make their voices heard and exert influence in the media industry system are part of the cycle of supply and demand, using both formal market research and audience metrics and

informal ways of interacting and connecting (e.g. social media, fan campaigns). It is the industry adapting to fan culture that developed independently, and it is fan culture adapting to the limitations and opportunities offered by the industry. Anxieties that the media and entertainment industries "play up the power of the fan" through their marketing and publicity activities is fundamentally a concern that the industry has granted fans too much power. In this sense, the fan entitlement discourse can be seen as an effort to put the genie back in the bottle. It is true that the industry system has evolved in such a way to incorporate and depend on more varied and qualitative types of audience feedback and interaction. However, as concerns around the "fansumer" show, fans are also claiming the various routes to power they have available to them; in this case, they see themselves as customers and act (demand) accordingly. Fans have also seized power from the bottom up by creating alternate routes to power for themselves – routes that do not follow pre-existing channels of influence or fit pre-existing roles. This is the logic behind seeing fan practices as "guerilla-style tactics" in the struggle for power in the fan/industry relationship, referencing the idea of guerilla warfare, whereby the less powerful use unorthodox, radical, and creative ways to fight a more powerful force (Gray, Sandvoss and Harringon 2007, 1-2). These fans enact power where they can: the power to interpret a text in oppositional, unusual, and personally meaningful ways; the power to transform the original text and create fan works that increase their enjoyment of the story and strengthen ties with their community; the power to discuss, critique, and make judgments; and, yes, the power to use the growing number of communication platforms available to them to demand the stories, characters, and representation they want. It is these kind of guerilla-style tactics that are being framed as problematic in the fan entitlement discourse in order to discipline excessive fan power in the fan/industry relationship.

Good Fans, Bad Fans

The underlying rhetorical strategy of how the fan entitlement discourse seeks to discipline excessive fan power is to define good and bad fandom – good fandom is healthy and acceptable and must be protected by disciplining and excluding bad fandom, which is entitled, toxic, broken. As such, the fan entitlement discourse represents an instance of the power to define, which I identified as one of the key areas of fan/industry power struggle in Chapter 2. Furthermore, the fan entitlement discourse is, to a large extent, part of the fan world's continuous process of self-definition, as it grapples with where to draw the lines between acceptable fans and "fanatics." In doing so, the discussion ranges from the extremes of behavior (i.e. death threats) to more subtle concerns, such as what behaviors qualify as "civil" discussion and which displays of emotional investment and enthusiasm are appropriate.

Struggles around self-definition happen in most communities — fan communities, online communities, offline communities — in order to set standards for appropriate and acceptable community behavior. Sophie Charlotte van de Goor's (2015, 275) article "'You Must be New Here': Reinforcing the Good Fan" describes how online fan communities construct "good" and "bad" fan practices in order to "emphasize a sense of togetherness" by defining and upholding such standards. Van de Goor specifically looks at the online message board 4chan and focuses on how members deploy the phrase "you must be new here," both seriously and playfully, in order to reprimand "improper behavior" while simultaneously establishing the person issuing the rebuke as "a 'good' citizen of that particular community" (276). She further explains, "Knowledge of 'proper behaviour' is wielded by people, in this case by contributors on 4chan …, as 'a tool of social distinction', helping to distinguish those who belong in a community from those who do not" (276). This knowledge of proper community behavior can be demonstrated by

displaying mastery of the administrative rules and regulations of the particular community (such as using correct post formatting) and by following "unwritten rules" of tone, content, and language that "help set and guard the imagined boundaries of a community, and help determine who belongs where" (276). Taken together, practices of othering and disciplining construct the image of the good fan, whose presence in and contributions to a community match what is allowed and avoid what is not. Van de Goor argues that the construction of the good fan is both the cause and result of a "sense of community as structured through internal and external discourse" (288). Academic discourse around good fans plays a part here, as fan studies tends to celebrate the fan who "holds all the positive qualities of being a fan" while downplaying "undesirable, disturbing, or problematising aspects, such as infighting, marginalisation, or improper tastes" (289). Popular media discourse about fans has also celebrated, or even actively encouraged, more commercial and palatable fan practices, thus raising the issue of "how much freedom there is (and we allow) to be 'different' inside this regulated fan culture, as well as an issue of how boundaries are policed in relation to individual degrees of fannish practice" (289).

The fan entitlement discourse defines good fans along a number of now-familiar axes: Good fans are respectful of authorship and deferential to the creators of media products. They are rational and not excessively emotional in their reactions, especially in their (occasional and well-informed) criticism. They are allowed to be sad and disappointed, but they may not be angry or outraged. They should not harbor any illusions of influence or ownership. If they don't like a media product, they may choose not to consume it — but they should not take this consumerist mindset so far that they become demanding. Ultimately, the way the fan entitlement discourse defines the good fan can be summed up in one key idea: know your place in the fan/industry hierarchy and act accordingly. Naturally, fans want to align themselves with good fan behaviors

while distancing themselves from bad fan behaviors. What this means is that fans are increasingly becoming complicit in defining good fandom in a way that maintains industry dominance.

The Benefits of Inclusion

While I do not claim that the fan entitlement discourse is entirely a “by fans, for fans” discourse and instead frame it as a fan world discourse that draws in participants from a variety of subject positions along the fan-industry spectrum, I have demonstrated that fans themselves are significantly complicit in this discourse, which essentially undermines their own power. Why might this be the case? One answer is that, by accepting and defending industry dominance, fans earn “the benefits of inclusion” (Stanfill 2019, 183). Fans who play by industry rules to affirm and celebrate the fan object can be “sanctioned.” As obsession_inc (2009, par. 5) writes in her analysis of affirmational versus transformational fandom, “sanctioned fans” are

> the very most awesome type of fandom for the source creator to hang out with, because the creator holds the magic trump card of Because I'm The Only One Who Really Knows, That's Why, and that is accepted as a legitimate thing. Additionally, in this world where the internet's democratization of publishing is making the world a scary place for creators, this is a very non-threatening place for those creators: they're in charge, they're always the last word on their own works, and the terrifying idea of fanworks taking their works away from them and futzing with them is not one that comes up a lot. As a result, these are the fans that the creator will hang out with, and vice versa.

Being an industry-sanctioned good fan thus earns these fans access and appreciation. It may even earn bragging rights and, consequently, cultural capital if, for example, someone associated with the fan object likes or replies to a Tweet. The benefits of inclusion are a direct result of the industry's power to exclude. Suzanne Scott (2011, 27) conceptualizes this as the "incorporation paradigm" of convergence culture (following Abercrombie and Longhurst's Incorporation/Resistance Paradigm), and explains that it "can be considered a positive thing for fans" insofar as that the industry increasingly produces texts that invite "participatory consumption practices." However, she cautions that, "It is the conditional and selective nature of these incorporations, and the subsequently limited codification of fannish 'participation,' that is the issue" (27). If the only way to be a good fan is to behave in ways that earn industry inclusion, contemporary fan culture is at risk of excluding the many ways of being a fan that make it pleasurable and meaningful for those who do not seek, or actively oppose, industry incorporation.

One major benefit of inclusion for many fans is that fandom can be a route to professionalization, especially around the creation of fanworks. The most familiar type of fanwork is likely fan fiction. However, fans create almost any type of artistic work one can think of, from art to music, costumes (cosplay) to films. When obsession_inc brings up the "terrifying idea of fanworks," it is a reference to transformational fanworks, specifically fan fiction, which is perhaps the most "terrifying" type of fan production in the industry's eyes because it tends to stray the farthest from the source text. Furthermore, in "Revenge of the Fanboy," Scott (2011) explains that there is often a gendered dimension to the type and, consequently, the respectability of certain kinds of fan works. While fan fiction is most often produced by female and minority fans (fitting with the well-established idea within fan scholarship that women and under-

represented groups need to do more interpretive and transformative work to make texts fit their needs and perspectives), fan filmmaking is a common type of fan work from the more male-dominated affirmational fandoms (Scott 2011, 18). Scott specifically discusses the figure of the "fanboy auteur" as "an industrial strategy to engender fans' support and, ultimately, manage fan response" (41). The "fanboy auteur" has ascended from being a fan to being a professional filmmaker, and who continues to credit their fan heritage (and the skills they honed in producing fan works) as highly influential in their work. Examples of such fanboy auteurs include writers, directors, and producers of major genre media brands: Joss Whedon (*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Angel*, *Firefly*), Ronald D. Moore (*Battlestar Galactica*), Eric Kripke (*Supernatural*), Damon Lindelof and Carlton Cuse (*Lost*), Russell T. Davies (*Doctor Who*), and J.J. Abrams (*Star Wars, Star Trek*). The fanboy auteur is a liminal figure, writes Scott, "simultaneously one of 'us' and one of 'them'" (161). Therefore, he "is better positioned to engender fans' trust, and thus channel fan interpretation and participation in ways that best suit the industry's financial and ideological interests" (161). In addition to serving as a trustworthy figure to safeguard the sacredness of text and author and, more broadly, industry control, the fanboy auteur is also an aspirational role model that sells the benefits of industrial inclusion and being a good fan.

On the other hand, fan fiction's position within fan culture and industry power structures has always been more complex. Rather than a route to professionalization, the culture around fan fiction has traditionally been more concerned with maintaining privacy and separation from the industry — what fans call "the fourth wall" (Larsen and Zubernis 2012, 13). These fans, then, may be less concerned with seeking the benefits of inclusion and more concerned with protecting fan culture as a free, independent, and transformational space. Writing about shame in the fan/producer relationship, Katherine Larsen and Lynn Zubernis (2012, 1) explain that fan fiction

culture has generally hewed to the "first rule" of fandom: "Tell no one about fandom!" The rationale is that fan fiction is primarily about self-expression and not necessarily a way to demonstrate professional potential. Of course, fan fiction does provide an opportunity to hone certain skills that would be valuable to the industry — arguably television shows and film franchises need writers who are skilled at spinning new stories from existing characters. However, fan fiction has historically had a difficult relationship with the industry. Fan fiction is often an outlet to experiment with identity and sexuality or grapple with challenging social situations, thus making it unpalatable for industry inclusion. A number of large media franchises (*Star Wars, Harry Potter*) used to be famously hostile towards fan fiction because the content was not always in line with desired "family values" (Stanfill 2019, 115). The generally agreed best practice, therefore, has been to maintain the fourth wall between fans and the industry. Larsen and Zubernis (2012, 13) explain that, "fans do not always welcome the breaking of the First Rule of Fandom, whether it's incursion from the creative side or fans themselves doing the rule breaking." While some fans do not seek – or actively reject – industry inclusion, the opportunities for status and social capital that come from being industry-sanctioned good fans are a powerful driver in the fan entitlement discourse.

Dominant Ideas about Good Fandom

Another reasons why fans might be complicit in protecting existing fan/industry power structures is because the contemporary fan subject continues to be "immersed in dominant ideas about the 'right way' to interact with the media" (Stanfill 2013, 118). In other words, even though fans have gained greater cultural status and value, negative perceptions of fans still linger in society at large. As I have demonstrated earlier in this chapter, fans can and do deploy

negative stereotypes against each other in order to protect their status. Stanfill (2013) writes about how good fans and bad fans are constructed through internal "intra-fandom" discourse in the essay "'They're Losers, but I Know Better': Intra-Fandom Stereotyping and the Normalization of the Fan Subject." She argues that fans use language of pathology and fan stereotypes to describe other fans in order to create boundaries and distance themselves from traits and behaviors that can be considered socially deviant, writing that,

> Contemporary arguments that position fans as newly mainstream and no longer stigmatized cannot account for this continuing experiential sense that some aspects of fandom, some ways of being a fan, or indeed some fans remain marginal. (Stanfill 2013, 118)

When she refers to "dominant ideas" about appropriate behavior, Stanfill draws on subcultural theory and the idea that fan culture as a subculture was, at least partly, defined by being different and apart from dominant culture. Stanfill seeks to complicate this divide by examining how "non-fan ideas about fandom come to be taken up and internalized by fans," specifically by analyzing how dominant stereotypes about fans are often deployed *within* fandom (121). Based on her interviews with fans of the television program *Xena: Warrior Princess* (which maintains an active fandom despite airing its final episode in 2001), Stanfill concluded that the fans she spoke to were keenly aware of the "socially devalued meanings of 'fan'" but they engaged in a "complex set of mental acrobatics" so that deviant fan behaviors and identities were "always attached to other fans in their accounts" (124-125). She writes,

> While fully accepting that fans do demonstrate these "inappropriate" characteristics, … my interviewees insisted that they themselves did not embody

> this nonnormativity, instead bracketing it off onto "fans in general" or "bad fans." This boundary maintenance demarcates "self-as-fan" as distinct from the socially deprecated traits. (125)

The fans in Stanfill's study drew on a number of familiar fan stereotypes to distance themselves from bad fans: excessive emotion (fans are too invested in their fan object and cannot engage with it rationally), mental and social pathology (fans are emotionally and intellectually immature, they are out of touch with reality, they have no life outside fandom), illusions of influence (fans overestimate their own importance to the show and its creators, they have an unreasonable sense of ownership over the fan object), excessive consumerism (fans are too conspicuous in their displays of fandom, they believe spending money gives them a greater connection to the fan object), and an obsession with the trivial (fans cultivate worthless knowledge and collect useless items). We see these same stereotypes deployed in the fan entitlement discourse because they connect to dominant ideas about fans' deviance and, therefore, align good fandom with more socially accepted ways of relating to media. Furthermore, as fan culture faces increased toxicity and turmoil, it is easy to scapegoat fan practices and attitudes that challenge long-held power structures and champion a nostalgic idea of good fandom that affirms and celebrates the fan object and its creator(s).

The Anxiety of Contemporary Fan Culture

Many fans are anxious about the state of contemporary fan culture and how to carve out their place within its changing landscape. The new norms of Internet culture are still being worked out, fandoms increasingly face the challenges of toxic behavior, and we are all enmeshed

in new culture wars. Furthermore, as the boundaries between grassroots fan culture and the mainstream have become blurred, fans are increasingly asking the question, *who isn't a fan?* The fan entitlement discourse is one way of grappling with this anxiety by defining the boundaries of good and bad fandom. As Busse (2013, 75) has argued in writing about the geek hierarchy, fan communities, just like most social groups, engage in boundary policing as a means of "protecting one's own sense of fan community and ascribing positive values to it while trying to exclude others." As such, boundary policing is rooted in anxieties around normalcy and status, and one's own ways of being a good fan are distanced from bad fans, who are, in turn, marked as excessive, inappropriate, or otherwise abnormal. Busse explains that the geek hierarchy "is deeply invested in ideas of normalcy as defined by the outside, i.e., fans internalize outside definitions of normal behavior in order to define internal hierarchies" (80). Interestingly, Stanfill (2013, 121) explains that subcultures, which are, by definition, outside of "normal" culture, often engage in "split subjectivity" in order to re-classify notions of normalcy and align themselves and their behavior accordingly. She writes,

> members of nonnormative groups will subdivide their group into (a) themselves and others like them, whom they classify as normal, and (b) a deviant subgroup they declare actually deserves the stigma or pathologization to which the entire group is subjected. (ibid.)

In other words, othering and stereotyping is a way of deflecting anxieties, and claiming normalcy for oneself by stigmatizing other members of one's subculture or community.

Furthermore, the boundaries between fans and non-fans have historically been well-policed, from both sides (Fiske 1992). It is the blurring of these fan/non-fan boundaries in

mainstream culture that is causing much conflict and anxiety. Consequently, more and more boundary-policing behavior has been brought inside the fan world and there are new boundaries of acceptability that fans are increasingly invested in maintaining. Scott (2011, 47) echoes this process of intra-fandom boundary policing:

> the lines between "us" and "them" are increasingly being drawn within fan culture. Fanboys are perceived as enjoying the spoils of convergence culture while fangirls prefer to "sneak in to rework [the media text], then do their best to disappear into a subcultural commons out of sight of the powers that be." As the definition of "fan" has grown increasingly fluid within convergence culture, the definition of "us" has constricted and become a defensive stance.

Whether we are talking about good fans and bad fans, or us and them, the impulse is the same: to hold on to the edges of the kind of fandom different groups perceive to be healthy, appropriate, and worthwhile. The fan entitlement discourse is one way in which contemporary fandom grapples with the challenge of defining its boundaries.

The fault lines within fan culture are opening up increasingly wider as the technological platforms that facilitate online fandom force different fandoms — with different ways of being a fan — together. With the rise of social media platforms, there are now fewer discrete fan spaces and significant convergence of fandoms. Affirmational fans clash with transformational ones, and vice versa. Nostalgic fanboys react to a perceived incursion of "social justice warriors." And fans across the board are re-deploying stereotypes in order to distance themselves from what they perceive as toxic, excessive, and inauthentic behavior. Casey Fiesler, in her study of platform migration within fandom, notes that the move to increasingly public and popular platforms has

caused a loss of community coherence: “it’s less tight-knit … because fandom is so much bigger than what it was. When it was on Usenet, it was a small group of people; of course they were more tight-knit than they are now” (Schwedel 2017, par. 8). In addition to being more tight-knit and perhaps more peaceful, pre-Internet fandoms were also more segregated. Therefore, a key feature of mainstream fandom is that fans with more diverse interests, opinions, and ways of engaging with fandom interact and, as we have seen, clash.

What underpinned pre-Internet fandoms was, to a large extent, a sense of shared values around creativity, expression, and cooperation. A key concern that fan scholars voice around mainstream fandom is the loss or disregard of these shared values. As Busse and Gray (2011, 431) put it, fandoms as “specific social and cultural formations – as communities – have a history, a continuity, and a sense of identity that are at times profoundly distinct from contemporary convergence culture.” The anxiety of contemporary fan culture and the rise of intra-fandom conflict, then, may be an inevitable part of the expansion of fandom—“growing pains” if you will—as fandom grapples with a mixing of fans who do not share a history, continuity, and sense of identity. The fan entitlement discourse is one result of this conflict: It defines good and bad fandom in ways that privilege industry power over fan power. However, in order to maintain one’s own position as a good fan, one must discipline bad fans. The result is that many fans participate in maintaining this discourse and policing its categories in order to protect their own status within contemporary fandom.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

Is fandom broken? As this project has shown, answering this question is highly contingent and fraught. Toxic behavior within fan spaces and communities cannot be denied. It casts a dark shadow over how fandom is perceived and experienced. However, I believe it is important to bring nuance and complexity to how we understand this “ugly” side of fandom. It is also essential that we deconstruct the discourses that are emerging in light of fan culture’s expansion into the mainstream, how these discourses reflect and define the challenges and opportunities of contemporary fan culture, and how they attempt to shape its future. I believe the fan entitlement discourse is critical because it is increasingly becoming the lens through which contemporary fan culture is being discussed and understood. If we do not carefully examine it from multiple perspectives, we run the risk of letting it define and limit what is considered good and acceptable fandom going forward.

In this project, I have examined the fan entitlement through the lens of power in the fan/industry relationship. Another perspective is that fan entitlement is a result of an increasingly toxic Internet culture, driven by the protection of anonymity and the echo chamber of opinion, where bullying, harassment, and outrage have become common. Being a fan of something has always gone hand-in-hand with intensified ways of feeling and being — the very definition is rooted in the extremes of emotion, engagement, and attachment. It is no surprise, then, that fandom harbors some of the most extreme displays of toxic Internet culture. Most recent work that addresses issues similar to the fan entitlement discourse has taken the perspective that fan culture is one among many battlegrounds in the ongoing culture wars, wherein historically

dominant groups are lashing out against real and perceived losses in status and socio-cultural capital. The discourse around "fandom is broken" can be seen, in many ways, as a backlash against greater diversity within fan culture and its associated popular cultural productions. For example, a heterosexual white man has historically had many "heroes" to choose from. When under-represented fans ask for greater diversity in these stories, it can feel like a loss to those who are now forced into the position of empathizing with stories and characters who do not look or experience the world like them. Consequently, framing those who ask for this diversity — especially loudly or in anger — as "entitled" or "toxic" is essentially an attempt to silence them. This culture wars perspective tends to focus on gatekeeping within fan culture — that is, how fans define the boundaries of good and authentic fandom, and, consequently, which types of fans and ways of being a fan are included and excluded. Kristina Busse's (2013) article "Geek hierarchies, Boundary Policing, and the Gendering of the Good Fan" employs the concept of the "geek hierarchy" to discuss how different fan practices are valued and respected, both within fandom and within mainstream culture. She talks specifically about gender within the geek hierarchy and how female-dominated fan practices are often devalued and dismissed as emotional and excessive. Busse (2013, 77) writes, "it is often the less explicitly fannish (or, one might argue, the less explicitly *female* fannish) elements that have been accepted by mainstream" (emphasis in original). Anastasia Salter and Bridget Blodgett (2017, 43), in their book *Toxic Geek Masculinity in Media*, similarly examine instances of gender-based exclusion in contemporary fan culture, explaining that "geeks are now powerful enough as a subculture to make victims out of others, particularly those perceived as lacking the credential earned through suffering that makes one a 'true' outsider geek." Suzanne Scott (2019, 64) specifically takes up the discourse around "entitled" fans in her book *Fake Geek Girls*, pointing out that articles

"expressing growing concern about increasingly 'entitled' or 'toxic' fan communities" began to appear conspicuously, and, as Scott argues, not coincidentally, in time with the "supposed 'invasion' of female fans." Geeks may have inherited the earth but, more often than not, these geeks have been fanboys, not fangirls.

The culture wars perspective is important and inextricable from many of the issues I have raised in this project. The power structures of the fan/industry relationships are, of course, tied to the same conflicts that rage in the culture wars. The Time's Up and #MeToo movements are prime examples of this, as women and minorities are speaking up about the hardships and limitations they have faced working in white- and male-dominated media and entertainment industries (Langone 2018). Notably, Devin Faraci, whose "Fandom is Broken" article was instrumental in framing the themes of the fan entitlement discourse, stepped down as editor-in-chief of *Birth.Movies.Death.* in October 2016 after allegations of previous sexual assault surfaced (Lang 2016). This event highlights the ways that the fan entitlement discourse is, in many ways, inseparable from the larger socio-cultural issues of our time and also significantly colored by misogyny, inequality, and anxiety around maintaining entrenched structures of power. However, for this project, I wanted to foreground more specific power struggles in the fan/industry relationship in order to work towards a more layered understanding of the fan entitlement discourse. As Kenneth Burke wrote in his influential 1939 essay "The Rhetoric of Hitler's 'Battle,'" objections to the source or existence of a text should not prevent us from deconstructing those texts rhetorically.

In this project, I have examined how the fan entitlement discourse demonizes particular fan practices and behaviors in ways that undermine fans' power in the fan/industry relationship. This has serious implications for both fans and fan studies scholarship going forward. In my

subject position as both a fan and an academic, I am invested in protecting and defending fandom, in its many forms. While this project is intended for an academic audience and not for fans per se, I do think it is critical that fans are mindful of how they may be participating in and perpetuating the fan entitlement discourse. The same goes for fan scholars and the field as a whole, which is historically rooted in a celebration of fan culture's potential for empowerment. Fan culture has been a safe space for minority and under-represented voices, and it is crucial that we attend to attempts to silence those voices. Furthermore, fan culture is also a space that allows entrenched power relations to be challenged, provides the tools to diversify and democratize reading and cultural production, and enables more egalitarian and grassroots-driven ways of interacting with media. In their relationship to the media industries, fan studies has celebrated fans for their active reading practices, prying open the text in order to decode it in negotiated or oppositional ways, which privileged personal interpretation (and, often, transformation) over authorial intent. Fan communities have been held up as alternative social communities and safe spaces that allow for freedom of expression and freedom from judgment. And fan culture has been held up as the successful prototype of an increasingly convergent culture where the traditional power structures that elevate the creative industries over its consumers are challenged. The fan entitlement discourse turns these triumphs of fan culture on their head. It frames fans who do not value and privilege the authority of the text and its author as disrespectful. Rather than applauding the flattening of fan/industry power structures, fans who express a sense of ownership or voice excessive criticism are marked as entitled and problematic. Inter-fandom stereotyping means that the safe spaces of fandom are once again becoming battlefields where ridicule and stigma are deployed as a means of disciplining other fans and reinforcing hierarchy.

The way the fan entitlement discourse is constructed does not merely claim that fandom

is broken, but it suggests that fandom, as we have known and celebrated it for almost three decades, is bad. Good fandom, as constructed in the discourse, draws on a nostalgic fantasy — one that hearkens back to top-down power structures, rationality over emotion, elitist notions of artistic appreciation, a rigid understanding of ownership, and, ultimately, a community that is hostile to excessive diversity and difference. I have outlined various sites of power struggle in the fan/industry relationship: power to make decisions, power of ownership, power to exclude, and power to define. The power to make decisions is addressed through debates around authorship, fan criticism, expertise, and creative influence. The power of ownership shows the continued tension between the industry's legal and economic ownership and the importance of emotional ownership for fans who pour their "lovebor" into their fan objects. The power to exclude is enacted in new and old ways in the fan entitlement discourse, as those who do fandom "wrong" are subjected to long-held stigmas around fanaticism and pathology, and framed as bullies in the fan/creator relationship. However, as a whole, the fan entitlement discourse is about the power to define who good fans are and what kinds of fandom should be valued. It is easy to conflate bad behavior within fandom — behavior that is unquestionably toxic and destructive — with bad fandom. The fan entitlement discourse uses a number of rhetorical techniques to encourage this kind of black-and-white thinking and makes the case that there is something fundamentally rotten in the state of fandom.

I hope this project has shown that we must take a more nuanced look at how the fan entitlement discourse scapegoats certain ways of being a fan for the troubles of contemporary fandom (and, arguably, Internet culture as a whole). Fan power is not the problem; in fact, the fan entitlement discourse greatly exaggerates fans' actual power as both a scare tactic (creativity by committee!) and a cautionary tale (death threats!). The problem is also not the fact that fans

challenge the sacredness of the text, the authority of the creator, or dominant structures of ownership. Fan power is not the problem; it is, however, a threat. A threat not only to certain types of fans who see progressive, diverse, and transformative ways of being a fan as an incursion on their nostalgic sense of authentic fandom. But importantly, it is a threat to the established business models of the media and entertainment industries. Fans are supposed to be enthusiastic recipients and consumers, eagerly awaiting the next installment of their favorite story and interacting in positive, supportive, and affirmational ways. If they interact or talk back, it is supposed to be in industry-sanctioned and useful ways. The fan entitlement discourse undermines the position of fans as active, not passive, as writers, not just readers, and as producers of their own cultural products. It implies that these positions, and this power, should be reserved for those in industrially-approved and –incorporated roles and that fans who claim and enact this kind of creative, productive, and authorial power (i.e. authority) must be disciplined. Entitled fans are, therefore, demanding fans. They are unruly, excessive, irrational, and dangerous. And the fan entitlement discourse is a way to put these fans back in their place. Fortunately, the fan entitlement discourse is not unopposed – as we can see in some of the comments and response pieces I analyzed in Chapters 4 and 5. However, the danger is that it becomes a truism about contemporary fandom and closes off the ways of being a fan and doing fandom that challenge established fan/industry power relations.

Fan Entitlement Discourse: The Sequel

On May 31, 2016, one day after "Fandom is Broken," Faraci (2016b, par. 2) posted a follow-up article at *Birth.Movies.Death.*, which attempted to respond to the impact the original article had had around the world of fandom:

> Last night I published a piece called “Fandom is Broken” and went to bed. I woke up this morning to find it trending on Twitter, to see tons of creatives retweeting and agreeing with it and to find a lot of people mad at me.

He called the article “Yes, Disney Should Have A Queer Princess” with the stated intent of addressing criticism against the previous article: “A lot of people who are reacting to this piece seem to think that I am somehow against inclusion or diversity in entertainment” (par. 2). The article initially seems to diverge from Faraci’s (2016b, par. 4) original argument that “fan outrage,” regardless of motivation or aim, is a symptom of unacceptable entitlement:

> I believe that people should let the decision-makers know that they want more stories featuring underrepresented groups. I believe that the only way to get more representation is to let the suits and the bean counters know that there's an audience for this stuff, to loudly proclaim your willingness to buy tickets or comic books (and then follow up on it by actually buying tickets and comic books). Everyone should let the companies behind the stories we love know that they would like to be included in them.

Indeed, Faraci’s updated position seems to be that audiences should not only “loudly proclaim” their desire for more inclusive stories, they should do so directly to key industry figures, “the suits and the bean counters.” However, Faraci (2016b, par. 5) quickly clarifies how this behavior is different from the entitlement he previously addressed, and indeed the entitlement of those fans who want to “Give Elsa a Girlfriend”:

> But the line is crossed when you go from "Disney, I would really like to have a

> queer princess in one of your cartoons" to "I demand that the writers and directors of *Frozen 2* make Elsa canonically queer." You can - and should! - let the higher ups know the kinds of stories you want told. You should not demand that storytellers tell their stories in the ways that you want.

Faraci is adamant that “the line” between appropriate fan action and fan entitlement lies in 1) whether fans ask for something general (more representation) or something specific (a queer Disney princess) and 2) to whom these requests are directed — that is, the “storytellers” or the “higher ups.” Specifically, Faraci argues that fans should “separate the creators from the IP owners” (par. 7). Faraci’s response makes sense as part of an ongoing process of negotiating the boundaries of good and bad fandom and the power dynamic of the fan/industry relationship. However, by defining the limits of acceptable fan demands very narrowly and specifically — tone, aim, phrasing, target — the implication is that the fan/industry relationship needs to be carefully controlled and policed, and that when fans attempt to elude or escape this control, they deserve to be disciplined.

Faraci’s article can still be considered as part of the original discursive event, as it contributed to the continuing discussion in the wake of “Fandom is Broken” rather than marking an end point. “Yes, Disney Should Have a Queer Princess” generated a further 668 comments, mostly around themes of representation and queer recognition:

Fig. 37. Word cloud of comments posted to "Yes, Disney Should Have a Queer Princess"

What is striking about the fan entitlement discourse in the wake of the 2016 discursive event is how much it has shifted from a debate or a negotiation — Is fandom broken? Are fans entitled? — to a taken-for-granted truth about contemporary fandom. Part of this is likely due to continued high-profile instances of the most extreme and hostile expressions of trolling and online harassment. In July 2016, when the controversial *Ghostbusters* remake was released in cinemas, Leslie Jones, one of the film's lead actresses, was the target of such severe harassment that she

deleted her entire social media presence (Child 2016). An article in *The Guardian* frames Jones's experience as due to the entitlement now (or always) endemic in geek culture:

> And yet geek culture has also been built on a kind of entitlement, particularly in its infancy, which saw non-professional bloggers taking studios to task for producing movies that failed to treat the movement's icons - the Supermans, Batmans and Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles of canon - with due respect. The nerds won that battle: Hollywood now treats audiences for genre material much as football clubs treat their fans, with reverence and even deference. … But the attacks on *Ghostbusters* suggest Hollywood may have unwittingly created a monster. (Child 2016, par. 6)

The article reinforces the idea that contemporary fandom has been triumphant to a degree that is has now turned monstrous. What is interesting about this particular article is that it does not treat fan entitlement as a new phenomenon but as something in geek (and fan) culture's very DNA. The implication is it was acceptable for fans to act as a check on Hollywood power when they were scrappy underdogs. But now that nerds (and fans) have "won that battle" and earned the industry's respect (and occasional "deference"), this entitlement has turned malignant.

A similar story unfolded around Kelly Marie Tran, the first woman of color to have a leading role in a *Star Wars* film, in 2018. The actress published an op-ed in the *New York Times* in August 2018, titled "I Won't Be Marginalized by Online Harassment." She writes about being the target of racism and online bullying, but does not contextualize it as toxic fandom or as fan entitlement. However, an *LA Times* article titled "Kelly Marie Tran is Leading the Charge Against Toxic Fan Culture" and published as a follow-up to Tran's op-ed and a broader take on

racist and sexist online harassment does both:

> A sense of entitlement accompanies modern fan culture, as if by loving something, you then become an investor with a right to dictate how you receive your returns. … Too often these days, fandom is an incubator where enthusiasm curdles into self-righteousness and enables racism and misogyny. (Hill 2018, par. 14)

Again, what is striking here is the taken-for-granted presence of entitlement in contemporary fan culture. The suggestions is that this entitlement, along with "enthusiasm [that] curdles into self-righteousness," is what fuels and facilitates online harassment and "enables" racism and misogyny. The implication, again, is that there is something fundamentally corrupt (and, indeed, corrupting) about contemporary fandom.

One event that has become a recent focus of fan entitlement discourse is fan reaction to the final season of HBO's *Game of Thrones*. If we think back to the roots of the current fan entitlement discourse around 2010, it is perhaps fitting that the discourse began, to a significant degree, with fans being disciplined for being too demanding of George R.R. Martin, the author of the *A Song of Ice and Fire* book series that the show is based on. The *Game of Thrones* fan reaction has now, perhaps, come full circle: The television show continued past the published books and concluded with an epic finale that, according to the show's producers, followed Martin's general story outline but was not significantly adapted from existing material. One would be mistaken for thinking that fans would be happy to see the story concluded on a grand scale with a heretofore unheard of budget of $15 million per episode (Jaworski 2019, par. 7). Unfortunately, many fans did not enjoy the final season, and did not hesitate to make their

displeasure known online. The now-familiar groans of "fan entitlement" soon followed, especially after some fans launched an online petition asking for the final season to be remade. The fan who launched the petition explained that, in his view, the season suffered due to "woefully incompetent writers when they have no source material (i.e. the books) to fall back on" (Jaworski 2019, par. 2). A number of articles covered the petition from the perspective of fan entitlement: *The Guardian* ran an opinion piece called "*Game of Thrones* Petitions and *Star Wars* Trolls? Fans Have Become Far Too Entitled" (Patrick 2019). *The Daily Dot* published an article called "The 'Game of Thrones' Season 8 Petition is Fan Entitlement at its Worst" (Jaworski 2019). *The Goat* reported that "Fans Signing A Petition Demanding A *Game Of Thrones* Final Season Do-Over Is Gross Entitlement" (Giles 2019). One article acknowledges that, "Sometimes, fan backlash can lead to the change that fans are seeking or at least detail the frustrations of a piece of media's failures in more detailed ways than 'I don't like it'" (Jaworski 2019, par. 5). However, the *Game of Thrones* petition "is not that" — instead it "reeked of the worst kind of fan entitlement" (par. 6). Another article reinforces the good/bad fan boundaries around criticism and influence we have come to know well in this project: "Enjoy, criticise, analyse – yes. But demanding to have a say in the work itself isn't part of the deal" (Patrick 2019, par. 1). What, then, is this "deal"? Once again, the deal is about power, and the tacit agreement that fan power starts and stops when and where it is desired and invited by industry. The same article continues, "Fans, particularly the ones more inclined to get aggrieved at the slightest hint of a property not being made in the exact way they want it, would certainly like to believe that they have that kind of power" (Patrick 2019, par. 5). Having "a say in the work itself" is not part of the deal when fans initiate it. However, when it originates from the industry, such interactions are celebrated as user-generated content, fan-focused storytelling, and smart

marketing. The writer further asks,

> What's at the root of these types of campaigns? In recent years we've seen a growth in entitled attitudes among some fans – a feeling that has always bubbled under the surface, but which has risen as the internet has given more and more amplification to their voices. As far as these fans are concerned, their beloved characters and universes are not "owned" by their makers – but by those who spend their hard-earned on going to watch them. And so criticism moves out of the realm of simply being a reaction, into something that drives a cause – the injustice will not stand, the wrong must be addressed. (Patrick 2019, par. 6)

"Entitlement" has increasingly become shorthand for fan attempts to take power where it was not granted, and it does so with a broad brush that paints across fans, fandoms, and fan behavior. When the discourse about contemporary fandom dismisses all fan entitlement, there is little room for caveats: When a petition saying that *Game of Thrones* was badly written is dismissed as entitlement, what would make a petition saying that its cast lacked diversity or that it portrayed gratuitous and unnecessary violence against women different? "The injustice will not stand." Who gets to define what constitutes injustice?

Significance and Limitations of the Study

I believe the fan entitlement discourse is one of the most important features of contemporary fandom and deserves much greater academic scrutiny. For fan studies, it forces us to rethink the dominant academic narrative of fan empowerment and the assumption that fan activity, agency, and productivity will continue to gain prominence and respectability. However,

the fan entitlement discourse appears to be part of a backlash that seeks to discourage these kinds of fan practices. Fan studies is built on a foundation of celebrating and protecting fan culture from those that dismissed it as frivolous and dangerous and believed fans to be dupes of the culture industries. We must, therefore, continue to question the fan entitlement discourse — and other elements of the backlash against fandom — and the ways it undermines many of the fundamental practices of fan culture. This is not a turn towards an approach that assumes contemporary fandom is "ugly," but it is an acknowledgment that fan culture is complicated and the way it is changing and evolving is not following a straight line. For fans, being aware of the fan entitlement discourse and how it is constructed is important because fans should be careful not to perpetuate the fan entitlement discourse uncritically and reinforce the idea that entitlement is an unpleasant but inevitable feature of contemporary fan culture. Online bullying and harassment that is rooted in racism, sexism, or homophobia should be critiqued as thus, and not dismissed as just another instance of fan entitlement. The fan entitlement discourse also has larger implications for society's changing relationship with media. Fans have historically been early adopters who are testing new ways of using, transforming, and connecting around media texts. The battles being fought in fandom may end up having wider consequences for society's relationship to media — will the trend towards audience empowerment continue or will fears around a toxic Internet culture lead to the re-establishment of a clearer separation between media producers and their audiences? The fan entitlement discourse arose due to social, cultural, and technological trends and is grappling with these large-scale challenges in the arena of fandom. As such, the discourse is perhaps as much about good and bad fandom as it is about good and bad online behavior or good and bad citizenship.

Of course, this study is limited in the conclusions it can draw, especially on a socio-

cultural scale. Even within fan culture, it is important to remember that there is never just one fandom, one fan culture, one type of fan. My aim is to build an argument around what I see as a troubling trend in contemporary fan culture. In doing so, I have not always been able to attend to the ways that the fan entitlement discourse also includes a great degree of nuance and widely ranging perspectives and backgrounds. In many ways, the fan entitlement discourse is a debate and, as in all debates, those with the loudest voices often prevail. As such, Devin Faraci and "Fandom is Broken," as the epicenter of this particular discursive event, cast a large shadow. As a professional film critic, Faraci cannot be considered primarily a fan. He, just like the website *Birth.Movies.Death.*, which he founded and posted his article on, occupy a liminal space: not a fan, but not quite "industry" either. This particular subject position can be described as the "fan-critic," with Harry Knowles of the website *Ain't It Cool News* (AICN) perhaps its first and most prominent example. The fan-critic acts as a fan representative, someone who takes a fan perspective while also making their living as a professional writer and critic. The fan-critic also works on behalf of fans to gather breaking news and gossip that the industry may or may not want to share. For example, Simone Murray (2004) in her article "'Celebrating the Story the Way It Is': Cultural Studies, Corporate Media and the Contested Utility of Fandom," describes the significance of Knowles hosting an official Q&A session with the writer and director of the *Lord of the Rings* film franchise, Peter Jackson:

> Knowles offered to act as intermediary between the film project and the highly active global Tolkien fan base by compiling 20 questions to put to the director from amongst the hundreds submitted by fans curious regarding Jackson's vision for the films. … For Knowles, the studio-endorsed Q&A sessions confirm that Hollywood has overcome its distaste for AICN's rogue tactics and has decided

> instead to pursue a policy of tactical engagement, seeking to incorporate AICN's global online community into its pre-release publicity strategies. (Murray 2004, 7)

The opportunities afforded to the fan-critic by embracing industry incorporation cannot be denied. Furthermore, Faraci (and other professional critics whose pieces I have included in the data set) tend to empathize with creators and reinforce the categorization of fans as bullies and creators as victims. However, my claims around the fan entitlement discourse do not rest on the assumption that it is exclusively a by-fans-for-fans discourse. In fact, the discourse is interesting precisely because it draws in a wide range of actors who have a variety of roles within and relationships with the media industry system — what Hills calls a fan world approach: "Everyone who participates in making a work participates in making it" (Becker quoted in Hills 2017, 873). As such, fan entitlement — and contemporary fandom as a whole — is discursively constructed by the many individuals and institutions that have a vested interest in it.

The study is also limited by the data set I have chosen to construct. I focused on a particular set of comments and responses: 2,350 comments to "Fandom is Broken" and 40 response pieces. Even within this discursive event, I did not include all possible data. The response pieces and related articles garnered further comments, thousands of them. I also did not seek to include social media discussion around this discursive event. "Fandom is Broken" trended on Twitter for at least a day, and likely inspired thousands of tweets that could have provided data for analysis. It is possible that this data could have significantly altered my conclusions. However, this would have required shifting towards a more quantitative approach, as it would not be feasible to read and code many thousands of comments and tweets manually. My belief is that qualitative methods, especially close reading, coding, and analysis of each

comment, were a more appropriate fit for the goals of this project.

Opportunities for Future Work

While contemporary fan culture may be increasingly marked by challenges and conflict, it has also given rise to new opportunities and subjectivities. One of the most striking features of contemporary fandom that is prominent throughout the fan entitlement discourse is its self-aware and self-reflexive nature. Following on from the various relationships addressed in the discourse (with the text, with the creators, with other fans), the data set also compels us to zoom out and consider a further relationship: the fan/fandom relationship. Often termed “meta-fandom,” the discourse I examine in this project takes us into the realm of fans thinking and talking about fandom itself: What does it mean to be a fan? How should fans behave — towards each other, the text, and its creator(s)? How has fandom changed and evolved, for better or worse? Fans have always been somewhat self-aware and introspective, and academics have celebrated them accordingly as active, thoughtful, and sophisticated media users.

Within fan culture, “meta” has also become a popular subject matter and websites such as Fanlore.org (a fan-run wiki of fan culture terminology and history) and the Fan Meta Reader (thefanmetareader.org) exist to collect and share fans’ thoughts and writings about fandom. The Fan Meta Reader describes itself as being “dedicated to bringing thought-provoking, theoretically innovative, and stylistically unique fan analysis – meta – to a wide readership” (About n.d.). While the Fan Meta Reader often strikes an almost academic tone (and some contributors are self-identified academics and fan scholars), fan meta is more commonly posted on platforms and in spaces that are not specifically dedicated to publishing meta, and provide a more general outlet for a mix of fan-related thoughts and musings. The discussion around

affirmational and transformational fandom is an excellent example of meta-fandom, and was posted by a fan on the then-popular personal blogging platform LiveJournal. Other examples are, of course, the articles, response pieces, and 455 comments I coded as being "about fandom" that comprise the data set for this project.

What drives meta-fandom? All of us increasingly engage in some self-analysis in our relationship with media. Are we too addicted to our phones? Do we need a "digital detox"? How can we cope with the overwhelming amount of content constantly at our fingertips? Why do we choose to engage with certain media and not others? There is also a growing movement towards developing and teaching media literacy, especially in the wake of "fake news" and the crisis of trust in media and news outlets. Meta-fandom is similarly rooted in a desire to examine one's relationship to media — for fans, this relationship is arguably deeper and more involved than for the average media consumer — and ask questions about how fandom shapes one's identity, relationships, tastes, and desires.

One way to better understand meta-fandom is through theories of the audience. Media fans are, at their most basic, a media audience. Nicholas Abercrombie and Brian Longhurst (1998), writing their foundational treatise on audiences before the mass adoption of the Internet, already identified how the nature of audiences is changing in our increasingly connected and media-saturated times. They chart the evolution of the audience experience from the simple audience ("the persons within hearing" of any kind of public performance) to the mass audience (the spatially and temporally distanced audience who receives a performance through a mass communication medium) to the diffused audience (the contemporary audience experience where "everyone becomes an audience all the time") (Abercrombie and Longhurst 1998, 68). The authors focus on performance as the key component of the audience experience. The simple

audience is constituted by a performance — a speech, a play, a concert — in real time, in a shared space. The mass audience is farther removed from the performance, which inevitably creates a greater separation between producer and consumer and also relaxes expectations of audience attention and propriety through the privatization of reception. The diffuse audience experience is facilitated by the "intrusion of media into everyday life" and is essentially post-modern: it is marked by the breaking of boundaries — between public and private, between performer and audience, between producer and consumer. Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998, 73) explain, "Life is a constant performance; we are audience and performer at the same time; everybody is an audience all the time. Performance is not a discrete event."

Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998, 138-40) argue that fans are a prime example of the diffused audience in that they are always simultaneously audience and performer — especially among highly involved and participatory fans, who the authors term "cultists" and "enthusiasts." When fans interact with other fans and participate in fan communities, they are performing fandom, which is, in a way, always already a "meta" activity. There are two important theoretical implications to Abercrombie and Longhurst's idea of meta-fandom as a performative, diffused audience. First, it shifts our understanding of audiences from being constituted by particular texts to being always already existing due to the ubiquity of performance in contemporary life. The idea of the diffused audience emerges from a different audience paradigm, what the authors term the Spectacle/Performance Paradigm. Contemporary society, they argue, is a performative society (77). Such a view draws on the work by Erving Goffman, whose influential book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1969) argues that "performance is entirely pervasive in everyday life, and practically constitutive of it" (Abercrombie & Longhurst 1998, 74). This has become even more true in our age of near constant connection and visibility due to the Internet,

smart phones, and social media. Second, in addition to being ubiquitous, the diffused audience eliminates the "distance between performers and audiences so important to performances in front of both simple and mass audiences" (75). This leads to a general breaking of boundaries, where people are "simultaneously performers and audience members, cultural consumers become cultural producers and vice versa. … Performances for the diffused audiences are public *and* private. Indeed they erode the differences between the two" (75-76). Looking at contemporary fan culture — specifically the fan entitlement discourse and meta-fandom — through the lens of a diffused audience raises a number of intriguing ideas. A key difference between the simple, mass, and diffused audience experience is whether the audience is in a public or private space. Importantly, being an audience in a public space requires "a measure of decorum and restraint. Public spaces are more conventionalized and rule-found than are private ones" (42). Since the diffused audience, and contemporary fan culture with it, are marked by a collapse of this public/private distinction, conflict and confusion is an inevitable result of these unstable foundations and changing expectations. As fan culture has increasingly moved into more public spaces, has it become more subject to the rules and rituals of public decorum? If so, who makes these rules? Meta-fandom may, in this sense, be a way of coping with the increased publicness of fandom and represent a struggle over appropriate audience behavior in the public spaces of the online world. Similarly, the breaking down of the performer/audience and consumer/producer boundaries also introduces instability. Meta-fandom, again, becomes a way of hashing out fans' subject position in these unstable relationships.

The idea of a diffused audience raises the possibility of an audience that is increasingly disconnected from a particular media text and effectively self-sustaining. That is, in many ways, also the defining feature of meta-fandom. Traditional audience theory tells us that audiences are

brought into existence by a media message, and operationalized through various modes of observation and measurement. In the case of fans and meta-fandom, then, how can we understand an independent fan audience that is separate from the fan object? Sonia Livingstone (2005, 17), in the book chapter "On the Relation Between Audiences and Publics" provides some useful tools for tackling this question. While audiences and publics draw on separate bodies of theory, she argues that, "In a thoroughly mediated world, audiences and publics, along with communities, nations, markets and crowds, are composed of the same people." The difference is often a matter a of perspective, and specifically a question of which group is afforded agency in their relationship to media consumption: "the effect of media on their audience is seen to reposition what was or might be or should be, a public (knowing, thinking, influential) as a mere crowd (watching, sharing and emoting) or mass of consumers (driven by tastes, preferences and motivations)" (18). Thinking about meta-fandom as a public foregrounds a sense of agency and social importance to fan activities that might otherwise be easily dismissed as frivolous. Meta-fandom can, therefore, be a way to think critically about our changing relationship to media, and is as deserving of scholarly attention as other types of public participation.

Fandom is Ordinary

My hope is that this project has piqued interest in the kinds of discourses, relationships, and ways of interacting that comprise (and complicate) contemporary fan culture. The fundamental question of fan studies is always, why study fans? Sandvoss et al. (2017, 13) have already given one kind of answer: Because "fan consumption has grown into a taken-for-granted aspect of modern communication and consumption," especially in spaces and places we would not associate with fans (e.g. politics). But looking at instances of meta-fandom, like this project

has, allows us to answer that question in a slightly different way: When we look at fandom beyond its relationship to the fan object, what we are really seeing is the way that a group (an audience, a public, a community) of highly engaged media users grapple with the role that media play in their lives today and the ways our various relationships with and around media are changing. Media culture today is ordinary, in the sense that Raymond Williams proclaimed culture to be ordinary in his famous 1958 essay. This statement, a response to elitist views of high/low culture, was inspired by Williams's studies at Cambridge and partly influenced by Marxist ideas about how culture is linked to its economic context. He argues that culture is both a "whole way of life" and its "forms of signification" — that is, an interwoven "productive process" of how cultural products act on everyday life, and vice versa (Williams 2011, 93). In claiming that "culture is ordinary," Williams rejects the notion of culture (and its productions) as elevated above and separate from everyday life, and highlights the way that culture both forms and is formed by the "ordinary." Similarly, we are increasingly seeing and experiencing the way that media culture shapes, and is shaped by, everyday life. And media fan culture, by virtue of always having been at the extremes of how people engage with and around media, is both a vanguard and a testing ground for the ways we consume and relate to media. The fan entitlement discourse I have examined in this project shows that there is clearly a lot of anxiety around the various relationships that structure interactions with media texts, with other media consumers, and with media producers. Specifically, this anxiety stems from a rise in perceived consumer power and the ensuing misunderstanding and misuse of that power. The key task of this analysis has been to show how the fan entitlement discourse disciplines bad, toxic, and broken fandom in an attempt to define and preserve good, authentic, and appropriate fandom on the basis of who should have power and how that power should be enacted.

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