

# **Transformative Works and Cultures, special issue, Transnationalism, localization, and translation in European fandom, No. 19 (June 15, 2015)**

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## Editorial

### Transnationalism, localization, and translation in European fandom: Fan studies as global media and audience studies

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[0.1] *Abstract*—Editorial for TWC no. 19, European fans and European fan objects: Localization and translation.

[0.2] *Keywords*—Europe; Global fandom; Global media flow; Globalization; International fandom

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## 1. Introduction

[1.1] What does it mean in today's global, networked culture for people of many languages and nationalities to identify themselves within the English loan word *fan*—or the Japanese loan word *otaku*? How do we navigate the ever-expanding world media marketplace, accessed via a constantly proliferating array of geography-defying online platforms, digital channels, and fan subs, to find the media that inspires our passionate attachment and creative production? Given increasing choices between international and local fan cultures, real-life and online activities, and fan as well as corporate-organized spaces, where do we locate the fan communities in which we feel at home? These questions are central to this special issue on European fans and European fan objects. Building on two symposia held at the University of Amsterdam in 2012 and 2013, this issue performs two primary functions. First, these essays investigate the specific fan practices, texts, communities, and scholarship in Europe, broadly conceived. Second, this collection, as a whole, also contributes to a larger conversation about global media and transnational audiences, especially as these issues of internationalization reflect back on the state of fan studies as an emerging field. Through the question of how to construct a specifically European form of fan studies, the articles in this issue center a global perspective, which questions assumptions about what it means to be a media fan and how the industry perceives

international audiences. Therefore, the articles also address factors that persistently complicate and limit the global flow of media and fan communities.

## 2. Why Europe? A microcosm of transnational flows and fissures

[2.1] The practices and community dynamics of media fans are predicated on the ways that fans access and engage with media. Thus, studying transnational fandom requires an initial consideration of how the contemporary international media and digital communications landscape influence the manner in which fans find media objects and how they are able to then form communities with other fans. Largely as a result of improvements in online streaming of professional and amateur content, it often seems as though the current media environment presents an unprecedented level of choice and unencumbered access to media, without the interference of national borders. As Wi-Fi and mobile technologies connect parts of the world once considered off the grid as a result of limited telecommunications infrastructure, and as the opening and expansion of markets like China and India present media industries with unprecedented global demand, international flows and transnational audiences begin to seem more like the norm than the exception; the notion of a digital divide can consequently appear almost antiquated (Castells 2000; Compaine 2001; Couldry 2012; Moran 2009; Price Waterhouse Cooper 2013). Yet this sense of increased freedom within a global media market often obscures the legal, national, linguistic, and cultural forces that complicate, limit, and interrupt the circulation of media and discourse on a global scale (Chalaby 2015; Hafez 2013; Horst and Miller 2006; Slater 2013).

[2.2] Hiding within the reality of improved access to global media and the success of non-Western media industries are persistent inequalities of attention and access. Thus, despite enormous increases in production worldwide and the theoretical availability of global media via streaming, American productions and platforms, including iTunes, Hulu, and Netflix, have maintained their position as the dominant form of export media (Steemers 2014). Global audiences most often choose between local/regional productions and American productions, not a fully integrated market of global productions, each with the same chance of reaching foreign viewers. Thus, Price Waterhouse Cooper's 2014–18 Global Entertainment and Media Outlook projects that American media will continue to generate a disproportionate 29 percent of the world's total filmed media revenue, distributed via both traditional and digital means (Bond 2013; Price Waterhouse Cooper 2013). According to the MPAA, as of 2013, an average Hollywood film earns 70 percent of its revenue from foreign sales, whereas India's booming Bollywood industry remains largely regional and domestic, with only 7 percent of its revenue derived from foreign sales (Singh 2014; Thusu 2008). Although

individual media products and genres can garner remarkable transnational success through both professional and amateur distribution, no other industry yet travels as prolifically and profitably as American media.

[2.3] Many case studies offer important insights into this discussion, including those on the rapid development of BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India, and China) countries and the 2015 special issue of *Cinema Journal* on African cinema, with a particular emphasis on the success of the Nigerian "Nollywood" industry (Sanogo 2015a, 2015b; Straubhaar 2010). Studying European fans and the systems of media production, regulation, and politics that condition their access to and interpretation of media also offers a unique microcosm of the promise and difficulties inherent to transnational media flows as a result of the region's intricate negotiation between local, national, and supranational governmental and cultural structures. Thus, studying the manner in which media does and does not flow across Europe, thereby garnering a chance to reach potential transnational fans, offers a window not only into the modern global media market's triumphs and discontents but also the specifically volatile state of contemporary Europe in which the euro, European identity, and the EU government clash, often violently, with individual national, linguistic, and cultural traditions, protections, and privileges (Bolton 2014; Bruter 2005; Risse 2014; Schlesinger 1997, 2001; Zabaleta et al. 2014). The transnational movement of media thus often draws on and mirrors tensions over the transnational movement of bodies in contemporary immigration debates (Barbulescu and Beaudonnet 2014; Dancygier and Laitin 2014; Guild, Rotaecche, and Kostakopoulou 2014; Rovny 2014). Although the humanitarian stakes are much less stark, the rhetoric of cultural protectionism and fear of cultural contagion often strike resoundingly similar chords, while resistance toward capitalism's voracious hunger for unencumbered markets of audiences and labor also animates both struggles.

[2.4] The struggle over EU media licenses encapsulates many of the complications of contemporary global media flow. Currently the rights associated with distributing media are regulated at the national level (Donders, Loisen, and Pauwels 2014; European Commission 2012; Netflix, n.d.). For companies interested in the European market, this means making around 50 separate licensing arrangements in a competitive auction system, which can become both cumbersome and expensive. As a result, large-scale transnational streaming services have been slow to expand in Europe, with notoriously underwhelming performance. Most famously, Netflix began developing individual platforms on a country-by-country basis, with ambitious plans to license separate media libraries for each country in its service area (Heyman 2015; Wallenstein 2014). Yet these plans have unfolded frustratingly slowly for consumers; they have been plagued by problems, including an inability to allow consumers to travel with their subscriptions and extremely small content libraries in many countries,



the result of the expense and time involved in the licensing process (Goldman 2015; Sreenivasan 2013). Netflix customers from one European nation must still resort to hacked, potentially illegal means to access their own paid account if they travel only a few kilometers from home as long as that travel involves a national border. Such speed bumps in international media flow feed what Manuel Castells and Gustavo Cardoso (2012) call the ever more pervasive and mainstream participation in "piracy cultures" as an essential and normative part of everyday life. The EU government has several times proposed a single pan-European media license, and it still lists the consolidation of licensing arrangements as one of its top 2020 copyright reform goals aimed toward creating a single pan-EU media market; yet these measures face serious opposition, which has thus far thwarted significant changes (European Commission 2012).

[2.5] The 28 member states of the EU often resist ceding their individual authority over licensing and a bundle of other media-related rights, which would allow media to flow across Europe without regard for national boundaries, including taxation of media content, tactics and attitude toward media piracy, methods for protecting and encouraging national media industries, media in protected languages, and public service media (Schlesinger 1997, 2001). For example, Germany has challenged Amazon's pricing policies in court because they contravene national pricing laws that forbid deep discounts on books (Eddy 2014; Thomasson, Inverardi, and Heavens 2013). Similarly, France maintains comparatively draconian digital piracy policies, especially in contrast to countries like the Netherlands, which until recently had a "legal to download, illegal to upload" policy (Danaher et al. 2014; Mims 2012; Spore 2014). Likewise, many countries' public service funding models clash with the principle of the free and global movement of media, as they primarily seek to serve their own tax base. The United Kingdom in particular, which pays for the BBC primarily with a tax on television sets and other TV streaming devices, restricts (legitimate) access to digital BBC content only to those geographically within the boundaries of Britain (BBC, n.d. a, n.d. b). Thus, significant national and legal barriers remain to the achievement of a single integrated European media market.

[2.6] In response to the nationalist legal regulation and values that persist, perhaps especially in the public service sector, some have suggested developing a more transnational European media, both for market reasons and to increase or reflect a multicultural, multilingual European identity (Chalaby 2002; Gripsrud 2007; Lauristin 2007). Yet while productive for some artists and directors, this suggestion also raises the contentious cultural and linguistic stakes that continue to impede and shape the flow of global media. It is worth noting that in addition to legal regulations, disparities in infrastructure and affordability also continue to limit many people's practical access to the world's media production; yet even in the absence of any roadblocks to access,

language families and cultural context mediate audience uptake (Adamu 2012; Adejunmobi 2007; Chung 2011; Gutierrez and Schement 1984; Piñón and Rojas 2011; Wilkinson 2004). With a relatively large language to geographical distance ratio, including 24 official and many more unofficial languages within the EU member states alone, Europe serves as an important case study of media flow across linguistic difference (Baroncelli 2013). Although there are many notable exceptions, especially those due to the allure of exoticism, without any intervention, media most easily spreads via linguistic and cultural proximity. Thus, in many cases, international media flows circulate within, for example, separate Anglophone, Francophone, Spanish-language, Arabic-language, and Hindi-language mediascapes, rather than a fully integrated global mediascape. At times, language politics directly cause the flow of some media and halt the movement of others, as in the case of Belgium, wherein France is a major supplier to half of the country and the Netherlands to the other; as a result of the country's strong linguistic divide, there is only negligible market penetration of French-language media in predominantly Flemish-speaking provinces and vice versa (van Besien 2013; Blommaert 2011; d'Haenens, Antoine, and Saeys 2009).

[2.7] Translinguistic media thus requires an extra process of translation, with consequent denotative and connotative shifts in meaning. Media industries make the decision to offer translated versions via dubbing or subtitles on the basis of their perception of market demand in the target language; some countries' smaller media industries can ill afford the expense of translation for larger markets in the absence of clear consumer demand, making it difficult to reach transnational audiences and cultivate international fans (Pelletier 2012). Yet these seemingly market-driven considerations also pose important political and practical consequences. The most obvious issue with media translation politics are gaps in the market, when industries perceive less potential market value than the costs of dubbing, subtitling, and distribution, and thus choose not to offer any product at all, or any linguistically localized product, to particular regions. Such gaps can result in an array of creative audience practices for informally translating, adapting, and distributing media where the formal system fails. These include amateur subtitling, as in anime clubs' distribution of fan subbed material before the Japanese industry recognized the viability of the English-speaking market, and online crowdsourced subtitling collectivities, as well as older practices, like the live commentary, described by anthropologist Elizabeth Hahn (1994), provided by Tongan MCs at movie theaters for English-language films (Dwyer 2012; O'Hagan 2009, 2012; Pérez-González 2007). However, these practices require an active, networked audience, and in the absence of such self-organized initiatives of motivated multilingual fans or the industry's market confidence, many media objects remain relatively isolated within their own language family and diasporic community.

[2.8] Further, national identity and language politics often become entwined with norms regarding the flow and appearance of transnational media. Thus, while the decision to dub or subtitle often results from media industries' market confidence, with the cheaper process of subtitling more commonly used for small markets and language families, these decisions also develop their own cultural associations and consequences over time (Pelletier 2012). Martine Danan argues that the normative preference for dubbed films derives from nationalist language politics and a desire to maintain the dominant status of the native media industry (Chaume 2007; Danan 1991). She writes, "Dubbing is an attempt to hide the foreign nature of a film by creating the illusion that actors are speaking the viewer's language" (1991, 612). The preference for subtitled or dubbed versions of foreign media thus reflects and to some extent produces differences in national media identity, culture, and interactivity. Germany still maintains an almost exclusive preference for dubbed foreign media, and voice actors often become celebrities in their own right, specializing in dubbing the voices of specific Hollywood actors, with their own attendant star texts that can directly color interpretation of the narrative (i.e., an actor known for voicing villains may trip the audience's expectations before any other clues surface in the plot) (Troester 2002). In contrast, in the Netherlands, the culture of subtitling folds neatly into the long-standing importance of multicultural tolerance and internationalism, which are central to Dutch national identity (Lechner 2012). As a result of the value the Netherlands places on direct access to foreign-language media, Thijs de Korte (2006) notes that Dutch NOB Cross Media Facilities in Hilversum were among the first to experiment with and perfect interlingual subtitling for live foreign TV broadcasts.

[2.9] Thus, national differences in media access, including copyright and other trade restrictions, preference for subtitles or dubbing, along with transformations in meaning created by the process of translation, voice actor celebrity text, and voice actor performance, together begin to suggest the remaining obstacles to a fully integrated and equal global media market. These and other related factors ensure that even when media travels globally, the text often still differs according to national boundaries and language. Transnational fans, in an important sense, are thus not actually fans of the same text. Further, differences in location and in cultural and political context also influence the processes of reception, meaning making, attachment, community building, and fans' cultural production. In the present era, Korean music videos can become instant international hits, inspiring global remix responses, and a British book, made into a film series by an American company, can become a worldwide cultural touchstone and the focus of unpredictable forms of international community building and activism (Cho 2012; Fisher 2012; Jenkins 2012; Jentsch 2002; Jung and Shim 2014; Lathey 2005; Mussche and Willems 2010; Rehlinga 2012). However, these stories encapsulate both the ways that forces of globalization connect disparate people and places, and the remaining hierarchies, disruptions, and disjunctures within global

culture. Thus, Psy's hit song "Gangnam Style," released in 2012, did not achieve equal uptake by all international audiences, notably, according to John Lie (2014), receiving limited market penetration in Japan, and international "Gangnam Style" remixes often play precisely at the interface between global circulation and recognition of the video as a meme, and the language and symbols of specific locations, which inflect each repetition with difference. They thus enact a user-generated form of "glocalization," adapting the music to new markets by writing the local into the global for the profit of the original producer (Robertson 1995; Terranova 2000). Likewise, stories about, for example, Estonian books made into Kenyan films that take the international market by storm are notably much more rare, although certainly not impossible. Sensitivity to these differences in the directionality of global flows, as well as the specific historical, linguistic, and political contexts that condition reception of international media, are vital to modern media, audience, and fan studies.

### 3. Going global: European fan studies in comparative perspective

[3.1] Thinking about European fan studies as one part of global fandom thus requires consideration of how processes of localization and translation interact with international media flow and the specific legal, cultural, and linguistic contingencies of being a fan and enacting fandom in particular places. The loanword *fan* thus provides a characteristic example of fandom as a polysemic system within which individuals negotiate between the norms and practices of shared multinational, often English (or Japanese) language, online fan spaces, and the numerous other places, both online and in the real world, where fans produce fandom in other languages, frequently with different norms and expectations, and at times surrounding a different series of fan objects than those most popular at the international level. Despite the existence of local words like *liefhebbers*, *appassionati*, and *fanaty*, many people internationally choose to identify as fans, either to participate in international online fan spaces in English or because even when participating in a local fan community in a local language, the word *fan* still connects to a participatory way of interacting with media and forming communities, made increasingly global by digital technologies. The term *fan* thus mediates between local and international media and audiences; it encapsulates a broad range of diverse activities, histories, and practices, which become invisible by attending only to English-language fan spaces, or by assuming that because conversations there take place in English, the participants all come from Anglophone countries. Likewise, European fandoms illuminate many of the pitfalls, and much of the unevenness and uneasiness, that accompany globalization of media and globalization of fan identity and community. Watching how fans resist, negotiate, and assert their visibility within international media texts demonstrates both the particular

circumstances of the European media market, as well as the function of global media as simultaneously a form of multicultural, cosmopolitan shared culture, a form of capitalist exploitation, a form of nationalist soft power, and a lingua franca within which individuals may translate and express their own particular experiences and struggles.

[3.2] In much fan studies work, Anglophone media and audiences and Japanese anime (and increasingly Korean K-pop) often dominate the conversation, becoming the unmarked center by default. This situation can obscure both the processes of power by which some media can travel internationally as part of the shared culture of globalization, thus amassing a global fan culture, while other media remains within regional, linguistic, national, and/or local spheres of influence, as well as the diversity of situated practices and meanings constructed by fans in different places. A number of scholars have already begun this work (Broughtona 2011; Denson 2013; Farley 2013; Harrington and Bielby 2005; Henningsen 2006; Hitchcock Morimoto 2013; Hu 2005; Jenkins 2006; Jung 2011, 2012; Jungherr 2012; Kim, Mayasari, and Oh 2013; Koulikov 2010; Lamerichs 2012; Li 2012; Lashley 2012; Lyan and Levkowitz 2015; Madrid-Morales and Lovric 2015; Mehta 2012; Nagaike and Suganuma 2013; Norris 2013; Punathambekar 2012; Sandvoss 2010; Schules 2014; Siuda 2014; Thornton 2010; Wei 2014). Thus, this special issue, highlighting the fan objects, practices, and communities of Europe, seeks to enter the ongoing discussion within the field of fan studies about how international audiences all co-construct global fandom, and how fans in different parts of the world all do fandom differently. How do people internationally, from diverse perspectives, all make meaning within the same transnational story? How do fans, internationally and across language barriers, interact with global internet fan culture or cultures? How does identifying as a fan carry different meaning (and consequences) in different places? How do fans internationally engage in fandom, both collaboratively and in isolation? By addressing these questions, the articles in this issue add to a robustly global understanding of what fandom means today, and they shine a light on the many vibrant fan communities and activities currently at play in Europe.

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#### 4. In this issue: Praxis

[4.1] Articles in this issue's Praxis section develop case studies in fan identities and activities from the United Kingdom, Poland, Italy, Wales, and trans-EU fan cultures. Bethan Jones utilizes Jonathan Gray's concept of antifandom to discuss the forms of community building and activism that arose in opposition to MTV's *The Valleys* (2012–14), a Welsh version of the controversial ethnic comedy reality TV series *Jersey Shore* (2009–). Drawing on affect theory, she argues that antifan activism against *The Valleys* relies not only on a general ethical objection to the show's moral text but

rather derives from specific lived experiences in Wales, situated in a shared history and cultural text. She therefore urges future research on fan activism to consider both the complicating activities of antifan social activists and the way in which culture conditions reception and activist fan organization.

[4.2] William Wolff archives Twitter traces of Bruce Springsteen fans' networked social infrastructure in Leeds, England. His study thus underscores the importance of active European audiences for Springsteen's continuing success and the local interconnections between fans and Leeds' businesses. Wolff characterizes conversations organized by a hashtag as "information ecologies," explaining, "With #bruceleeds...Bruce is connected to a city...to a space with a distributed, segmented, and evolving identity" (¶6.3). He thus argues that while the #bruceleeds tweets say very little to or about Springsteen, they reflect and map the dynamic practices and connections of Springsteen's fans in a specific space as they unfold and evolve.

[4.3] Also writing about European Springsteen fans, Maryn Wilkinson analyzes the portrayal of non-Americans in *Springsteen & I*, a crowd-sourced documentary about the experience of Springsteen fandom. Wilkinson notes that although the original call for fans to produce their own video clips went out internationally and specifically requested they discuss their fan experiences in their own language, very few non-Americans made it into the final cut, and those who did became marked in certain ways. Namely, because Springsteen's star text and corpus thematize working class American life, fans in *Springsteen & I* became authentic through association with working-class status and Americanness—ideally in combination. Non-Americans, Wilkinson argues, are marked as less authentic than Americans through their lack of access to Springsteen-esque experiences and American concert tours, as well as by the use of subtitles, and through cultural misunderstandings (or recontextualizations) of Springsteen's lyrics. Thus, like Laura Felschow (2010), who argues that *Supernatural* (2005–) included a caricature of a female fan in episodes like "The Monster at the End of this Book" as an expression of distaste over the gap between the audience that producers envisioned and the fans who actually engaged with the program most passionately, Wilkinson documents another way in which certain fans are privileged, in this case on the basis of nationality.

[4.4] This theme also surfaces in Eleonora Benecchi's examination of Italian fans' perceived relationship with the producers of American TV series. On the basis of ethnographic participant observation, she reports that despite the existence of international online fan communities for American programs like *Fringe* (2008–13) and *Lost* (2004–10), many Italian fans prefer to interact only with Italian-language fan spaces, and continue to imagine their relationship to show runners as much more remote than American fans' as a result of geographical distance and a perceived lack

of access. Benecchi posits that these results are partly explained by many Italian fans' preference for online, but still local, Italian-language fan spaces, but she also argues that, both implicitly and explicitly, American producers still primarily address and provide opportunities for participation and influence to American fans, despite American media's increasingly global reach.

[4.5] In addition to the global circulation of the professional American media industry, independent media also more and more often has the potential to connect with an international audience. Thus, Agata Włodarczyk and Marta Tyminska explore the manner in which Polish fans interact with and interpret American independent online radio drama *Welcome to Night Vale* (2012–). Włodarczyk and Tyminska explain that *Welcome to Night Vale* became attractive to global audiences partly because it is distributed online, with no delays internationally; it plays on established popular genres like surrealism and science fiction; and the cast's live performance tours include international venues. Yet via a questionnaire, they find that culture still influences Polish fans' experience, engagement, and interpretation of the radio series. For example, Włodarczyk and Tyminska notice that communism significantly colors Polish fans' understanding of the conspiracy-related elements of *Welcome to Night Vale*, while references to the particular history and context of American race relations in the program often fail to resonate, creating contentious online discussions about the characters' ethnicity in international fan spaces. They also argue that their poll's finding of participants' seeming reluctance to support *Welcome to Night Vale* financially, through purchasing of merchandise or donations, stems from the relative unfamiliarity and newness of crowd funding in Poland.

[4.6] Unlike the other articles of the Praxis section, which all address European fans of American media, Abby Waysdorf explores a fan object with its origin in Europe, followed by fans internationally, and most popular outside of America. Waysdorf studies the texts and communities of football slashers, who write homoerotic fan fiction about real players in professional European football leagues. She argues that football slash partly reflects on the increasing mediatization of the sport, which transforms players into celebrities and their every action into an ongoing public narrative, much like a male soap opera or serialized cult TV. However, she also cautions that besides an investment in players' personalities and romances, the writers and readers of football slash also engage in fan activities seen as masculine, traditional, and authentic, like attending games and supporting one team over a lifetime; in other words, they are "real" football fans, but they also expand on the always latent and increasingly central pleasures of interacting with football as a media text, explicitly centralizing the sport's human drama, narrative structure, and homosocial/homoerotic dimensions.

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## 5. In this issue: Pedagogy

[5.1] The pedagogy section considers how fan studies should be introduced into classrooms and how to train the next generation of fan studies scholars. Especially in light of recent controversies over the use of fan works in college courses, it is vital that teaching fan studies remains an open dialogue between researchers, teachers, and fans (Baker-Whitelaw 2015; van Tooke 2015; Waldorph 2015). These essays provide examples of the kinds of fan studies projects undertaken by contemporary students, and what classrooms and students stand to gain from incorporating fan studies into the curriculum. Paul Booth's essay develops a theory of fan studies education as a method to counteract the neoliberalization of education. Teaching fan studies, Booth argues, facilitates students' translation of fans' ability to become both consumers and producers of media and culture, toward a model of education in which students do not merely consume knowledge but learn to critically engage with, analyze, and produce knowledge. Fan studies, Booth extrapolates, thus models a culture of thinking and feeling people who disrupt the passivity valued by neoliberal corporate culture by becoming creatively and passionately engaged with school, work, politics, and culture. The other pieces come from Amanda Gilroy's "Media Matters" MA course at the University of Groningen, The Netherlands. As her introduction explains, the student pieces that follow replicate the classic *Dallas* (1978–1991) study performed in the 1970s by Ien Ang (1985), another great Dutch audience studies scholar, by asking students to survey viewers of the modern *Dallas* remake (2012–14). Doing so trains students to understand the strengths and weaknesses of various methods for studying online fan cultures, and it demonstrates how both audiences and audience studies have changed since Ang's original research, largely as a result of the Internet and mobile and digital technologies, as well as shifts in genre norms.

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## 6. In this issue: Symposium

[6.1] Symposium pieces in this issue provide a brief discussion of the history and/or ecology of fandom in specific European countries, including Sweden, Germany, Poland, France, Spain, and Russia. Vera Cuntz-Leng details the many German fan objects, such as the works of Karl May, literary traditions, particularly the centrality of derivative works, and conditions of media distribution, such as dubbing and the equal importance of anime and Hollywood imports, that localize modern German fan activities. Christina Olin-Scheller and Pia Sundqvist argue that high percentages of English proficiency and Internet usage facilitate easy access to full participation in international fandom for Swedish fans. The lasting legacies of media embargoes and censorship, as well as a strong desire for high-quality local media to succeed internationally, emerge as strong themes in the study of Polish fans conducted by



Joanna Kucharska, Piotr Sterczewski, Bartłomiej Schweiger, Joanna Płaszewska, and Justyna Janik. Analyzing how Spanish and French fans of *Game of Thrones* (2011–) think of their own activities, Mélanie Bourdaa and Javier Lozano Delmar utilize online interviews to conclude that a much higher proportion of Spanish viewers identify as fans and download episodes, whereas French viewers in the study are more likely to utilize streaming platforms; yet although few people in either sample participated in producing fan works, most French and Spanish viewers identified these as central activities for *Game of Thrones* fandom and defined fans as those who not only watch passionately and consume collectibles but also do that bit more to engage "beyond the simple act of reception" (§2.2). Sudha Rajagopalan investigates fandom in Russia within the context of GLBTQ censorship, where, she argues, fan activities cannot be reduced to a form of political protest but nonetheless overlap and intermingle with other coded civic conversations about sexual politics.

## 7. In this issue: Review

[7.1] Nicolle Lamerichs reviews *Online Games, Social Narratives* by Esther MacCallum-Stewart, an important contribution to contemporary gaming theory, and, for fan scholars, a useful guide to "game cultures and the social aspects of online gaming" (§11).

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# Theory

## Springsteen fans, #bruceleeds, and the tweeting of locality

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[0.1] *Abstract*—This article presents a case study of one Springsteen-affiliated hashtag, #bruceleeds, which emerged from the Springsteen fan community to organize tweets about Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band's July 24, 2013, concert at First Direct Arena in Leeds, England. A grounded theory analysis of #bruceleeds tweets from before the start of the Leeds concert shows significant interaction among fans and local businesses. By using the concert-specific hashtag #bruceleeds, fans and others who used the hashtag co-create an emerging concert experience grounded in a physical space. Drawing on theories on social interactions, classification systems, and mapping, I suggest that the #bruceleeds hashtag facilitates the metaphorical representation of a physical space—in this case, Leeds, England—and the emergence of a complex system sharing features of an information ecology consisting of fans, local businesses, civic organizations, and the technologies they use.

[0.2] *Keywords*— Audience; European fans; Fan community; Information ecologies; Music audience; Twitter

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## 1. Introduction

[1.1] In his ethnography of music audiences, *Tramps Like Us: Music and Meaning Among Springsteen Fans* (1998), Daniel Cavicchi reveals the extent to which various media helps fans transform, enhance, and make meaningful a fan's connection both to the object of their fandom and to other fans. Cavicchi observes, "Music is not a product to be consumed but rather a performance to be experienced, not a static 'text' that is mass-marketed but rather a dynamic event of communication unfolding through various media in space and over time" (1998, 89). When *Tramps Like Us* was published in 1998, media that afforded the creation of community included fanzines, computer discussion groups, concerts, and other face-to-face informal gatherings (Cavicchi 1998, 161–66). Though those mediums are still important for Springsteen and other music fans today, blogs, online forums, and social media spaces like Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and Tumblr have rapidly taken over as preferred outlets for fan discussions and community building (Duffett 2013; Sanderson and Cheong 2010; Magee et al. 2013; Recuero, Amaral, and Monteiro 2012; Bore and Hickman 2013; Blaszkka et al. 2012; Smith and Smith 2012). Specifically in terms of music audiences, Nancy Baym (2012, 2013) writes about the transforming and often tenuous relationship between fans and musicians as a result of social media. Liza Potts (2013) showcases how musician Amanda Palmer has been able to leverage social media and fan participation using the Losers of Friday Night on Their Computers #LOFNOTC hashtag to raise money and undermine the traditional relationship between artists and record labels. Lucy Bennett considers the impact of social media on the behavior of fans of musical acts R.E.M. (2011), U2 (2012a), Lady Gaga (2013b), and Tori Amos (2014).

[1.2] Despite the recent increase in the number of scholars focusing on music fan audiences, Bennett is correct when, in her introduction to a special section of *Participations* on music audiences, she laments the dearth of empirical studies about this group of fans (2012b). It is even more surprising that there has been no scholarly work on Springsteen fans since Cavicchi's ethnography. It is surprising for two primary reasons. First, Springsteen fans worldwide are a literate, communicative, and archival group, publishing Springsteen-dedicated books, blogs, fanzines, and wikis; creating Facebook pages; uploading YouTube videos; and tweeting about Springsteen. Second, there has been much scholarship on Springsteen and his music (Garman 2000; Harde and Campbell 2010; Womack, Zolten, and Bernhard 2012) as well as three international symposiums at Monmouth University in New Jersey in 2005, 2009, and 2012 dedicated to his work ("Glory Days—University of Southern Indiana" 2014). The lack of recent studies on his fans is a gaping hole in a growing body of work on Springsteen and his music.

[1.3] In this article, I discuss a case study of one Springsteen-affiliated hashtag, #bruceleeds, which emerged from Springsteen fans to organize tweets about Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band's July 24, 2013, concert at First Direct Arena in Leeds, England. Coinciding with the start and end of Bruce Springsteen's *Wrecking Ball* tour, between February 2012 and October 2013 I archived over 2.5 million Springsteen-related tweets—including all tweets containing the word "Springsteen"—and those with 2013 European concert-specific hashtags that have a #bruce[city] construct: #bruceleeds, #brucebergen, #bruceamilan, and so on. A grounded theory analysis (Strauss and Corbin 1990; Charmaz 2011) of #bruceleeds tweets from before the start of the Leeds concert shows a significant amount of interaction among fans and local businesses. By using the concert-specific hashtag #bruceleeds, fans and others who used the hashtag—that is, local businesses—co-create an emerging concert experience grounded in a physical space. Drawing on theories of social interactions, classification systems, and mapping, I suggest that the #bruceleeds hashtag shares properties of an information ecology (Nardi and O'Day 1999) that in part facilitates the metaphorical representation of a physical space—in this case, Leeds, England—and the emergence of a complex system of fans, local businesses, civic organizations, and the technologies they use.

## 2.Springsteen and his European audience

[2.1] Bruce Springsteen released his first album, *Greetings from Asbury Park, N.J.*, on January 5, 1973, and was immediately hailed as the next Bob Dylan—a blessing and a curse. *The Wild, the Innocent, and the E Street Shuffle* appeared on November 5, 1973. On May 22, 1974, in the Boston alternative weekly *The Real Paper*, Jon Landau, who would one day become Springsteen's producer, manager, and mentor, wrote: "Last Thursday, at the Harvard Square theatre, I saw my rock 'n' roll past flash before my eyes. And I saw something else: I saw rock and roll future and its name is Bruce Springsteen." Those words would, to Springsteen's dismay, become a promotional slogan for CBS Records upon the release of Springsteen's third album, *Born to Run*, on September 1, 1975. On November 18, 1975, during the *Born to Run* tour, Springsteen and the E Street Band made their first ever European appearance at London's HammerX Odeon, the first of four dates in England, Sweden, and the Netherlands. In anticipation of Springsteen's visit, British weekly music newspaper *Melody Maker* put Springsteen on the cover of its November 15, 1975, edition under the heading "Smash Hit Springsteen." The issue included a cover story and an interview by Ray Coleman conducted earlier in the year in Los Angeles. In the interview, Coleman asks Springsteen, "Do you consider yourself the future of rock 'n' roll, as you have been described?" Springsteen replies, "Hey, gimme a break with that stuff, will you? It's nuts, it's crazy. Who could take that seriously?" (2013, 68). That hype, however, made it all the way to London, where the Odeon marquee read in block letters, "Finally, London Is Ready for Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band" (Davies 2013). Walls around the theater were plastered with posters reading, "I've Seen the Future of Rock and Roll and Its Name is Bruce Springsteen." Inside the theater, the lobby and seats were covered with miniature posters. Seeing that, Springsteen, feeling like he was becoming a construct of CBS Records, lost it and ripped them all to shreds (Carlin 2012, 212). However, the show at the HammerX Odeon that night—and Springsteen's poster-ripping spree—have become part of Springsteen legend, and in the liner notes of the 2005 DVD release of the show, Springsteen (2005) writes, "It was the show that put us on the map in England and began a long and beautiful relationship with our fans overseas."

[2.2] That relationship, however, has not been without controversy. In July 2012, Jon Landau posted "A Thank You to Scandinavia" on Springsteen's official Web site, in which he describes the

[2.3] two shows in Gothenburg [as] among the very highest moments in Bruce and the Band's history of performing. As in all of Scandinavia, the crowds were among the greatest I have ever seen—for any artist. The audience comes with a great knowledge of Bruce's work, a depth of feeling for all of it, and a special empathy for his artistry. As a result, Bruce and the Band are free to be as spontaneous and loose and emotional as they can possibly be. The results are nights of pure magic....We play for so many audiences around the world, but none are better than we find here. (Landau 2012)

[2.4] Landau's phrases—"among the very highest moments in Bruce and the Band's history of recording," "the crowds were among the greatest I have ever seen," "none are better than we find here"—were not very well

received, to say the least, by some of Springsteen's American fans. Many took to Springsteen's official Facebook page:

[2.5] you think no crowds or people are better than sweden according to jon landau then stay in sweden. We don't want performers in the US that think we are second best. For that matter neither should any crowd.

[2.6] "None are better" than Sweden? Are you f'ing kidding me Jon? Wow, what a slap in the face to the fans in NJ...For decades we've been the crowd that supports Bruce—sells out 10 nights in a row, whether its the arena, Giants stadium or wherever...always on our feet, singing at the top of our lungs for our homestate boy...but in your entire career as Bruce's manager, you say "sweden"...?? Whatever—how easily you forget...we live and breathe Bruce and his music, and even the same air...

[2.7] Wow....been a Bruce fan since 70's....been to 30+ concerts...this hurt a liitle Jon, Bruce, and E Street Band. To say "best ever" is a bit much, but we [his US-based fans] have been the ones liking his works from the start...there wouldn't be a Bruce and E Street if fans like us didn't go to venues early on...sad that Bruce does all his longest shows in Europe...we'd stay that long and be vibrant if given the chance. Wish I hadn't read this post. (Springsteen 2012)

[2.8] One of the major Springsteen fan blogs, *Blogness on the Edge of Town*, published a commentary by Pete Chianca under the heading, "Maybe Springsteen's European Audiences Are Better" (2012). Chianca wonders how it came to be that "European fans have become the primary and most dedicated purveyors of Springsteen's entire oeuvre, and they're willing to prove it (all night) by giving themselves over to the spirit of the proceedings, come rain, sleet, snow, late hours or whatever else gets thrown at them." Chianca is in part referring to the roll call system that is currently used at shows outside the United States. In this system, fans organize when and where those with general admission standing-room-only tickets will queue and receive an entrance number (usually written in marker on their hand). Over a period of several days, fans return at set times to check in. If they miss a check-in time, they lose their place in line. Fans enter the venue in the queue order. Those with the lowest numbers are the ones who stand in front and get to touch Springsteen, feel his sweat, and maybe get called on stage. Some fans travel from show to show waiting in roll call lines with the reward of standing a couple of inches from Springsteen. Respected Springsteen fan and prolific tweeter @casinonancy (2014) shared with me after reading a draft of this article that these fans will often choose not to tweet roll call locations and times early in the roll call process. Instead, they will "DM or text each other when a pit line is starting...until they are assured of their number. They then share everything they have." Pit queuing is a significant ritual for European shows, which has the effect of building community, increasing fan loyalty, and boosting fan prestige.

[2.9] During the summer 2012 European leg of the *Wrecking Ball* tour, longtime fan and fan writer Caryn Rose followed Springsteen on an eight-day, five-country, seven-concert journey (checking in at roll calls, talking with fans) to find out for herself if European fans were substantively different from those in the United States. Rose published her account in *Raise Your Hand: Adventures of an American Springsteen Fan in Europe*, finding "it's not that the fans are necessarily better, but that the audience as a whole is different in crucial ways that have a direct impact on Bruce and the band's performances in Europe" (2012, 103–4). In August 2013, Chianca posted another article to *Blogness*, "US vs. the World: Should Bruce Springsteen Address 'The Europe Issue'?" Here he wonders why Springsteen hasn't graced the United States with a concert in over a year and instead has "spent 2013 putting on some of the longest, most surprising and well-reviewed shows of his career around Australia and Europe."

[2.10] Springsteen, however, has addressed the European issue over the years. In January 1999, he told Mark Hagen in *Mojo* that "we really connected with the European audience....The greatest thing that I did was go back in the 80s and to continue to go back. It has been the centre for an intense interest in the work that I've done" (Hagen 2013, 246). Indeed, Springsteen biographer Dave Marsh describes the fans in at Hovet arena in Stockholm, Sweden, during the 1981 European leg of The River tour as "just on the friendly side of riotous" (1987, 36). Addressing the Stockholm crowd, Springsteen hinted at the special relationship that was burgeoning among him and the E Street Band and the fans:

[2.11] I've learned a lot over here. I've learned the importance of the audience, the importance of you in the show.

[2.12] Because we come out and we play, and we play hard and try to tell you the things that mean a lot to us, and what you respond the way that you have tonight and last night, it's like a big "me too," you know...

[2.13] It's in a buncha little things. I want you to know that it means a lot to is just how quiet you've been in the slow songs since we've been here. I want to thank you a lot for doing that. (Marsh 1987, 37)

[2.14] Echoing those feelings of a growing bond between artist and fan, in the February 28, 2003, issue of *Entertainment Weekly*, Springsteen acknowledges that "for the best part of a decade, we've had a bigger audience overseas than in the States. Two thirds of my audience has been there; they were very connected to the *Tom Joad* record, very connected to music that was explicitly America, [so] there must be tremendous commonality felt about the values of those songs" (Tucker 2013, 274). @Casinonancy (2014) concurs: "I think the European audience fundamentally understands this is a co-created performance and they have to play their part. As Bruce says 'I can't get there on my own. We need you.' Also in Europe we have a different sense of people as artists and we expect our artists to often be controversial and political and we are comfortable with that."

[2.15] Record sale and tour data support these claims, with record sales outside the United States accounting for a higher percentage of total sales since the release of *Tunnel of Love* in 1987 (Earthslayer 2012) and European box office receipts higher than in the United States in 2008 ("Magic Tour [Bruce Springsteen]" 2014) and 2012 ("Wrecking Ball World Tour" 2014) (the years where I was able to find sale numbers). European shows have tended to be longer and the set lists more diverse than those in the United States (d\_vdindn 2013). In summary, Springsteen's European fans, like the American fans Cavicchi studied, are dedicated, valued by Springsteen and his organization, and worthy of study.

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### 3.Methodology

[3.1] Tweets analyzed in this study were archived between July 17, 2013, and October 21, 2013, as part of a larger study to archive Springsteen-related tweets during his 2012–13 *Wrecking Ball* tour. One large archive captured all tweets with the keyword "Springsteen." Individual archives were set up to capture hashtag-specific tweets for concerts that had their own hashtag, including #bruceleeds. The concert at the First Direct Arena was chosen at random from European shows in English-speaking countries (England, Scotland, Wales, and Ireland).

[3.2] All tweets were archived using yourTwrapperKeeper, "a quasi-standard for tweet datasets" (Bruns and Liang 2012; see also Gaffney and Puschmann 2013), which collects the tweet content, username, URL, reply username, and other information. Created in 2011 by John O'Brien after he disbanded his popular TwrapperKeeper archiving system (Bruns 2011), yourTwrapperKeeper collects tweets from Twitter's search API and streaming API containing a particular search term (such as keyword or hashtag) and archives them on a server set up by the researcher (Kelly et al. 2010). Highfield, Harrington, and Bruns (2013) have pointed out that despite yourTwrapperKeeper's robust archiving abilities, one limitation is that it does not collect retweets that have been created using Twitter's retweet button. Twitter's retweet button does not allow a user to edit the original tweet before publishing; it just forwards on the original tweet in full. Retweet button tweets show up in a follower's timeline with the original author's username and avatar, and a notification that it was retweeted by someone else. Manual retweets, on the other hand, show up in a timeline associated with the retweeter's username and avatar, as well as in a yourTwrapperKeeper archive. As Bruns and Liang (2012) note, "No dataset captured by using the Twitter API is guaranteed to be entirely comprehensive...however, such research nonetheless remains valid and important." In addition, though the analyzed corpus is extensive, the tweets are not representative of all the tweets possibly tweeted about the Leeds concert. The #bruceleeds archive, for example, did not capture tweets about the show that did not include the hashtag. In addition to yourTwrapperKeeper, I used the Twitter Archive Google Spreadsheet (TAGS) (Hawksey 2013; Gaffney and

Puschmann 2013) and the associated visualization environment, TAGSExplorer, both designed by Martin Hawksey, to create visualizations of the corpora.

[3.3] I used a grounded theory approach (Strauss and Corbin 1990; Charmaz 2011) to analyze the tweets, with each tweet functioning as a single unit of analysis. From each tweet emerged a primary code and, where applicable, one or more secondary codes. Charmaz argues that "grounded theory methods consist of systematic, yet flexible guidelines for collecting and analyzing qualitative data to construct theories 'grounded' in the data themselves" (2011, 2). Of the many benefits of using a grounded theory approach, the most important is that because theories emerge from the data, any biases a researcher may have ahead of time are greatly diminished. Researchers using this method do not approach the data with a set hypothesis they hope to prove. Rather, "one begins with an area of study and what is relevant to that area is allowed to emerge" (Strauss and Corbin 1990, 23).

[3.4] The process of preparing and analyzing the #bruceleeds tweets included the steps outlined below:

1. Download #bruceleeds corpus from your TwapperKeeper as Microsoft Excel file.
2. Open in Excel, adjust Unix time, which is set to Greenwich Mean Time, to account for the concert's time zone, and convert time and date to Western time and date conventions.
3. Filter tweets according to time constraints.
4. Building on categories generated during Open Coding (Strauss and Corbin 1990) when completing an earlier phase of the study (Wolff, forthcoming), use a modified version of axial coding (Strauss and Corbin 1990) to generate categories directly relating to a selected focus (Creswell 2006). This stage built on categories generated during prior axial coding (Wolff, forthcoming). My process was informed by Charmaz's (2011, 136) description of using gerunds for category names to showcase actions. These categories help understand phenomena observed in tweets.
5. Code the tweets along categories generated in axial coding into one primary code and, if necessary, one or more secondary codes.
6. Use selective coding (Strauss and Corbin 1990) to make connections between the categories defined during axial coding to help generate theories.
7. Import tweets into TAGS to create visualizations.
8. Write article based on findings, sending the initial draft to Springsteen fans who use Twitter to ensure accurate descriptions of fan activities. Then, following a practice advocated by Henry Jenkins ([1992] 2013), incorporate fan feedback in later drafts.

## 4. Results

[4.1] After adjusting for time constraints, 996 tweets from 480 unique accounts in the Leeds corpus were available to assess (table 1). Of these accounts, 48 were identified as being from businesses and government organizations from within Leeds and the surrounding area. Eighteen codes emerged from the data (table 1); of these, I am most interested in discussing those related to the larger categories of *Communication* and *Community Building*.

**Table 1.** Codes, totals, percentages, and code definitions

ID	Code	Total	% (n=996)	Definition
1	Affiliating	666	66.9%	A tweet that includes a Springsteen-related hashtag (not the use of @springsteen). Not counted when in a tweet that was retweeted unless the hashtag was added to a modified retweet.
2	Conversing	130	13.1%	A conversation between two or among more than two users. Distinct from TUMMELING.
3	Critiquing	32	3.2%	A tweet with a value judgment.
4	Emerging	7	0.7%	A tweet directly in response to something happening at the concert, which contains what might be described as "a spontaneous overflow of powerful emotion."
5	Generating	481	48.3%	A tweet that generates a community-level excitement and energy surrounding the concert. These can be tweeted by individuals, community organizations, and local businesses.



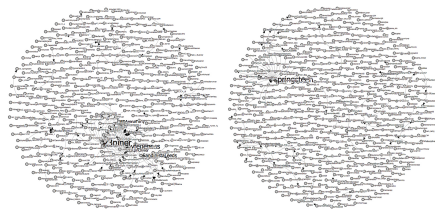
6	Historicizing	9	0.9%	A tweet in which authors locates their activities within a history of their own life.
7	Integrating	111	11.1%	A tweet that integrates the language or actions of the Springsteen fan discourse community.
8	Intertextual	165	16.6%	A tweet that overtly or unconsciously has its full meaning in the understanding of a larger context.
9	Locating	139	14.0%	A tweet where the author locates him- or herself in a particular tour city or city space, such as a pit queue roll call location, city landmark, or local business.
10	Mediating	125	12.6%	A tweet that links to an image, video, or other external media.
11	Narrating	253	25.4%	A tweet describing or depicting one's own events at a concert. These tweets can be days in advance or days after, as the experience of the concert tends to begin long in advance and continue for some time after.
12	Notifying	65	6.5%	A tweet using an @mention not necessarily to have a conversation but to alert someone that he or she has been mentioned.
13	Perpetuating	65	6.5%	A tweet perpetuating the larger narrative of Springsteen shows: rare songs, being brought on stage, tour premieres.
14	Phatic	6	0.6%	A tweet that does not contain significant additional information to place it in another code (McNely 2010).
15	Reporting	42	4.2%	A tweet that informs others of events or news relating to the concert itself. Many of these are tweeted from news organizations or blogs, or from individuals linking to them.
16	Requesting	6	0.6%	A tweet to the general Springsteen community asking a question or requesting information.
17	Tummeling	535	53.7%	A tweet that "facilitat[es] conversation and engagement within online communities" (McNely 2010, 4)—here, retweets.
18	Yearning	23	2.3%	A tweet that expresses a desire to have been at the show.

[4.2] More than 75 percent of #bruceleeds tweets show characteristics of *Communication*—that is, *Conversing*, *Notifying*, or *Tummeling* (here counted as retweets). Twitter uses the @reply functionality in a complicated way. Without a hashtag, a tweet that opens with an @reply, such as, "@vfneneboss Snap! Definitely my no 1 request for #bruceleeds," will only be seen by the author, the person being @replied to, and anyone who follows them both; such a tweet is what I am calling *Conversing*. Putting an @reply in the middle of the tweet is what I'm calling *Mentioning*: "6pm roll call at @fdarena. #BruceLeeds [URL]" and "Looking forward to seeing #bruceleeds at the @fdarena tomorrow, one of the lucky few, should be good #springsteen." In these tweets, the point is not necessarily to have a conversation with the person who runs the @fdarena account. Rather, it is a way of alerting the account that it is being discussed instead of writing "First Direct Arena," which, because they have been alerted, provides them with the opportunity to reply if they would like. When the @mention appears in a tweet, all the author's followers will see the tweet, not just those who follow both the author and the name in the @mention.

[4.3] Retweeting is a practice where users forward someone else's tweet on to their followers. Boyd, Golder, and Lotan (2010) discuss the ways that Twitter users retweet, which include the goals of the retweet, the number of characters available, and the technology used to compose the retweet. They conclude that no matter "why users embrace retweeting, through broadcasting messages, they become part of a broader conversation" (2010, 10). Rather than using the code *Retweeting*, I have borrowed McNely's (2010) term, *Tummeling*, which he adapted from Marks's (2008) discussion of the Yiddish word, *tummler*, "to facilitate." McNely argues that retweets facilitate conversation because they extend the reach of a tweet to an additional set of followers. *Tummeling* was popular in the #bruceleeds corpus, accounting for over 53 percent of tweets, with fans retweeting each other, businesses retweeting fans, fans retweeting businesses, and businesses retweeting businesses. For example, one fan retweeted a tweet from the Merrion Centre, which is down the street from First Direct Arena: "RT @merrioncentre: So excited for @Springsteen! We're ready to rock out with boss, are you?! #leeds #bruceleeds [URL removed]." This tweet from @fdarena requesting a retweet was retweeted dozens of

times by fans trying to win the contest: "COMPETITION: Feeling Lucky (Town)?! RT for the chance to win an item of Bruce #Springsteen merchandise! #BruceLeeds [URL]." Tweets that exhibit *Mentioning* and *Tummeling* build community among those tweeting #bruceleeds because they increase the number of people who see tweets and therefore have the ability to compose their own tweets in response.

[4.4] In the #bruceleeds corpus, tweets that exhibit characteristics of *Communication* hold more meaning compared to one other Springsteen concert I have analyzed. Tweets about the April 2012 concert at the Izod Center in New Jersey show that 6.0 percent have characteristics of *Conversing* (Wolff, 2015). Over 44 percent of Izod tweets show examples of *Narrating*. Conversely, the #bruceleeds tweets only shows 25.4 percent *Narrating* and 13.1 percent *Conversing*. Network maps of the two concerts side by side make visible the differences between the two corpora (figure 1). The #bruceleeds tweets show complex communication among a core group that includes fans and local businesses. The Izod network, however, shows little communication other than unidirectional notification to the @springsteen account—an account that did not tweet once during either concert. Interestingly, 40.6 percent of the tweets in the Izod network mention @springsteen, whereas only 4.3 percent of #bruceleeds tweets do. Although there is no way to make clear a causal relationship between the location-specific hashtag #bruceleeds and the enhanced communication among users with interviewing those who tweeted with the #bruceleeds hashtag, the network map helps make visible the communication among Springsteen fans and local Leeds businesses.

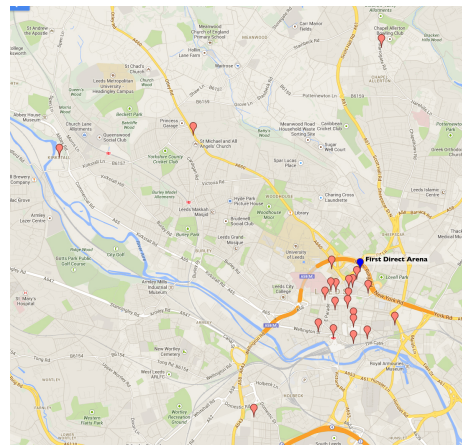


**Figure 1.** Network maps of #bruceleeds tweets (left) and Izod tweets.

[4.5] Within *Community Building*, we see *Affiliating*, *Generating*, *Integrating*, and *Locating*. Tweets that show *Affiliation* are those that contain a Springsteen-related hashtag, such as #bruceleeds, #springsteen, and #brucebuds—for example, "About to enter the Arena! #BruceLeeds [URL]." The hashtag succeeds in *Affiliating* fans' activities with the concert, whether they were at the concert or discussing it from afar. There were also some Leeds-specific hashtags used, such as #goldenticket (so named because the First Direct Arena is small in comparison to sites where Springsteen usually plays when with the E Street Band, the tickets were hard to get, and Springsteen was opening the new venue) and #getthebosstosandis (so named because a local restaurant was trying to get Springsteen to stop by for a drink after the show—and just in case he couldn't, they sent a bottle of tequila and their brand of beer to Springsteen's dressing room). *Affiliating* is not coded as being in 100percent of the tweets because I did not count retweets that contained the hashtag (unless the hashtag was added to a modified retweet). Retweets are an important part of communicating on Twitter. But with *Affiliating*, I coded those tweets where the author's immediate and obvious intention was to affiliate with Springsteen. With the retweets, the retweeter's goal seemed to be to forward the original author's tweet and not necessarily create a new affiliation.

[4.6] For *Generating*, nearly half the tweets were found to be generating community-level excitement and energy surrounding the concert. These include tweets by individuals, community organizations, and local businesses, such as, "Can anyone suggest a good pre-show bar for all #brucebuds to meet? #BruceLeeds [list of usernames removed]" tweeted by a fan, and "Good Luck to @FDArenaTony & the amazing @fdarena tonight for the first big event, I'm sure you will do Leeds proud. #BruceLeeds," tweeted by a local business. Often these are repeated over time to build excitement: "2 days and 23 hours remaining until #BruceLeeds [URL]," "1 day and 23 hours remaining until #BruceLeeds [URL]," and "20 hours and 46 minutes remaining until #BruceLeeds [URL]." Each tweet contains a screen shot of an iPhone with the countdown app counting down the minutes. The Leeds Chamber of Commerce, the Leeds Metropolitan Library, and Leeds Trinity University all got in on the #bruceleeds tweets, often congratulating First Direct Arena and wishing it luck on the first concert ever at the facility. A map of businesses and organizations that used the #bruceleeds hashtag pinned to a Google Map shows how pervasive the hashtag was throughout the city.

[4.7] For the code *Integrating*, as with all fan communities, the Springsteen fan community has invented and adopted a unique and meaningful discourse (Harris 1998, 8). For example, many hardcore fans consider themselves part of the E Street Nation (*#estreetnation*), and those who are friends through their Springsteen fandom call themselves Bruce Buds (*#brucebuds*). In specific fan contexts, phrases that might not seem esoteric hold unique meanings. For example, the term *pre-show*, as in the tweet, "PRE-SHOW!!!!!!!!!! #BruceLeeds," refers to the times when Springsteen walks on stage hours before the official start time to play a few songs acoustically to fans at the front of the pit. The terms *roll call* and *no-shows*, as in the tweet "*#bruceleeds* 9pm roll call. 43 numbers given, but few non showers already. Roll call tomorrow 10am, 2pm, 6pm, 10pm. [URL]," describe the queuing process that general admission ticket holders must adhere to if they want to get into the pit: multiple check-ins through the day, and if fans miss one, they lose their place in line. These tweets are *Integrating* the language or actions of the Springsteen fan discourse community. Interestingly, by the start of the concert, some local businesses were *Integrating* Springsteen fan discourse even beyond the *#bruceleeds* hashtag: "First @Springsteen ticket holder to show their ticket at [username removed] gets a free milkshake!! *#leeds #bruceleeds #brucebuds*." There is an obvious marketing component to this tweet, and on its own, it might seem that the shop that tweeted it was merely trying to lure fans in with the gift of a free milk shake. However, within the context of the corpus, the tweet feels more benign. The shop, like many other businesses and organizations in Leeds, has caught Springsteen fever, is excited that Springsteen and his fans are in town, and is trying its best to welcome them to the community. Integrating fan discourse is one way the shop is trying to do that.



**Figure 2.** Map of locations of businesses and civic organizations that tweeted using the *#bruceleeds* hashtag.

[4.8] For the code *Locating*, the *#bruceleeds* hashtag itself maps Springsteen to Leeds. When used in a tweet, it locates the person who, if not in Leeds, then is very much interested in what is happening in Leeds. The tweets coded as *Locating* were only those where a fan, business, or organization was actually located in a particular tour city or city space, such as a pit queue roll call location, city landmark, or local business. Tweets that exemplify *Locating* are: "Bruce fever is sweeping *#Leeds*. songs playing everywhere, Springsteen film on at the cinema, concert all over the press. *#BruceLeeds*," "@FDArenaTony can't wait to be part of it all!! So glad we've finally got an arena in this glorious city! *#bruceleeds*," and "All ready for 9am roll call at the hub of the very well organised pit que *#bruceleeds* [URL]." These tweets suggest that Leeds as a city and community space is very much a part of this Springsteen concert-going experience.

## 5. Discussion

[5.1] Hashtags have come a long way since Chris Messina (2007a, 2007b) first proposed "Twitter tag channels" in the tweet, "how do you feel about using # (pound) for groups. As in *#barcamp* [msg]?" (2007b), and since Audi aired the first TV commercial hashtag during the 2010 Super Bowl. Conceived as a remediation (Bolter and Grusin 2000; Bolter 2001) of Flickr tags and IRC channel creations (Messina 2007a), hashtags are folksonomic classifications of tweets (Potts et al. 2011; McCulloch 2013). Thomas Vander Wal (2007) explains that the value in folksonomies "is derived from people using their own vocabulary and adding explicit meaning, which may come from inferred understanding of the information/object. People are not so much categorizing, as providing a

means to connect items (placing hooks) to provide their meaning in their own understanding." Because anyone can create a hashtag, the hashtags often emerge through a process of negotiation.

[5.2] The #bruce[city] construct emerged in June 2009 during a conversation on Twitter between two men discussing how to organize tweets for an upcoming Springsteen concert in Bergen, Norway, during the European leg of the *Working on a Dream* tour. Helge O. Sveta, a reporter for the Bergen newspaper *Tidende*, asked his audience, "Skal du på Bruce Springsteen på Koengen?" ("Are you going to see Bruce Springsteen at Koengen?") and encouraged those who were going to see Springsteen at Koengen to use the #btbruce hashtag (2009a). In response, Andreas Ringdal suggested that the hashtag was a bit media specific (2009a), to which Sveta replied it wasn't his decision; the tag was going to be used for the paper's Cover It Live concert coverage (2009b) and for a contest (2009c). Ringdal replied, wondering, "Ville det ikke vært bedre å brukt en generell tag for konserten #brucebergen eller lignende" ("Wouldn't it be better to have a more general hashtag, like #brucebergen, or something similar?") (2009b). Ringdal understood that when there are too many hashtags for a particular event, the information often gets watered down through a distribution to the various hashtags (Potts 2013; McNely 2010).

[5.3] While #brucebergen and #btbruce did exist for the Bergen concert, a search on Topsy reveals the #bruce[city] hashtag construct was only used for one other city in 2009, #brucesevilla, and in only five tweets (#brucebergen was used in hundreds). Then, in 2012, when Seville, Spain, opened the first European leg of the *Wrecking Ball* tour, #brucesevilla was used again, but in only 10 tweets. Each of the eight cities with shows leading up to Milan, Italy, on June 7, 2012, had fewer than 15 #bruce[city] tweets. Then, out of nowhere, #brucemilan had hundreds—as did each concert following. The #bruce[city] construct was used again during the European, Australian, and South American legs of the 2013 *Wrecking Ball* tour and for the South African, Oceanic, and United States legs of the 2014 *High Hopes* tour. A thorough study of all the #bruce[city] tweets would reveal the self-organizing criticality (Bok and Chen 1991; Syverson 1999) that resulted into the hashtag taking off in Milan.

[5.4] Studies of hashtags, then, are exercises in the study of naming—the study of classification systems. Every #bruceleeds hashtag added to a tweet was added after a moment of judgment when the author considered how the tweet should be understood within the context of all tweets tweeted. By adding a hashtag, the author is labeling a tweet as one thing and not another. It is a tweet about Springsteen in Leeds, England, not a tweet about Springsteen in Gijón, Spain. Though existing among the millions of tweets sent out per day, it now has a metaphorical boundary separating it from some tweets and adhering it to others. Yet despite a classification's singular name, Bowker and Star (1999) describe the extent to which classification systems are representations of the cultures from which they emerge. Ludwik Fleck (1979) has argued that in order to fully understand a concept (that is, a classification of an idea), one must study the history of that idea. Hashtags are historical artifacts subject to various external influences, such as community ideas, available technologies, and business and political interests. Their ubiquity in broadcast media, with each television show, sports event, and product displaying its hashtag, encouraging its use, and in many cases having actors live tweet during the shows (Jenkins, Ford, and Green 2013; Bennett 2013a; Raghavan 2013), suggests that hashtags exist within a media ecology that includes participants, organizations, and technologies (Schäfer 2010). The hashtag #bruceleeds is no different. In the corpus, fans, local businesses, and civic organizations coauthor a remediated version of the concert event as a result of convergent composing technologies—Twitter for iPhone, Twitter for iPad, Twitter for Android, the Web interface—and the unseen unnamed technologies that make those spaces work.

[5.5] In his groundbreaking book, *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*, Harold Rheingold defines virtual communities as "social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace" (2000, xx). Rheingold's definition is helpful here because it allows us to raise questions about the nature of the relationships that exist in the #bruceleeds corpus and whether we should consider the users as part of a community. Did the public discussion last "long enough"? Was there sufficient "human feeling"? Were "personal relationships" formed through the use of the hashtag? With 75 percent of the tweets showing some form of communication, we see that there were webs of connections made. But how permanent were those webs? Or does the corpus show evidence of weak ties, which Wellman and Gulia argue

are "a better means than strong ties of maintaining contact with other social circles" (1999, 176). Gruzd, Wellman, and Takhteyev address whether communities can be found on Twitter by focusing on Wellman's personal network, and they found evidence of "a personal community [with] a somewhat interconnected network where some members form closer relationships between themselves" (2011, 1313). Studying a personal network is, however, quite different from studying a hashtag-generated corpus, as I have here.

[5.6] More instructive than focusing on community, I'd like to suggest what we're seeing in the #bruceleeds corpus is similar to what Bonnie Nardi and Vicki L. O'Day have defined as an information ecology: "a system of people, practices, values, and technologies in a particular local environment. In an information ecology the spotlight is not on technology, but on human activities that are served by technology" (1999, 49). A hashtag is both a classifier and also a technology, which, like all language and writing, is used by people to create meaning in particular contexts (Bolter 2001; Ong 2003). In information ecologies, "only the participants...can establish [its] identity" (Nardi and O'Day 1999, 55), which is why each hashtag corpus will show different properties and practices. No hashtag corpus is the same as another. The values that emerge from the #bruceleeds ecology are affiliating, conversing, locating oneself in a community space, and community building. The tweets show fan practices: they wait in roll call lines, they get more excited as the concert gets closer, they meet up with friends, and they use language (#brucebuds) to further locate themselves with those in their affinity group (Gee 2007). Nardi and O'Day (1999) adopt the ecology metaphor instead of one based on community because the former suggests diversity and evolution, whereas the latter tends to suggest homogeneity. Information ecologies are complex systems with diverse parts that coevolve as changes emerge. They contain keystone species without which the ecology would fail to survive. And most importantly for our purposes, they "have a sense of locality" (50–51). That locality is defined directly by the use of the #bruceleeds hashtag, which helps structure the space and provides opportunities for fans and others who are interested in the concert to participate in its growth over time.

## 6. Conclusion

[6.1] Paulo Gerbaudo suggests hashtags act as part of a social media that facilitates a "choreography of assembly," which is "understood as a process of symbolic construction of public space, which revolves around an emotional 'scene-setting' and 'scripting' of participants' physical assembling" (2012, 12). Gerbaudo is writing about the use of social media to help organize mass protest movements, such as the protests in Tahrir, Egypt, and the Occupy Wall Street movement. For him, in this instance, social media is seen as "a vehicle for the creation of new forms of proximity and face-to-face interaction" (13) rather than a symbolic representation of events taking place in spaces already.

[6.2] #Bruceleeds tweets, however, suggest that hashtags can also facilitate a representation of assembly, which also symbolically constructs a physical space. We see the construction of physical space in the #bruceleeds tweets when fans and businesses are *Locating* the tweets within Leeds. A significant contributor to the ability of fans and local businesses to symbolically represent a local space is the name of the hashtag itself: #bruceleeds. Nardi and O'Day suggest that "the name of a technology defines what it means to the people who use it" (1999, 54). Here, the hashtag itself mashes together the object of fandom (Bruce Springsteen) with a particular locality (Leeds). In that regard, the hashtag is a map directly connecting the tweets to a physical geographical space. One could map a Springsteen tour by plotting the hashtags.

[6.3] Maps tell stories by segmenting the world into latitude and longitude, roads with distinct edges, and defined borders around counties, states, and countries. Denis Wood argues "maps maintain the illusion of their objectivity [by] their adherence to the factual" (2013, 13). Franco Moretti observes "maps show us that there is something that needs to be explained" (2007, 39). Peter Turchi says, "To ask for a map is to say, 'Tell me a story'" (2004, 11). Meaning in maps emerges through context-specific multimodal texts and signs. The hashtag would be much different if it were contextualized as part of the venue—that is, #brucefdarena. With #bruceleeds, however, Bruce is connected to a city, and by extension the people in the city, the fans in the city, and the businesses in the city—in other words, to a space with a distributed, segmented, and evolving identity.

[6.4] In the #bruceleeds tweets, fans, local businesses, and local organizations co-create what Leeds means within the context of the concert and how those tweeting about Leeds choose to present it. When composing a #bruceleeds tweet, one has the option of what to include, just as one has an option of what to include when mapping Leeds on a piece of paper. Both practices are rhetorical. The tweets coded as *Affiliating*, *Generating*, and *Locating* contribute to what it means to experience the concert as well as what it means to experience a particular part of Leeds itself. #Bruceleeds tweets from government organizations that announce bus schedules for fans flying in, where best to park, or where to get a quick bite to eat before the concert all contribute to the locality of the event, as do fans tweeting about where to grab a beer before the start of the concert, what the weather is like for those who have yet to arrive, and what the roll call times will be the following day. Indeed, the tweets are about much more than Springsteen (the official @springsteen account is only @mentioned 43 times and tweeted zero times in 996 tweets). Rather, #bruceleeds tells a story of an ecology of fans, business, and organizations composing their fandom, and in doing so remediating their practices, values, and use of various technologies.

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# Praxis

## Antifan activism as a response to MTV's *The Valleys*

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[0.1] *Abstract*—MTV has launched several reality TV shows in the United Kingdom, but one, *The Valleys* (2012–14), about youth moving from the South Wales Valleys to Cardiff, has received much criticism. Grassroots criticism of the show arose, and a *Valleys*-centric campaign, *The Valleys Are Here*, took direct action. I adopt Jonathan Gray's definition of antifans to complicate ideas of fan activism. I utilize comments and posts made on the *Valleys Are Here* Twitter feed and Facebook account, as well as the organization's Web site, to examine the ways in which they encourage activism among antifans of the series. I pay particular attention to activist calls for MTV to be held accountable for its positioning of Wales and the Valleys, and to how it encourages participation among varied groups of people whose common denominator is their dislike of the series. Fan activism is not exclusive to people who consider themselves fans, and notions of fan activism can be complicated by drawing in antifans.

[0.2] *Keywords*—Jonathan Gray; National identity; Reality TV; Wales

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## 1. Introduction

[1.1] In recent years, MTV has launched a series of reality TV shows in the United Kingdom. Emulating US series such as *Jersey Shore* (2009–12), *Geordie Shore* (2011–) and *Desperate Scousewives* (2011–12) have followed the everyday lives of 20-somethings in the north of England. MTV's first foray into Wales, however, saw the cast of *The Valleys* (2012–14) leave their homes in South Wales and head to the bright lights of Cardiff to fulfill their dreams.

[1.2] *The Valleys* premiered on September 25, 2012, but backlash against the series began when advertising for the show began. Criticism was aimed at MTV's use of cultural stereotypes in both the TV advertising (with the inclusion of mountains and sheep drawing on notions of Wales as rural principality and the Welsh as a nation of sheep shaggers) and the house decor (leek-themed wallpaper and sheep footstools and chairs). After the season premiere, this criticism intensified, with a Welsh newspaper, the *Western Mail*, calling it exploitative; MPs such as Chris Bryant taking to Twitter to announce, "That's not what the Valleys are like" (Williams 2012); and prominent Welsh celebrities, including Rachel Trezise, condemning the show for being "cynical, cheap, ignorant and by no means representative of the South Wales Valleys and people that I know and love" (Wales Online 2012).

[1.3] Grassroots criticism of the show also arose, however, with petitions created to cancel the series and scores of angry Twitter users taking over the program's official hashtag, #TheValleys, to air their complaints. A *Valleys*-centric campaign, *The Valleys Are Here*, created in direct

response to the show, also took direct action, calling for MTV to donate 5 percent of their profits from the series to charities supporting deprived areas in South Wales, as well as creating their own films showcasing real people from the Valleys.

[1.4] In what I call antifan activism, antifans of a text—here, *The Valleys*—unite to protest it. The notion of antifan activism is not a new one; religious groups, for example, have campaigned to ban books such as the Harry Potter series (1998–2007) from public libraries, and domestic abuse charities have campaigned against the *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2011) trilogy. However, here I examine antifandom linked to a geographical and cultural identity—in this case, Wales and the South Wales valleys. This type of antifandom, while falling within Jonathan Gray's (2003) concept of antifans of a moral text, draws on Lawrence Grossberg's (1992) notion of affect as well as the ethical implications of a text to create a nuanced reading. This kind of antifan activism complicates current notions of fandom and fan practices, offering scholars of fandom new and intriguing ways to examine how audiences and texts interact and what can be learned from this interaction.

## 2. Framing antifan activism

[2.1] Fan activism has traditionally been regarded as fans acting together in order to extend or resurrect a group, film, or TV show in which they have an interest. *Star Trek* (1966–69) fans' letter-writing campaign of the 1960s, for example, would be considered a case of fan activism, as would *The X-Files* (1993–2002) fans' current campaign for a third film. More recently, however, focus has shifted to look at other methods of campaigning and activism within fandom (as evidenced by volume 10 of *Transformative Works and Cultures*, a special issue on fan activism published in 2010) and how celebrities and their fans have worked together to raise money and/or awareness for specific issues. Craig Garthwaite and Timothy Moore note that "it is clear that celebrities have the ability to influence the behaviour of their fans in other arenas" (2008, 5), and celebrities such as Gillian Anderson and Keith Duffy have mobilized their fan bases to promote charities and organizations. Actor Misha Collins, who plays the angel Castiel on *Supernatural* (2005–), used Twitter to ask his followers to donate money to the aid effort that followed the 2009 Haiti earthquake. Within 24 hours, fans had raised almost \$30,000 and a nonprofit organization, Random Acts (<http://www.randomacts.org/campaigns/>), was created, which supported the country's reconstruction and which continues the funding of three orphanages. Lady Gaga has similarly used her position to encourage fan charity. During her Monster Ball tour, she partnered with Virgin Mobile to offer premium VIP tickets to fans who volunteered with homeless youth organizations. As a result, Gaga and her little monsters raised more than \$80,000 (<https://www.looktothestars.org/celebrity/lady-gaga>).

[2.2] More fundamentally, however, fandom groups have also been created outside of any celebrity activity. "Aussie X-Files Fans" for Charity on Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/axfcharity>) has raised money for a variety of charities supported by Gillian Anderson (Jones 2012), and the Harry Potter Alliance (<http://thehpalliance.org/>) has also campaigned on a variety of issues, including rights to equal marriage and selling fair trade chocolate at the Warner Bros. studio. In each of these cases, the fandom has formed around an issue nominated by or affiliated with it, perhaps by issues raised in the text or by awareness raised by an associated star. Each of these examples, however, assumes that fan activism is only

undertaken by fans of a book, show, or celebrity. I challenge this notion by adopting Jonathan Gray's (2003) definition of antifans to complicate ideas of fan activism.

[2.3] Gray has been instrumental in critiquing reception studies and reassessing the notion of audiences. He asks whether we can fully understand what it means to interact with media texts by only examining fans, arguing that focusing so intently on the fan distorts our "understanding of the text, the consumer and the interaction between them" (2003, 68). Instead, Gray suggests that we must also look at antifans and nonfans as "the very nature and physicality of the text changes when watched by the non-fan, becoming an entirely different entity...Non-fan engagement with the televisual text denies us the existence of the solitary, agreed-on text with which to anchor such discussions" (2003, 75).

[2.4] I focus here on antifans rather than nonfans, although I would suggest that the physicality of the text changes when watched by antifans as much as it does when watched by nonfans. For Gray, an antifan is someone who strongly dislikes a text or genre—someone who is "bothered, insulted or otherwise assaulted by its presence" (2003, 70). Antifans are not necessarily ignorant of the texts they hate, even though they may have not watched the show or read the book. Rather, they are aware of the text paratextually, through advertisements or reviews; they are aware of the genre and harbor a dislike for it; or they have seen similar shows and find them intolerable. However, antifans may also have watched or read a text—and may have done so as closely as fans do. Antifans of the *Fifty Shades of Grey* series, for example, often spork the novels—deconstructing the text and critiquing it in journals and blog posts (Harman and Jones 2013). These antifans are not only aware of the text through paratextual means but have also engaged in a close reading of it. They are often more familiar with the content and larger discussions than fans are.

[2.5] As scholarly work on antifandom increases, so too do the ways in which we understand antifan behavior and its similarities to fannish behavior. In the same way that fans undertake activism around texts they love, so too do antifans undertake activism around texts they dislike. Gray (2008) notes that all censorship campaigns are examples of antifan activism, and many such campaigns work: a threatened boycott of NBC by conservative Christian groups led to the cancellation of *The Book of Daniel* (2006) after only four episodes had aired, and the Monty Python film *Life of Brian* (1979) was banned in several countries because of its blasphemous depiction of Christ. It is likely that only since the notion of antifandom had been disseminated that these occurrences are considered antifan activism, but recent protests, such as those highlighted by the Racebending Web site (<http://www.racebending.com>), occupy a more firm space within theorizing antifan activism. Racebending was founded by fans of *Avatar: The Last Airbender* (2005–8) after casting decisions were made when adapting the series to film. The Asian and Inuit cast of the Nickelodeon cartoon was replaced predominantly by white actors in the 2010 film, and fans of the series protested these changes. The Racebending protest thus sees fans move from a position of fandom (in relation to the animated series) to antifandom (in relation to the 2010 movie and its depiction of race and gender). While fan and antifan activity is thus often placed on opposing ends of a fannish spectrum, it might be more accurate to say that they exist on a Möbius strip, with "many fan and antifan behaviors and performances resembling, if not replicating, each other" (Gray 2005, 845). Antifans, like fans, also construct an image of the text—an image strong enough to cause them to react strongly against it. Gray concludes, "If we can track exactly how the anti-fan's text...has been pieced together, we will take



substantial steps forward in understanding textuality and in appreciating the strength of contextuality" (2005, 845).

[2.6] The issue of contextuality is important in this examination of the relationship between MTV's *The Valleys*, the geographical valleys of South Wales, and reactions to the series from the people who live there. Contextuality plays an important role in antifan reactions to a text, one that has been undertheorized: merely stating that we need to appreciate the strength of contextuality fails to help us theorize the relationship that exists between antifans and texts. Melissa A. Click notes that the fan's relationship with a text is "a complex experience affected by the social contexts in which a text exists" (2007, 306); the same is true for the antifan. These social contexts play a role in determining the affective relationship that antifans have with the text. Writing about affect in fandom, Grossberg argues that "the fan's relation to cultural texts operates in the domain of affect or mood" (1992, 56). This is not in the same domain as emotion or desire; rather, it is more akin to a feeling. Affect gives color, tone, and texture to fan experiences. It is defined quantitatively by the strength of our investment in particular experiences, identities, and meanings, and it is further defined qualitatively by the way a specific event or text is made to matter to us (Grossberg 1992). Fans engage in affective relationships with texts they have a strong investment in and that matter to them. However, examining the reactions to *The Valleys* by members of the Welsh public also reveals strong investments in the meanings of the text; this subject matter is important to them. The public's experience of growing up and living in the Valleys provides color, tone, and texture to their experience of antifandom. Their relationship with the series is therefore an affective one, but it is in opposition to any fannish relationship.

[2.7] The role that affect plays in antifandom is an important point that Gray does not address, in favor of focusing on antifans of a moral text (note 1). In his study of Television Without Pity forums, Gray notes that many expressions of antifandom "were framed explicitly as moral objections to certain texts and frequently suggested the poster's only meaningful interaction with the text was at this hinge point of morality and what we would call the moral text" (2005, 848). These discussions revolved specifically around moral or ethical concerns, such as a TV movie on homeland security "taking advantage of a horrible tragedy [rather] than reporting the facts" (qtd. in Gray 2005, 848), and instead of expressing anger at a text for aesthetic, industrial, or factual reasons. Gray notes that these moral text viewers worried about other people's reception. He argues that this demonstrates that reception occurs with an imagined community of others, and thus "a good deal of what the text means to [viewers] is a reflection of what they believe it will mean to others and what effects it will have on others" (2005, 851). What Gray fails to account for in his analysis, however, is what the text means to the viewer and the effect that the text has on viewers and their physical community. Antifans of *The Valleys* object to the series because of their lived experiences and the effect that the show has on attitudes toward the Welsh in general, and thus themselves. This contrasts with the "third person effect" (Gray 2008, 63) encountered in many moral panics—for example, the so-called video nasty debate in the 1980s that posited that young people would be adversely affected by violence in video releases. Gray notes that antifans "may not feel that this instance of sex or violence, for example, will affect [them], but [they] may worry greatly for others" (2008, 63). Antifans of *The Valleys*, however are aware of the effect that the show may have on them in its reinforcing of historically oppressive stereotypes. These concerns are thus not simply, or rather not just, an engagement with the moral text. Instead,

they involve a consideration of cultural, social, and political factors inherently connected to a specific location. In addition to antifans of moral or aesthetic texts, we need to consider antifans of a cultural text. The antifans deride *The Valleys* for portraying Wales in a negative and false light, and they do so on the basis of their lived experiences. These antifans are not simply voicing moral or ethical concerns, although these may form part of their criticism. They are voicing cultural concerns whereby their relationship with the text is affected by the social contexts in which the text is read and within which their own lived experiences reside. This is an important distinction. It affects the way we frame antifans and the importance these particular modes of activism have to fan studies.

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### 3. Examining MTV's *The Valleys* and representations of Welsh identity

[3.1] The first episode of series 1 of *The Valleys* opens with the words, "This programme contains strong language and scenes of a sexual nature," with a voice-over noting the same in Welsh. This use of the Welsh language clearly positions the program as Welsh ([note 2](#)) despite figures from the 2011 census showing that only 562,016 people (19 percent of the population of Wales) self-identified as being able to speak Welsh ([note 3](#)). The scenes that follow also depict images of traditional Welshness: rolling valleys appear on screen to the sound of a male voice choir; the Welsh flag, with its distinctive dragon, rolls in the breeze; a Welsh town nestles in the shadow of a mountain as a voice-over states, "The Valleys, a place of myth and legend, where the dragon sleeps and life is beautiful." The soundtrack then changes to dance music, and different images of life in Wales flash across the screen. These depict the Valleys as run-down, desolate areas of high unemployment and antisocial behavior (figures 1-4).



**Figure 1.** The rundown White Hart Free House, with uncut grass and piled-up trash, in the Valleys from the opening of MTV's *The Valleys*, episode 1. [[View larger image.](#)]



**Figure 2.** Dumpster diving in an alley in the Valleys from the opening of MTV's *The Valleys*, episode 1. [[View larger image.](#)]



**Figure 3.** Graffiti in a neighborhood in the Valleys from the opening of MTV's *The Valleys*, episode 1. [[View larger image.](#)]



**Figure 4.** Boarded-up shops in the Valleys from the opening of MTV's *The Valleys*, episode 1. [[View larger image.](#)]

[3.2] These images are interspersed with clips of the series 1 participants discussing their life in the Valleys. Lateysha states, "There's nothing in the valleys. It is shit," while Aron notes, "I love being Welsh and I love being from the Valleys, but there's no opportunities there for us at all." Carley sums up her disdain for the area with three words: "Trackies, trainers, twats." The purpose of the introduction is not only to frame the series as a whole (eight young people moving to Cardiff to pursue dreams of modeling and DJing) but to frame the Valleys in opposition to the Cardiff setting. Participants note in the opening scenes that Cardiff is the place to be for anyone wanting to make a life, and shots of the newly developed St. David's shopping center stand in contrast to the closed pits and derelict buildings of the Valleys. While Cardiff may be the way out of poverty for some of the participants—Chidgey, for example, has worked on a building site since leaving school—club owner and mentor Jordan states, "You can take the kids out of the Valleys but you will never take the Valleys out of the kids" while scenes play of the boys downing alcopops, the girls licking each other's nipples, and everyone dancing on nightclub tables.

[3.3] A binary is thus created before the episode really begins that sets up the format of the remainder of series 1. Interviews with the cast continue through the first half of the episode, interspersed with clips of the cast entering the house and their initial interactions with other cast members. The overriding tone of the interviews is sexual; most cast members talk about the kinds of people they are attracted to and pass judgment on the other cast members. Leeroy and Lateysha in particular detail what they would like to do to each other, and the "coming up" snippets before the break feature participants kissing in various locations. The final two cast members, Carley and Liam, are introduced after the break. Both disrupt the tone set by cast interviews thus far. Liam acknowledges his homosexuality and asks, "What the fuck have I let myself in for?" upon entering the house and meeting his fellow housemates. Carley disrupts the



tone by speaking Welsh (she is presented as the only Welsh-speaking housemate throughout series 1) for her introduction: "I'm from the Valleys and I like to get my tits out." Carley is also the only housemate who appears with a Welsh flag in the background in the interview sections. Carley thus disrupts notions of rural Wales as quiet—ideas promulgated by MTV itself that play into stereotypes about Wales.



**Figure 5.** Cast member Carley, running nude in a field while holding a Welsh flag aloft. [[View larger image.](#)]

[3.4] However, the series also refers to ongoing tensions about Welsh nationality. Rebecca Williams notes that the use of both rural Wales and the cityscape of Cardiff in science fiction TV program *Torchwood* (2006–11) "can be linked to ongoing tensions over Welsh nationhood since the opposition between rural Wales and the capital city can be seen as reinforcing negative stereotypes of Wales and potentially contributing to divisions based on geographical location" (2011, 64). Although the Valleys are not rural areas of Wales compared to, for example, areas of mid and west Wales (indeed, their history of industrial mining communities attests to an urbanized, industrialized locale), MTV depicts the Valleys and the people coming from it as coming from small villages and hamlets. The Valleys, in the discourse set up by MTV, is rural, in contrast to urban Cardiff, the big city where occupants of the Valleys come to fulfill their dreams. Tensions exist between the Valleys and the city in the series as well: mentor A.K. notes of the girls in the introduction to the episode, "They wear more makeup than clothes. Peeing in the street with a kebab in one hand a pint in the other hand." Liam, talking about the cast's behavior during a night out in Cardiff, says, "In amongst all this, I'm just thinking, like, this is totally embarrassing now. People are going to be thinking, like, who the hell are these Valley kids. They've come down to Cardiff making themselves look a right knob."

[3.5] Episode 1 shows the participants on a night out in Cardiff, but discussions in the house about going out into the city clearly demonstrate the housemates' familiarity with Cardiff. Leeroy mentions several clubs by name; Jenna acknowledges that Cardiff night life is completely different from that of the Valleys. This familiarity with the city contradicts MTV's preseries positioning of the housemates as being plucked out of their rural valley hamlets and placed into the big city, leading to questions about the reality of the series and the motives behind it. Thus far, the series follows the format of MTV's previous reality TV shows, but much is made in *The Valleys* of how there are no opportunities in the Valleys and how Cardiff is the center for anyone wanting a career. To that end, the housemates are fighting for an opportunity to work for Jordan Reed in PR and fulfill their dreams. Jordan, however, is shown watching the housemates during their night out at his club. In an interview segment, he notes, "Starting tomorrow, I'm their boss. Oh my god. I was expecting, you know, some real diamonds in the rough, but I just really forgot

how rough the Valleys is." As Gill Branston states, Cardiff, "represented as cosmopolitan, English-speaking and urban," is "in perceived opposition to an indigenous, 'language-d'...and rurally rooted Wales" (2005, 114). Although few of the participants speak Welsh, Wenglish (from the portmanteau "Welsh-English"), the dialect used in the Valleys, is commonplace. Participants use words such as *butt*, *cwtch*, *lush*, and *tamping*, which differentiate them from Cardiffians and make them other. This is highlighted in a segment from episode 1 in which the film crew goes to Tonyrefail with Jenna and Chidgey. The phonetic spelling of the town is displayed below the street sign (ostensibly for English-speaking viewers, but it has the effect of depicting the place as other), and Jenna's dad's remarks are subtitled even though he is speaking English and does not have a particularly strong Welsh accent (figures 6 and 7).



**Figure 6.** The pronunciation of Tonyrefail is provided under the place-name in MTV's *The Valleys*, episode 1. [[View larger image.](#)]



**Figure 7.** Jenna's dad's words ("They'll have me to fucking deal with, simple as that") are subtitled although he is speaking English, in MTV's *The Valleys*, episode 1. [[View larger image.](#)]

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## 4. Antifan activism: The Valleys Are Here

[4.1] Given this portrayal of the nation, Welsh response to the program was immediate and negative. Criticism was leveled at the lack of realism in the series. Many comments were made noting that relatively few of the participants came from the geographical Valleys. That a number of participants across the three series came from Swansea, Port Talbot, and Bridgend meant that many viewers thought that the series could not claim to be about the Valleys. This raises the question of what MTV considered the Valleys to be when they came up with the show's title and premise. MTV's decisions draw on cultural connotations of what the Valleys are and what people from the Valleys are like rather than a strict definition of the Valleys as a geographical place.

[4.2] Grassroots criticism via Twitter, MTV's Facebook page, and the *Western Mail* online escalated. Petitions were created asking for the show to be banned. A Valleys-centric campaign,

The Valleys Are Here, sprang up after advertisements for the series aired in May 2012. The campaign was created by brothers Alex and James Bevan from the Rhondda. Introducing the campaign on their Web site, they write:

[4.3] Right, so now we know the MTV bandwagon has rolled into the Valleys to make their new unscripted—but heavily edited—"reality" TV show *The Valleys*, as a follow up to *Geordie Shore*. They've been busy tweeting and writing press releases about the area, but they don't seem to know what they're talking about.

[4.4] In case you missed any of this, MTV has already talked about the "tranquility of valleys life" and our "hamlet towns." Pretty bizarre stuff, as anyone who's spent more than 10 minutes in the area would know.

[4.5] So we want to make sure that MTV doesn't make any more slipups or give millions of people another bad image of the area.

[4.6] That's why we've started "The Valleys Are Here" campaign and website. It'll be fun, but at the same time give a positive picture of Valleys life—so look out for a stream of films, pictures, stories and loads more.

[4.7] Life here isn't all rosy, nobody would say that, but we're proud of where we come from—and want everyone to know why.

[4.8] Lots of people are already on board with the campaign, but we need you to help us set the record straight.

[4.9] So if you want to get involved let us know. We're looking for volunteers to help with the campaign in any way they can—and want every Valleys person to tell us why they're proud of where we're from.

[4.10] The Valleys are Here—be part of it!  
(<https://valleysarehere.wordpress.com/about/>)

[4.11] The Valleys Are Here Web site is designed to promote a more positive image of the Valleys; it features photographs, films, and stories of life in the area. The site contains a gallery of photographs of the Valleys taken by its residents, as well as stories about a range of organizations existing within and serving the Valleys. Among these are Big Click RCT, which helps older people within Rhondda Cynon Taff develop new skills to make the most of computer technology. On the Big Click RCT page of The Valleys Are Here, the team writes, "At The Valleys are Here we've always said that not everything in the Valleys is rosy. The fact that too many people are still unable to get online, so miss out on all the advantages the internet brings (like being able to visit this site) is a real shame, but it's great that BIG Click RCT are doing something about it" (<https://valleysarehere.wordpress.com/our-stories/big-click-rct/>). Other organizations featured include the Merthyr Tydfil-based Central Beacons Mountain Rescue Team, made up of volunteers who provide a search-and-rescue service across South East Wales, and There Is More To (TIMTO), a social enterprise that began in Abercynon that enables family and friends to access a gift list that includes a donation for a charity of one's choosing. As well as the Web site, the campaign launched Twitter and Facebook pages to connect with prominent Welsh celebrities and

organizations, to showcase stories about the good work being done in the Valleys, and to permit site visitors to contact MTV.

[4.12] The site serves as a center of information on the Valleys. It combats the picture drawn by MTV, but it also features a call to action. Prominent on the menu bar is a section called Join, which asks visitors to pledge their support by providing their details in a contact form so that the organization can keep in touch and add their names to the online wall, and Get in Touch, which provides visitors with a range of ways to contact the organization. A further call to action exists in the form of a petition that The Valleys Are Here created asking MTV to donate 5 percent of the profits from the series to local charity, Valleys Kids. Valleys Kids, a community regeneration charity, provides opportunities and activities across Rhondda Cynon Taff to enable young people to grow and develop, to have high expectations, and to achieve their potential. Discussing the campaign and the petition, the Bevan brothers note,

[4.13] When MTV announced that they were basing their latest "constructed reality" show *The Valleys* in our area, a group of us got together and formed "The Valleys are Here" campaign. We realised that the money made from *Geordie Shore* helped MTV's owners Viacom make huge profits last year, but the local area saw hardly any of this cash. So we think it's about time MTV showed areas like Newcastle and the Valleys some respect. (<https://www.change.org/p/mtv-donate-5-of-profits-from-the-valleys-to-local-youth-charity>)

[4.14] The petition received 1,100 signatures after the season premiere, rising to 2,500 by February 2013. Those who signed included MPs Vaughan Gething, Peter Black, and Christine Chapman, celebrities Johnny Owen and Rachel Trezise, and sport stars including Ian Vaughn, as well as members of the general public. A variety of reasons for signing the petition were given by supporters, but almost all talked about how MTV depicted the Valleys in a negative way, the use of stereotypes by the production company, or the exploitative nature of the series.

[4.15] The Valleys Are Here tweeted updates on the petition and sent an open letter regarding their request to Kerry Taylor of MTV on October 18, 2012. They continued to tweet at MTV asking about progress. In addition, they found out where MTV planned to film the second season and got to the location first. A reply did eventually come, but it skirted the issue of a donation, leading the campaign to begin discussions about a protest in London.

[4.16] The Valleys Are Here also created its own film about South Wales. On August 25, a month before *The Valleys* aired, The Valleys Are Here issued tweets and Facebook posts with information on filming and an open casting call. The film was designed to "throw the spotlight on the Valleys as we know and love them" (<http://www.aberdareonline.co.uk/node/21074>), and anyone living in the Valleys was invited to attend. Among those who turned up to the shoot were the Valleys Roller Dolls team, Rachel Trezise, and local businesses, charities, and families. The Valleys Are Here encouraged participation from various groups of people whose common denominator was their dislike of the series, but that dislike was not evident in the final film. Instead, the campaign showcased what people living in the Valleys thought of life there, as opposed to MTV's partly scripted, heavily edited series.

The Valleys Are Here (Trailer 2 - HD)



**Video 1. Trailer for the film *The Valleys Are Here*.**

[4.17] This film is particularly important for theorizing antifan activism. Some scholars have argued that social media has promoted a diluted form of so-called slacktivism (Christensen 2011; Morozov 2009) or clicktivism (White 2010), which fails to actively engage activists on an issue while nevertheless raising awareness on a larger scale. Actively appearing on film, however, requires a greater investment, which is where contextuality comes in. Gray observes that "hate or dislike of a text can be just as powerful as can a strong and admiring, affective relationship with a text" and can subsequently work to "produce just as much activity, identification, meaning, and 'effects' or serve just as powerfully to unite and sustain a community or subculture" (2005, 841). This distinction between dislike and affect, however, is problematic. Affect—at least in fan studies—has become synonymous with a fannish relationship, but we must reevaluate our understanding of affect. A distinction may be drawn between positive and negative affective relationships if necessary, but both exist. Furthermore, these negative affective relationships help shape antifandom of moral and cultural texts.

[4.18] The negative affective relationship that antifans have with *The Valleys* is related to their lived experience of being from the Valleys. This lived experience is detailed in many of the comments on The Valleys Are Here petition, as well as on Facebook posts, on Twitter, and in the campaign video itself. Howell Thomas narrates the documentary, demonstrating his knowledge of and affection for the Valleys with information on a variety of topics; author Rachel Trezise talks about her relationship with the Valleys; and Grogg producer Richard James Hughes talks about the importance of the Valleys to the genesis of the Grogg figurines. Those living in or coming from these communities are quick to refer to their own personal experience of the area as evidence of their authority to comment on the TV show—which also permits them to reject the show as a cultural text.

## 5. Conclusion

[5.1] Antifan activism provides scholars with new ways of understanding fan activism. Fan activism is not exclusive to people who consider themselves fans; activism is further complicated by drawing antifans into the equation. Fan studies scholarship needs to do more work to

understand the complex ways that contextuality affects relationships between audience and text. Simply stating that we need to appreciate the strength of contextuality fails to help us theorize the complex relationships that exist, and more attention needs to be paid to the social contexts in which the text is read, as well as the roles that affect and the lived experience play. *The Valleys* antifans demonstrate the importance that lived experience has on the reading of a text and a subject's relationship to it; it also demonstrates the ways in which national and cultural identity can affect the content of antifandom and the form it takes. *The Valleys* is not a case of a moral text subsuming the aesthetic text. Many antifans of *The Valleys*, especially those involved in The Valleys Are Here campaign and documentary, are opposed to the text not because of its moral text in the sense that it is understood by Gray, or even the rational-realistic text; rather they are opposed to the cultural text, which frames Welsh and Valleys identity in a way that fails to present what they consider a true picture, and which presents a depiction of Wales that contrasts with antifans' lived experiences.

[5.2] Henry Jenkins (1992) asserts that common narratives no longer originate with the lived experience of members of a society but rather are created and distributed by publishing houses and production studios. Yet as this case study of *The Valleys* demonstrates, the lived experiences of antifans are used to create narratives that are used to counter these corporate constructions (Jones, forthcoming). Antifans of *The Valleys* use the depiction of Wales and Welsh identity promoted by MTV to create own narratives that rely on their lived experiences of the Valleys, countering what is shown on MTV. The Valleys Are Here documentary functions as a reframing device, one that seeks to reclaim a national identity. The documentary, with its specifically geographical focus—with references to culture and history as well as to good and bad lived experiences (figure 8)—as opposed to MTV's broad-brush Wales, allows for a response to the cultural rather than moral text of MTV's series.



**Figure 8.** Specific words from a voice-over highlighted on screen in the *Valleys Are Here* documentary highlighting good and bad lived experiences. [[View larger image.](#)]

[5.3] Although Kevin Williams argues that "the power to define Welshness has been at the center of the debate about the role of the media in Welsh society" (1997, 70) the response to MTV's *The Valleys* through campaigns such as The Valleys Are Here shows that the power to define Welshness is not limited to media producers or networks. Rather, ordinary citizens are able to define their own understandings of and experiences of Welshness, drawing on their lived experience and their affective relationship to place.

## 6. Acknowledgment



[6.1] I am grateful to Melissa Beattie for her comments on early drafts of this article.

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## 7. Notes

1. Gray (2005) acknowledges that it would be wrong to regard antifandom as always moral, and there are examples of antifandom provoked by poor levels of realism or sense. However, he limits his discussion of these to commercials and talk shows, noting that many advertisements are criticized by posters at Television Without Pity for making no sense and lacking in logic, and that the host of *The O'Reilly Factor* (1996–), Bill O'Reilly, fails to support his assertions with evidence.
2. For a discussion of Welsh heritage and language, see Dicks (2000), Smith (1998), Kumar (2003), Delanty and O'Mahoney (2002), Knowles (1999), Blandford (2007), and Ferve and Thompson (1999).
3. Data taken from the official labor market statistics Web site ([http://www.nomisweb.co.uk/census/2011/LC2203WA/view/2092957700?rows=c\\_lanspwni11&cols=national\\_identity](http://www.nomisweb.co.uk/census/2011/LC2203WA/view/2092957700?rows=c_lanspwni11&cols=national_identity)).

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# Praxis

## The creation of football slash fan fiction

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[0.1] *Abstract*—Although sports fandom and fan fiction are often thought of as different worlds, in the contemporary media environment, this is not the case. Sport is a popular source text for fan fiction, and high-level European football, one of the world's most watched sports, has long had an online fan fiction presence. In a study of the LiveJournal community Footballslash over the 2011–12 European football season, I investigate what makes football a suitable source text for fan fiction, especially slash fan fiction; what fan fiction authors are doing with football; and what this suggests about how football and fan fiction are used in the present day. I present a new understanding of football as a media text to be transformed as well as provide an in-depth look into how this type of real person slash is developed and thought of by its practitioners. In doing so, I show what happens when fandoms and fan practices converge in the 21st century.

[0.2] *Keywords*—LiveJournal community; Real person fan fiction; Real person slash; Sport

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### 1. Introduction

[1.1] Fan fiction is an emblematic fan practice. It has been a focus of study for over two decades, and it remains a vivid example of how fans reimagine and reinterpret their object of fandom. However, the practice is usually thought of as limited to so-called media fans—fans of TV series, films, and books—and not part of the practices of other kinds of fans. For example, sports researchers think that "despite meeting independently and writing their own fan materials, sports fans contrast with the likes of Jenkins's (1992) *Star Trek* fans' creative writing, which was inspired by and exceeded the 1960s series' social liberalism, because they cannot creatively refashion the cultural commodity" (Free and Hughson 2006, 92). Fan fiction, to most, is not something that sports fans do.

[1.2] However, a look at any multifandom fan fiction archive would show differently. Sports fans are writing fan fiction—fan fiction that is not particularly distinct from the fan fiction being written by media fans. Of this, slash fan fiction based on high-level European football is some of the most enduring. The LiveJournal community Footballslash has been in operation since 2002, with predecessors in e-mail mailing lists, and it continues to be active today. The existence of sport fan fiction is the result of two things: the increased mediatization (Hjarvard 2008) of high-level European football, in which the major leagues have become increasingly influenced by and reliant on the resources of the media, and the expansion of fan fiction practices. Football fans increasingly experience football through the media and as a media narrative, especially at the highest level, where media coverage is the most intense and live football is the hardest to access in person (Sandvoss 2003).

[1.3] Yet researchers have often been reluctant to consider fan practices that have arisen as a result of this because "many commentators have assumed that such cultures of engagement with football will be full of (predominantly middle-class) people whose interest in the game is simply a knee-jerk response to the marketing activities of clubs and corporations" (Moor 2007, 139). Media-based fans (and fan practices) are seen as a threat to real fandom, and a mediated understanding of the game is considered to be a recent development. Scholarship on football fans' engagement with media, especially new media, therefore often serves to prove how traditional and authentic these fans actually are (Gibbons and Dixon 2010; Rookwood and Millward 2011; Williams 2012). Here I look to provide a counterpoint to such perspectives by analyzing how the changing nature of football—and fan fiction practice—creates new ways of engaging with it, one that expands the idea of whom football is for.

[1.4] My study uses a combination of ethnographic (including autoethnographic) analysis and textual/content analysis of the football fan fiction community and its works. Its starting point is participation in the Footballslash community and its supporting sites, with a focus on the 2011–12 European football season. These supporting sites included Footballmeta, Football Kink Meme (Footballkink2), Touchline, RPS Football Fiction—Comment Porn (Commentporn), and Cornerflag, as well as several personal blogs of Footballslash participants and conversations with football fan fiction writers about their works and their wider football fandom. I analyze stories, story prompts, and general fan discussion regarding football, slash fandom, and their intersection. I have selected one piece of fan fiction as representative of the kind of work that football fan fiction writers do to transform the football narrative. Although a close reading of a single story does not reflect the wide range of interpretations that fans make about football through fan fiction, this analysis permits a useful illustration of the form and provides coherence to the discussion of different aspects of football slash fan fiction.

[1.5] Additionally, in April 2012, I posted a survey to Footballslash and Footballmeta, with results kept anonymous. Fifteen questions regarding demographic data, football viewing habits, and the discovery of Footballslash, both the community and the practice, were asked, and 67 participants responded. At the time I administered the survey, the community had a membership of approximately 2,900, although, because of the longevity of the community and the private nature of LiveJournal reading, it is difficult to judge how many were active members that still read and participated at the site. This survey was used to get a better sense of the community's general relationship to both football and media fandom.

[1.6] Here, I ask how football slash fan fiction came to exist and what purpose it serves for football fans in the contemporary media environment. To answer this question, I analyze the origins and implications of understanding football as a media text and narrative, and I address why fans are interested in writing slash fan fiction about football players. As a result, my research also provides an analysis of the still-controversial practice of real person slash, fan fiction written about real people as opposed to fictional characters. I thus present a different way of understanding sport and sports fandom—one that bypasses the arguments around authenticity and tradition to show other ways that sport can be appreciated.

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## 2. Football as cult media

[2.1] Marcus Free and John Hughson state that the nature of sports resists fan fiction because its "structures and rules generate uncontested representations of contests as 'results'" (2006, 92), and thus the unambiguity of these factual events resists fan interpretation. This is generally the way sport and sports fandom are situated: in comparison to the texts of media fandom. This traditional view of sport is that it is about who won or lost and who played well or poorly, which are issues that cannot be disputed. Sport is an athletic performance with clear outcomes, and therefore it is not open to interpretation in the manner of media fan practices.

[2.2] Yet today "it is increasingly difficult to maintain a purist definition of sport as athletic performance, given that, however important it might ultimately be, it could not be sustained without all of the other modes of media representation and the involvement of constantly shifting audience formations" (Rowe 2011, 520). Football, along with other popular sport, has become mediatized (Hjarvard 2008), reliant on the media's resources for income and visibility. While this has been an ongoing process since the sport was first codified in the late 1800s, it reached a new phase in the early 1990s with the rise of satellite channels that broadcast all (or nearly all) football games in their entirety (Sandvoss 2003; Boyle and Haynes 2004). Football on television is not simply transmission of a sporting contest: it is "part of popular

television, functioning under the sign of entertainment, and therefore also has to frame its own representations in the context of the values that constitute 'good television'" (Whannel 1992, 106). This has not been without controversy. The increased profile and wealth of football thanks to television, with the continuing need to appeal to sponsors and the general public, has led to the "sense on the part of many that the game has lost its soul to an alliance of merchandisers and 'inauthentic,' Johnny/Jackie-come-lately supporters" (Wagg 2004, 1). Compared to this inauthentic new fan, easily swayed by marketing and celebrity, the ideal authentic supporter avoids media representation in favor of "a long-term personal and emotional investment in the club" (Giulianotti 2002, 33) that is focused on physical presence instead of learning about the game through television.

[2.3] However, even this ideal authentic supporter sees football as more than results and is therefore influenced by the media. The structure of contemporary football relies not just on reportage but on its never-ending narrative, its focus on strong, individual players, and its creation of personal connections to a team's fortunes. In football, "no single game ever represents the game for players or spectators" (Hughson and Free 2006, 76), as each game is part of the narrative of the season or the tournament, and each season or tournament is part of the seasons or tournaments that came before it and that will come after. These games rotate around the comings, goings, and doings of the players (and managers) that perform in them. In combination, these two elements are what keep football engaging and entertaining to the majority of its fans. They are heavily discussed and promoted in all facets of the football media, contributing to an ongoing, long-term interest in the narratives by the fans who continually discuss and debate them. As a result, to truly understand football, one must look at not only the 90 minutes of the match but also the surrounding media, which function as necessary paratexts.

[2.4] Jonathan Gray argues that paratexts—texts surrounding and supporting a main text, such as a movie trailer, DVD extras, or fan works—are an integral part of how we understand the main text, as "a film or program is but one part of the text, the text always being a contingent entity, either in the process of forming and transforming or vulnerable to further formation and transformation" (2010, 7). If we take the game as the main text, paratexts or overflow material (Brooker 2001) are crucial to understanding football: without the context provided by newspapers, televised discussion shows, and so forth, the game would have no meaning. In the past several decades, corresponding with the amount of televised football available, the amount of paratexts surrounding football has grown exponentially (Cleland 2011). What's more, new media practices have shown that fans can shape these narratives themselves, creating blogs, podcasts, and message boards that form and transform the narrative

space. Football is therefore a multiauthored text, and increasingly, fans are among the authors.

[2.5] The narrative style of sport is frequently referred to as a male soap opera. This pronouncement is often made with some level of irony, as it juxtaposes the common belief in the lack of quality or importance of a soap opera with the importance given to televised sport. O'Connor and Boyle considered the relationship between soap operas and sport by comparing "the characteristics they have in common such as their broadcasting at frequent and regular intervals, their indeterminate (continuous) life span, their range of characters, and the introduction of multiple narrative strands which reach various stages of resolution" (1993, 3). Indeed, the two genres have many similarities, both in form and function for their respective fan bases, especially as a result of their long-running nature, with story lines that have the capability to span across decades in a manner unlike other forms of popular narrative. Players, managers, and teams all "have a past, a history, which the audience is aware of, and through which they are read" (Whannel 2002, 152). Soap operas, several of which have been running a continual story line since the 1960s or earlier, can match this in a manner unlike other forms of television.

[2.6] Yet it might also be fruitful to think of sport, and football specifically, as an analogue of a different but related form: cult television. Gwenllian-Jones and Pearson, in the introduction to their edited book on the topic, describe the form as featuring "a potentially infinitely large metatext and sometimes the seemingly infinite delay of the resolution of narrative hermeneutics" along with "interconnected story lines, both realized and implied, [that] extend far beyond any single episode to become a metatext that structures production, diegesis, and reception" (2004, xii). Matt Hills defines cult texts as featuring "hyperdiegesis: the creation of a vast and detailed narrative space, only a fraction of which is ever directly seen or encountered within the text, but which nevertheless appears to operate according to principles of internal logic and extension" (2002, 137). Cult media, and especially cult television, are considered to have complex, potentially infinite narratives, with questions that might never be truly answered, even when some are resolved, and a world and story that are never fully revealed to the viewer.

[2.7] Within a cult text, "there is always a deficit between what is (or can be) shown and what the avid audience wants to see, explore, develop and know" (Gwenllian-Jones 2000, 13). The thought that fans can fill in this deficit themselves led to the creation of fan fiction, which originally developed within cult fan communities (Jenkins 1992; Bacon-Smith 1992). It also led to the more widespread use of paratexts like guides to a series' world. Cult texts are seen as polysemic; they "present the reader with a multiplicity of possible interpretations which are consciously realized by the

reader" and "allow for different readings by different readers" (Sandvoss 2005, 125–26). Fan fiction and other fan-made or fan-oriented paratexts are one result of this polysemy; with them, "there is an acknowledgement that every text contains infinite potentialities, any of which could be actualized by any writer interested in doing the job" (Derecho 2006, 76). There might be an official producer, but there can be multiple authors of the text's meaning.

[2.8] As mediatized football connects to other media texts, it becomes possible to see the ways its potentialities can be explored. Sandvoss (2003, 2005) discusses the polysemy of football clubs and how the same club can have different meanings to different fans, but the narrative itself is also polysemic, and the growth of football paratexts shows that it can be interpreted by anyone. Football fans who discover fan fiction or fan fiction fans who discover football see the potential of the world of European football. Its narrative is complicated but is focused on a single question—who will win—that is then applied to the game, the season, or the tournament, and that is instantly deferred again as soon as it is resolved, with the new questions maintaining continuity with the old ones. Intertwined with this overarching narrative are countless other story lines, interconnected into the main question when necessary, and featuring a wide cast of interesting characters. Fans recognize the narratives promoted by the football media for what they are and utilize them in the manner of other narratives.

[2.9] "Filling Up the Space," a football fan fiction story by Luxover (2011), is an example of how the narrative of football is transformed via fan fiction. Here, Liverpool FC's 2009–10 season is reconstituted as the backdrop of the breakup and eventual reconciliation of a romantic relationship. It utilizes points in the actual events to show how Steven Gerrard, Liverpool's native-born captain, deals with both the disappointments of his failed relationship with Xabi Alonso, the Spanish midfielder who played for Liverpool before transferring to Real Madrid before the start of the 2009–10 season, and the disappointments of a poor season. The plot centers on Gerrard and Alonso, after their breakup at the beginning of the story, dividing the world between them so that they do not see each other, and the both of them then breaking the rules they set with each other. The well-documented events of the football season provide the framework of the story, as shown in this excerpt:

[2.10] October rolls around and Liverpool loses to Chelsea; Stevie feels the loss somewhere in his chest and so he goes home and thinks, *It shouldn't be this hard. It never used to be this hard.*

[2.11] To keep himself busy, he empties his closet, makes a pile of everything that he doesn't want anymore and adds to it until everything he owns is thrown on his bed, pants and shirts and ties and two watches. He

finds a pair of cufflinks that used to belong to Xabi and he wants to laugh. He does laugh. They're Xabi's favorite pair, white gold and plain and so completely boring that Stevie's heart flops a little; he's excited.

[2.12] Stevie puts the cufflinks on his dresser top and takes a picture of them with his phone. He sends it to Xabi, says to him, *Finders, keepers*.

[2.13] Xabi says, *That's not on the list*. He's terrible at this game.

[2.14] Stevie puts everything back in his closet and goes downstairs to watch crap television.

[2.15] Writing after the events of the season (the story was posted to the Footballslash community on September 26, 2011), Luxover intertwines the professional and personal disappointments of Steven Gerrard, with both achieving equal importance. In doing so, Luxover offers a new version of the well-known events of the season. For Luxover, the events are a media text to be expanded rather than a factual event that has ended.

[2.16] While this might be a nontraditional reading of the text of football, it is not one that comes from outside of it. Football is constructed in the media in such a way to keep viewers "interested in the next 'instalment' and provide an ongoing sense of the importance and uncertainty of upcoming events" (Kennedy and Hills 2009, 76). The presenting of football as comprising installments or episodes has been part of its makeup since the earliest days. The football press, fully in place by the early 1900s, encouraged its readership to see the football seasons as ongoing, something that they would need to keep buying papers to follow and that did not end when the whistle blew. The presentation of football on television makes this connection even more explicit. In scheduling terms, football functions almost exactly like a television show: games at a set time, once or twice a week, with a break in the summer. It also feels like a television show, "combining the spectacular physical, often violent elements of action drama with the detailed characterization, emotional concentration and relational emphasis of 'human' drama" (Rowe 2004, 185).

[2.17] Within this presentation, however, there is significant missing information. The viewer sees very little of the players/characters outside of their work space. While there is a large and increasing amount of information about both football and football players, there is still a necessary limitation on what is shown. Fans who have experience with fan fiction recognize these unseen parts of the text as something that can be filled in themselves. Most Footballslash readers and writers had previously written or read other fan fiction, and it was this experience that made them look at



football as something that could be likewise transformed. As media fans and fan fiction writers, this is what they have learned to do.

[2.18] Football fan fiction expands the emotional as well as the narrative space of football. As discussed by Kennedy (2000), football has a masculine address and focuses on what are considered masculine traits. The game is presented in a realistic style, and much of the commentary, both during the game and from pundits afterward, focuses on things that did or did not happen—the traditionalist view of what sport is. The more casual modes of address within football media, which takes the form of banter between the analysts or commentators, "approaches intimacy without engaging in the personal" (Kennedy 2000, 77) by focusing on triumphs or disappointments in the player's professional life, such as wins or injuries in the past, or direct reactions to game events. The narrative of football is masculine, whereas "emotions and sexuality [are] part of the domestic sphere and the domain of women" (Whannel 2002, 101). While anger or joy in relation to actions in the game might be acceptable, more subtle emotions are excluded.

[2.19] One use of football fan fiction is to rectify this exclusion by writing the emotional lives of football players back into the text. The Steven Gerrard of "Filling Up the Space" is at turns melancholy, proud, and happy; he misses Alonso, relies emotionally on his friend and teammate Jamie Carragher, and spends time reflecting on what Liverpool FC means to him. The emotional life that is left unrevealed within the actual text of football takes a central place within the story, providing it with its meaning. The reader understands Gerrard's hurt after the loss against Chelsea—a loss that somehow seems more painful than other losses—and can contextualize it within the relationships Gerrard has as well as the problems with the way Liverpool has been playing. Writing fan fiction becomes a way to give football and its narrative the emotional impact that they lack. Recontextualizing masculine genres into more feminine forms has long been standard in fan fiction, with the shows popular in the early years of the practice, like *Star Trek* (1966–69) and *The Professionals* (1977–83) considered to have a masculine address as well. In this, football fan fiction hearkens back to the origin points of the form rather than being a radical shift in subject matter for fan fiction.

[2.20] It must not be forgotten, however, that the writers of football slash fan fiction are football fans. By all indications, they all watch football regularly; they know the rules and traditions of the sport and its fan practices. Writing slash fan fiction is an understanding of football as a narrative form to be enhanced, but it sits together with the understanding of football as a sport. Neither fully transcends the other. "Filling Up the Space," for example, utilizes the terminology and description of football as a metaphor:

[2.21] Stevie remembers all of that as he watches Xabi get subbed off, and so he takes out his phone and he sends him a text.

[2.22] *You're always looking for Kaká, he types, when Guti's always open to your left.*

[2.23] He doesn't hear back until hours later, long since the match has ended and the players have gone home.

[2.24] *Kaká plays where you played, Xabi says. You were always open even when you weren't.*

[2.25] And Stevie doesn't know what to say to that, because sometimes he looks for Xabi when only Lucas is there. He wonders if Kaká knows what he's got.

[2.26] Narrative and sporting performance are not separated. Rather, they play off each other, with the knowledge of sport enhancing the verisimilitude of the story and working itself into its emotional core. The description of Alonso's and Gerrard's playing style becomes possible through the author's familiarity with televised football, providing it with an extra layer of meaning and explanation.

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### 3. Football as slash fandom

[3.1] The core of "Filling Up the Space," however, is in the relationship between Gerrard and Alonso. In this, it fits the conditions and norms of the genre. Fan fiction generally, and especially slash fan fiction, is built upon relationships. While recent scholarship (Keft-Kennedy 2008; Tosenberger 2008) has challenged the early interpretation of slash fiction as an ideal romance (Kustritz 2003; Salmon and Symons 2004) where "sex occurs within a committed relationship as part of an emotionally meaningful exchange" (Salmon and Symons 2004, 98), it is still a form that focuses on the relationship, of whatever type, between the characters utilized. Whether the relationship is antagonistic, friendly, or even an ideal romance, it is the exploration of it that drives the vast majority of fan fiction practices. Slash becomes a way to reinterpret the football text to focus on relationships and emotionality, which, as previously mentioned, are not prominent in the mainstream presentation of sport.

[3.2] "Filling Up the Space" is no different. It speculates on how Steven Gerrard would have felt after losing games to Chelsea and Sunderland and allows the author to work through her own feelings about Liverpool FC, but it is also about the romantic relationship of Gerrard and Alonso. They break up at the start of the story, spend the length of it circling around each other, and reconcile at the end. The actual events

might provide a framework for the author to build upon and work around, but the focus is the imagined romantic relationship between Gerrard and Alonso.

[3.3] In this, "Filling Up the Space" joins hundreds of other fan fiction stories detailing and exploring Gerrard and Alonso's romantic relationship. This pairing is the most popular in Footballslash, with 1,499 uses of the tag in the community as of February 2015 (the next most popular has 1,365 tags, and the third most 747). It is also among the most enduring, with stories about their relationship first appearing in late 2005 and continuing to be posted frequently, including at a newer fan fiction archive, Archive of Our Own, where it is the third-most popular male slash pairing. Despite Alonso's transfer from Liverpool in the summer of 2009, separating him from Gerrard, the pairing continues to thrive. It is far from the only pairing popular within the community, but its continued prominence as other pairings fade in popularity and new ones grow makes it an excellent case for exploring how relationships between footballers are interpreted in fan fiction.

[3.4] Alonso and Gerrard were teammates for 5 years at Liverpool FC, one of the most popular clubs in the widely watched English Premier League. Alonso was signed from his home club in Spain, Real Sociedad, in 2004, while Gerrard had grown up at Liverpool, joining the youth team at age 9 and signing his first professional contract with the club in 1997. On the field, Gerrard and Alonso played in complementary positions in central midfield, bringing them into regular contact with each other. However, the pairing did not establish itself until after Liverpool's win in the 2005 Champions League final in Istanbul, although they both had a presence in the community and were well-respected and well-recognized players among football fans of all varieties. In the Champions League final, Liverpool were losing 3–0 to the Italian superclub AC Milan at halftime, only to come back in the second half to tie the game 3–3 and eventually win the trophy on penalties. Both Alonso and Gerrard scored goals during that decisive half, with Gerrard receiving Man of the Match acclamation afterward. During the trophy presentation and celebration after the win, they briefly kissed, a moment that was filmed by the circling television cameras.



**Figure 1.** Kiss between football players Steven Gerrard and Xabi Alonso at the 2005 Champions League final in Istanbul after Liverpool's win. [[View larger image.](#)]

[3.5] In video, the moment is brief, a peck of the lips, with the two laughing afterward. As a still image, however, it becomes more intimate, resembling images of romantic kisses from other media. The viewer of such an image can ignore how brief and joking the moment was. As a photograph, it looks like a genuine romantic moment between the two men. The video might provide context and show what actually happened, but the fans overwhelmingly prefer the still image because it more closely mirrors what they want the moment to be. An image of these two players, already known within the community, in such an intimate pose, proved to be an inspiration to authors and potential authors. As it made its way to Footballslash and its users, the pairing picked up in popularity.

[3.6] These kinds of images are powerful within the community and provide much of its impetus. They are not limited to Alonso and Gerrard; the visual conventions of football, where players are frequently photographed embracing or otherwise in physical contact, inspire writers and readers. Slash fan fiction is essentially the eroticizing in fan-produced fiction of what Sedgwick referred to as male homosocial desire: "the whole spectrum of bonds between men, including friendship, mentorship, rivalry, institutional subordination, homosexual geniality, and economic exchange" (1984, 227). As Sedgwick (1985) explains, this has a long tradition in literature, and its history is frequently drawn upon when creating new works, particularly pop cultural works. *Star Trek*, for example, builds upon "the friendship of two males" (Selley 1986, 89) that characterizes much of American literature—two men with contrasting but complementary personalities exploring the wilderness (universe), with a great bond that cannot be matched by any other potential companion. It was this relationship between Kirk and Spock that led to the first media slash fan fiction, where "the fan has recognised the ambiguous possibilities of *Star Trek* and comprehended them as referencing the ambiguous area where the homosocial codes begin to be transgressed and friendship moves towards desire" (Woledge 2005, 246).

[3.7] Visual aspects are key to this interpretation. The way two characters look at each other is considered to be one of the enduring symbols of romance, carried on throughout different media eras. Eye contact, expression, and length of gaze all have significance. Viewers have learned to interpret these looks as romantic, even if nothing is specifically said in dialogue about their relationship (Bacon-Smith 1992). Within television and film with strong homosocial relationships, however, the use of eye contact and certain expressions are as likely to be shared between the two male characters as between a male and female character. Fans of the Kirk/Spock romantic pairing recognized "shots in which Kirk looks at Spock in the way a hero might look at

a heroine" (Woledge 2005, 243–44) and read them as romantic, especially because Spock was a much more interesting character than Kirk's nondescript and underwritten female love interests presented within the narrative, and one that fans already had an understanding of. Once this potential reading was understood within the media fan community, it spread to other media narratives with relationships that could be read as homosocial.

[3.8] In contemporary media fandom, the idea that "there is a 'homoerotic subtext' revealed in the way certain male characters look at one another has become so familiar within fandoms that it is even possible for slashers to speak of such looks as 'subtexty'" (Allington 2007, 48). The practice of slash fan fiction since its beginning is based on "the images the viewer sees on the screen, and the way women read those framed images" (Bacon-Smith 1992, 232), which function alongside textual discussions of the relationship between the two characters. Once a fan learns how to see the homosexual subtext in the homosocial relationship, seeing it anywhere becomes possible. As Busse puts it, "Slashers are trained to tease out homoerotic subtext in the texts they encounter" (2006, 208).

[3.9] As slash fan fiction grew as a practice, the relationships that could be interpreted this way grew to include nonfictional, or real person, relationships. In its earlier years, "fandom...maintained an ethical norm against producing erotica about real people rather than fictional characters" (Jenkins 2006, 142). Coppa (2006) disputes this somewhat, noting that Duran Duran fan fiction was circulating in 1991, but she also notes that the authors were unlikely to come from regular media-based fandom and did not realize that it was taboo. However, this proscription became impossible to enforce as the practices of fan fiction expanded online and became accessible to a wider range of fans. These fans either didn't learn or didn't care about the taboo, finding the exploration of the homosocial relationship more interesting than maintaining it. Heavily mediated real homosocial worlds, such as that of boy bands or reality television, presented the same subtexty images and close relationships as fictional narratives, and proved just as open for exploration. While still controversial in some circles, in general, real person fan fiction or real person slash is accepted as part of the fan fiction landscape and is often offered alongside fan fiction (Busse 2006; Flegel and Roth 2010). The writers and readers of Footballslash came to it because they recognized the slash potential of football and "knew it had to exist," as one of my survey respondents put it. Even if fans' previous experience in fandom had been entirely based in fictional texts, they didn't see much difference between the Lord of the Rings franchise and the English Premier League. Both are media texts open for transformation, and most importantly, both are mostly homosocial worlds with plenty of opportunities to read homosexual subtext.

[3.10] Football, and sport in general, is one of the primary places that homosocial bonding is expressed within Western popular culture. Whannel discusses how, since its early days, "sport was for the boys, with the role of women decorative" (2002, 67). While women might now be allowed to play sport, and football is a popular sport for women to play, the presentation of top-level professional football in the media is one without women. Women are not on the field, the bench, the training grounds, the dressing room, or any the spaces that make up the world of football in the imagination. Some partners of the players (so-called WAGs) might have celebrity careers of their own, but within the football text, they are relegated to a familiar support or decorative role or are erased entirely. They do not act on the field and are rarely encountered in the paratexts. Football is "embedded largely in masculine exclusivity; in male groups" (Whannel 2002, 137).

[3.11] If women are mostly absent in the presented lives of football players, men are everywhere. As teammates or rivals, players are supposed to develop strong connections to these other men who make up their world. Teammates, for example, are supposed to be loyal to, and friendly with, each other. Much of the overflow material of football is dedicated to showing these friendships, either directly (interviews where players are asked questions like "who is the best dancer at the club" or "who takes the longest in the shower") or indirectly (players shown in the training ground joking and laughing with each other). They spend a great deal of time together and are often separated from family and other nonteammates at training facilities, away games, or tournaments. Even the sport of football itself, the main text, is built around the necessity of men interacting and working together. One player cannot play the game himself; he has to pass the ball to his teammates and work with them in order to obtain success. When a goal is scored, he does not celebrate alone but with his teammates. Homosocial connections make up what football is. Even when players are antagonists, placed in opposition to each other rather than expected to work together, they are still placed in a homosocial relation. These relations are presented visually—two (or more) players embracing after a goal is scored, players staring at each other antagonistically, as if ready to start a fight—and textually, with players talking about who their friends are or voicing their displeasure with an opponent. The codes of interaction between men that slash fans have learned to read as homoerotic—eye contact, physical contact, embraces—appear regularly in football photography. These moments might be fleeting in the actual game, but they are frozen in time via photographs or GIFs, constantly available for fans to look at and reinterpret.

[3.12] This homosociality makes football attractive as a source text for slash fiction. While many of the Footballslash participants were long-term football fans, many others came to it through media fandom. When encountering football, they found an attractively homosocial environment made up of attractive and homosocial men that

offered a new setting and characters to which to apply the familiar textures of slash fan fiction. The isolation and high emotion of the world echo the so-called intimatopic environments described by Woledge, found in text that "emphasizes homosocial bonds through the depiction of the loyalty between two men who live and work in a more or less homosocial community" (2006, 100). While not all football fan fiction is intimatopic in Woledge's strict sense of the term, the environment is similar to this foundational form of slash fan fiction. It also offers the variety of slash pairings that Tosenberger (2008) sees as being part of the appeal of Harry Potter (books 1997–2007; films 2001–11) slash fan fiction, from the traditional buddy slash to enemy slash to power slash, but with an even greater number of potential pairings due to its large size. Additionally, the high-pressure, exclusively homosocial environment of professional football, filled with highly physical young men, is a space that that, like the boarding school of Harry Potter, already has a long-standing homoerotic reading (Pronger 1990) and provides a range of ways for strong homosocial relationships to move to homosexual desire. These fans' appreciation of football's fan fiction potential led to their becoming fans of it as a sport. For those who came to Footballslash as football fans already, the community provides a space to discuss aspects of football and footballers that are not generally discussed in mainstream football communities, and to appreciate it as a (slashy) narrative as well as an event.

[3.13] Therefore, the image of the kiss, as it became known, provided a base that fan fiction authors could build upon. Images of Alonso and Gerrard touching, hugging, or looking into each other's eyes, readily available through the celebration of goals, consolation after defeat, or simply playing around at training, also easily fit into the subtexty category that slash fan fiction fans have learned to recognize. Constant repetition of these images across fan blogs reinforced the idea that there is a romantic relationship to write about. This was added to information received from the football media, drawing from interviews, games, and the general football fan gossip that populates Internet message boards. As teammates, Alonso and Gerrard had complementary styles and played well together, with a noticeable on-pitch harmony that, within the narrative conventions of football, suggested a good relationship off it as well. This was a view held not only by the fan fiction community but also by regular football fans. Interviews where either player talked about the other circulated within the community and within private blogs, appearing alongside collections of slashy images.

[3.14] In this manner, fan fiction writers eventually built up what Bacon-Smith referred to as a macroflow, the process where fans build up their understanding of the series, "creating a unified, coherent, and seemingly complete map of the series universe in the mind of the viewer" (1992, 131). The macroflow is made out of the microflow: "clusters of relational movements and contrastive actions that appear in

individual episodes...and that absorb considerably more conceptual time than real viewing time" (136). The macroflow is the sense that Gerrard and Alonso have a romantic relationship, one that stretches over several years, that may or may not be finished. It is built from small moments where they hug and look delighted after a goal, when Gerrard claimed to be devastated after Alonso left for Madrid, or images of the kiss. These moments are continually discussed and debated by fans of the pairing, and slowly, as with other slash pairings, a coherent image of the relationship is created, with certain integral points. Those who enjoy the relationship eventually begin to "agree on the centrality of particular events, characteristics, and interpretations that support their favored romantic pairing" (Stein and Busse 2009, 197). "Filling Up the Space," for example, references Istanbul as one of Gerrard's key memories of Alonso, with Gerrard recalling "the way Xabi whispered to him in bed that night, his mouth pressed to the skin of Stevie's shoulder blade, *Would you have still wanted to kiss me if we had lost?* and Stevie said into the pillow, *I want to kiss you all the time, and football's got nothing to do with it, Xabi's smile against his skin.*"

[3.15] What is notable about a slash interpretation of Gerrard and Alonso's relationship, however, is the relatively small amount of actual sources that fans of the pairing draw from. Unlike, for example, the constantly asserted deep bond that Kirk and Spock have for each other, the relationship of Gerrard and Alonso is built on fairly innocuous statements of admiration and friendship, pictures of goal celebrations, and, of course, the kiss. For the writers and readers, this is enough. Perhaps more than slash fan fiction built on other source texts, football slash fan fiction requires little in the way of evidence. Writers need nothing more than a picture, a quote, or an idea that two players would be good or hot together in order to write. The dynamics of football and the writers' understanding of slash fan fiction mean that that there is enough in these elements to start slashing.

[3.16] The appeal of Gerrard and Alonso as a romantic pairing is not only because of the way they interact with each other, but because of the way Gerrard and Alonso themselves are constructed within the discourse of the community. Gerrard—loyal, proudly Scouse, and somewhat rough around the edges—has his counterpart in the elegant, cosmopolitan, and occasionally intellectual Alonso. They present a classic homosocial pair, contradictory but complementary, similar to Kirk and Spock or any number of popular slash pairings. They both are considered to have not only positive qualities but also ones that are interesting to explore in fiction, including what is going on underneath Gerrard's ineloquence and Alonso's good taste in popular culture. They are appreciated as good players but also as good characters, which is what has made them so enduring in the community. Other pairings similarly reflect classic homosocial relationships, such as rivalries, mentor/mentee relationships, long-term best friends, and other varieties of complementarily contrasting characters that the community has



come to understand. Indeed, the most popular players in Footballslash are the ones who feel most like personalities that can be explored.

[3.17] This understanding of Gerrard, Alonso, and any other player that is written about comes from a wide variety of sources, combined to make a coherent whole. The increased mediatization of football encourages star footballers to be considered media stars, with a focus on their personal history and personality as much as (and often more than) their sporting ability. It is not enough for a football player to be talented; he has to have an interesting personality and a certain amount of charisma—or at least be constructed to appear that way. A talented player becomes a true star by these means and can therefore build his brand and gain recognition, prestige, and lucrative sponsorship deals.

[3.18] Although this process is considered modern, it is not a particularly new development within football (Woolridge 2002). In the past, cigarette cards, newsreels, and print features focused on individual footballers with particular skill, turning them into interesting personalities that the public might pay to see perform and stars that fans would be eager to learn more about. Print was and remains a particularly key format for constructing true football stars, "those players who have more than just footballing skill, as they have a character and personality which lifts them above the ordinary star" (Woolridge 2002, 64). Profiles of star players after World War I not only discussed their skills and the history of their careers but also their backgrounds, their hobbies, who they might be as men. These stars were the draw for ticket sales and the selling of even more newspapers, just as they are today.

[3.19] What has changed is style and volume. The expansion of sports pages and an increase in football-related publications, both online and off, means that there is an increasing amount of space to be filled with content. Journalists find that "descriptive, personality-based, sports trivia is what they need most to make the kind of copy that will sell newspapers" (Sugden and Tomlinson 2007, 50), and so there is an increasingly large amount of this information available. Additionally, both football clubs and football players themselves have become content producers online, and one of the things they can offer better than the established football media outlets is personality-driven content. The official online video channels of a given football club will have, in addition to game highlights, lighthearted interviews with the team, and a player's own Web site or Twitter feed will discuss his favorite music and childhood heroes. As a result, there is a large amount of information for fan fiction writers to draw upon.

[3.20] This information is then incorporated into the discussions that members of the fan fiction community has with each other about the players and their relationships. Discussion about characters is an important element of fan communities. Bacon-Smith observed that that "in interaction with others who share in the fictional relationships,

the actions and behaviors of the fictional characters generate discussion and gossip as if the characters were in some way real" (1992, 158), with Jenkins (1992, 81) also referring to this as "television gossip," seeing it as a practice of soap opera fans that was moved into the fan communities that he studied. Bacon-Smith and Jenkins see the role of this gossip as making the characters and the program more real to fans, something integral to their fan identity in that it validates the object of their fandom, making it worthy of their attentions in comparison to others.

[3.21] However, in the context of fan fiction, and especially for football slash fan fiction, this gossip also serves the opposite purpose—in making the characters real, it also makes them fictional. Through the process of gossip, fans speculate on what might happen with the characters within the narrative, whether they feel that they did right thing, or how their past may have informed their decision. They become understood by the fans, and therefore they become clear enough that the fan can write about them herself without relying on the text's official author. While a show might be created by producers, "the slash canon is based on a collective interpretive process" (Stasi 2006, 120). In real person fan fiction, without an official author and with a canon made up of many different media that must be combined, character discussion and identity creation between fans is key. Football slash writers are aware that what they are writing about is fiction, unlikely to be true, and very much in their own heads. Writers rarely try to prove their favorite pairing exists in reality, but there is discussion of who the players are and how they interact. Because this knowledge is taken from the media, it feels to the authors not much different than knowledge about fictional characters. As with other real person fiction fandoms described by Busse, the players are "simultaneously real and fictional, and...fans can talk about their fantasies as if they were real while being aware that this 'reality' merely constitutes a fandomwide conceit" (2006, 209). These character identities become something that participants in Footballslash know, can reference, and can build upon. Steven Gerrard's loyalty and Xabi Alonso's love of F. Scott Fitzgerald's 1925 novel *The Great Gatsby*, both part of "Filling Up the Space," are particularly important aspects of Gerrard and Alonso's characters, for example. Alonso's appreciation for literature, which he mentions in interviews, marks him as urbane and sophisticated, while Gerrard's rejection of wealthier football clubs to stay at Liverpool suggests he would show the same kind of loyalty to the people he cares about. These are both established aspects of the two men within the community. The identity that has been built, that makes them compelling characters and an interesting relationship, is therefore incorporated into the story.

[3.22] This process serves to enable the community to see football players "as fully formed, intricate, and interesting characters" (Busse 2006, 214), with an emphasis on seeing them as characters. The fans know that what they are writing about is not the

real Steven Gerrard but a construction made by the community. They "purposefully use real-life information to create fictional worlds inhabited by fictional protagonists" (Busse 2006, 214). As with constructing relationships, the act of interpreting Steven Gerrard or any other football player into a fictionalized version is an extremely enjoyable activity. Fans enjoy looking through Web sites for information, discussing them with their fandom friends, and building versions of football players that they can play with. The writer comes to feel that she knows the player she is writing about, but this is different from the sort of "parasocial" (Horton and Wohl 1956) relationship where a fan feels like she has a genuine relationship with a media figure or character. Rather, the author has knowledge of her fictional creation—knowledge shared across the community, thus in one way permitting the entire community to serve as author.

[3.23] This fictionalization can also extend to the environment in which the stories take place. Fan fiction authors decide how much reality they want to incorporate in their stories. Alternative universe stories, where the players are not footballers but have some other profession, are popular. Some authors wish to stick as close to the real lives of the players as possible, dealing with the infidelity of the players in regards to their wives and girlfriends or the homophobic culture of professional football. Others bypass these less pleasurable elements while keeping the environment. "Filling Up the Space," for example, spends a good deal of time on Gerrard's relationship with his teammates, but it does not mention his celebrity wife, Alex, or suggest that they would disapprove of his relationship with Alonso. This parallels the way in which Gerrard and the rest of the Liverpool team are discussed in football media. It is often, although certainly not always, the mediated reality, rather than the absolute reality, that is the basis for football slash writers' stories, and there are many ways this can be interpreted depending on what sort of story the author wishes to tell.

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## 4. It's just hot

[4.1] Slash fan fiction is not only about emotion, relationships, and characterization. It is also about sex, and "while it is important to note that not all slash is overtly erotic, the point is that it can be" (Tosenberger 2008, 201). While some stories are simply romantic, many are expressly, explicitly sexual. Football slash fan fiction is also a way to express and imagine sexual fantasies about football players in an environment where this is welcomed. In Footballslash, its related communities, and the personal blogs of its participants, pictures of footballers are posted with the intention of finding the players attractive—pictures of faces, shirtless torsos, thighs, and the like. The concept of the spaces of the community as dedicated to slash means that fans can "look frankly, safely, and openly at the bodies of others and...repeat that viewing experience as often as they like" (Coppa 2009, 112). Finding football players

attractive in such an environment is not shameful, but rather at least half the point of being part of it.

[4.2] Whannel notes that "sport, as a social practice concerned centrally with the body, has been characterised by its striking repression of sexuality" (2002, 11). This is especially true for male athletes. The body of the male athlete, ideally, "is an instrument of supreme sporting performance rather than an invitation to libidinal pleasure" (Rowe 2004, 159–60). The body's muscles and form are created for a purpose, and that purpose is to perform, and specifically to perform for other men. Within the codes of representation of male athletes, "viewers are encouraged to concentrate on what is being done rather than on how appealing the athlete might look in doing it" (Rowe 2004, 153). Sport has long been constructed as the ideal space of and for masculinity, and "the representation of sport stars is precisely to do with the normalisation of hegemonic masculinity" (Gosling 2007, loc 4817). Within this hegemonic masculinity, "it is wrong to look lustfully at the male body" (loc 4817), and therefore the ideal way to see male athletes is with the sexual aspect removed, regardless of the intense physicality of the activity. Within this framework, it is perhaps unsurprising that "until recently, there has been a reluctance to objectify sexually the male sports body" (Rowe 2004, 154).

[4.3] As football stars become media stars, however, this has changed. In recent years, "the gradual freeing up of fixed socio-sexual identities, the influence of feminism, and the increasingly overt sexualization of culture and commercialization of sexuality have resulted in a strengthening trend of openly sexualizing sportsmen" (Rowe 2004, 154). Attractive male football players, such as Freddie Ljungberg and Cristiano Ronaldo, have been found to be effective salespeople for a range of products, especially in overtly sexualized campaigns for underwear. Male football players in states of undress sell magazines, and their attractiveness is written about as a way to entice women into paying attention to the sport. No longer is the attractiveness of football players unacknowledged, their bodies covered; rather, their handsomeness is praised and their torsos splashed across billboards. However, this recognition is set outside of regular football fan practice, positioned as something that people who aren't fans of football might be interested in and as separate from any thoughtful or serious consideration of the sport.

[4.4] Longtime male fans see a mode of fandom that acknowledges the attractiveness of the athletes as wrong, combined with an idea that women, who were rarely perceived as fans in previous decades, are new consumer fans brought in by media and marketing to civilize the game and lack the attachment to the club that authentic male supporters have (Moor 2007; Pope 2011). Interest in the narrative aspects of football and its stars, thought of as imposed by the new football media, is

similarly coded as feminine and suspicious. Women are constantly asked to prove their fandom by men, and admitting to finding the players attractive is a quick way to be found illegitimate. Female football fans often "are accused that their motivation is not genuine, but is related to eroticism" (Ben-Porat 2009, 888); they have to work to dispel that notion in order to have their fandom seen as valid. This is common across football fan cultures worldwide and is internalized by female fans, who look down on those who don't follow the established masculine codes of spectatorship. In England, female fans complain about other women who "'let...us all down' by finding players attractive" (Jones 2008, 528), while in Japan, women protest that "I'm not a *mi-ha* fan, I'm watching soccer seriously" (Tanaka 2004, 54). The code of proper fandom "prioritizes a particular mode of spectatorship in soccer games" (54), and this mode of spectatorship is that of the heterosexual man.

[4.5] The practices of slash fandom work to overcome this contradiction by providing a space where the attractiveness of the football player is highlighted and prized that does not feel lightweight. The nature of proper fandom is inverted; eroticizing the players becomes the norm, but a norm that rewards the sort of intellectual work that goes in to writing stories or analyzing the game. As a community made up of other football fans who share the same outlook toward the players, it also allows fans to see this eroticization of football players as legitimate. There is no contradiction between being invested in Liverpool's results and being sexually attracted to Steven Gerrard within the football fan fiction community. Many Footballslash participants do not take part in any other football fan community online, preferring to reserve their comments and discussion for a place where they feel more comfortable.

[4.6] However, thanks to football fan fiction's relative secrecy, it also becomes possible to participate while still presenting elsewhere as a traditional fan. Football slash fan fiction may be relatively easy to find, but first one must know what slash fan fiction is. Football fans more generally, even those who maintain a strong online presence and identity, are unlikely to be aware of the practice unless they wish to be. Fans involved in the practice do not proselytize; indeed, there is a fairly strong taboo against making it known to those unfamiliar with fan fiction practices. Within the community itself, writers utilize user names and pseudonyms, further separating themselves from potential discovery. A different pseudonym can then be used on more mainstream football Web sites. The nature of online fandom means that it is easy to switch between the two spheres, between one form of fandom and the other. The fan fiction writer can therefore maintain her legitimacy as a serious football fan, if she so wishes, without having to give up both her attraction to players and her enjoyment of fan fiction practices. This also serves to protect the community, as mainstream football culture is notoriously homophobic and would likely react poorly to slash. The nature of online communication, with its separate spaces with separate identification that are

accessed in the same physical way, means that such a division of identities is possible and that the community can be kept safe.

## 5. Conclusion

[5.1] Football slash fan fiction is both a result of and reaction to mediated football fandom. It exists because of the understanding of football as a narrative, but also because of what mainstream football fandom leaves out of its world. It is a way to play with the boundaries between real and fictional while also exploring the hidden potential of the football narrative and experiencing it in a welcoming environment.

[5.2] It is also a result of changes in fan fiction practice. Contemporary slash fan fiction writers see nearly any media narrative as transformable, and this potential increases when the narrative is seen as slashy. Changes in the way that fan fiction is distributed and consumed meant that the older proscriptions about what was "fic-able" and what wasn't became less powerful. Once they learn the form, slash fan fiction writers become trained to see slash and fan fiction potential in the media they encounter. Professional football's heavily homosocial environment makes it ideal for a slash interpretation, with the visual material to stimulate the imagination and a variety of potential relationship dynamics and character types to write and read about. Additionally, its similarity to cult narratives means that fan fiction writers recognize where they can fill in the narrative spaces of football to suit their needs. This is not necessarily in contrast to being a more traditional sports fan, but rather in tandem with it, a way to work through the emotions of being a football fan and to explore parts of it in a way not seen in more mainstream football fan spaces.

[5.3] Therefore, football fan fiction exists at the convergence of media narratives, media forms, and contemporary communication. It shows that the polysemy of both football and fan practice leads to new ways of understanding and appreciating one of the most enduring objects of fandom. This does not come at the expense of more traditional forms of sport fandom but rather as a complement to it, an expansion of what football can mean and how it can be interpreted.

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## Praxis

### Representation of American versus non-American fans in Baillie Walsh's 2013 documentary *Springsteen & I*

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[0.1] *Abstract*—This article explores the representation of American versus non-American fans in Baillie Walsh's 2013 crowd/fan-sourced documentary *Springsteen & I*. The film—as much as it was fed by a wide and international range of fan-produced material—ultimately produced and presented one particular type of fan as privileged and appropriate to speak for all: the American Springsteen fan. The film does so in three main ways: by presenting American fans as more authentically connected to Springsteen's language and lyrics (they truly "understand" his work); by showing that American fans relate to Springsteen's world and themes in more authentic ways; and by presenting American fans as experiencing a better, closer, more authentic Springsteen when seeing him perform live. The essay thus reexamines fan stereotyping from the perspective of national identity. It aims to rearticulate the necessity of the vigilance and scrutiny of crowd-sourced fan texts because they have profound effects on how fans are taught to view themselves in and by the media.

[0.2] *Keywords*—Bruce Springsteen; Crowd-sourced film; National identity

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[0.3] We're here for one reason! Because *you're* here!

—Bruce Springsteen, *Springsteen & I* (2013)

[0.4] Regardless of their different life paths, [Springsteen fans] have all somehow experienced more or less the same thing, and this single experience is the touchstone of true fandom.

—Paul Greene, review of Linda K. Randall's *Finding Grace in the Concert Hall* (2010)

[0.5] Any one Bruce-fan could somehow speak for *all* Bruce fans.

—Linda K. Randall, *Finding Grace in the Concert Hall* (2010)

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# 1. Introduction

[1.1] In late 2012, music video and film director Baillie Walsh, along with producers Ridley Scott and Svana Gisla, sent out a call to Bruce Springsteen fans all over the world. The call invited the fans to submit short personal video portraits that explained what Springsteen and his music meant to them for a new documentary entitled *Springsteen & I*. Inspired by the crowd-sourced documentary *Life in a Day* (2011, also produced by Scott), and distinctly not commissioned but merely approved by Springsteen himself, the aim of the project was to "invite people from all over the world to share stories that celebrate one of the greatest lyrical storytellers of our generation" (note 1). These contributions would then be cut together into a feature-length documentary by the team to produce "a unique cinematic experience...[based on] a wide variety of creative interpretations, captured in the most visually exciting way [that a fan could think of, whether they be] a hardcore Tramp since '73 or [had heard] one of his songs for the first time today" (note 2).

[1.2] The call spread quickly online (note 3). Importantly, the call, and particularly the extensive communication on Facebook from the production team, insisted that fans submit footage in their own language. It included comments such as, "Please note it is preferred that you say it in your own language, so you don't have to find the perfect English words!" and "Hello everyone!! Would love to know what countries you all live in??" followed by "Thanks to everyone for sharing, what a multi-national bunch we are!!" (note 4). This open source approach and decidedly internationally oriented ideal for the project was further illustrated by a secondary call, which asked the fans to upload still portraits of themselves holding up their favorite Bruce Springsteen album in their homes, cars, or other places. These portraits would then be incorporated into an interactive online poster for the film, featuring 350 clickable photos of international Springsteen fans.

[1.3] After receiving over 2,000 video submissions—more than 300 hours of footage—by late February 2013 (note 5), Baillie Walsh began to edit the material into a 75-minute film (<http://www.thewrap.com/movies/column-post/bruce-springsteen-and-i-fans-make-movie-and-it-rocks-104536>). The final film was promoted and released as a "digital cinematic event" (<http://www.ncm.com/press/release/springsteen-and-i-to-make-fans-rock-n-roll-dreams-come-true-in-us-cinemas-this-summer>), which fans all around the world could be a part of: it was to be simultaneously broadcast in over 2,000 cinemas in over 50 different countries on July 22, 2013. Surprisingly, the final film—despite of its insistence on international source material and its global promotion and release—featured very few foreign-language contributions and appeared to focus instead predominantly on North American and British fans. For myself, a Springsteen fan, and my Springsteen fan friends (some of whom had submitted video to the site in

Dutch), this was a disappointment. We thought that the film successfully captured the essence of what it was like to be a Springsteen fan but that it had selected a particular, singular voice through which to do so. Even though the film had been fed by a wide and international range of fan-produced material (this becomes clear upon review of the "I uploaded" comments on the Facebook page or of the interactive poster), the film ultimately presented and produced one particular type of fan, thus marking him or her as privileged and appropriate to speak for all: the American Springsteen fan.

[1.4] Here I examine how *Springsteen & I* constructs, produces, and regulates its own object: the Springsteen fan. More particularly, I examine how the film privileges a certain nationality for this fan in an analysis of fan stereotyping that has thus far remained overlooked in the field of fan studies. In *Springsteen & I*, the type of fan in focus is not a one that merely reproduces fans as socially awkward, geeky, or nerdy—the sci-fi fan stereotype that Henry Jenkins argues remains a normative categorization in *Textual Poachers* (1992) or that Lisa Lewis addresses in her edited volume, *The Adoring Audience* (1992)—but rather one that is defined and determined specifically by an American national cultural identity. The character of *Springsteen & I* is thus one of a gatekeeper (note 6). The film transparently invites and channels open source materials into popular media output, thereby reaching enormous audiences that would mirror in character the originally targeted respondents. However, something strikingly untransparent occurs instead when the shaping/selection process of the output takes place. The national character of one type of fan takes precedence over all others.

[1.5] The way that this precedence is constructed in *Springsteen & I*—or the premise by which a hierarchy among Springsteen fans is seemingly validated—can be related to the notion of authenticity, or more specifically to the more "authentic" Springsteen fan. The notoriously slippery and tenuous concept of authenticity has long been connected with rock and pop music. Scholars such as Simon Frith (1981) and Lawrence Grossberg (1992) have argued that rock emerged in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s as the more authentic counterpart to pop music's mass entertainment; there was a truth and directness about it, a rawness that countered commerciality and society's dominant norms and values (note 7). Similarly, ideas of authenticity are also key to an understanding of Bruce Springsteen's music, his themes, his public persona, and his live performances (Bird 1994; Pfeil 1995; Palmer 1997). Springsteen's lyrics are infused with apparently authentic images: real borders, reflections on aging, the effects of war and politics, the daily lives of working-class Americans. In terms of gender, his work presents traditional (that is to say, traditionally conservative) images of men and women. Likewise, in terms of class and labor, he generally romanticizes American blue-collar workers—an image he himself affirms with his jeans, leather jackets, and T-shirts. This working-class authenticity is further reflected by his onstage

performance, where the E Street Band is presented as a "well-oiled machine" of unified workers, to which Springsteen himself is a benevolent but hardworking Boss (Palmer 1997, 109). His live performances are fueled by an uncompromising energy and dedication to his fans, presented authentically through the visible strain on his muscular physique and his sweat, which mark his unparalleled endurance: his shows commonly exceed 3 hours in length. Through all this, he exhibits an ideology of authenticity through his simultaneous critique, support, and evocation of long-standing American ideals.

[1.6] The issue, however, is not whether or not this all is actually authentic (as opposed to a strategy, performance, or construction). Rather, what is at stake is that this part of rock music culture, and Springsteen's career in particular, is driven by notions of authenticity that also seem to inform and imbue its fandom. The more authentic fan knows, sees, understands, and appreciates Springsteen's constructions. As Kemal and Gaskell write of a different type of music, "We may listen to music, but we may argue that for our listening to have integrity, to be true to its object, we must understand the music we are listening to" (1999, 4). The more authentic music fans thus truly understand the music; they have an intimate, real connection to Springsteen and his work, and they can therefore be authentically moved by him. Such fans enjoy a special, close bond with the performer. This bond is perhaps partially inflected by worship, but it is mostly based on feeling honestly and personally connected through an acknowledged common understanding of what it feels like to experience life in a certain way—as well as, of course, the shared appreciation of how the produced music itself addresses and manifests this experience. This is exactly what *Springsteen & I* suggests the American fan is best equipped for. A close analysis of the film demonstrates that it suggests that some fans are more authentic than others. This occurs in three main ways: in how the fans are presented to connect to Springsteen's language and lyrics—their understanding of his work; in how the fans are presented to relate to Springsteen's world and themes; and in how the fans are presented with regard to the experience of seeing Springsteen perform live (the Springsteen fan pilgrimage par excellence) (note 8).

[1.7] I bring together discourse and textual analysis to examine both levels of constructed imagery and stylistic devices within the film; the spoken words and mise-en-scène of the original fan-produced portraits; and the way the film itself puts these portraits and images together through its use of editing, sound, and alternative footage. My aim here is to rearticulate the necessity for vigilance and scrutiny of texts such as *Springsteen & I* because they may have profound effects on how fans are taught to view themselves in and by the media.

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## 2. *Springsteen & I*



[2.1] Bruce Springsteen, who is now entering the fifth decade of his career, has garnered an exceptionally loyal, wide, and collective fan base that "rang[es] from the teenagers to the liberal intelligentsia who 'hear' the significance in his lyrics that younger listeners may not" (Palmer 1997, 108). For Springsteen fans, the live experience is perceived as "the defining event" (108). It is interesting to note, then, that the 75-minute documentary intercuts its fan portraits only with extracts from vintage Springsteen live performances, as opposed to, for instance, interviews or other archival material. Furthermore, the "cinematic event" that heralded its release screened the documentary, then, after it ended, offered 35 minutes of exclusive, never-before-seen live footage of Bruce Springsteen at Hard Rock Calling 2012, followed by an 11-minute additional epilogue entitled "Meet the Fans." This last bonus feature showed Springsteen, after one of his concerts, personally meeting some of the fans who were featured in the film. The whole construction of the *Springsteen & I* cinematic event thus rewarded the true, loyal fans—that is, the authentic fans who stayed to the end. It also prominently advocated the live experience as essential through both the live concert footage that came after the film and the live fan face-to-face experience with Bruce at the very end. With this last offering, the film also pronounced the validity of its own authenticity by showing that some of the fans featured in the film were able to meet Springsteen face to face, thus bringing them authentically closer to him—but only after successfully submitting their fan confessionals for the film and, crucially, after seeing him live in concert.

[2.2] The main documentary incorporates fan portrait footage in three ways: in longer close-up portraits that last up to 5 minutes; in brief video appearances that last from a few seconds to up to a minute; and occasionally by voice only, in a sound bridge over live or abstract video material. The film presents 15 larger portraits (fans we get to know in greater detail, and/or to whom we return several times) and 51 smaller contributions, through video or voice only, as part of montage sequences that collect and present a number of fans consecutively (note 9). In the original call, the production team of the film also asked the fans submitting footage to present three words that summarized what Bruce meant to them. Many of the smaller contributions in the film are part of montage sequences that present a range fans articulating these three words to the camera, or the concluding montage where we see them say "thank you, Bruce" in a variety of ways.

[2.3] What is immediately striking about the film is that the selected fans presented within it are predominantly American, and almost the entire film is in English. Of the 15 larger portraits, eight are American, one is (made obvious as) Canadian, three are British, and three are Danish. (This in itself is remarkable: all three non-Anglo/American fans are from the same country.) The three Danish contributors in the film speak excellent English, with American intonation and phrasing, evident in



comments such as, "He's cool—we're all kings on the street," "My girl said to me...," and "Of course, I understand why he loves his woman." In addition, the two Danish fans who clearly identify themselves as living in Denmark (the third fan, a busker, leaves his location unidentified in the film) are called Jane and Jon, monikers that position them as, by extension, semi-Anglo American as well. Moreover, of the 66 total fan contributors to the film, only 16 are markedly identifiable as being of non-Anglo-American origin, and of those 16, only five speak their own language in the film: a Spanish fan, a French fan, and a German fan are shown in the "three words" montage sequences (their three words are subtitled in English), and in the final "thank you" montage, we see a French fan say "Bain—Merci, Bruce" and a Japanese fan say "Arigato" as she holds up a written sign that reads "thank you"—as though she herself has supplied the subtitles for her own message. This means that in the entire 75-minute film, the total number of non-English spoken words barely exceeds 15.

[2.4] There may be many reasons for this, of course. The film's production team might not have had the financial means or time to translate foreign-language submissions; non-English contributions might just not have been very good or suitable; or the film's production companies might have insisted the final film feature few subtitles so as to better cater to the Anglo-American market. But it is a striking ratio nevertheless, especially considering the size of Springsteen's international fan base and the production team's initial insistence on original-language contributions via their online communication. Ultimately, however, the reasons that produced this result are perhaps less important than its effects: through its elimination of non-English-speaking contributors, the film presents the majority of Springsteen fans—in a film that is entirely about Springsteen fans—as speaking and thinking his language: (American) English. However, Springsteen's fan base is significantly international: of the 133 concerts in his last tour, only 48 took place in America and five in Canada, with the remaining 80 shows spread out over 24 countries, including Mexico and Chile. His 2014 High Hopes tour even kicked off in South Africa. Aside from this, Springsteen has always had a particularly keen European following, with his Scandinavian, Dutch, German, French, Spanish, and Italian shows generally selling out in mere hours. David Brooks of the *New York Times* writes, "They say you've never really seen a Bruce Springsteen concert until you've seen one in Europe...The passion among the American devotees is frenzied, bordering on cultish. The intensity of the European audiences is two standard deviations higher"

([http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/26/opinion/brooks-the-power-of-the-particular.html?\\_r=1&](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/26/opinion/brooks-the-power-of-the-particular.html?_r=1&)). Springsteen's Italian fans in particular have pioneered a strong academic interest in his work (D'Amore 2007). It is significant, then, that a music critic such as *Uncut* reviewer Michael Bonner wrote: "It's hardly a revelation, but Walsh's film reminds us that—as with Dylan's Bobcats and Neil Young's Rusties—Springsteen's fan base is predominantly blue collar"

(<http://www.uncut.co.uk/blog/the-view-from-here/first-look-springsteen-i#t1t7Tc5qJpXryAFX.99>). Not only does this assume Springsteen's prevailing type of fan is working class—which is odd because Linda Randall's ethnographic study of Springsteen fans, *Finding Grace*, concluded the contrary (Randall 2010, quoted in Greene 2012, 852)—but the term *blue collar* in itself presumes fans' Anglo-American heritage. It seems relevant and valid, therefore, to investigate this further. I now turn to representation of fan nationality in the film.

### 3. An authentic understanding of Bruce Springsteen's work

[3.1] A key recurring element of the fan-produced contributions selected for the final film is the emphasis on a deep, authentic understanding of Springsteen's lyrics. Significantly, the fans who mention such an understanding explicitly in the film—as opposed to just an appreciation for the music—are all American. Kitty, an Asian American young truck driver, thinks that Springsteen's lyrics speak to her. She reports that, thanks to Springsteen's work, she recognizes that she is the backbone of America, and she notes that she understands him to be simultaneously patriotic, political, and poetic. As an American male fan, shown driving in his car while wearing sunglasses, explains, "Bruce's lyrics always made me feel like I was going through someone's family photo album...and looking at their life, and feeling what they felt, and smelling their coffee...and feeling their sadness...and their triumph." The man then breaks down in tears.

[3.2] The central, emotional upsurge in this fan's portrait places further emphasis on his authentic, intimate understanding of Springsteen's lyrics; they move him because he truly understands them. In opposition to this, however, one of the shorter portraits, that of a Polish fan in the film, shown outdoors in a field with a wooden commemorative cross in the background, reveals that foreign fans are perhaps less adept at grasping the true message of Springsteen's work. In English, the fan explains:

[3.3] I think that in general Polish people could relate to his music, especially during communism, because he was singing about freedom...At the time people couldn't speak English so well, so when like in the song "Born in the USA," they could understand only the chorus, so everybody was thinking that, "Oh, he's praising the fact that he's an American. It's so great!" I guess that if you hear him singing "Born in the USA" with such charisma, you want to be like that. I want to be an American too.

[3.4] The film next cuts to a live performance of Springsteen singing "Born in the USA." It cuts straight into the first line of the lyrics (skipping the musical introduction)

with a sudden boom; we see a close-up of Springsteen delivering the following lines with great intensity and rawness:

[3.5] Born down in a dead man's town  
The first kick I took was when I hit the ground  
End up like a dog that's been beat too much...

[3.6] Through this abrupt, loud juxtaposition created by the cut—a technique that is distinctly opposed to the smooth use of sound bridges in and out of Springsteen's music in the rest of the film—the sequence emphasizes the content of Springsteen's lyric and identifies it as one that actually critiques the very idea of being born in the USA. The film thereby suggests, through the edit, that the Polish fans mentioned in the story actually misunderstood Springsteen's words and were wrong in their romantic beliefs about being born in America. Although the way the Polish fan recounts the tale subtly implies that he too now understands what the song is about, this short portrait—and particularly the way it is cut into the Springsteen performance, as well as the fact that we never return to the Polish fan to hear him finish the story—leaves hanging the idea that Polish/foreign fans don't quite hear or understand the true meaning of Springsteen's lyrics because they fail to comprehend the authentic meaning and complexity of his message.

[3.7] That such an authentic understanding comes more easily to American fans is made evident by two portraits of mothers, who proudly speak of their children knowing and understanding Springsteen's lyrics. Ten-year-old Dominic, Theresa Martin's son, is made to recount on camera how his mother taught him all the words to his favorite Bruce song, "Death to My Hometown," and how he *really* hears the words." A second mother, a soccer mom, talks about how all the CDs in her car are Springsteen's (with the exception of one Patti Scialfa album—Springsteen's wife), how her sons only hear Springsteen in her car, how they are "schooled in the music of Springsteen," and how proud she is they now know all of Springsteen's lyrics. Such portraits indicate that American fans have a strong generational prevalence. This is further illustrated by one of the first short portraits in the film, which shows an American woman holding up a dusty portrait of Springsteen to the camera. She explains she used to present it to her baby every night, and, pointing at Bruce, she would repeat: "Daddy—dad-dy!" This suggests that her child was instructed to value the importance of Springsteen and that Springsteen literally presents a fatherlike figure, specifically for the next American generation. None of the European or non-American fans in the film are shown expressing their Springsteen fandom in this way—although Danish Jon comes closest, in testifying that he liked Springsteen ever since he was a young boy. Generally, non-American fans are presented as older and childless in the film ([note 10](#)). This in contrast to the featured younger fan portraits that are, again, all American. Aside from

Dominic and recently graduated truck driver Kitty, a young American girl who is about 9 or 10 years old explains why Bruce is her favorite artist, whereas teenager Jillian, who has just discovered Springsteen's music, closes off the film by reading a thank-you letter she has written to Bruce, which sparks off the closing, three-word "thank you" montage (note 11). In presenting the American fan as having a more authentic, more advanced, and deeper understanding of Springsteen's lyrics, and by providing them with clearer generational prevalence, the film thus privileges their status.

#### 4. Authentically living Bruce Springsteen's themes and world

[4.1] The representation of American versus non-American fans in *Springsteen & I* connects them differently to key motifs and themes in Springsteen's work. The car and driving—a commonly recurring motif in Springsteen's songs as well as an important American symbol of freedom and exploration—are dominant parts of three fan portraits in the film. All three are American and are featured in longer portraits, and all three are cut together relatively back-to-back early in the film, building up a force of presence. We first see Kitty, the truck driver, behind the wheel. She recalls listening to the album *Nebraska* while driving through Arizona (thus emphasizing a connection to specific American locales) and explains why Springsteen is her favorite artist to listen to on the road. We then see the soccer mom talking about how all the CDs in her car are Springsteen's and discussing Springsteen's schooling of her children. As the soccer mom begins to drive—the car takes on motion in the frame—she explains that she has taken her children "all over God's Creation" by road. The film then dissolves into a live performance of Bruce singing "Candy's Room." This song explicitly mentions driving as part of a romantic escape ("We go driving, driving deep into the night, / I go driving deep into the light...") and therefore positions the driving fan portraits as closer and more authentically connected to the content of Springsteen's music. The film then dissolves via a sound bridge into the portrait of the American man in sunglasses, who talks about understanding Springsteen's lyrics and who cries as we see him driving alone in his car. The sound bridge and dissolve techniques used in and out of the live performance connect the driving fans organically to the music, the lyrics, and Springsteen himself. The portrait of the crying man in the car additionally features some subtle jump cuts (the footage is presumably a cut-down version of a longer monologue)—a technique that speeds up and further emphasizes the progression of the car. The sequence of Kitty's static seating behind the wheel, the soccer mom's in-motion car, and the crying man's sped-up driving connects Springsteen's music directly to American driving—American drivers, American roads, American forward movement and mobility. Because it remains an isolated construction in the film—no other fans are shown in their cars—the film again privileges the American fan as the fan type that has better access to and a better understanding of the authentic reality

of Springsteen's symbolism, world, and writing. The idea of what the car and driving mean, in Springsteen's music as well as in life, is only and best experienced by American fans.

[4.2] Alongside this connection to the motif of the car, the film explicitly foregrounds the working-class fan (as was also observed by Bonner in his review of the film). It thus naturalizes the romanticized view of working-class life that is so deep rooted in Springsteen's work. Most of the fans who explicitly mention what they do for work are, again, American. Kitty the truck driver explains how she has a master's degree, but

[4.3] After graduation, I couldn't really get a job and so I started working at Jamba Juice making oatmeal in the early morning. I'd have to get up at three o'clock. I didn't have a car, so I rode my bike to work and that was when "Working on a Dream" came out. I would listen to that on my way to work and feel like, "Oh, I'm such a hard-working person." (*She chuckles.*) "I'm the backbone of America." That's what...Well, sometimes I feel like that when I listen to Bruce like, you know, like I'm really important, the work I do, the...The more physically demanding my job is, the more important I am, when I listen to Bruce. I don't know if that makes any sense, but that's how I feel.

[4.4] The fact that Kitty so sincerely stresses the connection between listening to Springsteen's music, her working-class background (she couldn't then afford a car), and her understanding that the more physically demanding her job is, the more important she will be for him establishes her authentic understanding of his lyrics and emphasizes the fact that she recognizes herself—her work and her purpose—in his music and themes. By so prominently selecting and featuring this portrait of a working-class fan who recognizes the validity of this sort of work, the film emphasizes and validates this romantic image. It does so without introducing a countering voice that would express the difficulties of the working-class position or providing a white-collar fan perspective, thus strongly privileging working-class status.

[4.5] Such discourse is furthered by another American fan couple in the film, from New York, shown seated together on their small sofa, her legs atop his, as they explain:

[4.6] We are kind of like the people that are in his songs in different ways. Very much so, blue collar. Blue collar. Together 28 years. Struggling. Yeah, struggling with the kids, and you go to work every day in Manhattan, and [he] works with his hands and has been doing that for over 30 years. But we're still together. That's the main thing.

[4.7] The romantic implications of this fan story raise working-class existence to one authentically connected to Springsteen's work as well as one that is warmer, truer, and more long-lasting. Noting that they have never been able to afford to go to a live concert (they are the only fans in the film so presented), although Bruce is very much part of their lives, the couple are later shown dancing to Springsteen's song "Radio Nowhere" in their small kitchen. This is the only scene in the film where Springsteen music moves from the diegetic (it originally comes from their radio) via a sound bridge to nondiegetic sound, into live footage of the same song, all while keeping the same shot visually: as the couple dances in the kitchen, the music swells, becomes rounder and louder, larger than life or the diegesis, before we cut to Bruce performing the song in front of his fans. The film thereby suggests that the music played on the radio in that working-class kitchen is able to expand to take on the same grand (and more authentic) qualities of the live experience. These fans are privileged to such a degree by their American working-class status that the pilgrimage reverses: Springsteen comes to them; the live event enters their home.

[4.8] This is decidedly not the case for the British working-class fan shown in the film. A man in his fifties, wearing a T-shirt with a picture of Springsteen on it that reads "The Only Boss I Listen To," explains to the camera while seated in his attic, "Madison Square Garden. I'd worked in a factory for 20 years and I'd saved up enough money eventually to afford to go on a 'Bruce trip,' as we call it. Four days in New York, two concerts at Madison Square Garden..." This fan expresses his fandom by relaying his connection to Bruce as one that was validated by seeing him live—and not only that, but live in New York, in America. He goes on to say, "We went down to the bar to pick up our tickets on the night of the concert, the first concert, and excitedly opened the envelope, looked at the tickets, looked at the map seating plan—and we were right at the back, right at the top. So a bit disappointed. But we were in New York, America, for the first time." The fan again emphasizes the experience of America as one that counters hardships: he was disappointed by being so far away from the stage, but he was in America, which made up for it. The fan then explains in great detail how he and his wife were upgraded to front-row seats—the best tickets in the house—by one of Springsteen's infamous, mysterious American men in black (the fan even imitates the American accent). He continues, "I got so excited I bought my wife three glasses of Champagne at seven dollars a glass. And I was a factory worker at the time. And it was phenomenal. So that's what it's like to be a Bruce Springsteen fan." This portrait thus both begins and ends with the explicit pronunciation of the fan's identity as a factory worker—an aspect of his character that is emphasized even more by the sound bridge that follows the portrait, as the image cuts to a live performance of Springsteen singing "Factory":

[4.9] Early in the morning, factory whistle blows,  
Man rises from bed and puts on his clothes  
[...]  
It's the working, the working, just the working life.

[4.10] The aural and lyrical techniques used here doubly underline the strong connection between the working-class fan and Springsteen's music because it creates an echoing/mirroring between the two through the repetition of the word *factory*. This is made possible only because the fan speaks English. More importantly, however, this fan portrait suggests that real Springsteen fandom comes into being (the fan says, "So *that's* what it's like to be a Springsteen fan") at his moment of experiencing the live event in America. The fan's identity as a factory worker brings him closer to the themes and content of Springsteen's music, but it is the experience of seeing Bruce live in America (the pilgrimage)—one that, incidentally, was notably improved by virtue of an anonymous American benefactor—that ultimately brought this fan quite literally closer to Bruce and made his fandom more authentic.

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## 5. Authentically experiencing Bruce Springsteen live

[5.1] Many of the fan portraits in the film are about seeing and experiencing Springsteen live. These portraits are, however, informed by a differentiation between those that are more authentic because they are intense and directly connected to the performer, and those that are less so because they rely on mediation or extension, or because they are experienced by proxy. The American fans all recount aspects of the live experience that emphasize their access to Springsteen's authenticity. The 9- or 10-year-old girl explains that she loves Bruce because "when he has a concert, he puts a lot of effort into his singing...You can just see his veins popping out because he's working so hard and after one song, he's as sweaty as a normal singer would be after he's done, like, 10 songs." It is an observation that not only expresses being close enough to gain such insights about the physical endurance in Springsteen's performance but also makes this performance more authentic in and of itself because it is marked by the recognition of an actual strain on his body. Another fan, an eloquent American woman who speaks into her laptop's camera in a large, art-filled apartment, recounts seeing Bruce "way back when," in 1976:

[5.2] As soon as I got there, as soon as the lights went out, I made my way to the front of the stage, back when you could do that. And I was front and center up against the stage, right in front of Bruce. Even after all these years and all the shows that I've seen, that concert still defies description. And I think that only the people who saw him in the early days in the small venues, before the mega crowds, and when you could get so close that you

were sharing the sweat and spit of whatever band member you were closest to, can really know the ferocity and intimacy of those concerts.

[5.3] Here the portrait of the American fan confirms a literal closeness—she was so close to the stage that she could share the sweat and spit of the band—as well as a temporal closeness: she was one of "the people who saw him in the early days in the small venues, before the mega crowds," which privileges this fan's more authentic fandom—a fandom that is more knowing and true because it recalls an earlier, purer, more direct experience of Springsteen.

[5.4] Among such testimonies, a Canadian man reveals that he held up a sign saying he had just been dumped at a concert in Ontario (note 12). Springsteen pulled him up on stage, hugged him, told the crowd he'd been dumped many times himself, and launched into the fan's personal request: a song about being dumped called "I'm Goin' Down." Here, the literal closeness that comes with being a fan in the golden circle—at the front of the crowd—translates into a personal/spiritual closeness. In that moment, the fan's and Springsteen's experiences of being dumped become one and the same. This conflation is also illustrated at the level of the film: the fan's portrait melds into a voice-over narrating the actual footage of the concert where this encounter took place; we see it all actually happen up close. The film thus privileges this (privileged) fan by actually bringing his portrait back, and thus closer to, the authentic reality of that event as it was caught on camera. A similar privileged position is attributed to an Elvis impersonator from Philadelphia. Philly Elvis recounts how he was pulled up on stage to sing after holding up a sign reading, "Can the King Sing with the Boss?" at a live performance in Philadelphia. Again, the narration of the video portrait becomes interwoven with archival footage of the actual event. Even though the impersonator was not quite himself at the time of the encounter—he was dressed as Elvis—his fan experience is still marked as authentic because it is presented as so essentially, so authentically, American. The man explains that when, midperformance, he moved from "All Shook Up" into "Blue Suede Shoes," "the band was right there with him." Here, the shared legacy of true American rock 'n' roll translates into an organically transitioning, collective performance on stage with Springsteen. This American fan's experience is presented as privileged because he is shown to naturally become one with the performers; they are extensions of the same roots.

[5.5] In contrast to these intense and directly connected fan experiences of live Springsteen performances, the non-American portraits in *Springsteen & I* are defined by more mediated, indirect, even proxy Springsteen experiences. When a young British woman recounts what happened to her during a live show at Hyde Park, for instance, we see her walking on the grass at that very location. The wide tracking shot suggests that her current surroundings in the park—in contrast to those in her tale—



are empty. This juxtaposition implies that the moment this fan is recalling is no longer there, that it was transitory; she is now far removed from that reality. The fan explains that during the concert, she wore a T-shirt reading, "I'll Be Your Courteney Cox" as she sat up on her friend's shoulders, which led her to being picked from the crowd to dance on stage with Springsteen during a rendition of his song "Dancing in the Dark." The girl's portrait is first intercut with footage from the music video that her story makes reference to—one in which the young actress Courteney Cox (later of *Friends* fame) is pulled from the crowd by Springsteen to dance with him on stage—before it leads into archival footage of the concert at Hyde Park that shows this happening to the fan. Although this fan was also pulled on stage and got close to Springsteen, the interweaving of three different video strands here (her portrait, the music video, and the caught-on-camera concert footage), as opposed to the simple two strands of the dumped Canadian and Philly Elvis portraits, emphasizes the addition of a layer of mediation. This is a retelling of a reenactment of a previously staged, fake live performance in a commercial video (note 13). The way that it is cut together does not bring the fan closer to the footage of the event. Rather, it further removes her from its authenticity. On top of this, as many Springsteen fans will know, pulling up a girl during "Dancing in the Dark" is a recurring element of most of his live performances. The British fan's story is therefore not as uniquely individual/authentic as its North American counterparts. She is merely one of many—a stand-in or proxy for the American girl used in the prestaged music video (where the live performance was not an authentic one to begin with).

[5.6] Another British fan portrait introduces David, an antifan (the only antifan in the film), in the documentary's most blatant comic turn. Within the shot, David is shown to speak and look directly into the camera as he leans over the armrest of his sofa. He directs his comments at his wife, a Springsteen fan, who is filming and whom we do not see:

[5.7] **Wife (off camera):** So, David, what does Bruce Springsteen mean to you?

[5.8] **David:** Bruce Springsteen means love, not for him, but for you. You being a fan, I've had Bruce Springsteen songs rammed down my throat 24/7. It tends to lose its edge. It really does. I've been all over Europe.

[5.9] **Wife:** So how many concerts have you been to?

[5.10] **David:** You—I think you reminded me. It was about eight. Eight that I've actually been to. Yeah, Amsterdam, Paris...I mean, I've seen some beautiful cities along the way, but then I've always had this little bit where I've had to go to a concert in the middle of it, which tends to spoil it for me.

[5.11] This charming and funny exchange stands alone in the documentary because it features a fan of a fan rather than of the performer. It again adds a layer of mediation, albeit in a completely different way than the "I'll be your Courteney Cox" portrait. Not only does the real European fan (though still Anglo-Saxon), the wife, disappear off camera here, but the story explicitly associates the spoiling of European cities with Bruce concerts. It is a comment that again sets this live experience apart from its American counterparts, where fans proudly proclaim having seen Springsteen in New York, in Philadelphia, or at Fenway Park in Boston. Most importantly, however, it presents the European man central to the portrait—David, the antifan husband—as one who is not really authentically a fan of Springsteen; he is merely one by proxy.

[5.12] The film does present a few rare exceptions that deviate from the pattern of privileging the American Springsteen fan. Toward the end of the film, we encounter Jane, a Danish fan, who films herself in an open spot in the woods in a visually stunning, different, yet natural environment. Confessionally claiming that this is the first time she has ever used a camera or made a film of herself, she uses the portrait to define her own fandom:

[5.13] I have listened to his music every day since '85. I know the lyrics. I know the music. Every day when I go home for work, I hear his records in my car. I sort of relax. I sort of get in a very good mood when I listen to Bruce. It doesn't matter whether it is the new music or the old music. I just love listening to his music. I'm not the kind of fan who knows the size of his shoes, or the names of his children, although I know he has three children and he has a lovely wife Patti...I'm the kind of fan who has attended all his concerts since '85 here in Denmark. I always stand in the first row, screaming and shouting and dancing like a teenager to a Beatles concert. This summer I was that lucky, that finally, after all these years, I touched him. We touched each other, twice, in Roskilde, in Denmark, and I cried like...I wept. Because it was so big.

[5.14] In this monologue, we see the European fan differentiate herself from other fans ("I'm not the kind of fan who..."). This in itself is quite common in fandom (Coppa 2006), but in this monologue, it becomes inflected with a specific national subtext emphasized by the background surroundings in the shot: the Danish forest landscape. When Jane subsequently defines her own fandom, however, she proceeds to appropriate almost all the characteristics we have come to associate with the privileged American fan type. Her identity and the setting she chose may be different, but her behavior is the same: she knows the lyrics, she listens to him in the car, she stands in the first row, she touched him—and she wept, because it was so big. If we turn this around, through this non-American fan portrait, the film reaffirms that what

defines the privileged American Springsteen fan is indeed privileged because it applies to all authentic fans. The American fan type thereby becomes entitled to speak for all fans because this voice knows and expresses best what it means to be a true Springsteen fan.

## 6. Conclusion

[6.1] *Springsteen & I* offers a distinctive hybrid phenomenon: part fan film, part fan tribute, part crowd-sourced film, part music documentary, part concert film, part global cinematic event. The film took an online open source sampling of fan-produced self-portraits (fan video selfies, as it were) and transformed them into a carefully crafted, tightly selected, singular object with a singular voice. This voice defines what it means to be a Springsteen fan, and, especially when screened in the more traditional closed cinematic structure or *dispositif* (note 14), it may have a profoundly powerful effect on its audience. A closer look at the film reveals that the construction of this singular voice promotes one particular type of fan—the American fan—as most authentic and privileged over all others. The film suggests that the American fan has a more authentic understanding of and connection to Springsteen's lyrics, that the American fan is more authentically able to recognize the themes in his work because they authentically embody them and live in his world, and that American fans experience a more authentic live performance because they see him in America, get closer to him, share direct experiences with him, and perhaps even know him from way back when. Non-American fans, however, are consistently positioned at a greater distance from Springsteen's work, be it through language and subtitles, American benefactors, or their fan partners, or be it that they act as substitutes for actors in reenactments of his music videos. For a film that was taglined as "by the fans and for the fans" (note 15), such constructions and hierarchies problematize this very definition and leave its audience—particularly international fans—feeling significantly more passive and distanced than its premise implied, if not outright excluded. *Springsteen & I* provides a good example of why the consistent deconstruction of such gatekeeper texts about fans should remain an essential component within the field of fan studies, especially if we aim to truly understand, and ultimately reappropriate, the image of the fan as it is globally dispersed.

## 7. Notes

1. Taken from the original call, no longer available online, but previously at <http://www.springsteenandi.com>.
2. From the original call.

3. It was sent out to Bruce fans through Springsteen's official Web site, an official promotion/submission Web site (<http://www.springsteenandi.com>), several official Facebook pages (including regional variants, such as <http://www.facebook.com/springsteen-I-Germany>), Bruce Springsteen fan sites, selected newspapers and music magazines, and online fan forums and mailing lists. See also "Be a Part of the New Film *Springsteen & I*," BruceSpringsteen.net, November 9, 2012 (<http://brucespringsteen.net/news/2012/be-a-part-of-the-new-film-springsteen-i>), and "Bruce Springsteen Wants You!" *Guardian*, November 13, 2012 (<http://www.theguardian.com/music/2012/nov/13/bruce-springsteen-documentary>).
4. A selection of comments from the production team is available at <https://www.facebook.com/SpringsteenI?fref=ts>.
5. Because the submissions were only allowed to be 5 minutes long, this would translate to roughly 3,500 submissions, but The Wrap (<http://www.thewrap.com/movies/column-post/bruce-springsteen-and-i-fans-make-movie-and-it-rocks-104536/>) claims there were 2,000.
6. I choose the term *gatekeeper* here in reference to Bourdieu (1993), who argues that the very construction of access to culture through, for instance, a certain selection process or a specific setting (think of art galleries or the selection of certain art house films for film festivals) in fact determines the content of what is produced within that section of culture to begin with. It is this kind of symbiotic relationship that defines the functions of the gatekeeper—one that is based, of course, on the interventions of specific power structures. This is the aspect I'm interested in addressing here.
7. The concept of authenticity is notoriously complex and slippery; much has been written about both Frith's (1981) and Grossberg's (1992) work on authenticity in the field of music studies. For current discussions, see Dettmar and Richey (1999) and Taylor and Barker (2007).
8. See Aden (1999) and Brooker (2007) on fan pilgrimages.
9. There are 55 smaller portraits in the montage, but four of these contributors are also part of the main portraits and have therefore here been only counted once.
10. There is one other shot in the film that features a fan with her two children. In the final montage sequence, we see a mother and her two children, who appear to be of Latin American origin, say "Thank you, Bruce" in unison, but because they appear for only a few seconds, far less weight—and much less of a generational story line—is provided than for any of American counterparts.

11. The American fan turns to Bruce to thank him and seemingly, at the level of the construction of the film, inspires all other fans to do so as well. The American fan is here the instigator who sets the course for all other fans to follow.
  12. Interestingly, this portrait is first made more distant and obscure because the portrait consists of a self-made short film shot in black and white and filled with abstract details and images. It is thus set distinctly apart from the many American portraits in the film.
  13. Palmer (1997) extrapolates extensively on the nonauthentic nature of the music video in and of itself, especially compared to the experience of a live concert.
  14. *Dispositif* is a term used to describe the three-tiered construction in cinema of technology, content, and perception that fuels the force of ideology in apparatus theory (Baudry 1975).
  15. This tagline is featured on the back cover of the DVD.
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## Praxis

### Cultural differences: Polish fandom of *Welcome to Night Vale*

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[0.1] *Abstract*—*Welcome to Night Vale* (2012–) is an intertextual podcast in the tradition of popular horror and weird tales. Listeners are meant to be part of a (fictional) community, listening to the radio in the small desert town of Night Vale in the Southwestern United States, although neither the state nor the exact time are specified. We follow the host of the program, Cecil Palmer, as he describes the town's community life, although the events presented in the show are far from normal. The first episode was published online June 15, 2012, with no marketing to accompany the event. Many had first heard about *Welcome to Night Vale* through fan art available via social media, including Tumblr, Soup.io, blog communities, Facebook groups, and deviantArt. Although the production is available in English only, it has a Polish fandom. We describe the difference in perception of this popular text based on differences in the cultural background and literary knowledge of the listeners. We also attend to fan practices such as fan art surrounding *Welcome to Night Vale* because their content correlates with the creator's culture of origin, as well as the issue of funding the free podcast among fans from different countries and different economies.

[0.2] *Keywords*—Audio drama; Fan art; Podcast; Reading practices; Visualization; Weird tales

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#### 1. The *Welcome to Night Vale* phenomenon

[1.1] Recently a new fandom has emerged to join the big names: that of bimonthly podcast *Welcome to Night Vale* (2012–), written by Joseph Fink and Jeffrey Cranor (Romano 2013). The podcast has gathered many listeners all around the globe in part because it is a self-produced, free production. It topped the iTunes podcast charts in 2013 (Romano 2013), and as of February 15, 2015, it remains in the top 20 most popular podcasts, regardless of genre, in the United States and the United Kingdom. The podcast is in the form of a radio show, with elements such as news, announcements, and weather forecasts. It is set in a peculiar small town located in the desert, somewhere in the American Southwest. What sets this text apart from others



is the fact that Fink and Cranor created a city where all conspiracy theories are true and the level of eeriness is high (D'Amico 2013). The sheriff's secret police, the cat suspended in the air, and angel interferences are commonplace in *Night Vale*. The city has been described as a place of "surreal horror" and its citizens as "members of the Addams Family" (Baker-Withelaw 2013). The story's narrative includes paranoia, black comedy, Lovecraftian worlds, and irony (figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Official Welcome to Night Vale Facebook status, January 30, 2014. [[View larger image.](#)]

[1.2] In 2013 the show extended its formula to include live shows, which were held exclusively in the United States, creating a situation in which fans who reside outside of the United States are excluded from an important experience related to the *Night Vale* text, although the live shows are recorded and available for download. In 2014, *Welcome to Night Vale* live shows toured Europe for the first time (United Kingdom, Sweden, Norway, Finland, Netherlands, Denmark, France, and Germany) between October 16 and November 8, changing the fandom dynamics—although not so much for Polish fandom. Those who live outside of the text's core country are, by the very nature of the pop culture industry, underprivileged in terms of consumption of the text (Siuda 2012). Usually the exclusion is limited to event attendance and instant availability—that is, those living outside the core country have to wait longer for the copies to become obtainable. In the case of *Night Vale*, fans are excluded in another way: the text itself is densely culture specific. Thus, it is interesting that regardless of the text's various exclusions, the show's fandom is still growing in countries other than the United States.

[1.3] Media fandoms often concentrate around a visual text, such as a film or TV show. This is where *Night Vale* stands out: it has only one official logo (figure 2), which has remained unchanged since the show's release, and several merchandise-related designs. Most of the visual representations have been created by the fans themselves. As a result of its audio-only form, the most prominent feature of the show is the anchor's—Cecil Baldwin's—voice. Therefore, *Night Vale* is an unusual text to gain fan attention of this magnitude.





**Figure 2.** Official Welcome to Night Vale logo. Source: Tumblr. [[View larger image.](#)]

[1.4] We became interested in the podcast first as fans and then as academics. As fans of the podcast, we immersed ourselves in the online fandom, particularly in the Facebook group called Welcome to Night Vale Polska (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/134875500055093/?ref=ts>), and followed various Tumblrs. One of the things that struck us was the fact that ways of decoding the show in the Polish groups seemed different from the global groups gathered around Tumblr or Pinterest. Polish fans of *Welcome to Night Vale* differ from US and global fandoms in their readings and thus in their fan practices. We found it interesting that a text deeply rooted in American culture had become an object of fannish interest in Poland. We thus conducted a small sociological study among Polish fans of *Welcome to Night Vale* aiming to examine three aspects of this fandom: demographics, practices and engagement, and modes of reading.

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## 2. The importance of reading context

[2.1] Culture is a pool of raw material individuals draw from to form their personalities and mind-sets (Benedict 2006). It provides a pattern that forms modes of conceptual (Maruszewski 2001) and linguistic (Tokarski 1993) world perception. How we think of the surrounding world and the interactions that we observe is rooted in what we learned growing up, as well as in the knowledge and experiences that were available for us to shape those patterns. The environment we grow up in shapes the neurologic pathways in the brain, meaning that the experiences of the surrounding world affect the way the brain interprets visual stimuli (Kossut 1994; Grabowska 1997). Culture has a similar influence: through socialization, culture teaches its members certain ways of interpretation, attributions of behavior, and patterns of

associations. For example, Western culture is deeply rooted in reason and logic, ideas derived from ancient Greek philosophers, whereas Eastern culture is not (Boski 2009). The resulting differences can be observed in how people brought up in those cultures read a single picture and what is deemed more important, such as the center or the possible context visible in the background (Nisbett 2004). Cognitive psychologists strive to describe the ways in which the world is categorized and conceptualized (Hirschfeld and Gelman 1994; Ross and Murphy 1999), and anthropological linguists further describe the relations between grammar compounds and lexical structures that are connected with the process (Tokarski 1993). The cultural shift in the social sciences has both further complicated and simplified those studies. The generalization of results has become more difficult, as the experimental sample has to encompass cross-cultural data. On the other hand some of the discrepancies found in samples of mixed cultural background can now be explained by cultural factors. The importance of the environment and culture in which an individual grows up translates into different ways of reading because the process of understanding a text depends on a person's previous knowledge and experiences. Thus, the understanding of a text would differ not only individually (Barthes [1970] 2006) but also culturally (Burzyńska 2012). Readers growing up in a specific culture acquire different literary competences based on the texts of the indigenous culture and those that were translated and popularized in the country in question. Moreover, both global and local current events influence fiction (Boxall 2013) and the ways of reading, since both are interconnected. People living a comfortable life read fiction concerning poverty in a different manner than those who have experienced it firsthand.

[2.2] Individual reading preferences appear later in life, most probably depending on previous encounters with various genres. People choose texts they like the most from the pool of available titles. Neurologic makeup, temperament, and personality as well as need for stimulation also take part in the process of choosing texts. However, people usually do not limit their experiences to a single genre, preferring to flirt with others out of curiosity or by recommendation. The texts they read further shape their worldview and patterns of world perception. Thus, the literary competence of an individual is a result of two overlapping influences: culture and personal preferences (Benedict 2006). Consequently, it is not surprising that most Polish *Welcome to Night Vale* fans choose certain tropes and characters to be their personal favorites, and they interpret many of the events differently than American and other global fans.

[2.3] Some texts may be universally regarded by critics as literary masterpieces; however, the way of reading them will always hold cultural bias (Douglas 1982; Boski 2009), meaning that the inherent culture of an individual influences interpretation of situations and texts. Apart from the different pool of texts that constitute the readers' cultural and individual competence, there are also important factors ingrained in the

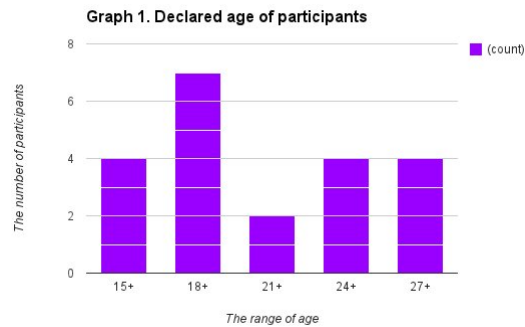
culture-specific socialization processes (Benedict 2006; Nisbett 2004). The tropes the readers recognize and identify as the most important or the most likable seem to be the key to understanding the culture-specific patterns of reading. This is why it is important to look at the way fans from peripheral countries read their favorite text.

### 3. Methods

[3.1] We constructed a sociological questionnaire of 21 items. All participants were informed of the aim of the study beforehand and were assured of full anonymity. The survey was conducted in Polish; all respondents' names are pseudonyms, which we assigned during data analysis. The questionnaire was distributed online via the Facebook fan group Welcome to Night Vale Polska. The group had 102 members as of January 25, 2014. The questionnaire link was also posted on the podcast official fan page. Furthermore, the link to the questionnaire was posted on the authors' Facebook walls and shared by a few participants of the study. It was also posted on a multifandom Facebook page of a popular pop culture blogger, Zwierz popkulturalny (<http://zpopk.pl>). Answers were gathered for 48 hours, which resulted in 21 completed questionnaires.

[3.2] There are methodological difficulties in terms of finding a representative study group among fans of the show because there are no means to assess the exact population complexity. Thus, for this study, we used the Facebook group members as an approximate number of the population. We used Matt Hills's (2010) proposition that the time of engagement in the fandom or in liking the show should be the indicator of whether a person is an enthusiast, fan, or cultist fan. Thus, we hypothesized that the Facebook group members can be considered cultist fans, although we are aware of two limitations to this assertion. First, the show was created two years ago, so the time of possible engagement is not lengthy. Second, it is impossible to estimate how long the members will remain in a fandom. Furthermore, we hypothesized that the number of members would more or less correspond with the actual numbers of the *Night Vale* fandom population. As such, the number of responses constitutes 20.58 percent of the Facebook group members. However, because not all cultist fans may be gathered around the Facebook group, we cross-posted the study to attempt to widen our sample, which permitted us to gather more data. We are aware that this is just an assumption and as such holds a measurement error. The small number of participants may be considered a disadvantage and the group not representative enough. However, the most important issues mentioned in the study are based not on quantitative but on qualitative data. Following Lieberman's (1991) suggestions, we did not attempt to make any predictions or correlations because the sample size was too small to justify such interpretations. We also tried to avoid measurement errors.

[3.3] Twenty-one people filled in the questionnaire. Among them were 17 women, three men, and one person who chose the option "other" when asked to identify sex/gender (in Polish, a single word corresponds to both English terms: *pleć*). The median age for the study group was 20.5 years. We chose this estimator to avoid issues relating to the unknown population complexity. The oldest person who took part in the study was 29 years old, and the youngest was 16. These results suggest that the age distribution of *Night Vale* fans is broader than the mean suggests and may exceed the maximum and minimum reported in the study. The age distribution is presented in figure 3.

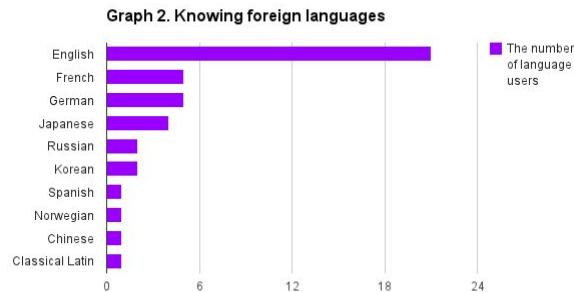


**Figure 3.** Graph illustrating age distribution of study population. [[View larger image.](#)]

[3.4] When asked about education, six participants stated that they held a master's degree (*wyższe—magister*), one a bachelor's degree (*wyższe—licencjat*), and three basic education (*podstawowe*). The question about completing preuniversity education resulted in some difficulties. In Poland, preuniversity education has four steps: kindergarten (*przedszkole*), elementary school (*szkoła podstawowa*), middle school (*gimnazjum*), and high school (*liceum*). Those who finish elementary school are said to have basic education (*wykształcenie podstawowe*), and when they finish middle and high school, they have middle education (*wykształcenie średnie*). Out of 21 participants, 11 reported that they had middle education, although their age suggests that they have either finished middle school, are currently studying in high school, or are high school graduates and currently working or studying.

[3.5] Using a multiple-choice question, we asked participants what foreign languages they knew. The level of proficiency was not examined, leaving that interpretation to respondents. Because *Night Vale* is in English, we were interested in the fandom's fluency in nonnative languages. We hypothesized that some of the fans of the podcast may not know English, as there are two fan projects translating *Welcome to Night Vale* into Polish. The results, however, showed that every participant knew at least one foreign language, with English known by all 21. Eighteen participants knew more than one foreign language. On average, every person knew 2.19 foreign languages. The fewest number of known languages per person was one, and the most was five.

French and German were the second most often spoken languages, chosen by five respondents each. Out of 21 respondents, four stated that they knew Japanese, two Russian, and two Korean. Five other languages were known by one participant each: Spanish, Norwegian, Swedish, Chinese, and classical Latin. The results are illustrated in figure 4.



**Figure 4.** Graph illustrating distribution of languages spoken by the study population.  
[View larger image.]

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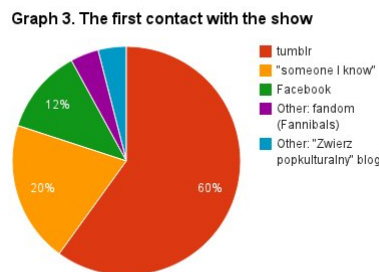
## 4. Engagement and fan practices

[4.1] To address the level of engagement in Polish *Night Vale* fans, we considered issues such as the beginning of interest, frequency of listening, and reasons for listening. Because Poland is a peripheral country for *Night Vale* text, and one that is geographically removed from the United States, the extent of engagement varies from the global fandom. Polish fans do not attend the live shows, which are considered an integral part of the podcast text and the fandom; they can only watch the fan-made recordings on YouTube. In consequence, Polish fans of *Welcome to Night Vale* are by definition less active and have fewer possibilities for engagement. (However, some US fans face similar difficulties). The issue of engagement likely lies in perceived and/or imagined, not real and/or objective, boundaries and difficulties. It seems like there is a prevailing stereotype that any trip to the United States must be extremely difficult, complicated, and expensive—likely a notion held over from Poland's communist past, when such travel was much more expensive as well as hard to achieve for political reasons. Because of this cognitive factor blocking fan travel, fans are more liable to invent other methods of engagement. By comparing global practices in the *Night Vale* fandom with those that are undertaken by Polish fans, we can sketch a picture of the ways Polish fandom differs.

[4.2] The podcast is deeply rooted in American culture, which will be read differently by members of other cultures. Although it is not uncommon for texts to be translated into other languages to permit their consumption in different countries, they are usually distributed via official channels and prepared by professional translators,

although there are thriving fan sub communities that create subtitled versions of texts such as films and TV shows. In the case of *Night Vale*, the podcast is downloaded in its originally presented format and listened to; there is no additional information or mediation provided by translators or editors. Thus, the podcast becomes a text that is read alongside other texts that provide the reader with context, or that is read in a unique way. The data obtained in this study permit us to compare *Night Vale* fans' practices in other cultures and countries, thus creating a map of complex engagement.

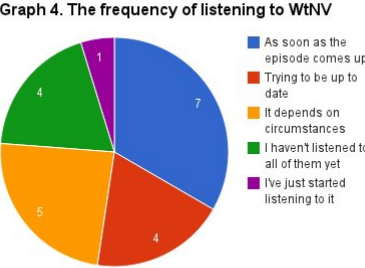
[4.3] The podcast had no real marketing or advertising campaign; thus, it is important to know how fans first heard about *Welcome to Night Vale*. Because it is possible that someone can find information about the podcast from multiple sources, we permitted multiple answers for the question regarding how the respondents became fans. Fifteen of 21 participants reported that they had found information about *Night Vale* on Tumblr, and five people stated that someone they knew had recommended the show. In addition, five people stated that they found out about the podcast via different fandom channels and sources, and one noted that it had been the Fannibals (AXN's *Hannibal* [2013–] fandom) that had introduced the podcast to them. Although Facebook was used by all participants, only three people stated that it was their first point of contact with the show (figure 5). Among the other answers, one person mentioned Instagram and one the Zwierz popkulturalny blog.



**Figure 5.** Graph illustrating respondents' first contact with the show. [*View larger image.*]

[4.4] Participants reported various sources of initial information. The global platform Tumblr was reported by the majority; nowadays, Tumblr serves as a major platform to exchange news and new trends in the fandom world. Less formal sources were also mentioned, but they were not necessarily less global. The Internet plays a major role in providing fans with information, but at the same time, opinions and recommendations are passed among fans during everyday on- and off-line conversations.

[4.5] When asked about the frequency of listening to the podcast (figure 6), seven respondents stated that they do their best to listen to the new episode as soon as it is released, and four said that they try to be as up to date with the show as they can. Among the respondents, five stated that they listen irregularly, depending on the circumstances. Five fans had not listened to all of the episodes. Four of them said that they have not listened to them yet, and one was a new fan. Thus, respondents were not all *Night Vale* experts. They are also not, as we hypothesized, cultist fans according to Hill's definition of the term. Out of 21 respondents, 10 stated that *Welcome to Night Vale* was the only podcast they listened to, while 11 habitually enjoyed other podcasts as well. When asked to name other podcasts they listened to, several titles were mentioned (figure 7). BBC 4's *Cabin Pressure* (2008–14) was mentioned seven times. We hypothesize that for some fans, the podcast sphere of fan engagement was opened by this radio show because it the cast includes Benedict Cumberbatch, who was popular among fans at the time. Fans migrate between different fandom groups as they follow their favorite stars or favorite themes. In this particular case, the format of the text—audio drama—permitted the migration.



**Figure 6.** Graph illustrating respondents' frequency of listening to *Welcome to Night Vale*. [View larger image.]



**Figure 7.** Titles of podcasts that study participants listen to habitually. [View larger image.]



[4.6] One item on the questionnaire regarded the matter of reasons for listening. It was important to establish the reasons for engagement and thus examine what can make Polish citizens become fans of an American podcast. One of the reasons Polish fans listen to *Welcome to Night Vale* is the anchor's voice; nine of 21 respondents had included this argument in their answers. The anchor's voice serves as the most distinctive feature of this text, so it is important to note that the fans associate the show with his voice. Additionally, the audio nature of the podcast limits the sorts of possible hooks the creators can use to lure an audience; the visual is excluded in a strictly visual-oriented culture, which is a challenge. *Night Vale* creators overcame this obstacle by casting an actor with a voice that the study respondents described as "charming" (*czarujący*) and "brilliant" (*przecudowny*). Moreover, one of the participants, Simon, noted that when he listens to the podcast now, he feels as if he "was going back home (however sappy that sounds)" (*czuję się jakbym wracał do domu [jakkolwiek tanio to brzmi]*). Anna described the voice of *Night Vale* as soothing, "perfect to listen to before falling asleep" (*idealny do przesłuchania tuż przed snem*). Kate commented that the show helps her relax.

[4.7] Another important feature of *Welcome to Night Vale* is the humor of the show (figure 8). Seven of 21 people mentioned that they genuinely enjoyed it. The eerie plot and content of the podcast was a reason why 12 of the respondents listen to the podcast. Sara stated that she found the tropes in the script very Lovecraftian and that she greatly enjoyed it. John pointed out that the creators were able to "perfectly balance comedy and horror" (*zachowuje doskonałą równowagę między horrorem a komedią*). Samuel commented that the show was meant to be "horrorresque" by design, and the authors were able to uphold this promise in the podcast so far. In *Night Vale*, what is uncanny or abnormal becomes normal ("Nienormalne" jest normalne), which provides the story with unexpected twists, as Anna commented. Agnes wrote that the idea of the show is "plain fantastic" (*jest fantastyczny*). Martha stated that for her, the podcast is "fantastically absurd, funny, disturbing, and a bit terrifying" (*bo jest cudownie absurdalne, śmieszne, niepokojące i trochę przerażające*). A similar stance was expressed by Hannah. Victoria was the only one who mentioned the character creations—not only Cecil and Carlos, who dominate the show, but also others whom she finds amazing.



**Figure 8.** An example of *Welcome to Night Vale* humor. Source: official Twitter feed.

[[View larger image.](#)]

[4.8] We asked about listeners' favorite elements of the plot, a question designed to analyze the main areas of focus of Polish fans. We also wanted to gain insight into



what features of the show make it so special and immersing for fans, especially Polish ones. Therefore, the question was divided into two parts: "What do you like about the show?" and "Who are your favorite characters in *Night Vale*?" The answers received were elaborate and diverse, which is why we decided to quote them at length.

[4.9] The textual quality of *Welcome to Night Vale* is hence one of the important factors that Polish fans of the podcast focus on. It is interesting, however, that they embrace the Lovecraftian angle of the script, even though the writers are not keen on H. P. Lovecraft's writings (D'Amico 2013). The conspiracy theories are not mentioned at all in the responses to this question, which may be interpreted as culture-related reading differences. In Poland, conspiracy theories are not uncommon, especially after the presidential airplane crash in 2010, but they are also not as widespread. They are rarely discussed or written about in the mainstream media, and those that are mentioned tend to have different content than those in the United States. In Poland, most of those theories are usually communist related—for example, after the airplane crash, it was believed that Stalin had planted a birch tree in order to create a situation that would result in airplane catastrophes. Polish fans may recognize a small percentage of the conspiracies in *Night Vale*, thanks to other texts imported from America, but not all of them. They do not think about *Night Vale* in terms of conspiracy theories coming true; they thus do not recognize the founding idea for their favorite podcast. What they mention most often is rooted in the podcast's textual nature, including an original narration expressed on many levels, including humor and mystery. Muriel "was pulled in by the exquisite climate" of the show (Zacząło się od ciekawości i możliwości szlifowania angielskiego, ale wciągnął mnie niezwykły klimat), although she started listening because she was curious. The other aspect most often mentioned was the acting talent and the voice of the radio show's anchor. Amy said that she was "a great fan of the absurd humor and climate in which the podcast is rooted" (jestem ogromną fanką absurdałnego humoru i klimatu w jakim prowadzony jest ten podcast).

[4.10] Among the questions concerning what the respondents like the most in *Welcome to Night Vale*, three of 21 people mentioned the relationship between Cecil and Carlos. For Victoria, this particular element of the podcast made her interested in it. Ellen had quoted one of the show's catchphrases when describing what she liked: "Carlos's perfect hair" (włosy Carlosa są perfekcyjne). In contrast, for Samuel, this aspect of the plot was "fairly good," but he observed that he became tired of the "Tumblr fan base that ignores everything except two men banging and tentacles" (Aktualnie rzygam WtNV przez fanbazę z tumbra, która olewa wszystko na rzecz ruchających się facetów i tentakli). The extent of same-sex fan art and fiction might cause Samuel to lose interest in the podcast; he struggled to find people who noticed

more about the plot than just the gay romance. He does not find the slash practice disturbing, just tiresome.

[4.11] When asked about the most liked character, eight of 21 respondents chose Cecil. Victoria wrote that he is "one of the most interesting fictional characters I know. How can you not like a person who is all excited and in awe watching videos of kittens, but at the same time regards the disappearances of the interns like something completely normal?" (Jak można nie lubić osoby, która zachwyca się video z kotkami a śmierć kolejnych stażystów traktuje jak rutynę?). For John, Cecil is *Night Vale*: the anchor welcomes listeners into the uncanny city and thus is the best-known figure in this fictional universe. Cecil's romantic interest, Carlos, had fewer fans—only four respondents indicated that they liked him. However, Amy wrote that Carlos the Scientist stands in for all of the listeners who only take a brief look at the Night Vale community through the radio show and do not really live there: "He is the only one who does not understand the desert community, he is just like us" (Jako jedyny nie rozumie pustynnego społeczeństwa, jest taki jak my).

[4.12] The Faceless Old Woman That Secretly Lives In Your Home was a favorite character for five respondents. Maria stated that the character "seemed scary, but her voice convinced me to like her," and "she is closer to me" (Na początku wydawała się straszna, ale przekonał mnie do niej jej głos...Faceless Old Woman z jakiegoś powodu jest mi bliższa). The last thing we asked participants was to vote for the fictional characters in a Night Vale mayoral campaign. The Faceless Old Woman beat Hiram McDaniels and other candidates in this competition, with 12 votes.

[4.13] The character of Tamika Flynn, a 13-year-old girl, was liked by three of the respondents. She was described as courageous and brave, since, as Betty pointed out, she had defeated the most dangerous creature in the world: the librarian—though in the narrative there was more than one. Maria respects Tamika not only because she is courageous but also because she is "fantastic, strong and intelligent. And she reads books, which always counts" (Jest fantastyczna, silna i inteligentna. No i czyta książki, a to zawsze na plus). Tamika has a stocky build, she is smart if not a genius, and she is a leader of the war against the librarians. She is not a normal, stereotypical representation of a sweet 13-year-old in pink. Furthermore, because her personality and intelligence are written in opposition to what society wants a girl her age to be, she has the potential to become a role model.

[4.14] Some of the respondents claimed that they liked all the characters or could not decide on just one because it changes as they listen. The characters of any culture text enable us to explore the fictional world and get a better insight into the narrative. Most characters chosen by the fans were either the gatekeepers of the world (Cecil and Carlos), were interpreted as exceptionally weird and bizarre (Cecil and The

Faceless Old Woman), or questioned the reality of the world they found themselves in (Tamika and Carlos). *Welcome to Night Vale* has at least 13 voiced characters and more than 40 recurring characters. However, listeners clearly found a group of characters more compelling than the others.

## 5. Funding strategies

[5.1] *Welcome to Night Vale* is a production of an independent publishing house that signs artists from all over the world. The company is funded exclusively by fan donations. Among all of Commonplace Books productions, *Welcome to Night Vale* is the most popular as of this writing. The first 12 episodes of the podcast were self-funded by the authors, but after the podcast gained popularity, the funding model was changed. In the introduction to the 12th episode, a female voice asks for positive reviews on iTunes, as it would be very helpful for the show. Information in the 14th episode informs listeners that Commonplace Books has started selling *Night Vale* merchandise, starting with T-shirts. From the 20th episode, the regular donation campaign opened, together with the podcast's creator speaking to the fans directly, asking for their support. Since then, almost every episode begins with a message in which the creator, his coworkers, or other mysterious figures (who claim to be Joseph Fink) encourage listeners to support the project with donations, monthly declared donations, or shopping in the *Night Vale* online store. Another source of income became available when the podcast accumulated a significant fandom that was eager to participate in live events. Most of the tickets to the live shows are sold out several days after release, which hints at the popularity of the podcast. Thanks to the varied sources of income in the form of crowd funding, micropatronage, and merchandising, the show has creative space and independence. The authors guarantee and uphold the bimonthly release schedule, along with a high quality of writing and professional acting. It would not be possible without the financial support of the listeners and fans.

[5.2] Because fan donations are an important part of the podcast's financial system and are still a significant issue when it comes to *Night Vale*'s continued existence, our questionnaire had a few questions regarding the level of financial support among Polish fans. Out of 21 respondents, only two declared that they had donated money to the show by buying *Night Vale* merchandise. None of the other options, such as donating or signing up for regular monthly donations, was chosen. The majority—12 respondents—answered that they did not support the show yet, and the remaining seven declared that they simply did not donate and probably would not in the future. The 19 people who did not make any financial contribution to the show were also asked about their reasons, with the help of a multiple-choice question. Most of them (15 respondents) declared that they simply did not have money to donate. Additionally, four people admitted that they do not know how they can financially

support the show. Another four declared that they did not have a PayPal account, which is necessary for to donate or to shop in the *Night Vale* store. One respondent chose the "they're not that good" answer. Within the "other reasons" category, one person responded with characteristic *Night Vale*-ish humor: "The Evil forbids me" (zuo mi nie pozwala). Two felt the need to explain the reasons: "It didn't strike me, I'm not that attached" and "I don't have money, but if my situation gets better, I will fix my mistake!" (Nie mam pieniędzy, ale jak tylko moja sytuacja się poprawi—naprawię ten błąd!).

[5.3] These results should be compared with the broader context of demographics of the group as well as crowd-funding and fan practices in general in Poland. The audience in the United States, which is predominantly the biggest target group, is also most accustomed to the idea of crowd funding and micropatronage (Economist 2010). The Polish audience is not that familiar with those concepts; they remain in the process of being introduced into people's awareness. Currently there are two Polish sites that try to repeat the success of Kickstarter. One is called [wspieramykulture.pl](http://www.wspieramykulture.pl/) (concerned about creating cultural projects; <http://www.wspieramykulture.pl/> [we support culture]) and the second [polakpotrafi.pl](http://polakpotrafi.pl/) (<http://polakpotrafi.pl/> [Pole can]), which supports basically any project. Their effectiveness is not as outstanding as their American counterpart. Also, they are not extensively known among average Polish Internet users. What is more, our daily observations of Polish fans' activities suggest that they are more likely to support Kickstarter initiatives than domestic ones. Additionally, the level of cyberpiracy is considerably higher in Poland than in the United States or Western European countries; the law is less strict when it comes to personal use of such files, and common practice usually leads to this kind of behavior being ignored. Furthermore, Polish currency, the zloty, is worth three times less than the US dollar (US\$1 = 3.13 zloty, as of January 30, 2014); further, the minimum wage in Poland is estimated to be approximately €369 (\$US499.67) per month ([http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Minimum\\_wage\\_statistics](http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Minimum_wage_statistics)). In the United States, the minimum wage income a month is approximately \$US1,160. According to the study group's demographics, most are students or recent graduates, so we can assume that their income, if they have any, is considerably smaller than the minimum wage in Poland and is mostly spent on their daily needs. By the same token, online payment methods are also limited because the Polish banking system differs slightly from the American system. Although the fan funding culture is gradually developing in Poland, it is neither as habitual nor as organized as in the United States. Thus, cofunding is less popular in Poland than it is in the United States.

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## 6. Polish fan character visualizations and translations

[6.1] Just like any other fans, Polish fans engage in active fan practices, which Zubernis and Larsen (2012) note requires producing some extra content in the context of admired text. Polish fans create fan fiction and fan art, and they cosplay. However, because the Polish fandom of *Night Vale* is still growing in numbers, as well as struggling with assuming its own fandom identity (not all fans consider themselves part of the fandom), the results of fan practices are not particularly visible in a global fandom context. Fan fiction is written in both Polish and English, but it does not cross the cultural and cultural-linguistic barriers as freely as fans would like. Most of the artworks made by Polish fans are presented on international Web sites and services such as deviantArt or Tumblr, which makes it difficult to recognize Polish fan art artists at first glance. The blog of multifandom artist and designer Maja Lulek (<http://majalulek.blogspot.com/>) is one important exception because she posts her works on a blog that also serves as an artistic portfolio. However, we observe that, paradoxically, Polish fan art tries to fit international fan standards but does not recognize some important issues concerning media representation.

[6.2] A podcast might be considered a hot medium (McLuhan 1965), as it is similar to radio: it engages both the attention and imagination of the listeners. Hot media do not dominate our perception because they do not guarantee all the information at once; individuals must reconstruct the missing data for themselves. Up until the live shows, what most of the *Night Vale* characters looked like, or who they actually were, was not addressed, leaving their representation to the imagination of the listeners. A popular way of depicting Cecil is shared by most of the fans. This shared image can be described as fanon—fan-based ideas so common and widespread among all the fans of particular fandom that that are widely considered canonical, even if they do not exist within the original text—although Polish fandom does not use this word. In this dominant fan image, the anchor is depicted to be a young white man with black-and-white hair, violet eyes, quirky tattoos, sharpened teeth, and occasionally an additional pair of octopus arms attached to his body. He is dressed in a semiformal, elegant manner in a white shirt, colorful vest, and either a necktie or a bowtie. Because he lives in *Night Vale*, he could also be nonhuman or not completely human. This image prevails in both fan art and cosplay. The second idea, less explored (and maybe less catchy) in fan's activities, is to use the original actor's look to inform the character (figure 9). Carlos is often portrayed as a scruffy-haired Latino wearing glasses and a lab coat with checked shirt and jeans (figure 10).



**Figure 9.** Cecil Baldwin, the radio anchor of *Night Vale*. Source: <https://www.facebook.com/CecilEdwardBaldwin>. [View larger image.]



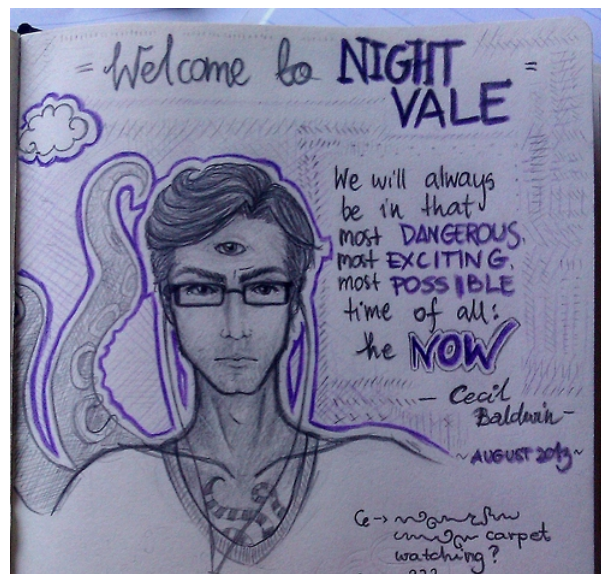
**Figure 10.** Carlos cosplay performed by AcidTygr. Source: <http://allalongtheradiotower.tumblr.com>. [View larger image.]

[6.3] Fans around the world are drawing their own unique, conceptualized versions of *Night Vale* characters. It can be argued that the artists made a conscious choice while conceptualizing both Cecil and Carlos. Most of those depictions present the standard, fanon interpretation that is recognizable among global fans of the show. Examples of Polish fan works can be seen in figures 11 to 14. However, most of the Polish fan art is posted on international platforms, such as deviantArt or Tumblr, which exist within global fandoms, and because of this, they can be interpreted within global contexts, such as popular or high culture representations of race and ethnicity.





**Figure 11.** Fan art by Maja Lujek. Courtesy of Maja Lujek (<http://majalulek.blogspot.com/>). [View larger image.]



**Figure 12.** Sketch illustration showing Cecil with additional tentacles. Source: <http://destka-for-the-wicked.tumblr.com/>. [View larger image.]



**Figure 13.** Allantiee's take on Cecil in his workplace. Source: <http://allantiee.deviantart.com/>. [View larger image.]



**Figure 14.** Fan art by OlivCater. Carlos is here represented as a person of color, whereas Cecil is still white. Source: <http://olivcater.deviantart.com/>. [View larger image.]



[6.4] Most of the Polish-made fan art is quite similar to fans' ideas all over the world. Cecil's third eye, the tribal and cult tattoos on his arms, and Carlos's lab coat and messy hairstyle make them recognizable by other fans that are familiar with those ideas. Most fan art is concentrated on Cecil or Carlos; almost no other character appears in fan artwork. This is slightly different than the questionnaire analysis would suggest, as people declared their admiration for characters other than the main two.

[6.5] The Polish fandom of *Night Vale* engages in one other fan practice known widely in manga and anime fandoms: fan translations. One of the two main initiatives, Welcome to Night Vale Polska (<http://welcometonightvalepolish.wordpress.com>), was created by fans from the Facebook community, which has since been deleted for unknown reasons. The second project is a YouTube channel that provides the episodes with subtitles synchronized with the sounds of the show (<http://www.youtube.com/user/doubleohfangirl/>). However, only the first three episodes have been translated, and there is no information on plans to translate more. The small amount of available translated material can be attributed to two reasons. First, most of the fans have no problem listening to the podcast in English. Second, both the listeners and the translators have engaged in many heated discussions on how some aspects of the show should be translated, such as the exact translation of the term "Glow Cloud," as it was thought to be quite difficult to express all the glory and fright implied. Fan translators often elaborate on subjects that their intended readers may not be familiar with, such as cultural aspects or historical facts; in this particular fandom, such subjects include US history, Indian tribes, US customs, or US political structures in cities.

[6.6] The visual representation of characters seems to be shared by fans globally, so it would seem that such representation became independent of cultural influence. However, it would be interesting to see if the same visual representations are favored by fans living in non-majority-white countries. The creation of art requires a different set of skills than writing fan fiction or preparing translations for other fans. In both cases, an advanced knowledge of English is needed. The language barrier can be considered an obstacle for Polish fans wanting or trying to actively engage in the English-speaking fan culture in terms of fan fiction writing. It does not, however, imply that Polish-language fan fiction is not written at all. The *Welcome to Night Vale* Polish fandom has created its own Polish-speaking space that remains, in a way, separate from the global fandom. We are still researching the detached aspect of Polish fandom and are not ready to elaborate on this subject, beyond the fact that the quality of the texts seem to be on a level equal to other fan fiction. The second fan practice requiring fluent knowledge of English is the translations, although they also require a proficient knowledge of the native language as well as cross-cultural knowledge.

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## 7. Race and ethnicity

[7.1] The issues of race and ethnicity are the second culture-related difference in analyzing *Welcome the Night Vale*. An obvious problem in worldwide media is providing misleading representations of people of color, as well as constant misrepresentation of gender and sexuality (Brooks and Hebert 2006). Fan initiatives have the power to make this kind of cultural shift toward media equality. This problem is vivid in the discussion among American fans, as seen in social and fan-related media such as Tumblr, Twitter, Facebook, and LiveJournal. One prominent example is a Tumblr called Night Vale of Color (<http://nightvaleofcolor.tumblr.com/d>), which is dedicated to presenting nonwhite depictions of characters. In *Welcome to Night Vale*, thanks to its audio-only nature, much information, including what the characters look like and their ethnic background or cultural heritage, is mostly unknown. There is one exception: the Apache Tracker, who is obviously of Slavic origin and pretending to be Apache, which Cecil considers to be highly insensitive and racist.

[7.2] *Night Vale* leaves much unsaid, including the characters' descriptions. Some fans claim that Cecil's looks should correspond to the actor who voices him, Cecil Baldwin. The voice-actor-to-character look analogy came up when the creators were discussing the live shows. Jeffrey Cranor played Carlos in episode 16 of the show. Nonetheless, he decided, along with Joseph Fink, that because his ethnicity and sexual identity do not match the previously provided description of the character, he should not be the one to voice Carlos. They decided to offer the role to Dylan Marron (figures 15 and 16). Cranor (2013) wrote,

[7.3] It sucks that there's a white straight male (me), playing a gay man of color (Carlos). Look, I know it's a voiceover, but it's not just that...What am I doing voicing this major character when there are so many talented, gay, Latino or Hispanic men who can/should be doing it? Why didn't I think of all of this before ep 16? I don't know.



**Figure 15.** Dylan Marron, the new voice of Carlos. Source: <http://nightvale.wikia.com/wiki/Carlos>. [View larger image.]



**Figure 16.** Official casting announcement from Dylan Marron's Web site. Source: <http://dylanmarron.tumblr.com/>. [View larger image.]

[7.4] However, in Poland, a country that is mostly ethnically and religiously homogenous, these issues are mocked or dismissed, even by fans claiming their open-mindedness for all the other minority matters in the show. One Welcome to Night Vale Polska group member started a survey on what Cecil was imagined to look like. Comments mocked the political correctness: "Quickly, somebody with headcanon black, to show we're not that bad!" One of the authors of this article reacted to those statements, politely saying that such comments could be considered racist. The

discussion that developed was heated but also substantial. Most of the interlocutors expressed unawareness of issues related to race and ethnicity; they often conflated racism with rebelling against mainstream culture. Polish fans, used to participation in international fandoms, tend to perceive discussions on representation, race, and racism as unimportant fuss and feel attacked for being white. One of the discussion participants stated, "I don't think there is anything wrong with the fact that, as white people, we imagine Cecil as white. After all he [the white Cecil] is more familiar for us" (A.'T.'M. 'Moim zdaniem nie ma nic złego w tym, że jako białe osoby wyobrażamy sobie Cecila białego. W końcu do takiego jest nam najbliżej; <https://www.facebook.com/groups/134875500055093/>). Still, most of the discussants are disconnected from multicultural and diverse societies, and therefore the issues of diverse skin color are not a part of their everyday life. Thus, discussions such as this one are seen as hate-inducing Internet flame wars. Furthermore, when the term "white privilege" (McIntosh 1989) was introduced to the discussion (while analyzing why, in most *Night Vale* fan art, Cecil is depicted as white), it was first interpreted as racist and, after the term was explained, considered an exaggeration. Furthermore, most of discussion participants expressed curiosity and were interested in defining racism; they were also keen to discuss race representation in private messages.

[7.5] Because Poland is mostly inhabited by people of Slavic and Caucasian descent, the visibility of people of color is almost nonexistent, even in big cities. For Polish citizens, a model (statistical) person has white skin because this is the color they see exclusively on a daily basis. Fans' imaginations thus construct characters with white skin—not as a result of a description or preference, but as a result of the way the fans perceive the world. Problems of race and ethnicity are considered too distant from Polish reality; however, the level of racism and intolerance displayed in Polish mass media and the Polish Internet is considered high, according to the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance Report (2010). The question of media representation is thus mostly not an issue that Polish fans discuss; however the diversity of characters' identities is one of the factors that attracts Polish listeners.

[7.6] The existence and experience of this heated discussion made us realize that Polish fans differ significantly from US and UK fans because of their sociocultural background. The discussion of race does not immediately come up among Polish fans. It is, however, evoked by the cultural exchange on social media and fan platforms. Polish fans tend to notice and follow the general discussions on those topics and form their own opinion on the basis of what they read on the Internet, not everyday experience, which results, depending on the level of their involvement in these discussions, in mocking advocacy for racial representation. Intellectual acceptance may occur, but it takes more time and reading for behavioral changes to appear. Fans can therefore teach each other about problems they can never experience themselves.

Moreover, they can learn from each other's experiences about diversity, race, and representation. By being involved in global fandom, they gain insight into matters and problems that they would otherwise not think about. By indirect experience, they gain awareness of these problems; should they later experience something similar, they may behave with more empathy.

[7.7] Fans, especially those active on Tumblr, tend to perceive themselves as the most tolerant and open-minded of people—equality in general, as well as LGBTQ rights, are well known and supported. In contrast, other equality-related issues such as race, representation, or ethnic minorities are still not globally discussed. Moreover, as a result of cultural differences, some fans are isolated from the day-to-day experiences of diversity because exposure to ethnic diversity is not equal among cultures. Academics must thus consider the cultural background of the fan group they are researching; otherwise, some statements the fans may use in their fan practices or discussions might seem intentionally racist or ignorant. Involvement in fandom can, to some extent, shape both thinking patterns and behaviors toward more significant open-mindedness. However, the experiences that are read about remain indirect in nature and have less impact than direct ones. The possible influence of the varied fan experiences may influence behaviors and attitudes—a subject that ought to be examined more deeply.

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## 8. Conclusions

[8.1] *Welcome to Night Vale* has gathered an enormous international fandom during its short existence. The support of fans and their fascination with this improbable desert city have enabled the creators to hold live shows that could fund further episodes. The tale of weird Night Vale has spread across the world through social media, reaching geographically distant countries like Poland, where it has found its share of faithful followers. Results show that Polish fandom differs greatly in modes of reading and fan practices while sharing the same visual imagination as fans worldwide.

[8.2] Polish *Night Vale* fandom is objectively a small group of multilingual fans who enjoy the eerie and uncanny character of the podcast. From the demographic data gleaned from our survey, we infer that they are mostly students or young adults with high levels of education and creativity. Their way of reading the podcast demonstrates a culture bias; for example, they do not recognize the conspiracy theory tropes, which are highly relevant to those who live in the United States. The weird fiction aspect of the story is far more important than the government-related issues, to the extent that it justifies the conclusion that it is a different, culture-related way of reading. Because of Polish fans' ethnic homogeneity, the race and ethnicity of the characters are not discussed—there is nothing to discuss among those who primarily think of others as

the same as them. Until confronted with other worldviews and depictions within the international fandom, the imaginary homogeneity of the citizens remains. Funding is another aspect that differentiates Polish fans from others. They tend not to support the show financially, mostly as a result of economic and technological obstacles, as well as an underdeveloped crowd-funding culture. The fans we surveyed are highly creative, and the show-related artworks are at the same level as internationally produced fan art. The visual imagery of characters and their motives seem to be the most common aspect that Polish fans share with the global fandom.

[8.3] Polish fans of *Welcome to Night Vale* differ from the global and American fandoms of the show; however, further cross-cultural research must be performed. The work presented here has important implications for further studies on fandoms forming in noncore countries and the modes of these fans' engagement.

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## Praxis

### Online Italian fandoms of American TV shows

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[0.1] *Abstract*—The Internet has changed media fandom in two main ways: it helps fans connect with each other despite physical distance, leading to the formation of international fan communities; and it helps fans connect with the creators of the TV show, deepening the relationship between TV producers and international fandoms. To assess whether Italian fan communities active online are indeed part of transnational online communities and whether the Internet has actually altered their relationship with the creators of the original text they are devoted to, qualitative analysis and narrative interviews of 26 Italian fans of American TV shows were conducted to explore the fan-producer relationship. Results indicated that the online Italian fans surveyed preferred to stay local, rather than using geography-leveling online tools. Further, the sampled Italian fans' relationships with the show runners were mediated or even absent.

[0.2] *Keywords*—Buffy the Vampire Slayer (1997–2003); Fringe (2008–13); Global; Local; Lost (2004–10); Show runner; Supernatural (2005–); Transnationalism

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## 1. Introduction

[1.1] Much recent research in the field of fandom studies suggests that the Internet is a key factor in altering the relationship between fans and creators of the original text (Baym 2000; Hills 2003; Pearson 2010), giving fans unprecedented access to the production sphere (Caldwell 2006, 2008) and transforming fandoms into transnational online communities (Booth 2010; Jenkins 1992; Jenkins, Ford, and Green 2013). According to this perspective, the Internet has changed fandom in two main ways. First, it has helped fans connect with each other despite physical distance, which has permitted the formation of international fan communities (Baym 2000; Hobson 1982; Jenkins 2006, 1992). Second, the Internet helps fans connect with the creators of their favorite TV shows, deepening the relationship between TV producers and fans (Askwith 2007; Benecchi and Richeri 2013). Despite the documented development of

strong fan communities for American TV shows in European countries (Benecchi and Richeri 2013; Porter and Lavery 2006; Scaglioni 2006; other essays in this issue of *Transformative Works and Cultures*), the relationship between these local fandoms and the original TV shows' producers remains an underresearched field.

[1.2] To fill this gap, I performed a study that aimed to investigate the relationship between Italian fans of American TV shows participating in online communities and the creators of their favorite TV show. I chose Italy because other studies have underlined the relevance of fandom phenomena in this region (Andò and Marinelli 2008; Tedeschi 2003) and because there are strong fan communities for American TV shows there (Benecchi and Richeri 2013; Scaglioni 2006, 2007). Italian research has found that fans are a relevant group when performing both quantitative and qualitative analyses. The quantitative wide surveys conducted by Andò and Marinelli (2008), for instance, emphasize how the phenomenon of fandom is spreading in Italy, and the qualitative studies of Scaglioni (2006) and Benecchi and Richeri (2013) reveal the depth of fan devotion to specific cultural objects in Italy.

[1.3] My research explores the kinds of relationships Italian fans of American TV shows, in particular *Supernatural* (2005–), *Fringe* (2008–13), *Lost* (2004–10), and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003), build with the original producers via the Internet. What kind of online fan activities do they pursue to connect with the original producers? To begin to answer this query, I conducted a qualitative analysis of the relationship formed through fan activity between producers of American TV shows and Italian fans. I chose producers involved in the production of selected TV shows who play the role of show runners (Caldwell 2006, 2008; Frigge 2005). As stated in previous research (Benecchi and Richeri 2013; Frigge 2005) and documentaries (Wild 2000), when there is a relationship between fans and producers of American TV shows, it is primarily a fan–show runner relationship.

[1.4] My work addresses two main research questions: Are local online fan communities part of transnational online communities? And has the Internet actually altered the relationship between fans and the creators/show runners of the original text? I found, in part, that even though the Internet gives fans unprecedented access to the production sphere, it does not necessarily translate into an alteration of the power relationship between fans and creators—all the more so for fan communities based outside the United States. In the case of fans in Italy, specific online fan communities have an informal stay-local policy, so in this instance, the vaunted transnational online community of fans is not seen in practice.

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## 2. Methodology

[2.1] In order to analyze the relationship between Italian fans and American producers of TV shows, I used a qualitative approach. I performed an empirical analysis using traditional ethnographic tools such as participant observation and narrative interviews. The methodology chosen for this study responds to the need to permit the researcher's subjectivity to play a central role in the research process, profiting from his or her ability to observe and establish relationships (Vergani 2010). I began my analysis with online covert observation, following the protocol developed by Langer and Beckman (2005), which helped me identify fan communities in Italy that were active online and that seemed appropriate for my research in terms of number of messages exchanged, number of active users, number of visits per month to the relevant online spaces, and frequency of content updates. I identified two fan sub communities (Subsfactory and Itasa) and three general fan sites connected with forums, Facebook, and Twitter (Telesimo, Serialmente, and Telefilm Addicted) as relevant Italian fannish spaces.

[2.2] While observing the activities and participating in the discussions in these online spaces, I was able to identify a group of fans to approach to conduct narrative interviews. I expanded this first list of possible interview subjects by using a respondent-driven method, which assumes that those best able to access members of hidden populations are their own peers. I conducted 26 face-to-face narrative interviews with selected Italian fans who were active online, 17 women and nine men, ranging in age from 22 to 41 years. Data collection used the grounded theory approach of Glaser and Strauss (1967); this approach does not separate the phases of data collection and analysis. Data collection is thus an ongoing process, with the analysis proceeding in parallel with the data collection itself. Further, according to Riessman (2007), narrative interviews involve the generation of detailed stories of experience, not generalized descriptions. Therefore, in this study, I use a descriptive approach following the model of Demazière and Dubar (2000) that focuses on the direct voice of the fans.

[2.3] Although the sample size of the subject pool was small, at 26 respondents, an inductive method focused on individuals or small groups permits access to the causal texture of the social life of communities (Small 2009; Vaughn 1992). Qualitative research performed using such small groups is able to arrive at meaningful findings (Geertz 1973; Harper 1992; Lieberman 1991; Savolainen 1994). More recent research, such as that of Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006), found in their study comprising 60 interviews that saturation was achieved after 12 interviews. Further, online fandom is treated as an imaginary community (Grossberg 1992); in such a case, even a small number of subjects is important because of the impact of their activities on others and because a study of them could tell us something about the community they are part of.

[2.4] Fans' remarks in their online fandom forums and in the narrative interviews were originally in Italian. The translations are mine, and presentation has been edited to idiomatic English-language usage while still attempting to retain the original voice of the fan. The narrative interviews were conducted both in person and via Skype over the course of a year, from January 2013 to January 2014.

### 3. A relationship in absentia

[3.1] When asked to define their relationship with US producers, most of the fans interviewed talked about—even emphasized—the absence of a relationship. Only four of them believed that they were actually in a relationship with a creator of an American TV show, but they portrayed this relationship as distant and virtual. According to fans, this absence was the result of the physical distance, indicating that in this instance, the Internet does not transcend geographical distance:

[3.2] I'm Italian, therefore no contact at all. (Interviewee 10)

[3.3] According to the Italian fans interviewed, an absence of contact does not apply to all fans of their fandom but instead mainly to fans based outside the United States, which hints at how the Italian interview subjects imagine American fan behavior. Of course, fans everywhere vary in their desire to directly contact TV producers, but fans based outside the United States have far fewer opportunities to do so. Therefore, it is unsurprising that the fans I interviewed perceived American fans as being closer to the show runner, and thus more influential, as this remark demonstrates:

[3.4] They [the producers] are so far away. Maybe American fans have more opportunity for interaction, but to us they are like out of reach. (Interviewee 8)

[3.5] When the Italian fans interviewed spoke about a productive fan-producer relationship, they made explicit reference to American fandoms, portraying them as hyperreactive and participatory:

[3.6] He [Eric Kripke of *Supernatural*] answered the fans about Ruby! They asked to cut her and he did it! I didn't dislike her so much, but it seemed very important to American fans to have her eliminated. He must really love them to change the story for them. (Interviewee 20)

[3.7] When comparing the data from the narrative interviews with recent studies on American online fandoms (Andrejevic 2008; Baym 2000), a discrepancy appears between the interviewed Italian fans' beliefs about American fan-producer interaction and the reality that only a minority of American fans meet and interact with the

original producers. The study sample also appeared to believe that fandom is deeply connected with interaction and participation, and therefore, they often described American fans as "big fans" and themselves as "normal fans."

[3.8] When the interviewed fans offered descriptions of concrete interactions and communications between fans and producers, they spoke of Americans, not themselves. When referring to their own relationship with American TV show creators, they spoke in terms of desire:

[3.9] Oh I would like so much to interact with them in real time or to have some of my questions and doubts answered. They [American fans] have all these opportunities to get in contact with them. They can even visit the set and meet the cast or go to conventions and talk with them firsthand. They are visible as a face in the crowd, [which] is always better than to be part of a faceless crowd! (Interviewee 1)

[3.10] In the eyes of the Italian fans interviewed, to be a big fan, a fan must not only make herself visible to the TV show's creators and to other fans, but she must also be willing to participate in international fandom activities. From this perspective, Italian fans are in a less than ideal position to become big fans because of their physical distance and the language barrier. Nevertheless, they do claim a right to define themselves as fans, even if that definition is different from what they perceive to be the ideal fan profile, which they attribute to American fans. In many cases, the fans I surveyed saw a certain appeal in the fact the show runners were so untouchable and far away:

[3.11] I love him [Kripke] so much. At a distance. As it should be. I wouldn't dare meet him or talk to him. What if he were completely different from what I have imagined? I have this idea in my mind of him being like a god of storytelling. Someone who has all the answers, someone who has a plan. What if he reveals himself to be without a clue about where his story is going? What if I realize that he writes the thing that the devil network wants him to write? I mean, the forced introduction of Ruby and Bella inside the show was enough already. I need to believe he is someone above average. Otherwise I could not worship him like I do. (Interviewee 8)

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## 4. Where there's a will, there's a way

[4.1] The Italian fans interviewed remained detached from American show runners, but not for lack of opportunity to interact online. As demonstrated in previous field studies (Benecchi and Colapinto 2010, 2011a, 2011b), in the last decade, producers of American TV shows have been particularly open to interactions with their fans, and

opportunities for fan engagement with TV shows and their creators have multiplied (Askwith 2007; Caldwell 2006, 2008). American show runners have personal blogs, Facebook pages, and Twitter accounts where they make themselves visible to fans and offer chances for interaction (Wild 2000). Despite this, the strong online presence of TV shows' producers is not perceived by the Italian fans interviewed as interactive per se. According to the interview subjects, to be considered proactive, American show runners must exhibit a fan-friendly profile:

[4.2] All the producers are online nowadays. But this doesn't mean they are willing to have a relationship with fans. For many of them Twitter is like a shop window where they expose their products and merchandise for fans to buy. (Interviewee 2)

[4.3] They are oh so active but not interactive. They talk a lot about their international fandoms, but when we go to conventions they do not even know they have fandom in Italy. (Interviewee 3)

[4.4] What is lacking, according to the interviewees, are not opportunities for interaction but rather the will of the producers to profit from them. Despite the presence of strong fan communities for American TV shows in European countries (Le Guern 2002), including Italy (Benecchi and Richeri 2013; Scaglioni 2007, 2006), show runners are believed to consider European fandoms as not worth the effort to start an actual interaction:

[4.5] We are an important asset for the show but I don't think the original producers realize this. (Interviewee 9)

[4.6] Therefore, producers who appear to be willing to connect with local fandoms are described as exceptional:

[4.7] The most intelligent ones understand that they have a market outside the US and try to connect with Euro fans, but the majority of cases look only to US fans. (Interviewee 15)

[4.8] Although the absence of a fan-producer relationship is attributed to producers, the Italian fans interviewed did not appear to be willing to make direct contact with them. Most of the fans interviewed (23 of 26) never even tried to directly interact with American producers through the Internet. As one fan noted of online interaction with producers,

[4.9] I've never thought about it. We are best friends, at least until the TV show is canceled. But we meet in this fantastic world he [J. J. Abrams of *Lost*] created, where I am like Dante and he is my Virgil. We do travel

together, but we do not need to talk too much. We just need to share the experience. (Interviewee 13)

[4.10] Even though some of the Italian fans interviewed talked about their desire to get in contact with American producers, they also drew attention to the fact that the language barrier, which, even more than geographical distance, prevented them from interacting online:

[4.11] It [the Internet] doesn't really help, mainly because of the language barrier. I wouldn't feel comfortable trying to talk to them with my English. Usually I wait for others to translate what they say and then I comment with them. I know everything about them but I'm invisible to them. It is OK though. (Interviewee 2)

[4.12] A willingness to overcome physical and language barriers has surfaced in cases considered to be exceptional by the fans interviewed, such as the end of a TV show or the departure of a beloved show runner:

[4.13] When the series [*Lost*] was canceled I wrote him [Abrams] but I had the mail translated by a British friend so that my English would not be too broken. I wouldn't want him to think Italian fans are an ignorant bunch, even if when it comes to English speaking we are a little bit! (Interviewee 4)

[4.14] In normal circumstances, an indirect approach to American producers is preferred by the fans interviewed:

[4.15] At the end of season 5, I had to thank him [Kripke] for what he did for us. So I participated in a collective thank you gift organized by American fans. That was easy though. I just had to complete a form and send a little money to them. When he thanked us it felt like I was part of that amazing fandom he was talking about. (Interviewee 1)

[4.16] However, even though contact with the producers is indirect or mediated by other fans, its appeal or value is not lessened.

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## 5. Looking for a mediator

[5.1] A mediation between fans and producers can be offered by other fans identified as big-name fans or leaders of the local fan community. Among the fans I interviewed, Webmasters and forum leaders associated with local fan communities often did the work of collecting the thoughts expressed by the producers via Facebook or Twitter:

[5.2] I visit American forums as a lurker to gather news. Then I come back to my fan forum and post them or discuss them with the others. I do the same thing with official blogs or Facebook pages. I check them because you have a chance to know things firsthand. (Interviewee 20)

[5.3] I have to say our Webmasters are amazing. I do not need to go into international forums to know what the show runners said or did because they do all the work for me! (Interviewee 24)

[5.4] This tendency to search for information mediated by a trusted fan was also emphasized by the fact that only four of 26 fans interviewed noted that they followed their favorite producer on Twitter and Facebook—but all 26 noted that they were part of a local fan community or lurked in international ones. The fans I interviewed had thus adopted a stay-local strategy, where any connection to the international community was made via the leaders of the local fan community or alternatively via lurking. Moreover, 21 of the 26 Italian fans interviewed noted that they read online interviews involving their favorite producers. When asked to give details about this activity, though, they admitted to reading translated versions provided by Italian fan forums or magazines. Even in the case of fans who read the interviews with the producers firsthand, via official channels, mediation was still involved, this time by the channel of communication itself: fans were able to keep in contact with the producers by following them on the Internet while remaining invisible to them. As one fan remarked,

[5.5] I read all his [Abrams's] interviews and Q/A sessions. I also observe his Facebook page and public Twitter account even if I do not officially follow him. It's like I know him. He doesn't need to know me, though. (Interviewee 9)

[5.6] Despite the mediated nature of online interviews, the Italian fans interviewed considered them to be a channel of communication used by the producers to directly address fans, as is the case when producers answer collective fan questions:

[5.7] They answer fan questions in their interviews. He [Kripke] started this practice when we were complaining online about Dean being a douchebag. He basically used that interview to tell us that we were wrong and that he was going to show us later on in the show. And he did! (Interviewee 4)

[5.8] Even traditionally immediate events are becoming more mediated, as previous field research has found (Benecchi and Richeri 2013). International fan conventions have been transformed in online events by Italian fans. As Benecchi and Richeri



(2013) note, few Italian fans actually participate in the physical events at the convention site itself, but almost the entirety of the local fan community participate virtually. The convention is in effect transferred online, thanks to the written, audio, and video reports published by the fans who are actually attending. According to the Italian fans interviewed, cost was the primary reason more fans do not attend conventions involving the cast of their TV show:

[5.9] The prices are crazy. They don't take into considerations the fact that fans are coming from different countries. (Interviewee 12)

[5.10] I went once but you have to pay for everything. EVERYTHING. At some point I thought they would make me pay for even looking at them. (Interviewee 13)

[5.11] However, indications of different motives emerged:

[5.12] People who go share everything online. Autographs, pictures, conversations. Of course it is not like being there, but it comes pretty close. I would even say it is better this way. If I don't understand something I can discuss it with my friends in the fan community. Moreover, when you are at a convention live, there is only so much you can do. At home in front of my PC I can watch and listen to almost everything. (Interviewee 24)

[5.13] I follow my favorite conventions online through [a fan] community forum. If I would go there, I'd probably be alone, the prices are so high! This way I can share the experience with all my friends in the fan community! (Interviewee 16)

[5.14] The mediation of both the local and international fan communities allowed the Italian fans interviewed to have a better experience when it came to making contact with the original producers of the TV show. Even in exceptional cases when conventions are held in the fans' country of origin, the mediated experience was still the most frequent one for the Italian fans interviewed:

[5.15] I know they had the [*Supernatural*] convention in Rome, but it was impossible for me to go there. The pass, even the basic one, was too expensive. People from my community went there though, but they are the ones who usually go to international conventions too. Thanks to them, every step of the convention was documented and I didn't feel detached at all. (Interviewee 1)

[5.16] I would be paralyzed, literally. And I do not speak the language well enough to interact with a TV show's show runner. I mean they are like our

gods and I wouldn't dare directly interact with them. I sent some questions for the question/answer sessions and they were answered! It was so exciting! They basically talked to me, you know? (Interviewee 7)

[5.17] From the narratives of the study sample, it is evident that the Internet has given them unprecedented access to the production sphere, but this did not increase their level of interaction with American producers.

## 6. Fandom locally

[6.1] The detachment perceived by the study respondents on the part of American producers was not only the product of a perceived lack of commitment toward Italian fans on the part of the producers; nor was it motivated by the language barrier or physical distance. Rather, the lack of interaction between the Italian fans interviewed and the American producers was the result of a fan decision to stay under the radar—a decision characteristic of Italian fandoms, as other studies have found (Scaglioni 2006; Tedeschi 2003) and as these remarks make clear:

[6.2] American fans tend to make themselves visible not only to their community but also to a larger one. Producers know them by name. I'm thinking about the real fans introduced in *Supernatural*, for instance. They are interviewed by journalists who praise them for their activity. Think about the *Fringe* [2008–13] fans and their Twitter campaign. They are public in some way. We are not like that. I cannot go to my friends and colleagues and say, hey guys you know what? Last night I was up until 2 AM to discuss the last episode of *Fringe*. They would take me to be a crazy person. (Interviewee 7)

[6.3] We have to stay under the radar. Especially because we are old...Our age ranges from 30 to 40. We have families and serious work. Fandom is something that involves young girls screaming at a One Direction concert, at least in my parents' minds. (Interviewee 3)

[6.4] This preferred tendency to remain inside the local space of fandom was reflected in the highly mediated fan-producer relationship as well as in the participation of the Italian fans interviewed in international fan campaigns or online activities. Online activities that required or could result in direct contact with the producers were often delegated to fans based in the United States or other English-speaking countries. According to the interviewees, their involvement in activities that sought to influence the production of American TV shows was extremely low:

[6.5] I've never participated in a save the show campaign. It doesn't really save the show, does it? (Interviewee 1)

[6.6] I signed some online petitions organized by American fans. Just that. (Interviewee 2)

[6.7] The interviewees used physical distance to explain their detachment from the original producers:

[6.8] Never organized one [fan campaign]. I leave that to fans living in the US. They are the ones near the producers. They can talk directly to them. We are too far. We can just support them. (Interviewee 7)

[6.9] The reluctance to participate in public activities or to be seen outside the local fan community was not only a product of circumstances (language barrier, physical barrier, low access to Internet) but also a result of fans' choices.

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## 7. Be careful what you wish for

[7.1] As previously stated, the fans interviewed sketched a profile of big fans, who are characterized by a willingness to interact directly with the producers and to influence the TV show. This profile was often applied to American fans, who were perceived as a coherent and monolithic community. Even though direct contact with American producers was believed to be important to construct a big fan profile, it was also considered counterproductive by some of the fans interviewed. As one noted,

[7.2] All those fans wanting to have an impact on the production. I think it's making the TV shows develop in a very wrong way. Joss Whedon was right in this: do not give to the fans what they want, give them what they need. (Interviewee 3)

[7.3] In the narrative interviews collected, the fans, while praising the supposed interactivity and participation of American fans, refused to take on this behavior. The Italian fans interviewed exhibited a tendency to stay local. According to their statements, discussions about the producer's choices and statements should develop inside local fandoms, not outside, and the interaction between fans should be pursued inside local fan forums, not international or official ones. The reason for this was the fear that in international or official fan spaces, producers would visit and sometimes interact with the fans. Although the language barrier was explicitly identified as a primary reason for this commitment to local fan spaces, it was not the only one:

[7.4] Basically I read what they say online and then I go comment inside my fan forum. I do not interact in other fan spaces, let alone in official

forums. I wouldn't feel comfortable knowing that he [Kripke] could read what I write at any given time. In my fan forum I write in Italian and the space is closed to nonsubscribers so I feel protected. I would feel under judgment in a forum I know the producer can read. I mean, you know the old adage: what happens in fandom should stay in fandom.

[7.5] Despite their tendency to stay local, all the Italian fans interviewed recognized that fans could potentially influence the producers of a TV show. According to their statements, the closer the relationship between fans and producers, the stronger the potential influence of fans on the TV show. Again, they attributed more influence to American fans because they believed that fans based in the United States were more likely to interact with and meet original producers.

[7.6] According to the collected narrative interviews, fans were believed to be the most influential when it came to the economic sphere:

[7.7] Fans are an economic resource for producers. We buy merchandise, we participate in save the show campaigns, we even collect money to feed their initiatives. We are an economic asset for them. (Interviewee 5)

[7.8] The fans interviewed were reluctant to acknowledge the narrative influence of fandoms over the plot of a TV show. They recognized that the ability to influence the narrative was potentially present, but they strongly thought that producers should ignore fan requests when it came to writing the show's scripts:

[7.9] Fans shouldn't have a lot of influence. Their requires are often the product of a personal desire they don't think about the greater good. (Interviewee 1)

[7.10] Fans shouldn't be allowed to ruin TV shows. When a show runner listens too much to fans or want to be friend with them, that is when tragedy happens. Like in the 6th season of *Supernatural*. It is like those mothers trying to be their children's best friend. (Interviewee 4)

[7.11] The narrative interviews identified productivity more than interactivity as the core of fandom. Some of the fans even stated that it was through their online productivity that they could make themselves visible to the producers and obtain answers to their requests:

[7.12] I have my issue with the way the TV show is developing, but there's no use in trying to speak with them online. Better make the problems emerge in fan discussions or through fan activities such as meme of fan video. This way is more effective because you make people talk. Think about

the Sera Gamble case [on *Supernatural*]. It's not like we asked for them to cut her as a show runner. We talked about her inability to [perform] the role and we made other talk. And The Powers That Be heard. (Interviewee 22)

[7.13] According to this perspective, fan labor, rather than direct contact with the show runner, was the more productive way to contact the producers of a TV show.

[7.14] We are recognized by them [the producers] because of the massive work we do to promote the TV show [*Supernatural*] in Italy. I've never tweeted with them or written them fan mail. But they know we exist because of the things we do for them. (Interviewee 1)

[7.15] The Italian fans interviewed were not seeking a direct dialogue with the producers. Rather, they preferred to wait for recognition of their work to keep the TV show and their creators at the center of the public discourse, to promote the TV show to a less engaged audience, and to translate content for local fandoms.

[7.16] The relationship they built with the producers of their favorite TV show was often indirect, even imaginary, but it was built out of passion nevertheless:

[7.17] I worship him and his work. I would do anything to spread his words and his world. The only thing I need in return is for him to keep my beloved TV show up and running. (Interviewee 26)

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## 8. Conclusions

[8.1] This empirical study of the relationships built by a sample of Italian online fans and the producers of the American TV that they are fans of found that the community preferred to stay local, rather than using online tools, such as forums that permit direct interaction with the show runners, that would have given their fan experience a transnational dimension. Further, despite an explicit desire to connect with the producers of their favorite TV show, the sampled Italian fans' relationships with the show runners of their TV shows were often absent, or at least mediated. The fans interviewed tended to be active members of their local fan communities but pulled back from international or official communities, citing reasons such as physical distance and the language barrier; they also perceived big fans, who would engage in such activity, as mostly comprising Americans. However, other, more complex factors were in play. The narrative interviews indicated that fans tended to avoid direct contact with show runners because of a diffuse fear of judgment that worked in tandem with the belief that fans and producers should remain and work in different spheres and in different ways. A common belief among the fans interviewed was that big fans should not directly challenge or engage with the TV show producer in a

discussion over the TV show's development—something that the interviewed fans did not think was appropriate or that was even detrimental to the show.

[8.2] The results of this study cannot be generalized to the universe of Italian fandom; therefore, the conclusions drawn from the qualitative interviews performed should be considered important rather than representative. By combining observation of online fan behavior and narrative interviews, even with a small sample of fans, useful information may be gleaned on how Italian fans relate to American producers and American fan audiences. This information may be used as a starting point for further analysis.

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# Pedagogy

## Fandom: The classroom of the future

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[0.1] *Abstract*—What is the role of the fan scholar in the age of the fan-scholar? I explore fandom as the classroom of the future—that is, as a space and as a culture that may be one of the few places where people are encouraged to think critically, to write, and to make thoughtful and critical judgments about hegemonic culture once formal schooling is complete. The type of critical thinking that can happen in fan environments could benefit our formal educational system. As fans, scholars, fan-scholars, and educators, we need to be more assertive against the encroaching normalization of commercialization, market forces, and neoliberal control over affect, both in education and out of it. We need to teach not just fan studies, but how fandom itself encourages how to be thoughtful fans in a world increasingly hostile to expressions of affect.

[0.2] *Keywords*—Complicity fandom; Critical fandom; Fan-scholar; Neoliberalism; Pedagogy

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## 1. Introduction

[1.1] You may be curious about my essay's title. I call fandom the classroom of the future for three reasons. First, I believe our educational system can benefit from more fandom enthusiasm, both from us as scholars and from our students, fans themselves. Second, as fan-scholars, we have a momentous opportunity and responsibility to learn from and to teach fannish ardor in the classroom, and to contribute to it as both fans and scholars. And third, new generations of fans will become future teachers, thinkers, and responsible media citizens. It is our responsibility, as today's media scholars and teachers, to help train them in these critical skills of fandom by exposing them to thoughtful, engaged fan work. Indeed, once formal schooling is complete, one's fandom may be one of the only places where one is encouraged to think critically, to write, to discuss deeply, and to make thoughtful and critical judgments about hegemonic culture. One's fan identity might be the catalyst of critical intellectual shifts. It is within our abilities as scholars, educators, and fans to support, nurture, and maintain these critical fandoms against what I see as an encroaching turn to neoliberal education and corporate-focused fandom.

[1.2] As fan-scholars, we need to voice our own particular enthusiasms in multiple venues and integrate more fan voices in our classes. I'm not seeking here to perpetuate an imagined fan/academic split. Rather, I want to touch on those whom Matt Hills (2002) calls fan-scholars, those who "overlap...fan and academic analyses. Fans...[who] produce their own critical accounts" (18). Hills writes of the "possibility that fan and academic identities can be hybridized or brought together not simply in the academy but also outside of it," in this figure of the fan-scholar (15). I agree. We need to bring together the fan and the scholar, but this can be more than a metaphor.

We literally can bring fan scholars and fan-scholars together—in classrooms, at conventions, and online.

[1.3] I am seeking fan scholars to partner with fan-scholars (the hyphen is crucial) to foster more critical fan traits in students, the fans of tomorrow. By critical fan traits, I don't mean to emphasize the type of critical *work* that fans do, although that is important. Rather, I mean that all fans' work is itself a critical component in today's media environment, and fan scholars (with or without a hyphen) can foster a need to respect fans and their work through interaction and dialogue in and out of the classroom and in and out of fan communities. This focus combats what I see as a neoliberal turn in fandom, which places cultural value on so-called right and wrong ways to be a fan, extols the individual over the community, promotes fandom as a capitalist enterprise, and polices and disciplines particular ways of expressing fannish enthusiasm.

[1.4] Neoliberal fandom teaches us to devalue public affect. As the meme in figure 1 from Disney's film, *Frozen* (2013), remarks, "Conceal, don't feel, don't let them know." Emotional fandom is supposed to be hidden. Although there is no wrong way to be a fan—any type of affect strikes me as a valid lifestyle and choice—impinging on others' abilities to be fans in their own ways limits fandom as a whole. It is important to reflect on the varied fan experiences and to acknowledge the multiplicity of fan identities. There are as many ways of being a fan as there are fans in the world. It is important to celebrate this fannish variety and to teach others to value it as well.



**Figure 1.** *Frozen* (2013) Internet fangirl meme, found online (<http://FangirlProblems.net>). [View larger image.]

[1.5] Indeed, some of the most engaged, passionate, and critical fan work is happening outside of the academy, and it behooves us to help our students—these future fans—learn from and contribute to it. Just glancing online on an average day, I see nonacademics engaging in scholarly discussions. We can see this with the Fan Meta Reader (<https://thefanmetareader.wordpress.com/>), a project put together by Lori Morimoto, which takes fan-scholar criticism seriously. The majority of the articles written on the Fan Meta Reader are by fans doing the type of critical work on fannish texts that fan scholars could benefit from. Its purpose is to bring

[1.6] thought-provoking, theoretically innovative, and stylistically unique fan analysis—meta—to a wide readership. The Reader is committed to bridging the divide between academic and fan writing on television, film, and fandom, offering a place for thoughtful work that doesn't fit within a traditional academic publishing framework; equally, the Reader aims to demonstrate the breadth of fan writing, which is not confined to fan fiction alone. (Fan Meta Reader 2015)

[1.7] Other fan-scholar groups like The Organization for Transformative Works (<http://transformativeworks.org/>) look at fandom as a critical component of the media landscape. Blogs like The Collective (<http://acollectivemind.com/>) encourage fan commentary on a wide variety of media texts. Fans compare and contrast elements of their shows. They debate gender representation in comic books, address the roles of Joseph Campbell's classic hero's narrative in young adult fiction, focus on the logical fallacies of sports journalism, discuss video game narrative dissonance, offer compelling Bechdelian analyses of the roles of women in media. Everyday people use fandom to engage in a variety of issues and real-world problems.

[1.8] I want to make two separate but related arguments, then synthesize them with a call to action. First, fandom is expanding, and economic issues are all-pervasive. We have a responsibility formally, as educators, and informally, as fans, to combat an encroaching neoliberal emphasis both in fandom and in education that portends the erosion of key moral and civic mentalities in today's fans. I don't mean to deny the existence of real fan hierarchies, although the difference here is one of institutional and systemic intolerance versus ground-up, interfan group conflict. Thus, by encouraging a particular style of fan engagement, the mainstream media industries reify these boundaries and hierarchies of fandom and inscribe ways of being that promote hierarchical discourses, as Suzanne Scott (2008, 2009) has pointed out in terms of authorized fan videos, or as Amazon's Kindle Worlds (<https://kindleworlds.amazon.com/>) reveals with authorized fan fiction. It is a particular type of fandom—one that matches the ideals of the corporation, but not necessarily those within fan communities.

[1.9] Second, we need to teach students to be critical fans. Teaching students critical fandom is not about teaching them which texts are good and which are not. It is not about teaching value judgments or teaching them how to be "good" fans (however that might be defined). Rather, it is about teaching constructive styles of personal and community engagement. We can become involved in these discussions. Critical fans demonstrate listening skills by interacting with other fans in thoughtful ways. Critical fans encourage discussion through individual contribution and empathetic conversation. Critical fans encourage civil discourse, even if it's a disagreement. It's not about a good or a bad style of fandom (e.g., affirmational or transformational; see *obsession\_inc* 2009; Hills 2014). Rather, it's about how individuals comment to and react to each other in productive and respectful ways. This is not about policing fan work that is currently out there but about cultivating more critical work for the future. We need to use more critical fandom in our classes to demonstrate it and use more of our scholarship in our fandom communities to reinforce it.

[1.10] This leads me to a call for action. It is our role as educators to listen to fandom; and it is our responsibility as fans to promote critical fandom in all our work. I want to bring up what Matt Hills (2012) has called "fan and academic moral economies, and address...how they might be made to intersect" (27). For Hills, fandom and the academy both use particular disciplinary guidelines to manage their respective identities. These moral economies, to use Henry Jenkins's ([1988] 2006)

term, must be brought into the open and interrogated. We can do this by working with fan-scholars.

[1.11] We should start engaging with more fan works as well as fans themselves in our classes. Teachers should let the fan experience inform their teaching, and they should explore fandom with their students. We should present at fan conventions and write for fan blogs. We can invite fans from a variety of backgrounds to speak about different experiences of fan affect. Students will not only learn from this experience but will see critical fandom demonstrated for them. Despite—or perhaps because of—the negative experiences of fandom we have all seen or experienced, we should be more engaged with fan communities. Fandom is the classroom of the future because people never stop learning, and their fandom is where that learning will happen.

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## 2. Fandom, antagonism, and neoliberalism in fans' media play

[2.1] I want to begin by showing how media fandom is best understood as a continual, shifting negotiation and dialogue within already extant industrial relations. Then I will illustrate ways that funneling fan affect into particular channels limits the critical work of fandom. Fans today are being taught how to be a particular type of fan, dividing fandom into deliberate silos rather than enhancing the commonalities between them.

[2.2] Both media fans and the media industries must continually negotiate, navigate, and adjust to the presence of each other in tandem with changing paradigms of technological discourse in our digital society. Interpreting this interaction requires an understanding not of the individual categories and corresponding definitions of fandom and industry but of the unique sites of their interaction as constitutive of meaning in and of themselves. We must look not at polarities of industry/audience but rather at the play between their moments of interface. This is often where complications arise in the fan-scholar and the fan scholar identities: as more specific types of fan activities continue to be pathologized, fans can become protective of their own fan identities.

[2.3] For Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998), fan audiences are hybridized as both a practice of resistance to media hegemony and as an identity of consumer complicity within that same hegemonic state (Hills 2002). In the intervening years since Abercrombie and Longhurst's sociological study of audiences, the academic path of fan studies has nurtured and facilitated these contrasting views of fans. On the one hand, fandom can be seen as a specific practice around which people can structure particular meanings in their lives. This view draws on the active work of fans in resisting media messages, and most saliently finds a home in the poaching metaphor of Henry Jenkins (1992). On the other hand, as Miles Booy (2012) argues about *Doctor Who* (1963–89, 1996, 2005–) fans, "the 'poacher' paradigm underestimates the conservatism of [fans'] interpretive practice" (4), and the identity of fandom often derives unconstrained pleasure from the symbiotic relationship between fans and the media industry. Although many specific fan practices can be resistant, transformative, or critical of media practices, the underlying affective connection between identity and activity marks fans in an always liminal state between resistant and complicit in institutional contexts. For example, mimetic fandom—a fandom of material objects, demonstrated via physical construction—as Matt Hills (2014) discusses, "deconstruct[s] the binary between transformative and imitative fandoms (§1.2).

[2.4] Media fans embody and project multiple identities, practices, and performances at once. As our digital media have encouraged a multiplicity of identities to develop, both online and in person, we often find ourselves resorting to traditional representational stereotyping in understanding key changes in cultural identity. Fandom is no different.

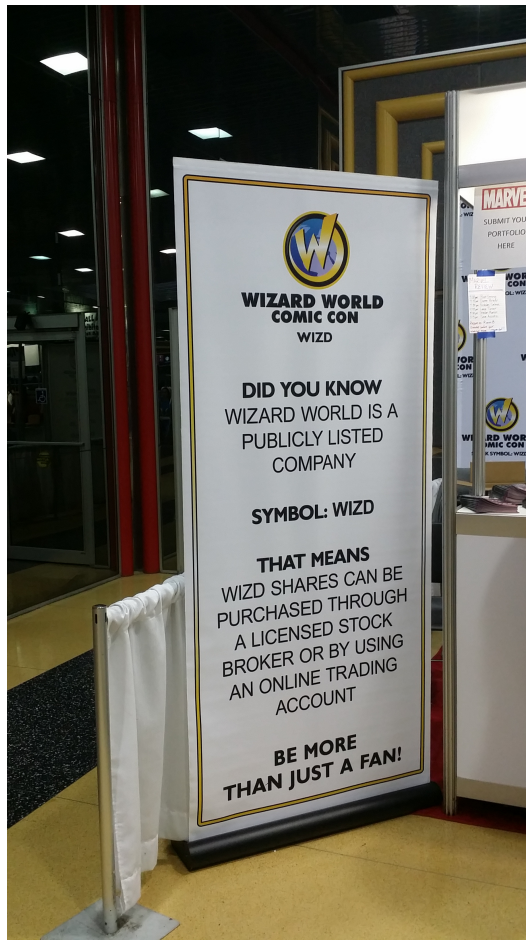
[2.5] Kristina Busse (2009) offers an analysis of fans that provides insight into the role of the fan in the media industries:

[2.6] Media fans thus are at the center of a media convergence of text and context, producer and consumer, appropriation and ownership; they showcase ideal investment in a media product and its transmedia branding and the marketing strategies of their communities...Fans are ever present in the contemporary media landscape, and fandom is growing both more mainstream and more difficult to define as a result. (356)

[2.7] In a 2015 *Cinema Journal* In Focus section, fan scholars like Busse, Abigail De Kosnik, Suzanne Scott, Karen Hellekson, Alexis Lothian, and Mel Stanfill argue that this mainstreaming has produced an increased focus in both fandom and fan studies on an industry/fan model—a model that inherently privileges dominant readings of texts, monetizes affect, and valorizes complicit fandom. Here, I'm defining complicit fandom as a particular type of fan audience that is uncritical of the media and reinforces dominant readings and hegemonies. I'm not saying that this is an inherently bad practice, but rather that we need to reinforce that it is not the *only* practice. These scholars assert that critical fan work is under threat by economic forces that reveal the primacy—and attention—of more dominant and hegemonic ideologies.

[2.8] The media industries have popularized fandom today, but they are depicting a particular type of fandom—an uncritical, passive, and consumerist fan audience. Fans are being taught that the best way to be a fan is to reinforce traditional (financial) hierarchies in fandom. Figure 2 illustrates a sign at the 2014 Chicago Wizard World Comic Con, which encouraged fans to become "more than just a fan" by investing with the company, literally profiting from other fans.





**Figure 2.** Sign at 2014 Chicago Wizard World Comic Con. Photo by author. [[View larger image.](#)]

[2.9] This emphasis on complicit fandom highlights the prominence of neoliberal thinking in the fandom industries. As Robert McChesney (1999) defines it, "Neoliberalism is the defining political economic paradigm of our time—it refers to the policies and processes whereby a relative handful of private interests are permitted to control as much as possible of social life in order to maximize their personal profit" (7). From a media/fan studies perspective, neoliberalism focuses on the consequences of the centralization of media corporations, the global diffusion of media outlets, and the economics of affective enjoyment.

[2.10] Mainstream media seem to both embrace and distance themselves from fans, while fans both embrace and distance themselves from the media industries. Yet both groups' resistance to and complicity with the other ultimately augments a hybridization of fan identity and fan practice within this neoliberal media ecology. As with any capitalist institution, the media industry creates an environment where privatization and commercialism is the norm, and critical or alternate views are ignored or elided. Success is still measured in publication and ratings, not emotional engagement.

[2.11] A neoliberal culture harnesses the pleasures of leisure into economic profit for others—browsing social media becomes a way of making money for media corporations through advertising, for example—as "the last vestiges of private, intimate life, relationships and emotions are, often unwittingly and gradually, sacrificed to work" (Harvie 2013, 53). Fans' works become fodder for industry profit, as Amazon's Kindle Worlds demonstrates; even more alarming is the lack of authorial freedom. For example, the content guidelines for writing *Gossip Girl* (2007–12)



fan fiction include no pornography, no offensive content (including foul language—without saying what that language might entail), no "poor customer experience," including poorly formatted books, no crossover, no brand names, and no erotica (figure 3). But feel free to write whatever you're a fan of!

## kindle worlds

### Gossip Girl Content Guidelines

1. Pornography: We don't accept pornography or offensive depictions of graphic sexual acts.
2. Offensive Content: We don't accept offensive content, including but not limited to racial slurs, excessively graphic or violent material, or excessive use of foul language.
3. Illegal and Infringing Content: We take violations of laws and proprietary rights very seriously. It is the authors' responsibility to ensure that their content doesn't violate laws or copyright, trademark, privacy, publicity, or other rights.
4. Poor Customer Experience: We don't accept books that provide a poor customer experience. Examples include poorly formatted books and books with misleading titles, cover art, or product descriptions. We reserve the right to determine whether content provides a poor customer experience.
5. Excessive Use of Brands: We don't accept the excessive use of brand names or the inclusion of brand names for paid advertising or promotion.
6. Crossover: No crossovers from other Worlds are permitted, meaning your work may not include elements of any copyright-protected book, movie, or other property outside of the elements of this World.
7. No erotica, including frequent, prominent, or graphic descriptions of sexual acts.
8. Your Work may not be a novelization of a Gossip Girl television series episode.

**Figure 3.** Screenshot of guidelines for Amazon's *Gossip Girl* (2007–12) Kindle Worlds fic. [[View larger image.](#)]

[2.12] The type of fandom that gets positive coverage in the press is a complicit, authorized fan audience, as recent examples like Caitlin Moran's interview with *Sherlock* (2010–) stars Benedict Cumberbatch and Martin Freeman illustrate. By asking them to read aloud slash fiction written about their characters in *Sherlock*, and then encouraging the audience to mock it, she caused a great deal of hurt and embarrassment to everyone involved, including the fan authors, from whom she did not seek permission to use their work. Graham Norton does similar fan mockeries on his comedy chat show, *The Graham Norton Show* (2007–). Disciplining fandom in this way means mocking those aspects that are perceived as strange or weird. However, this mockery works for this neoliberal impulse as well. Moran, by mocking slash fandom but extolling her own complicit fandom of Benedict Cumberbatch, inherently disciplines a particular style of fan discourse. While there is nothing inherently wrong about dominant readings of media texts and fannish enthusiasm for hegemonic meaning, we need to be aware that this becomes the accepted image of fans that our students see. Students today are seeing dominant, uncritical fan audiences as positive, or are retaining a pathologized view of critical fandom, turning them into what Geraghty (2012) calls "invisible" fans "who do not see themselves in the very texts they study [and] are also unaware, or at least unwilling to recognize, the fact that the media pervades our lives so much that we all act as fans now" (170). Students simply do not see themselves as fans, and they therefore do not see the inherent disciplinary nature of fan representations.

[2.13] I'm not attempting to ignore the very real, very powerful, and very common conflicts in fandom. Contra the writings of the first wave of fan studies (Jenkins 1992; Gray, Sandvoss, and Harrington 2007), fandom is not a homogenous, happy-go-lucky, everyone loves each other group. There are not only real divisive elements in any fan culture, but there is also just plain nastiness. Take this example: in a humorous article written a week before Peter Capaldi's debut as the Twelfth Doctor in the *Doctor Who* franchise, Donna Dickens (2014) describes how annoyed he looks in each promotional photo. Responses from commenter DoctorWho1966, written a week before the airing of the premiere, are far from pleasant in tone or content:

[2.14] He's the best in years and I am a fan from 1981. I love these novice Newvian articles. You have no idea what you are even talking about!

[2.15] Once you see the new season, you will understand the look on his face and how his character acts. He is not like his young heroic predecessors, he plays the character somewhere between Pertwee and Baker. Feel free to Google who they were if you have no idea.

[2.16] Here, two different styles of fandom—a humorous criticism and a humorless dismissal—enact in miniature a much larger cultural discourse. The comments section of any such article is filled with similar dismissals, insults, and attempts to regulate others' fandoms and affective enjoyment—enough to make common the phrase "never read the comments."

[2.17] Such behavior occurs face to face as well as online, as conflicts at the 2014 World Science Fiction Convention (Worldcon) in London, recorded by Bethan Jones (2014) and Bertha Chin (2014), attest. Jones reports on the behavior of panelists and audiences:

[2.18] I was really surprised at some of the behaviour I saw though. The first was a panellist, a *Star Trek* novelist, who referred to LGBT issues as "LGB, whatever. Too many initials." For a science fiction convention, much less one with an academic track on diversity, I was shocked...

[2.19] The other thing I found disconcerting was the clear divides between factions of fans. I know that fandom is not homogenous...but I'd never come across such clear divisions between literature and media fans, offline (older) and online (younger) fans, and academics and non-academics...You don't have to agree with them—there were several panelists I didn't agree with—but that doesn't mean you get to interrupt them, shout at them, speak over them or click your fingers at them.

[2.20] Chin (2014) discusses how this convention was alienating for anyone not white, old, and male:

[2.21] If you're wondering why your attendees/supporters are aging when younger fans are heading to other conventions, then it's time to take a step back and do a little bit of navel-gazing. Over the course of the time I was there, I've witnessed:

- a young female panelist, a professional like every other speaker on the panel, talked over and mocked because she was young and did not have the "40 years worth of experience of being in fandom."...
- a panelist being called a racial slur, threatened and stalked but organisers did not remove the offender from the convention itself (which still perplexes me).
- one of the panels I was speaking in, an audience member snapped their fingers at the speaker to get her to stop talking because she wanted to disagree.

[2.22] This might just be the specific convention—Worldcon is known for its stuffiness—but as Chin (2014) notes, "Bad behaviour is bad behaviour." Fandom fails like the debacle of #gamergate (Chess and Shaw 2015; Fembot Collective 2015), which began in August 2014, for instance, illustrate a general lack of compassion and empathy in many fan communities for any difference. Homogeny begets homogeny.

[2.23] I'm not saying we can, nor that we should, attempt to cure fandom of its antagonism. Not only does that emphasize and reopen the pathologization of fans, but it also portrays fan scholars as angels swooping down to solve humanity's problems. However, by speaking up and speaking out, we can demonstrate and encourage more thoughtful styles of community engagement in our students. Fan behavior—human behavior—is fluid. A recent study of *Game of Thrones* (2011–) fans by media research institute Latitude, for instance, found numerous motivations and styles of fandom; it also found that "fans are as complex and well-rounded as the characters" (Gosselin 2014, 4). This is an industry-funded survey, showing the growing awareness of multiplicity in fan communities. But it also compares fans to characters on a television series, as if the characters are more real than the fans themselves. This is just one example, of course, and there are hundreds of others.

[2.24] We can also encourage and support the critical interactions that do exist: for example, a story was released online about a positive site of interaction between fans and the media industry. In early September 2014, fantasy author Peter V. Brett posted a story about his young daughter, who wanted to play the DC Comics-themed game *Justice League: Axis of Villains* (Wonder Forge, 2013). However, out of four heroes and at least two dozen villains, there were no female characters in the game. Brett and his daughter did a DIY art project to create female characters for the game and posted the results online. Two weeks later, the game designers responded with an apology ("We screwed up," they wrote, "and everyone here knows it" [Pahle 2014]), added female superheroes to their next game (*DC Super Friends Matching*, forthcoming), and promised to add female characters to any rerun of the original *Axis of Villains* game (Pahle 2014). As Brett (2014) writes:

[2.25] The persistent courage of Anita Sarkeesian, recent steps by the NFL, the president, and countless other brave women and men who are tired of staying quiet on gender issues has me feeling that we're close to another tipping point in US society, and we should all keep pushing.

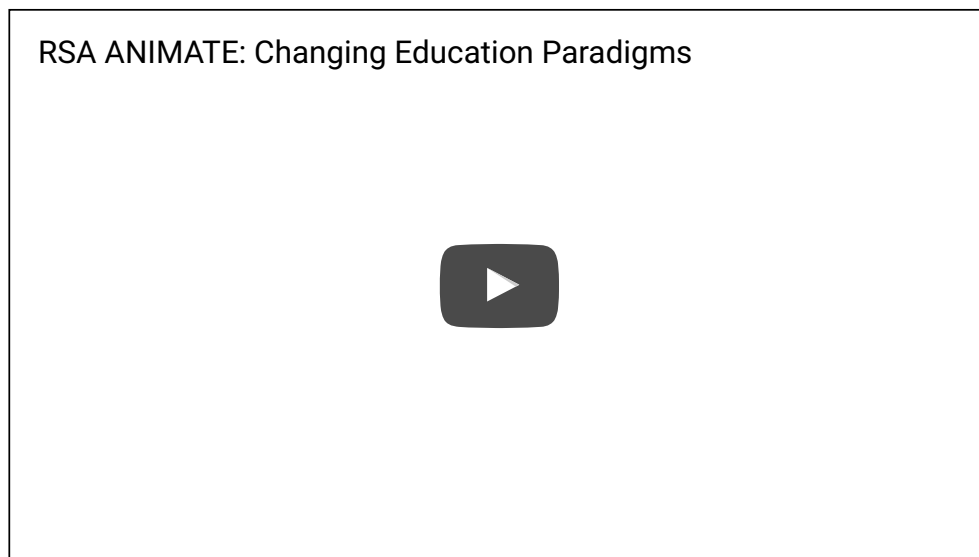
[2.26] Yes. We should keep pushing. Fan scholars can help the push by reinforcing any responsible interactions when we see them and discussing the others. I certainly don't mean that disagreement can't happen in fandom—in fact, quite the opposite. Disagreement is part of the essence of fandom. However, there is a difference between disagreement and dismissal; there is a difference between argument and aggression. Neoliberalism encourages a winner-take-all, aggressive mentality in fandom.

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### 3. Neoliberalism in fandom and in education

[3.1] Where is this neoliberal ideology coming from? One area underexplored in current fan literature is where neoliberalism affects fandom in higher education. The neoliberal impulses in politics affect the educational climate, emphasizing a "student as consumer" model of education. Higher education has become the bastion of the administrator and the accountant, not the instructor and the student. At all turns, at least in my own US higher educational system, students see critical thinking and liberal arts as less valuable than more "practical" fields. In the UK system, more and more administrative oversight leads to more and more metrics and so-called research excellence frameworks, or REFs, placing value on outcomes rather than development.

[3.2] In a TED talk delivered in 2010, education expert Sir Ken Robinson argues that the current industrial model of education is outdated, outmoded, and obsolete (video 1). Why, he argues, do we stamp down creative thinking, collaboration, and aesthetic appreciation in favor of silo-ization, rote learning, and standardized testing? Because our model of education was designed for an industrial economy, not for today's intellectual, knowledge, and creative economies. Creative thinking. Collaboration. Aesthetic appreciation. Sound familiar? These are fan-based modes of critical thinking. But, as Geraghty (2012) reminds us, students "do not see themselves" as part of fan communities, do not see themselves "as part of the same discourses around consumption, cultural distinction and fan practices" (163). Being and bringing practitioners of these models of fandom into the classroom, models that we can learn from fans themselves, would allow us to combat this neoliberalism, this belief that, as Henry Giroux (2012) describes, "knowledge that can't be measured or defined as a work-related skill is viewed as irrelevant" (3). It will allow us to teach students to value critical work. Indeed, learning from critical fans allows us to train students to question the world around them.



**Video 1.** Sir Ken Robinson, "Changing Education Paradigms" (filmed October 2010).

[3.3] Yet the perception of fan studies in the academy is that it is a liberal art with few, if any, practical applications. Many of us have faced the question in meetings, job interviews, or promotion/tenure review: "Fan studies...so, what is the point?" Yet fandom helps develop critical thinking and writing skills—important skills for students after college. Harnessing for the classroom the critical thinking in fandom helps to elucidate its place in our curriculum. According to educational researchers Richard Arum, Josipa Roksa, and Esther Cho (2011), writing in a longitudinal project funded by the Social Science Research Council, students attend class approximately 9 percent of their time and study 7 percent out of class. That means 16 percent of their time students might be exposed to specific in-class critical thinking pedagogy. The researchers found, however, that 51 percent of students' time is spent in leisure, where their fandom may take precedence. If we could get students to think critically in their fandom as well, during that 51 percent leisure time, we could facilitate critical growth as a whole.

[3.4] Indeed, this 16 percent may actually be granting universities too much critical power. As Arum and Roksa (2011) describe in *Academically Adrift*, "An astounding proportion of students are progressing through higher education today without measureable gains in general skills," including

critical thinking skills (35–36). Empirical data demonstrate that a college education today has a barely noticeable impact on students' skills in critical thinking, complex reasoning, and writing; indeed, "a market-based logic of education encourages students to focus on its instrumental value—that is, as a credential—and to ignore its academic meaning and moral character" (Arum and Roksa 2011, 16). I believe that fan studies, as a critical and interdisciplinary subject, has the capacity to combat a shift towards neoliberal emphases within education. Of course, as Jen Harvie (2013) notes, "participation is not intrinsically politically progressive...[but we can] look for ways they extend equal opportunities for social engagement" (10).

[3.5] There is evidence that being part of a fandom or participating in fan discussions teaches critical thinking (Jenkins 2006; Jenkins et al. 2009). There is evidence that fandom develops writing and reasoning skills (Black 2008; Jenkins 2006). There is evidence that fandom can thrive outside of a market mentality (Hellekson 2009; Turk 2014). Indeed, to better integrate a critical media literacy into the classroom, a "better strategy for viewing fandom...is to remain open to the possibility of welcoming certain aspects of...fan culture into the school curriculum" (Alvermann and Hagood 2000, 37). Incorporating fandom into the classroom has been well researched by many others (Black 2008; Booth 2010, 2012; Gutierrez 2012; Jenkins 2006; Lachney 2012; Lavery 2004; Robson 2008; Winslade 2010). I want us to do more than encourage our students to embrace fandom; I want us to create critical thinkers outside of the classroom as well. Bring fans into the classroom to model fandom. We can continue to encourage counterhegemony, emphasizing its powerful role in shaping alternative values and meanings by demonstrating this ourselves. Be fans. Be *critical* fans. Be the best that we know that fandom can be.

[3.6] In an era of global diaspora and instantaneous communication, fandom can become a glue to cohere disparate individuals, what Chin and Morimoto (2013) call transculturalism. In the high-tech, multicultural, and intercultural society of fandom, a type of accidental pedagogy occurs after formal education as fans learn from each other and from others via digital technology. We need to foster this growth today in our fan students by introducing it into our classes. In 2013, I invited a number of fan-scholar speakers to come to my class. Renee Ismail, Laura Evelyn, and Michi Trota introduced students to concepts like con harassment and rape culture. Speakers like Shelby Mongan described their own critical fandoms and, for instance, love of crossplay. I have taken students to different fan conventions and asked them to participate in ethnographic studies with me (Booth 2013). And in turn, I've encouraged those fan-scholars to discuss their academic history with my students.

[3.7] As fan teachers, we ought to use our own fan voices in the classroom and to do our own fan projects for and with students. We ought to be demonstrating our love of *Supernatural* (2005–) or *Doctor Who*. We need to teach students how to continue to educate themselves after higher education through fan communities. Benjamin Woo (2014) notes that because it "relies on knowledge, skills, beliefs, and other psychological factors, fandom is, above all, something people do" (§3.9). However, Woo is only partially correct; fandom here, described as a practice, ignores the major focus of fandom as an identity as well. Being a fan and demonstrating this critical fandom to others presents a unique opportunity to advise in critical intellectual and civic work.

[3.8] As with the push in academia to market and commoditize the degree, the neoliberal impulse is approaching our everyday fandom as well. We need to avoid taking fan studies into the same territory as education has gone—the neoliberal emphasis on complicity with commercial

industries—and instead build on those critical thinking tools developed and fostered by fan communities. We need a way of expressing the everyday qualities of pedagogical fan criticism.

[3.9] What is the role of fan studies in all this? Much has been written about interfandom antagonism. As Hills (2012) notes, this antagonism can come from industry paratexts or through interfan discourse. Industry paratexts, like the DVD documentary *Comic-Con Phenomenon* (2008) about the Twilight franchise's (books 2005–8, films 2008–12) fan presence at the comic convention, helps, as Hills (2012) describes, to discipline fans into particular behaviors by "dematerializ[ing] any sense of fan critique, or disempowerment, as well as glossing over otherings of media folk versus fan audiences" (117), while interfan discourse teaches fans how to behave by stereotyping and mocking other fandoms. But does fan studies also discipline fandom? These conflicting fannish moral economies are paralleled in fan studies as well: rarely has fan studies turned the lens on itself to identify its own gaps.

[3.10] One of these gaps is the way that fan studies may actually perpetuate hierarchical discourse by reifying the boundary between the fan and the academic. Bradley Schauer (2014) notes how there is

[3.11] a trend in contemporary...criticism in which critics strive to separate themselves from a strawman "fanboy" audience that is completely uncritical of comic book films, and possesses the arcane knowledge necessary to comprehend them. Rather than accurately representing how these films are constructed, and the way audiences engage with them...this critical attitude serves mainly to reinforce traditional taste hierarchies.

[3.12] Although Schauer is here writing about film criticism specifically, I think we have reached a point where fan criticism online is becoming both more mainstream and more hierarchical. Our students will be writing the fan criticism of the future. As fan scholars, we can continue to combat this intellectual snobbery by speaking up, and speaking out in venues normally out of our wheelhouse.

[3.13] In 2013, I wrote that "a greater dialogue between self-professed fans and academics would augment the already-strong work being done in fan studies, and would bring a fannish voice into scholarship on fans" (131). I also advocated for three ways to facilitate this dialogue: "publishing more fan-friendly works, speaking at fan conventions and using social media more publically" (132). We owe it to ourselves as fan researchers and as fans to become part of the conversation. This isn't us starting a conversation; it's us joining a conversation that is already happening.

[3.14] For example (and coincidentally), *The Conversation* (<http://theconversation.com/au>), an Australian and UK online magazine, uses a journalistic approach to highlight academic thought in a popular venue. The Nine Worlds convention (<https://nineworlds.co.uk/>) invites academic panels along with fannish ones—something Worldcon has long done. Outside of the academy, the world of fandom itself is burgeoning with critical thinking skills. The famous Bechdel test is, after all, named after Alison Bechdel, a cartoonist who mentioned it not in an academic essay but in her comic strip *Dykes to Watch Out For* (1983–2008). The fan-generated Hawkeye Initiative (<http://thehawkeyeinitiative.com/>) offers a sound criticism of gender representations in comics. Feminist game critic Anita Sarkeesian created a YouTube video series, *Tropes vs. Women in Video Games* (2013–; <https://www.youtube.com/user/feministfrequency>), to investigate representations

of women in video games. Her Kickstarter campaign originally sought \$6,000 but made over \$150,000. The subsequent misogynistic harassment and death threats she has encountered are examples of online interaction that fan scholars can help combat (Chess and Shaw 2015). These are just a few examples.

[3.15] Sometimes the media industry even listens. The most recent *Dungeons & Dragons* (TSR, 1974) rules have specifically stated that players "don't need to be confined to binary notions of sex and gender" (McNally 2014). But too often the media industry doesn't listen. A variant cover of *Spider-Woman #1* (2014) by Milo Manara caused a great deal of controversy for its overly sexual depiction of the heroine, as well as her rather oddly proportioned body (although to their credit, after the controversy Marvel reassigned other variant covers to other artists; Rife 2014). With all the fan-scholar discussion online about gender representations and female fandom (not to mention body-shaming issues), to be so ignorant of the multitude of fan discussion online isn't a failure on the part of fans to communicate, it's a failure on the part on the professionals to listen. Recent controversies surrounding sexist superhero clothing reveal a similar failure to understand the market. Marvel released a T-shirt for girls that read "I need a hero" and a similar one for boys that read "Be a hero," and DC produced a T-shirt for women that read "Training to be Batman's wife" (Asselin 2014). This fundamentally gendered misunderstanding of the nature of the fan audience signals miscommunication at this site of interaction.

[3.16] We can help popularize fan-scholars by bringing their voices into fan scholar venues. We can also augment them by contributing to fan communities. Many fan scholars keep blogs; many contribute to conversations happening on Twitter and Tumblr. Yet the creeping hegemonic influences over the normalization of fandom and the pathologization of less-commercial fan activities shift the focus of online fan sites. For example, popular fan blog *The Mary Sue* (<http://www.themarysue.com/>) was revamped in May 2014. The site had previously had a creed that read "A Guide to Girl Geek Culture" and was dedicated to focusing on female fandom and bringing to light the contributions of women to the STEM fields and feminism in popular culture. However, when the site became more integrated into the geekosystem, it immediately took its banner down and claimed the site was now inclusive and for everyone (as if it wasn't before—for example, misinterpreting feminism). Without a dedication to critical fandom, *The Mary Sue* reminds us that a patriarchal, hegemonic reading of fan culture becomes dominant but still excludes too many. As academics, we are not the only people that can call these things out when we see them, but we are well poised to help.

[3.17] Change won't just happen. We need to work at it. It will be uncomfortable. Often, giving talks at fan conventions can be awkward when a deep-seated belief in one type of fan activity (memorizing the names of extras or obscure facts, for example) is seen as more valuable than something else. Although I didn't attend the 2014 Worldcon, the reports from panelists Jones and Chin detail the conflict, visible hierarchies, and inflammatory comments from many. Talking to fans at conventions can sometimes rile up fans who hate bringing feminism, race, or politics into discussion about their shows. These sorts of reactions are unavoidable when the status quo is disturbed.

[3.18] But we need to disturb it. The Status, as *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog* (2008) reminds us, is not Quo. The minute the status quo is accepted is the minute we need to shake things up. It is crucial to foster a type of responsible social engagement to start to combat the vast swathes of negativity and reactionary elements online. The reaction to Sarkeesian's *Tropes vs. Women in*

*Video Games* series is just the tip of the iceberg. With the rise of global neoconservative movements, it is time to fight back with informed citizenry and democratic discourse—a type of discourse generated by and within critical fan communities and practiced in the classroom.

[3.19] Fandom is the classroom of the future because when the texts are gone, the fandom remains. By contributing to fan conversations and by starting conversations of our own in public, we will be able to stop seeing fans as the result of the media industry's work. This is the disciplinary mechanism of fan studies at work. By studying fans, we reify the boundary between ourselves and fans. It's not that we're ignoring fandom in our scholarship today; it's that we reify industry work by subsuming fans underneath it. Ultimately, as fan studies scholars and fans ourselves, we need to take a fannish approach to cultivating considerate, innovative, and critical thinking in fandom. By embracing our own fandom, we highlight the mutability of those boundaries.

[3.20] I realize it is a hard sell—I'm asking us to write out of our training, to speak to different groups, and to spend our free time exploring the boundaries of fandom and the academy. However, the more of us who do it, the less any one scholar has to shoulder. Inscribing critical fandom in our work means more than just teaching; it means collaborating, conversing, and generating new ideas in fan communities, in scholar communities, and in fan(-)scholar communities

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## 4. Fandom in the future

[4.1] As fan studies scholars and, importantly, fans ourselves, we get to study a particularly pleasurable facet of human existence. As we enter a new phase of fan studies, as the Fan Studies Network (<https://fanstudies.wordpress.com/>) has developed, as the many interesting and varied papers presented at its symposium illustrate, fan studies is alive and thriving. I encourage us as scholars, and implore us as ethical global citizens, to celebrate our differences and to encourage our students to do the same. We need to reinforce the importance of critical fandom in our classes and in the lives of our students, share resources with each other, bring in and be guest speakers for classes. Skype and Facetime are excellent tools that allow transcultural fandom—transcultural fan studies—to reach across international lines.

[4.2] As our educational systems lose critical focus to corporate control and neoliberal impulses, I urge us to combat this shift by refocusing our efforts on creating informed and educated fans. As fandom is becoming more neoliberal as well, I ask us to reflect on critical fan practices that an industry-focused turn may neglect.

[4.3] I admit I may be a bit of a Pollyanna here, but I believe we as fan scholars need to be more assertive against the encroaching normalization of commercialization, market forces, and neoliberal control over affect, both in education and out of it. Some may argue that this is simplistic or idealistic, or doesn't apply to their own teaching motivations. However, it does matter to fans; it matters to fan-scholars; it matters to fan studies to begin to help critical fandom flourish. There is a problem in our culture today, and we can help. We need to teach students how to be civil, how to disagree responsibly, and how to debate with respect. Fandom can offer a bastion of critical thinking in a world of conformity. In other words, we need to teach how to be critical and thoughtful fans in a world increasingly hostile to affect.



[4.4] If, as I have asserted, fandom is the classroom of the future, then we need to model critical fan behavior ourselves—in all our classes, in all our scholarly arguments, in all our conversations with students, media professionals, and other fans. We need to foster critical fandom in ourselves in order to demonstrate it to others—because being a fan is the responsibility and being a fan scholar is the privilege, not the other way around. It's one I'm happy to share with other fan scholars and to pass on to future generations and future of fans.

## 5. Acknowledgments

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# Pedagogy

## Watching *Dallas* again I: Doing retro audience research

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[0.1] *Abstract*—This essay and the audience reception projects it introduces alleviate the desperation of seeking the television audience by recourse to Ien Ang's influential book, *Watching Dallas* ([1982] 1985). Within the context of a unit on audience research in a master's-level course on media, two groups of students explored the possibilities of remixing Ang in the present digital media landscape via informants' comments on the first season of the new series of *Dallas* (2012–14). Discourses of nostalgia circulate within and around the text, as well as the project itself. Retro audience research generates not only data about the affective memories and critical reflections of informants but also insights into research methods and the production of new nostalgic subjects.

[0.2] *Keywords*—Ien Ang; Nostalgia; TV studies

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### 1. Introduction

[1.1] Media scholars have been desperately seeking the television audience with increasing urgency during the almost quarter of a century since Ien Ang defined the pursuit in her 1991 book. In our media-saturated culture, "the 'audience' is everywhere and nowhere" (Bird 2003, 3), frustrating attempts to find and define it. However, Ang's earlier book, *Watching Dallas* (1985), pushed the frontiers of audience research and offered an influential approach to TV studies. She paid attention to how audiences make aesthetic judgments and the mechanisms by which pleasure in televisual texts is aroused. While tracking the *politics* of pleasure became an almost mandatory activity in audience research, Ang crucially connected pleasure to "the *fictional* nature of the positions and solutions which the tragic structure of feeling constructs, not with their ideological content" (1985, 135). In the wake of massive attention to the sociocultural dimensions of TV viewing, Ang's work reminds us to think about the aesthetic discriminations of popular audiences. *Watching Dallas*, and Ang's

related work, is the inspiration behind the present essay and the audience reception projects it introduces (note 1).

[1.2] The two projects were produced as practical, graded assignments within a unit on television audiences in an MA course entitled "Media Matters" that took place at the University of Groningen, The Netherlands, in the fall semester of 2012–13. We had used Ang's *Watching Dallas* as a case study in audience research, comparing it with the work of Liebes and Katz (1986). The first season of the *Dallas* reboot (2012–14) was showing on Dutch TV during the course, and Ang's original research was conducted in The Netherlands. These coincidences prompted the exercise to test if Ang's study still offered usable paradigms—if and how it could be updated to engage with television audiences in 2012. What would change, and what might stay the same? And what would this tell us about TV audiences and about audience research?

[1.3] Thus, the MA students were watching a sequel (though many had not seen the original before checking it out online prior to class) and producing one in their remixing of Ang's original *Dallas* study. I want to validate their return to the past as a mode of what I will call strategic nostalgia. This is not nostalgia as it used to be viewed, as a romantic, reactionary pursuit that hinders theoretical development in the present, or what Emmanuel Levinas called "a retrograde return to sameness" (quoted in Casey 1987, 362). Rather, nostalgia is rehabilitated as "reflective" in its ability to motivate "creative challenges" (Boym 2007, 13). To be strategically nostalgic about past texts and research methods involves both (the construction of) affective memories and critical reflection. New modes of nostalgia offer an "interpretative space" in which past meanings are renegotiated in the present and relate to "direct social referents" (Stewart 1988, 227). It is only by virtue of resonating in the present that the past is able to produce "nostalgic subjects" (Casey 1987, 369).

[1.4] The studies that comprise this three-document series discuss viewers' reception of the new series in the context of their nostalgia for the old. While one group of researchers annotates this reception as (mainly) transhistorically restorative, the other locates reflective modalities. Taken together, they suggest the complexity of nostalgic responses among both participants and researchers. But other memory archives are also at work here. Thus, my memory of watching the original *Dallas* (1978–91) and of the excitement of reading *Watching Dallas* as an undergraduate soon after its English publication was part of the context within which the audience research was conducted, as was a certain nostalgia for the golden age of TV studies. While a residual romanticism may thus inform the whole undertaking (with the student projects to some extent enacting my own potentially restorative nostalgia for *Watching Dallas*), the return to Ang's methods and interests generates new meanings in the context of debates around audience studies in the era of Web 2.0. Turning back to Ang's *Dallas*

study is a way of making visible the emotional investments and aesthetic judgments of ordinary viewers, who are perhaps somewhat unfashionable in the age of media creativity. We may have to take the risk of nostalgia in order to have any purchase on viewers who are not "producers."

[1.5] Indeed, these projects might be seen as part of a broader turn to the past in the field of television studies. The original *Dallas* was the primary case study for research into cultural imperialism at a time when American visual culture saturated the globe, encouraging cross-cultural readings of American TV. Now "there are signs of a critical reassessment of 'globalization' in favour of a more 'retro' theoretical position that uses the imperialist perspective with some new insights" (Corcoran 2007, 84). In other words, if speaking of cultural imperialism seemed outdated as critics emphasized local appropriations of American products and de-emphasized power inequalities based on directions of flow, now there is a turn to historically-oriented studies that acknowledge both the complexity of viewers' cultural resources and the persistence of US domination in the global television landscape.

[1.6] The rest of this essay offers, first, a brief review of the concept of the audience and its continuing validity as a focus of research; second, a potted history of audience research, which outlines those aspects the current projects confirm, those they challenge, and those they evade or (unconsciously) reject; and third, a summary of the projects' remixing of Ang's epistolary approach and some preliminary thoughts about this project's findings.

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## 2. Defining the (television) audience

[2.1] Who or what is the audience? In everyday discourse, the word is used so often that its complexity can be forgotten. Who gets to define the audience, and for what purposes? Ang draws a distinction between "'television audience' as a discursive construct and the social world of actual audiences," a division that continues to motivate audience studies (1991, 13). The audience as a discursive figure is an "imaginary entity" or "invisible fiction," institutionally constructed to serve the institutions of televisual production and distribution. From a Foucauldian perspective, the institutions construct and constrain the concept and practices of the audience, but also, perhaps perversely, enable activities that exceed their categorization. Actual audiences constantly appropriate what they watch to suit the specificities of their social lives. Thus, Ang problematized the notion of the audience as an objectified construct within the context of the broadcast era, challenging the views of media producers.

[2.2] In the past two decades, the notion of the television audience has moved away from the institutional perspective, where the object was to produce knowledge about the audience that enabled the reproduction of more members, to a focus on audience diversity. Critics have invested in providing thick descriptions of the contexts and practices of consumption and of the embedding of television in the intimacies of daily life.

[2.3] More recently, in the brave new world of social media and Web 2.0, definitions of the audience have become even more complex. Davis and Michelle annotate the shift in roles from "the traditional reader, listener, viewer, spectator, and citizen" to the new modes of "user, customer, player, producer, visitor, gifter, fan, friend, voyeur, learner, and participant" (2011, 559–60). The distinctions between producers and users of content have blurred, as have those between viewers and fans. If fans were previously seen as marginal figures that needed to "get a life," the work of Henry Jenkins, Matt Hills, and others has mainstreamed them. Indeed, Toby Miller, who exhorts us to "Turn Off TV Studies," claims "audiences are deemed interesting insofar as they are populist delegates for analysts' own fandom" (2005, 99). In the new terminology, consumers have been replaced by "prosumers," who in turn have morphed into "produsers." The activity, creativity, interactivity, and interconnectedness of televisual produsers are the focus of debates about new media audiences.

[2.4] New digital technologies seem to have liberated the audience while at the same time making it almost impossible to find or define it as concept or collective, or audience members as individuals. As Hight et al. argue:

[2.5] Individual and group configurations of audience, and the production of meanings that they generate, become elusive objects of study as they are overwritten by the materiality of the data trails their online activities produce. Indeed the concept of audience itself, with its connotations of receptivity, is losing stability as many audience-members take up the opportunity to insert themselves into the production environment by variously direct means of content-generation. (2011, 554)

[2.6] In this context, some critics suggest we abandon the audience altogether. Thus, Jay Rosen ([2006] 2011) introduces "the people formerly known as the audience," claiming that they "were on the receiving end of a media system that ran one way, in a broadcasting pattern...and who *today* are not in a situation like that at *all*."

[2.7] All of this has consequences for audience studies. Should we abandon audience studies along with the audience? If the audience is lost in cyberspace, how can we



track its reception of specific texts? Moreover, "The moment audiences are producers and co-creators, as a 2.0 perspective suggests, they hardly need the mediating voice of research to tell them how what they are doing has meaning" (Hermes 2009, 112).

### 3. Old media resiliencies

[3.1] However, while the platforms that deliver our media have changed beyond recognition in the past couple of decades, the underlying media, such as print and TV, remain basically the same. The differences between digital and analog transmission and the ways in which we access television affect the "intertextual space in which a particular text is consumed" (Couldry 2011, 219), but our televisual encounters have significant continuities with older paradigms. The old screen medium of TV, however diversified its delivery through time and space, is still located in everyday life. Nick Couldry argues that "it is easy to exaggerate the irrelevance of the traditional media" and to forget the "centripetal forces that continue to drive attention to common media as the site of 'what's going on'" (2011, 215). He cites Van Dijck's rubric that only one in a hundred people is producing content, 10 are interacting via commentary, and the remaining 89 are just viewing. Technologies are not totalizing and deterministic. Viewers continue to enjoy the shared ritual of television schedules, even though video and DVD have offered escape from them for decades. Internet viewing promises endless personal freedom, but I suspect that, like me, individuals impose their own structures to mimic the rhythms of the schedule or spread the spectatorial pleasure (thus, in 2013 I watched the first season of *House of Cards* mostly at weekly intervals, though all 13 episodes were available at once on Netflix). This may be a generational issue; younger viewers without schedule memories may find other ways of negotiating the TV2 landscape. If watching TV is no longer a family affair, it remains communal, with groups of friends establishing ritual watching, for example, and chatting online about their experiences. New ways of sharing our thoughts and feelings about what we watch remix the collective viewing experience of the past. Old and new experiences of television overlap and inform each other.

[3.2] Rosen's ([2006] 2011) comments imply that older audiences were passive and new media ones are active. But audiences have always been both active and passive. Individuals might be casual viewers of one program and invested fans of another. There remains much to be said about the complexity of passivity. Crucially, Wood and Taylor (2008) argue that old questions of meaning should not be submerged by new media concerns with connectivity, and that indeed these may not be separate sets of questions. They suggest that we will lose sight of the contextual intimacy and textual specificity of television viewing if we regard it as merely a part of media convergence. As television scholars have observed, the pressure of new media theory should not mean that we have to reinvent the wheel of audience research (Wood and Taylor

2008; Press and Livingstone 2008). "Old media resiliencies" (Freedman 2006) validate the present projects' concepts of the audience and recourse to research paradigms derived from the mass media era.

## 4. Qualitative audience studies: Back to the text

[4.1] Many recent texts offer surveys of audience studies and audience research, mapping the field with different inflections and emphases. As Davis and Michelle (2011) note, every methodology textbook perpetuates a basic division between qualitative and quantitative research. I will bracket here any consideration of the latter, despite recent calls to embrace what has been seen as the poor relation within cultural studies (Deacon and Keightley 2011), given that the projects I am introducing are firmly located within the former school. Within qualitative studies, Schröder et al. (2003) identify two main traditions. These are, first, an ethnographic tradition that focuses on the embeddedness of media use in the social fabric of everyday life. Second is a reception studies tradition in which the emphasis is on the acts of decoding taken by specific audiences in their encounter with specific texts. The first mode focuses on the media as object and the second on the media as text.

[4.2] Of course, there is overlap between these approaches, especially if we look back to pioneers in the field. Morley's and Ang's work, for example, is indebted to Stuart Hall's (1980) interpretation paradigm of encoding/decoding but attends to what actual audiences do with television texts and the politics of domestic consumption. In *The Audience in Everyday Life* (2003), Bird uses a series of ethnographic studies to analyze how people live in a media-saturated world. She argues that media reception cannot be understood only in relation to specific texts. However, her articulation of a moral and emotional popular aesthetic depends on responses to specific TV series like *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman* (1993–98). Thus, a "double articulation" comprehends both technological/sociological and textual/symbolic analyses. As Press and Livingstone note, the audience is also "doubly articulated—as the consumer/viewer" (2008, 7).

[4.3] However, in practice, it has proved difficult to combine the two modes in audience research. Though there is no shortage of text-based analyses of contemporary television (as work on *The Wire* [2002–8], makeover shows, and two collections on *Mad Men* [2007–15] indicate), Web 2.0 media exchange has helped to engender a shift away from textual analysis in audience studies. As Gauntlett argues, "'Media Studies 2.0'...emphasises a sociological focus on the media as it is in the world, and as people experience it—and therefore is...associated with a welcome end to the armchair ramblings of 'textual analysis'" (2009, 149).

[4.4] Even within the (older) ethnographic turn in audience studies, participant observation (or, more recently, participant co-creation) has come to be the privileged methodology. Researchers are granted "close-ups" (Hermes 2009, 123) as a result of layered relationships built up over long periods of time. For example, Antonio C. La Pastina (2005) advocates a "media engagement approach" that involved work in rural communities in Brazil for a decade, including a year in Macambira talking to inhabitants about the telenovela *O Rei do Gado* (1996–97). Joke Hermes and her research group at InHolland University have been working on a telenovela project with a young Moroccan Web community in The Netherlands since 2006, including assisting with funding proposals. The aura surrounding this mode means that only projects that live up to a rigorous set of criteria are admitted to its pantheon. Thus, Hermes writes that "Marie Gillespie's work in east London on television, ethnicity and social change... is one of the few *true...examples*" of audience ethnography (2009, 117; my emphasis). There has been criticism of informant invisibility in text-based studies such as Ang's and Bird's, which are seen to lack "the contextualization necessary for *genuine* ethnographic work" (Press and Livingstone 2008, 9; my emphasis).

[4.5] As the adjectival qualifiers in my examples suggest, the discourse potentially excludes much audience reception work. As I have already noted, there are new problems with traditional ethnographic participation in an age when audiences are geographically dispersed and communicate online. Moreover, while the multidimensional approach of participant observation provides insights into the whole social ecology within which audiences function, individual media and specific media texts fade into the background. Unlike Gauntlett (2009), I suggest that affective attachments to popular culture are visible through audience investment in TV aesthetics, revealed through semiotic analyses ("armchair ramblings") by audiences and researchers. Despite the complexity of the current media landscape, case studies, "reframe[d] and recontextualize[d] in a new way" (Morley 1999, 196), offer access to "the cultural politics of what audiences *feel* about the representational capacity of television" (Wood and Taylor 2008, 148).

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## 5. Self-reflexive research

[5.1] An important development in television ethnography, and one that affected our project, is an element of reflexivity, which asks both researcher and audience to reflect on their respective positions. For example, Ellen Seiter, in her research on soap operas, notes the continuing "defensiveness that men and women unprotected by academic credentials may feel in admitting to television viewing in part because of its connotations of feminine passivity, laziness and vulgarity" (2000, 496). Research participants may feel intimidated by the researcher's perceived status. Moreover, despite the mainstreaming of fandom and the rise of the scholar-fan, it is perhaps

easier for the likes of Henry Jenkins and Jason Mittell to publically celebrate their TV habits as acafans than for nonacademics. In self-reflexive mode, ethnographers note how their presence affects (or constructs) the responses they document. Kirstyn Gorton was interested in how people "'orient' themselves towards the screen" by dimming the lights or snuggling up in a blanket, but she abandoned her attempt to replicate David Morley's work in *Family Television* (1986), realizing that "it was impossible to 'sit in' on the emotional moments people experience when watching television." The presence of the interviewer, if only to record and observe, disrupted the "feeling of intimacy" (2009, 144).

[5.2] Carolyn Ellis (2004) validates autoethnography as a way of acknowledging the researcher's participation and role. Though she is not focused on television, her "methodological novel" offers a useful "Chart of Impressionist and Realist Ethnography," setting up a series of terms under the headings "Art" and "Science" with double-ended arrows that express resistance to the binary mode even as the headings encode it. Thus we find stories/theory; dialogue/monologue; co-constructed/received; creative interpretation/systematization; and hunger for concrete details/appetite for abstraction. The personal voice stands at the other end of the spectrum to the institutional voice. Methodologies and forms have different emphases in each paradigm, with autoethnography and interactive interviewing on the one side matched by formal interviewing and questionnaires on the other. Results are expressed in fiction, photography, performances, and museum installations or in grounded theory and analytic essays (Ellis 2004, 359–63). In retrospect, it is clear to me that I privileged the "Art" side of this (incomplete) list. The student researchers, however, retained, what seemed to me at the time, a residual attraction to scientific objectivity, especially in terms of the perceived institutional hegemony of the academic essay. Likewise, my own disciplinary heritage in English obviously factored into my sense of quantitative research as a mode of objectification and my reluctance to advocate its use.

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## 6. The projects in practice

[6.1] Before embarking on the assignment, the researchers themselves were asked to respond to the TV series by e-mail, and the responses were posted on our course site. Before the next class, I produced a brief analysis of their comments, articulating the repertoires used to make the TV text meaningful and the discourses generated by their remarks. I noted a range of cultural competences related to TV knowledge (intertextuality; the aesthetics of the soap opera; genre classification) and some key discourses, which I defined as follows: The Past (this was both textual and generational, with six respondents writing about the original series, and two referring to their mothers); Feminist Identifications (with key characters); and the

Contradictions of Pleasure (which I related to the legacy of the devaluation of mass culture). The point here was not, as in Morley's *Nationwide* study (1980), to decide on the program's messages and then read the audience's decodings in terms of their repetition of or deviance from the expert decoding. Rather it was to frame the subsequent research in terms of the diversity of interpretations and meanings, and to foreground the researchers' investments, and disinvestments, from the beginning.

[6.2] Where Morley's (1980) project essentializes a preferred reading (in Hall's [1980] terminology), an objective model that Morley himself later challenged, Ang starts with a sense of affiliation with her informants and an openness to what loving or hating *Dallas* meant to them. Thus the audience research precedes, and preconditions, any reconstruction of the ideological work the text performs. Nevertheless, it is perhaps impossible to wholly avoid preferred readings if we conceive of these more broadly than simply production encoding. Because the whole point of the exercise was to remix Ang, her findings about the original series had a privileged status. The researchers were primed to look for ironic readings as well as melodrama and emotional realism, though the two groups come to opposing conclusions about contemporary irony (the issue that dominated discussion of the TV landscape). And, because *Dallas* is a sequel, discourses of nostalgia circulated within and around the text (in reviews, online discussions, and marketing). My own decoding of the researchers' responses (potentially) produced a secondary encoding that similarly focused on the persistence of the past.

[6.3] The research groups stayed close to Ang's original question, as posted in a Dutch woman's magazine, to which she received letters from *Dallas* viewers. But they used social media sites to access the audience. They did not deploy qualitative software programs, such as NVivo, to classify their findings, which I think helped to focus their attention on the specificity of responses. They posed as insiders to solicit more participation. This provoked some initial class discussion about ethics, but most were comfortable with the notion of performance as part of postmodern identity. They recognized, too, that doing reception research produces involvement with both text and audience and gained insight into the investments of ethnography (and television viewing). As Liebes and Katz (1986) note in their work on the original *Dallas*, critical or aesthetic decoding can signify involvement as much as distance.

[6.4] Rearticulating Ang's question, the studies asked for online, written responses. This is contrary to recent audience research that has advocated enabling more interpretative space for participants. Gauntlett's (2009) suggestions for creative and visual research methods are designed to promote participation and reflection (see his projects at <http://www.artlab.org.uk/>). Multimodal work (interviews, blogging, video making, visual mapping, biography) offers dynamic possibilities (as in McDougall's

2010 research on audiences of *The Wire*) and focuses attention on the varied results when different groups are asked to do different things. However, I remain wary about othering more traditional ways of talking about television. On the other hand, genre bending could be a more significant element in the presentation of the results, leading to experimentation with formats other than the academic essay. (One group in the subsequent year's class used Facebook both to collect and present their research on *Orange Is the New Black* [2013–].)

[6.5] Participants were clearly informed and consented to the use of their responses in the research projects. However, working in The Netherlands, our protocols did not require approval by an external ethics board, unlike most such studies conducted in the United States. This issue remained peripheral to our field of vision until brought to our attention by the journal editors. Thus, somewhat belatedly, all screen names were replaced by pseudonyms to protect the privacy of the participants. For us, this was a salutary lesson in the practicalities of cross-cultural scholarship, not least in light of the concern with national and transnational spectatorship in the essays themselves.

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## 7. Conclusions

[7.1] This reception research generated more than details about audience responses to watching *Dallas*. Remixing Ang produced insights about methods and procedures, something that did not preoccupy Ang in her original project (contrary to Liebes and Katz [1986], for whom the fine-tuning of the method was crucial) (note 2). Perhaps the most interesting aspect of recoding Ang's epistolary approach was the dialogic interaction of researchers and research subjects, which complemented the structural dialogue with Ang's texts. The online medium made it easier, even mandatory, to respond to participants' comments and generate an ongoing conversation, which both research groups recognized as an integral feature of their methodology. In some ways, though, the current projects not only update Ang but also unlock the potential of her original form. That is, though Ang did not correspond with her letter writers, epistolary histories emphasize the production of networked identities (Gilroy and Verhoeven 2000). In any case, feedback was not something we had thought through in advance, but it turned out to offer valuable textual and theoretical insights. While the researchers retained their role as cultural translators, this identity position became more flexible and mobile as researchers and participants interacted to produce knowledge.

[7.2] The projects address the relative rarity of team work in media ethnography (Bird 2003). Despite some operational issues, particularly in a context where the students received a collective rather than an individual grade, the projects demonstrate that Pierre Lévy's ([1994] 1999) collective intelligence model can be

usefully imported into audience studies. Working through disagreements and drawing on a wide range of collective cultural competences, the researchers acknowledged, at least intermittently, that they were "smarter as knowledge communities than as individuals" (Hermes 2009, 124) (note 3).

[7.3] It is worth noting that the material in "Watching *Dallas* Again 3" is translated from Dutch to English. The research group was required to operate bilingually, discussing material in English in class and by e-mail with me, putting this into Dutch to correspond with their informants, then translating their own and their respondents' material from Dutch to English. Finally, Raquel Raj, a native English speaker and nonnative Dutch speaker, worked on the translations to improve comprehensibility while retaining a strong sense of the original voices. Thus, the researchers repeated in condensed form the trajectory of Ang's original work, first published in Dutch in 1982 and then in revised form in English in 1985. In class discussions of Ang's second text, we found some oddities in the English, notably in the informant translations (the series is often referred to as a "film"; the Ewings are described as "that 'immense' family," and a viewer writes that she "lap[s] it up" [Ang 1985, 57, 100]), which made us speculate that perhaps Ang had revised and translated her own text while Della Couling did so for the respondents' texts. Subsequently, though this is not articulated in the essay itself, there was a high level of self-consciousness about the responsibilities of translation, and it added a substantial extra burden to the decoding enterprise. The whole process speaks to the underarticulated role of translation in audience studies.

[7.4] This exercise demonstrates that it is both possible and productive to adhere to the principles of Ang's pioneering study even in this postbroadcast, or post-TV, mediasphere. The research offers interesting stories about a particular moment of audience reception. At precisely the moment that Jason Mittell (2012–13) was codifying "complex TV" (also a course text), these stories point to the complexity of responses to seemingly noncomplex TV. Discourses of nostalgia, irony, and genre modulate the televisual literacy of the projects' informants. Eschewing a sociological framework and a focus on everyday life, the researchers attended to the aesthetic issues that preoccupied Ang, along with a new focus on the TV landscape.

[7.5] Perhaps most significantly, however, the research process itself generated new insights and reshaped (some of) the researchers in unexpected ways. In the process, new television audiences and audience pleasures were created that do not so much repeat the past as connect it with the present. In this context, I want to end with part of an e-mail from one of the researchers, Raquel Raj, who writes that the project

[7.6] forced me to reconsider my views on reality TV and soaps. Soaps were definitely at the bottom of my list, with reality TV right behind. After

our project, I started watching *Days of Our Lives*—in part because I remembered watching it occasionally with my mom and grandma during mid-day breaks in the heat of summer vacation, but also because Mittell... said so little about soaps in his book...After reading the responses to our *Dallas* questions and realizing that people enjoyed watching—I mean really enjoyed!—a show I had to *Clockwork Orange* my eyes open to watch, I felt really enthusiastic about finding new vistas of viewing enjoyment and/or reexamining the old. All these months later, I'm still watching *Days* and loving that old character decisions from 25 years ago come back to haunt those characters in the present. It's impressive that the writers are so invested in going back to the old scripts and episodes and showing how history repeats itself. (May 21, 2013)

[7.7] Raj demonstrates the value of feeling sentimental about television and audiences. This is not the time to defriend but to remix the old paradigms of the new audience research, and in so doing produce new nostalgic subjects.

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## 8. Acknowledgments

[8.1] I would like to thank Anne Kustritz and Emma England for their thoughtful comments on earlier versions of the students' essays. Special thanks are due to Raquel Raj and Mabel Wale, who undertook the mammoth task of revising the original essays for publication.

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## 9. Notes

1. While completing this piece, I came across Bevin Yeatman's 2011 essay on audiences, which, like the present project, is inspired by Ang's insights. However, Yeatman argues that her work was "significant for a particular time and medium but things have changed" (644).
2. In the context of the present project, the European COST action "Transforming Audiences" argues that we should remember the historical legacies of particular research methods. However, the work they have produced so far is arguably part of the text-aversion school, focusing mostly on densely theorized methodological issues. See the special section on "Multi-method Audience Research" (2012) in *Participations* 9 (2).
3. What was also revealed, however, was the difficulty of sustaining team work, especially in a pedagogic context, over a longer period. The course finished in January 2013, after which some students embarked on internships or study abroad, while



others starting writing their dissertations. In practice, this meant that the burden of revision fell to a couple of students.

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# Pedagogy

## Watching *Dallas* again 2: Locating viewing pleasures—An audience study of the new *Dallas*

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[0.1] *Abstract*—This audience reception project performs a study of the first season of the new *Dallas* (2012–14) in terms of its lack of ironic viewing, which relegates the show to a restorative form of nostalgia.

[0.2] *Keywords*—Ien Ang; Nostalgia; TV studies

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### 1. Introduction

[1.1] The original *Dallas* (1978–91), which built on the ongoing, overlapping serialized narratives popularized in the first real prime time soap opera, *Peyton Place* (1964–69), was the basis of an entirely new genre of prime time soaps that hit the airwaves in the 1980s, including *Knots Landing* (1979–93, a *Dallas* spin-off), *Dynasty* (1981–90), and *Falcon Crest* (1981–90). The new *Dallas* (2012–14) displays a remarkable fidelity to the legendary series that inspired it. Not only with respect to its narrative development—the interplay between predictability and complexity—but also with respect to its visual style—the lush colors, the static camera, the (for current standards) long shot durations, and the harmonically balanced, precisely symmetrical image compositions—the sequel boasts a desire for continuation, if not restoration. Of course, this mode of what Svetlana Boym (2001, 41) terms "restorative nostalgia" is only one way of framing the new *Dallas*. Does it not also inhabit its conceptual opposite? That is, is its nostalgia not also highly reflective precisely in its excessive mode of continuation/restoration? To relate it to the production of viewing pleasure, does it not also invite an ironic gaze?

[1.2] This study attempts to broach these questions. This research project, which studied a sequel, is itself constructed in a follow-up logic, with Ien Ang's pioneering

*Watching Dallas*, published in Dutch in 1982 and translated into English in 1985, as well as her more recent work on ironic viewers (2007), as the guiding precursor texts. Our project is brought into dialogue with Ang's work both methodologically and in terms of the interpretive framework. It is this dialogue that functions as our operational logic, through which the (necessary) differences in methodology and the divergences in the data are teased out, then ultimately, historically, and culturally situated with respect to contemporary television practices and their attached forms of viewing pleasure. These contemporary practices, particularly the diversification and "genrefication" of present-day television, offer a likely explanation for the distinct lack of ironic viewing we ultimately found among the audience members of the new *Dallas*.

## 2. Methodology—Choosing a research question

[2.1] On the basis of our conviction that the great expansion and diversification of television practices since the original series went off air had produced similarly variegated and wide-ranging forms of audience pleasures, we initially expected to find a great multiplicity of perspectives on the new *Dallas*. We ourselves already evinced a diversity of affective positioning, ranging from absolute enjoyment in immersion to a radically distanced, critical mode of viewing. Yet although we were internally diverse, we were nevertheless united by a certain obliqueness of our viewing angles. Each of our affective positions was slightly askew, affected by the fact that we had watched the first season of the show with such great attentiveness because it was a necessary precursor for this research. Of course, there is no such thing as a purely academic exercise: no matter how hard one tries, one will become emotionally invested—not only in the topic at hand, but also in the supposedly objective angle as such. This also demonstrates the problematic of the very attempt at establishing an exact typology of viewing pleasures. If one can be emotionally objective, one can also be immersively ironic, but by no means do we wish to pitch irony, immersion, or value against each another.

[2.2] Indeed, what makes Ang's original study so fascinating is precisely this dismantling of the charged value dichotomy between spectatorial pleasures. Although, as Ang wrote, these polarities are "difficult to reconcile," in her reading, irony turns into a modality of "real love"—a "weapon" that enables one to enjoy a supposedly shallow show "without suffering pangs of conscience" (Ang 1985, 109, 101). Spectatorial distance (the degree of one's removal from the medium) is situated; one's viewing position constantly slides, eroded by the push and pull of affect. If between us we displayed an array of directionalities of investment and affective movements, these movements were commonly vectored and traversed by certain institutional requirements and scholarly ambitions. Whether our viewing position was emotionally invested, critically distanced, or clinically immersive, our authorial position was

inevitably framed by the way our passion is supposed to be articulated in accordance with the discursive boundaries of what qualifies as an academic exercise.

[2.3] Negotiating our individual readings, we began by deciding how to phrase the question we would pose. Ang's original question, translated into English, ran as follows:

[2.4] I like watching the TV serial *Dallas* but often get odd reactions to it. Would anyone like to write and tell me why you like watching it too, or dislike it? I should like to assimilate these reactions in my university thesis. Please write to...(Ang 1985, 10)

[2.5] As a consequence of the aforementioned desire for our project to create a dialogue with Ang's, we aimed to maintain many elements of her work so as to retain a common framework in which comparisons could take place. We thus decided to stay as close to Ang's original phrasing as possible, making only changes that were necessary to reflect the different circumstances of our project and to increase the quality and quantity of responses. Consequently, we changed it from the first person singular to the first person plural in order to display that ours was a joint project. We also changed the wording from "Would anyone like to" to "Would you like to," because we thought that a more direct interpolation of each individual, rather than appealing to the whole viewing public at once, might increase the number of replies and elicit more immediate, personally invested responses. Additionally, we rendered the final part of the question more succinct to hold the interest of participants, and we deliberately kept the description of our project nonspecific so as to avoid unwittingly influencing respondents with the presumed importance of the project. The question we decided on therefore reads as follows:

[2.6] We like watching the TV serial *Dallas* but often get odd reactions to it. Would you like to briefly share with us why you like or dislike watching it, as a contribution to our research project?

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### 3. Methodology—Reaching the audience

[3.1] In order to provide a counterpoint to our colleagues' concurrent project, which focused, like Ang's, on the Dutch audience, we decided to access an international, mostly American, audience. We narrowed this focus further, choosing particularly to target the Dolly Parton fan scene, in which a member of our research group is involved, because it had displayed a lively discussion about the new season of *Dallas* when it was airing in the United States. It promised to be a group with many members likely to have watched the show, but one that was not demarcated simply by this viewership, which could provide a mix of casual and dedicated viewers. In keeping

with Ang's methodology, we approached our audience as insiders in order to be as conversant as possible with the cultural discourse in which our audience was embedded. Thus, our insider posted the question as her Facebook status and also in one of the larger Dolly Parton Facebook groups.

[3.2] Within a few days, however, we realized that this approach did not generate enough responses for the comprehensive response analysis we had in mind. In fact, we had received no responses to the first post and only two responses to the second. Neither of the responses to the second post was productive. The first discussed only the old *Dallas*, the second failed to directly address the series, and both were too short to permit us to draw any meaningful conclusions.

[3.3] Consequently, we had to make changes to our methodology. Assuming that the lack of (useful) responses occurred because of the current off-air status of the series—which means that casual viewers would not be sufficiently engaged to respond—we decided to directly tap the *Dallas* fan base. We thus researched Facebook groups and Internet forums for *Dallas*, for TNT (the American cable network broadcasting *Dallas*), and for soap operas in general, singling out all those that allowed questions of extratextual nature and use (like research) to be posted. Because of the aforementioned problem with the first attempt, we decided to clarify that we wished to discuss the new *Dallas*. We also wanted to overcome the earlier problem of the brevity of responses, so we included an e-mail option for those respondents eager to reply in greater detail or with wider exemplification. The amended question read:

[3.4] We liked watching the new season of the TV serial *Dallas* but often get odd reactions to it. Would you like to briefly share with us why you like or dislike watching it, as a contribution to our research project? For longer responses, feel free to send us an e-mail at [redacted].

[3.5] We posted the amended question in three Facebook groups and four online forums. In order to reanimate slackening or inactive discussions, we attempted to encourage individual respondents to elaborate further on their points (with moderate success). After all the discussions had died down, we collated the results. In total, we received 43 responses, of varying length and relevance, from 23 individual respondents.

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## 4. Collating responses—Nostalgia and irony

[4.1] The comments in response to our questions shared basic themes with the responses collated in *Watching Dallas*. As Ang's findings display, viewers of soap opera-style television programs switch effortlessly between textual and extratextual discourses, while describing a pleasure in the show's narrative development and its

overall aesthetics as well as their personal engagement with the show's characters as if they are (yet being aware that they are not) real people (Ang 1985; Allen 1995). This form of media literacy is also demonstrated in the comments by the 2012 audience, where posts veer from discussions about the show's writers, to ratings, to set decoration and acting skills, to the characters' actions or personalities. In addition, there are numerous references to executive producer Cynthia Cidre, sometimes shortened to CC, who is almost treated like a character in the show. This discussion of the show runner and her decisions shows just how involved the commentators are with the show. In an interesting example of this involvement and fan appropriation of a cultural product, RR writes: "J.R. as ineffectual old fool is not a good look. CC should know that now based on feedback. No excuses this time. And, it's not about what CC likes. CC is in the wrong business if she does not get that now."

[4.2] There are, however, two fundamental differences between our findings and Ang's original results. The first difference can be found in the nostalgia underlying many of the comments of those viewers who brought the series into a direct relation to its famous precursor. One respondent, John, writes: "There was not one good original idea in the whole season. Anything that was good in it came from the original." He is not alone in this nostalgic praise of the original *Dallas*. Larry Hagman also receives rave reviews. AW writes: "J.R./Hagman is king," and respondent Soaplover adds "seeing the old characters again" as a reason to watch. On *Soapcentral*, Luca states: "I love the homage to the old *Dallas*." Many of the complimentary comments refer to the original show, and similarly, most of the critique takes a comparative approach.

[4.3] Whereas this first difference is of course an expected result for responses to a show that claims to be a sequel, the second difference is more significant on the interpretive level because it directly concerns the two modes of viewing Ang identified in *Watching Dallas*. Ang discerns on the one hand an "affective mode of pleasure, which is based on taking melodrama seriously" and on the other hand an "ironic pleasure," which is "a mode of viewing that is informed by a more intellectually distancing, superior subject position" (2007, 23). This latter mode incorporates a pleasure that runs transverse to the expected horizon of responses—an ambiguous enjoyment in a self-reflexive awareness, or, as Ang put it, a display of "pleasure in the show while simultaneously expressing a confident knowingness about its supposedly 'low' quality" (1985, 5).

[4.4] Yet the responses we received betray no ironic detachment. This is not to say that no critical positions were taken. Viewers are critical of various story lines, acting skills, or the amount of screen time certain characters get, but these elements are presented by respondents as detracting from their enjoyment of the show rather than



a reason to watch it. In other words, there were no comments that suggested viewers were watching *Dallas* because the show is so bad that it's good, or in which viewers were actively distancing themselves from the material. In a prime example, the aforementioned John writes in a highly critical post on *Soapchat*: "And then we come to Jesse Metcalfe, who has almost single-handedly ruined the show." Thus, Metcalfe's lack of acting skills does not raise the issue of the campy character of the show but rather detracts from the pleasure experienced. To illustrate his involvement, this same informant is not afraid to praise elements of the show he does enjoy, like the skills of the director and the design of the costumes: "Sue Ellen looked stunning for her age. I loved the way they dressed her, that zipper dress was great." Indeed, the responses stayed on a level of a certain spectatorial deference. That is, all the comments can be located on an upright (as opposed to inverted) pleasure scale, and given Ang's original bifurcated pleasure topography, the lack of ironic responses to our research question posed an interpretive conundrum.

## 5. Does the medium matter? Methodology versus cultural setting

[5.1] Though our findings seem to point to a complete absence of ironic viewing pleasures, it is important to bear in mind that an audience with an ironic stance might be markedly difficult to tap with the kind of research setup we used. Our suspicion is that these viewers are not as invested in the meta-TV community as the audience seeking an authentic form of immersion. The new *Dallas*, however, is just not widely watched enough for a methodological approach similar to Ang's—that is, addressing a more general audience—which might reveal a greater variety in terms of the audience's relation to, and investment in, the show. Then again, *Dallas*'s current lack of popularity might also be a direct indicator of its failure to attract ironic viewers.

[5.2] At first glance, the differences between our findings and Ang's reflect the methodological differences between the two projects. That is to say, the diverging data allude to the specificities and limitations posed by the specific medium—the Internet—through which we both disseminated the question and gathered our responses.

[5.3] Because we distributed the question online, the target group of our project diverged considerably from Ang's, particularly in terms of gender, nationality, and engagement with *Dallas*. Ang posted her question in *Viva*, a general-interest Dutch woman's magazine (Ang 1985). Thus, her target population was heavily weighted toward women from The Netherlands, only some of whom would have been actively engaged with *Dallas*. However, the media used in our research—Facebook groups and Internet forums—led to our respondents having a quite different makeup. As a result of their use of these forums, our target population was considerably more likely to

already be engaged with *Dallas*. The gender of 52 percent and nationality of 74 percent of our participants could be ascertained from their user profiles. Although it could be argued that the identity that these individuals present online may not be identical with their real-world identities, this does not inhibit our claims.

[5.4] Thus, when we speak of our participants, we refer not to the actual individual sitting at his or her computer screen but rather to the identity that individual chooses to present, under his or her chosen pseudonym, in the online environment. This is no different than Ang's study, where the participants presented their identity to the researcher in their letters. This also does not undermine our claims about the effects of these facets of identity on responses; an online gender identity, for example, can still have significant behavioral effects, even if not directly related to the gender of the individual. So of our respondents, 63 percent were male and originated from a wide range of countries, including Canada, Sweden, Australia, Ireland, and the United Kingdom; however, the majority of participants (59 percent) were American.

[5.5] By accessing more heavily engaged *Dallas* fans, we could have inadvertently filtered out all those who view it ironically. Yet it is not self-evident that just because a viewer takes an ironic stance, he or she is not also significantly invested in the show or would not also enjoy discussing it online. Furthermore, this argument would only be feasible for forums dedicated specifically to *Dallas* but would not apply so readily to the more general interest groups and forums in which we also posted, such as those focused on TNT or soap operas, none of which generated ironic responses.

[5.6] Thus, instead it could be argued that our lack of ironic viewers occurred because our responses were dominated by North Americans. There is some logic to such an argument; the content of *Dallas* and its cultural codes—language, landscape, gender roles, diegetic and nondiegetic music, modes of social interaction, dominance of capital both politically and culturally—are all easily identifiable as stereotypically North American. Consequently, those identifying as American watching the show might be seen as lacking what Millwood-Hargrave and Gatfield (2002) identify as a critical distance of spectatorship, which is a prerequisite for an ironic viewing.

[5.7] Yet apart from its literalist fallacy, this argument is undermined by the responses we received from non-Americans, which also exhibited no signs of ironic viewing. For example, Luca from Sweden, states, "IMO, it is excellent. I got hooked after episode 2 or 3"; Sofia from Australia states, "I can't praise Hagman enough: I thought he was absolutely brilliant," a point also agreed on by Hill23 from Scotland, who argues, "Hagman was superb...He is a formidable actor," and by Greg from Canada, who overflowed with excitement over "the fact that DALLAS IS BACK ON TV!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!" Hence, the responses we received from non-Americans do not suggest that they have a greater perspectival distance. That is, different national identification

does not in this case result in a more explicitly critical, ironically distanced mode of viewing.

[5.8] In terms of gender, if anything, one would expect our population to result in more ironic views being expressed, not less. Soap operas are usually aimed at a predominantly female audience, and although *Dallas* is in many ways not a typical soap opera, Ang agrees that its primary audience is still female, which then might be seen as creating a distanced form of viewing for the male audience (Ang 1985). This is corroborated by Millwood-Hargrave and Gatfield's (2002) study of British soap operas, where they found that ironic viewing of soap operas was more prevalent among the male audience. Male opinions are much more heavily represented in our results than in Ang's, yet we still found no evidence of ironic viewing practices. Consequently, the different target groups—emerging through the different media used to disseminate the question—do not explain the diverging data.

[5.9] The remaining question is whether the differences between the media through which responses were received are responsible for the lack of ironic viewers. The most crucial differences relate to publicness and visibility. Unlike Ang's research, where respondents wrote sealed letters addressed to one individual, almost all of our respondents replied through Internet forums. Our respondents therefore would have been aware that their contributions were publically available on the Internet, which could have deterred them from writing controversial responses. Moreover, this visibility also means that almost every response is heavily colored by the preceding comments, because discussions in online forums operate as extended dialogues with multiple nonlinear cross-references, rather than a series of linearly developed arguments. This is evident in one of the threads that began in response to our question, where three users began a long discussion, referring back and forth between their posts. Consequently, many responses either reply directly to those that came before them or are likely to contain similar themes. It could be argued, therefore, that when the standard response in fan forums is adoration, ironic viewers may be discouraged from responding, due both to normative reasons and to the visibility of responses and dialogic nature of the discussions.

[5.10] Yet this foregrounding of the new visibility in our approach underestimates the visibility of Ang's responses as well as her respondents' awareness of this visibility. In her question, she states: "I should like to assimilate these reactions in my university thesis," meaning that the respondents would have been aware that they were not writing just for one single individual but that their views would potentially be accessible on a much wider scale. Furthermore, online forums arguably allow (or even invite) a greater form of anonymity than individual letters, however securely sealed they might be. Our users certainly maintained this anonymity; all used pseudonyms.

As Sherry Turkle (2011) suggests in her study of online identity, the anonymity in Internet forums allows users to transgress the boundaries that circumscribe their off-line cultural discourses and hence allows them to act in ways that potentially undercut their morally anchored public identities. In Turkle's words, "The years of identity construction are recast in terms of profile production" (182).

[5.11] Indeed, because the form of visibility in online forums is markedly inauthentic, it could also be seen as encouraging users to be more controversial and to display their diverging, critically distant, and ironic angles on the show. Additionally, while it is likely the case that earlier responses would color later ones, this would not necessarily discourage people from expressing their ironic positions; they could have responded to earlier comments and discussed the same themes while still articulating disagreement. In short, perspectives pertaining to the specificity of the research medium do not suffice for an explanation of the absence of the parodic dimension that is significantly present in Ang's findings.

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## 6. *Dallas* and contemporary media culture

[6.1] If not on a methodological level, *Dallas*'s position with respect to contemporary media culture does matter. In fact, a central reason for the lack of ironic responses is the change of size of its audience compared to the original series. The original was broadcast on CBS and the 2012 *Dallas* on TNT. Though this entails a switch from a public network to cable, both channels are/were available to almost all US households. Comparing the kind of viewers both shows attracted, it is nonetheless important to note that CBS is part of the "big three" networks (along with ABC and NBC), which, during the run time of the original *Dallas*, dominated American television. Attracting at its height over 90 million viewers for its legendary episode, "Who shot J.R.?", the original *Dallas* was immensely popular, if not generation-defining, with respect to 1980s popular culture. With respect to current television ratings, TNT's *Dallas* was only relatively successful, averaging 4.5 million viewers during its first season. This difference in audience size plays a crucial role with respect to the absence of reappropriated forms of spectatorship. Because *Dallas* 2012 does not come close to the dominant position in the pop cultural discourse that the original series inhabited, there will be far fewer casual viewers watching it solely to engage in discussions about the latest highlights of popular culture. It is among this group that ironic viewers are more likely to be found.

[6.2] Furthermore, because TNT is an almost exclusively drama-oriented broadcaster—its motto boasts, "We know drama"—another reason for the lack of ironic viewers is the fact that contemporary productions of irony exist largely outside this genre. A genre that is deeply marked with irony is reality TV, with MTV's *Jersey Shore* (2009–

12) its chief exponent. Looking at message boards relating to *Jersey Shore*, it is evident that it has a large following of ironic viewers. As one viewer almost apologetically explains on the *Jersey Shore* message boards at tv.com (<http://www.tv.com/>): "I find it amazing that I am actually so obsessed with this show. I realize how stupid they all are and how their actions are mildly retarded, but at the same time I can't look away." Thus, it is the diversity of the current television pleasurescape—with distinct shows like *Jersey Shore* catering to ironic viewing habits—that to a great degree explains the lack of voices of ironic enjoyment in the new *Dallas*. Such a finding, although not in line with Ang's findings in her original study, accords with her more recent work. Before the show's return was announced, Ang presciently predicted that *Dallas*, if watched today, would not attract ironic viewers, primarily because it would be "no longer in touch with the current, more explicitly ironic structure of feeling that has come to dominate" (Ang 2007, 6).

## 7. Locating irony

[7.1] Neither methodology nor audience composition can fully explain the complete absence of irony demonstrated in our gathered responses. The most likely reason is instead the increasingly diversified—and to a great degree genrefied—television landscape. Genrefication necessarily entails the tagging of viewing pleasures. The ironic enjoyment Ang found among *Dallas* viewers in 1982 is now first and foremost associated with MTV and its numerous makeover-themed reality TV shows, such as *Teen Mom* (2009–) and *Jersey Shore*, to name only two. Unlike *Dallas*, however, these television shows offer pleasure only on a "more is more" level happily embraced by its audience.

[7.2] This raises a question: Can viewing pleasure still be considered ironic when it only fulfills the horizon of pleasures tagged onto the show consumed? Relatedly, is an ironic pleasure not always based on a transverse act—that is, a deliberate misreading? With these questions in mind, current television practices display a transvaluation of irony. Laughing at 'The Situation' roaring, "It's T-shirt time!" is not ironic (only perhaps on a heightened, supposedly deferential level). That is, in an intricate ironic inversion, one might be again deferential in a secondary loyalty to the text. Our findings, however, do not hint at this mode of reading of the new *Dallas*. As such, *Dallas*'s lack of ironic viewers relegates the show to a merely restorative form of nostalgia. The potential pleasure derived from this mode of viewing quickly eroded, as Larry Hagman's death caused the show to lose one definite link to the past—and unquestionably its best actor. Although the second part of season 3 premiered in August 2014, the show was canceled a few months later. Though our study revealed some audience members who experienced genuine immersion and engagement with

the current cast and story lines, it is clear that the limited audience was not enough to safeguard the show's existence.

## 8. Acknowledgments

[8.1] Thanks to Alexandra Zumpolle for her contributions. Revised by Raquel L. Raj and Mabel Wale.

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# Pedagogy

## Watching *Dallas* again 3: Reassessing Ien Ang's *Watching Dallas*

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[0.1] *Abstract*—This audience reception project performs an audience study of the first season of the new *Dallas* (2012–14). It draws on Ien Ang's *Watching Dallas* ([1982] 1985) to analyze the production of irony and nostalgia. We observe that the blend of ironic viewing and nostalgia results in a more ironic, reflective nostalgia, in contrast to a more serious restorative type of nostalgia.

[0.2] *Keywords*—Nostalgia; TV studies

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### 1. Introduction

[1.1] "The one and only *Dallas* is back with more delicious drama. J.R., Bobby and Sue Ellen Ewing return to the ranch...joined by the next generation of Ewings, who take ambition and deception to a wicked new level" ([http://shop.tntdrama.com/media/index.php?v=tnt\\_shows\\_dallas\\_media](http://shop.tntdrama.com/media/index.php?v=tnt_shows_dallas_media)). An American television serial about a family living on Southfork Ranch in Texas, the 2012 version of *Dallas* picks up where the old left off, with Ewing family feuds, old rivalries, and oil intrigues. Taking its cues from the original show, which premiered in 1978 and ran for 14 seasons until its cancellation in 1991, the new *Dallas*'s main plot revolves around one part of the Ewing family trying to drill for oil on the ranch and the other part trying to stop the drilling in order to preserve the family's lands. The new *Dallas* premiered in 2012, exactly 30 years after Ien Ang's book *Het Geval Dallas* (*Watching Dallas*) was first published. *Watching Dallas* analyzed audience reactions to the television series. This project intends to do the same for the 2012 version of *Dallas*.

[1.2] In her research, Ang analyzed the reception of *Dallas* (1978–91) by gauging audience reactions to the show. She placed an advertisement in *Viva*, a Dutch women's magazine, asking readers to respond to the following question: "I like

watching *Dallas*, but often get odd reactions to it. Would anyone like to write and tell me why you like watching it too, or dislike it? I would like to assimilate these reactions in my university thesis." She received over 40 letters, all of which she used in her research. We conducted our research in a similarly qualitative manner.

[1.3] Two decades have passed since the end of the original show, which situates the *Dallas* reboot (2012–14) in a brand-new television era. When Ang conducted her original research in The Netherlands, there were no commercial channels. In the early 1980s, The Netherlands had only two channels, with a third added in 1988. This is a completely different matter today: more than 25 cable channels alone are currently broadcast inside the country. Does this freedom affect our reception of television shows? We intended to examine how this changed media landscape has influenced the viewing experience.

[1.4] Thus, we analyzed viewers' reactions to the new 2012 *Dallas* series in order to find out what kind of meaning viewers give to their experiences and how that differs from 30 years ago. Although we focused on how audiences perceive the new *Dallas*, we also considered how media consumption has changed in general.

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## 2. Methodology

[2.1] Following Ang's research on *Dallas*, we too relied on the use of qualitative case studies rather than quantitative methods. Forty-two people responded to Ang's *Viva* advertisement, mailing in letters of varying length. Placing advertisements was the most effective method of gathering audience data at that time; however, technological change has meant that additional options were now available for our research. Because it is faster and more economical, and because it can reach many more potential participants than a magazine advertisement, we initially chose to use the Internet to make contact with potential viewers and invite them to share their experiences of watching *Dallas*. We decided to use a question similar to the one Ang placed in *Viva*, making some small changes so that it was simpler and directly addressed the reader in order to increase the number of responses: "We like the TV series *Dallas*, but often get odd reactions when we tell people. Would you like to tell us why you like or dislike the series? We will use the answers in our research project."

[2.2] Our question was posted on social media Web sites frequented by our friends as well as sites that were likely to be viewed by large numbers of individuals who had watched the series, a combination that we hoped would elicit a range of responses. Specifically, we posted the question on Fok.nl (<http://www.fok.nl/>, a general media site in Dutch); the Unihockey Club Face Off Facebook page (a Groningen University sports venue); the Web site of the University of Groningen American Studies Study



Association; TV.com (<http://www.tv.com>); Reddit (<http://www.reddit.com/>); Forumer (<http://www.forumer.com>); and the Net5 Facebook page. Respondents could reply either publicly on the topic itself or send us personal messages, and we decided to personally contact all the respondents individually to ask them if they would elaborate on their previous response.

[2.3] Unfortunately, responses to our question were too limited to provide sufficient material for this research. Consequently, we decided to supplement this material with additional information from friends and family. We contacted members of our own personal networks by e-mail and solicited them to take part, using the same question.

[2.4] This meant that, unlike in Ang's study, many of our participants watched the series purely to take part in this research; also, some of the respondents did not watch the entire series. Also in contrast to Ang's research, our sample was more heterogeneous in terms of gender and age. The social media and forums we chose were used by both men and women. This was also the case with the family members and friends we approached: we asked men as well as women to watch the series. Ang used only the women's magazine *Viva* in her research, which resulted in only three reactions from men (1982, 14). Questions regarding respondent distortion will be addressed in the discussion section of this essay.

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### 3. Results

[3.1] Ultimately, our sample consisted of 22 reactions, 8 from men and 14 from women. The age division of the respondents—11 under 40 years old and 11 over 40—is important to keep in mind, as it represents those who have not seen the original *Dallas* and those who have, respectively. Our justification for using a nonrepresentative sample is the same as Ang's (1982, 9). Because the responses only serve the purpose of exemplifying the insights of the researchers, misrepresentation is not an issue. It is clear to the researchers that no generalizations about larger populations can be made on the basis of this sample.

[3.2] The positions of the respondents toward *Dallas* are clear from each response: none of the responses was neutral. For our convenience, positive respondents are called enthusiasts and negative respondents skeptics. In order to respect the privacy of the respondents, only the parts of the responses that are relevant to our argument are included. Additionally, respondents are identified by a random set of initials.

### 4. Media landscape: Genre

[4.1] An analysis of the respondents' experiences of viewing *Dallas* is premised on the notion that viewing television is an overdetermined material practice. If television shows are cultural products, then reactions to them are reactions to cultural constructs. Accordingly, reactions are also structured by ideological systems of meaning and value. Therefore, in our research, we infer that the ideology of mass culture shapes the way our respondents articulate their experiences of viewing *Dallas*. In *Watching Dallas*, Ang relies on the same presupposition. She notes that because there is no experience outside of ideology, the aim of her work is to describe how the personal experience of watching *Dallas* depends on the ideology of mass culture (1982, 23). In order to be a useful update to Ang's work, our research needs to take a similar approach to the new *Dallas*.

[4.2] In order to answer our central questions—namely, what kind of meaning do the viewers of *Dallas* give to their experiences of the show? and how does that differ from 30 years ago?—we note three aspects of the new *Dallas*. First, changes in the media landscape have certainly changed the experiences of watching television over the last 30 years. Consequently, the new *Dallas* must be contextualized within the current media landscape. Second, we discuss how viewers experience melodrama in the contemporary television format. Finally, we analyze how memories of the old *Dallas* shape experiences of watching the new.

[4.3] The new *Dallas* has remained the same as the old in some ways, though it has transformed in others. Differences between the original show and its sequel have not gone unnoticed by the audience. Changes are the result of both content-related factors like exoticism and plot, and more practical issues such as new viewing options.

[4.4] Exoticism and glamour both play roles in the attractiveness of *Dallas* for some of our respondents. Exoticism here means a foreignness that was important to Dutch viewers of the old *Dallas*. Respondent AP wrote:

[4.5] 30 years ago, watching the show was really relaxing because it showed a completely different world than my own. There were fewer television programs than now. Glamour programs (like RTL-Boulevard, etc.) did not exist yet. The Netherlands was less Americanized and *Dallas* was a sort of dream world that, nonetheless, corresponded to an existing reality far from my own.

[4.6] BL similarly discusses elements of glamor in *Dallas*, mentioning "sports cars with shiny wheels," as well as physical appeal, when writing, "The prettiest girl swings between JR junior and Bobby Jr (is his name Christofer?)." AP, above, observes that she no longer has a need for glamor or dreamlike worlds; to BL, however, glamor adds to the appeal of the show and her viewing experience.

[4.7] These glamorous elements might also contribute to the common categorization of *Dallas* as a soap opera among respondents. From a production point of view, *Dallas* does not fit the standards for a soap opera. It should rather be classified as a prime-time drama. Both the original *Dallas* and its new incarnation aired weekly, rather than daily; they were not produced for daytime consumption. Even so, research participants compare *Dallas* to soap operas, noting its much higher production values, quality scripts, and aesthetic appeal. JB writes, "*Dallas* changed my main objection to soap operas, namely that they're of low production quality." FF notes, "My recollection of soap operas is that they go on without end. For some reason this show has created the impression it will end at some point."

[4.8] It appears that the production values of the show alone are not what keep respondents interested in the show, as the quality of *Dallas*'s plotlines is frequently measured by entertainment value rather than artistic merit. BL remarks, "The incredibly bad plot is really relaxing to watch." Respondent AA writes,

[4.9] Enough things happen in the show to keep it interesting. The blend of old and new characters is reasonably entertaining, and everyone has enough sympathetic traits to still be likable. The changes in plot are as they should be in a soap opera. Over the top, but exciting all the same.

[4.10] Despite its prime-time slot, the characters and story lines in *Dallas* closely resemble those of soap operas—and that is exactly how people experience and judge the show. This could explain why fans of the soap genre are generally positive about *Dallas*. As both BL and AA mentioned, to those familiar with the genre, the soap opera standard of rapid plot development and frequent moments of high intensity add to the enjoyment of watching *Dallas*.

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## 5. Media landscape: Programming

[5.1] Production values and content are not the only technical issues that influence viewer satisfaction. As mentioned above, the television landscape in The Netherlands has significantly changed between the first broadcast of the original *Dallas* on the TROS channel in 1981 and the airing of the new series of *Dallas* in 2012. A change in the number of networks has also caused a change in television programming; similar programs of the same genre are often aired at the same time. Respondents point out that programming has a significant effect on their *Dallas* experience, and consequently the popularity of the new series. WP said that *Dallas* faced hardly any competition when it originally aired—something that is very different today. AH comments, "Nowadays there is so much on television that programs really have to distinguish themselves from others. This series distinguishes itself only by the familiar name, not

because of the content." RP notes something similar in her response: "In the past you watched it because there was nothing else on TV, now you don't watch it because there are too many other programs on."

[5.2] These responses show that in viewing the old series of *Dallas*, people were searching for entertainment. As one of the relatively few shows on television at the time, *Dallas* proved successful at providing said entertainment. Soap operas today face competition from many different genres, including complex and reality television. Viewers are forced to make choices in what they consume. This deliberate decision to actively spend time watching a show implies a certain amount of dedication. Shows have to earn continued viewing. DG states her reasoning for not watching *Dallas* any more: "First, because these series are a dime a dozen, and second because I just don't have time for it." This response also hints at an additional reason for the current *Dallas*'s underwhelming ratings: as a result of technological changes, viewers are no longer confined to static programming. Fewer people watch shows on television, choosing instead to watch via mobile devices or online (either by downloading or by streaming), which further strengthens the aforementioned active choice and investment factors (Stelter 2012). In The Netherlands, it is not uncommon to stream shows that were released in the United States but are not yet available internationally. New modes of programming within the media landscape may have added to the decreased interest among our respondents in a classic television show like *Dallas*. In this light, it is also worth mentioning that several respondents stopped watching the new series of *Dallas* after satisfying their initial curiosity about the new series, or when the show failed to live up to their expectations.

[5.3] The meaning of *Dallas* in relation to programming has certainly changed between the original and the new series. Today, *Dallas* finds some of its significance in the active dedication involved in watching the show. This is underlined by the choice viewers make when choosing *Dallas* over other shows—a less prevalent option 30 years ago. Additionally, *Dallas*'s meaning to its viewers is highlighted by the investment of time involved in watching the show on demand.

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## 6. Melodrama and irony

[6.1] The contemporary television format also affects how viewers experience melodrama. While reading through our informants' comments, similarities in vocabulary immediately gave us food for thought. The words *tedious* and *plot twist* are repeated responses. These words have everything to do with the soap status of *Dallas*. The soap opera differs from the normal TV serial in its long life: a soap opera can go on virtually forever, whereas serials have, or at least give the impression of having, conclusive endings. Despite the questions we have raised regarding whether *Dallas*

actually fits within the definition of a soap opera, it is evident that our respondents still associated the show (or the *Dallas* brand) with this genre. Respondents, both enthusiasts and skeptics, pick up on the soap status of *Dallas* by commenting on its open-endedness, mostly with the word *lengthy*:

[6.2] It was fairly tedious, but JR's amazingly cunning character, in contrast to a number of disgustingly virtuous characters, and the completely unrealistic storyline kept the series fun anyway. The program almost attained a Cult status. (VA)

[6.3] I didn't like the new episodes of *Dallas* because the pace is slow, the storyline is quite boring and overall it seems old-fashioned. It reminds me somewhat of *The Bold and the Beautiful*, in which very little happens in an episode and that makes it tedious. (HT)

[6.4] From these responses, it seems that there are two dominant positions toward the soap status of *Dallas* and its melodrama. Skeptics would typically use the characteristics of the soap opera in a formal way, where "tedious" and "plot twist" connote "tiring" and "boring." On the other hand, admirers use the same words to indicate an ironic reading of *Dallas*. Ang also noticed an ironic viewer position in her study of the original *Dallas*. According to Ang, the ironic viewer position transforms serious melodramatic narratives into comedies (1982, 29). Ang finds her explanation for the ironic position in Michel Foucault's "The Order of Discourse." Foucault (1981) argues that ironic discourse aims to make the object graspable. Through the ironic position, the subject places him- or herself in a superior position in relation to the object. Viewers reconcile the ideology of mass culture (that soap operas are of low quality, for example) with their experience of pleasure by finding enjoyment in those very elements that position the show in a lower cultural category (Ang 1985, 99).

[6.5] The ironic position seems to prevail among enthusiasts. This is a development that relates to the contemporary mode of viewing television. Because television has become so self-reflexive—perhaps even self-ridiculing—the audience has responded in a similar fashion by ridiculing the television shows from an ironic position. The audience presents *Dallas* as a guilty pleasure in an attempt to apologize for liking melodrama. Additionally, viewers even involve the serial's consciousness about its norms to articulate their ironic experience:

[6.6] Also the way Christoffer [*sic*] first marries the trickster, only to jump into a relationship with his ex (who keeps swinging between JR junior and Bobby junior), then makes up with the trickster and moves on again etc. etc. I really enjoy that. (BL)

[6.7] BL sees the show's norms as the basis for his pleasure in watching *Dallas*. Involvement with what we might call the habits of a serial is an aspect of the contemporary television viewer experience. Jason Mittell (2012–13) argues that contemporary television has pioneered new forms of engagement for the audience. The audience ironizing the norms of the serial is not just an apology for the low cultural status of soaps but also a manifestation of engagement with recognizable paradigms. It is therefore not surprising that none of the respondents articulated an "immersed" experience of *Dallas*; the contemporary mode for viewing television serials is all about engagement with the norms that the serial itself is conscious of. An ironic experience seems to be the current reaction to dealing with melodramatic discourse.

## 7. Nostalgia

[7.1] We found that ironic viewership was accompanied by nostalgia. Many respondents compared the new *Dallas* to the old, particularly those who remembered the original series. For these respondents, expectations for the new *Dallas* were shaped primarily by memories of the original. These memories are often the main reason for watching the new version of *Dallas* in the first place:

[7.2] I used to love *Dallas*...I watched the new series once and some of the old actors were still in the cast, to my surprise. Fun, I thought. But it was a disappointment. The new series isn't any worse than the old one but I just wasn't into it anymore. (JO)

[7.3] When asked why *Dallas* belonged in the past, JO replied:

[7.4] The new *Dallas*'s plot is similar to the one in the old series. I'm not really interested in immersing myself in it again. There are better shows.

[7.5] VA notes that the old characters are the same, a point she liked, but that "the second generation is too young, too slick, and not cunning enough." Though she thinks the story line is no worse than before, she stopped watching the new *Dallas*. Other respondents gave similar reactions but made their nostalgic feelings explicit:

[7.6] I used to watch *Dallas* as a kid, and I was curious to see what they had made out of it. It was fun to see the old characters again...So nostalgia [*jeugd sentiment*, "childhood feelings"] is the main reason that I watch *Dallas*. (BL)

[7.7] Admittedly, nostalgia is the main reason that I started watching. We used to watch with the entire family and I wanted to know whether or not I would find the new series just as fun and exciting. And I do. The storylines

are solid and the fact that a couple of old actors are still in the cast gives it something extra. Season 1 has concluded, and if there is a second season, I will definitely watch it. (Night\*)

[7.8] I only watched the 1st series, not the 2nd and, to be honest, I don't really feel like watching *another* series. To me, nothing is better than the original Sue-Ellen, Jr, Bobby etc. It was fun *then* but not anymore...*Dallas*, for me, is nostalgia, nothing more. (RP) (note 1)

[7.9] In these cases, the reasons for watching the new *Dallas* are rooted in nostalgia. Most conclude that *Dallas* belongs in the past, and they regard the *Dallas* reboot as an attempt to reconstruct the past. It is entirely likely that *Dallas* has been idealized in their minds. The setting in which they watched the show is as much a part of their lived experiences as the actual episodes. Our respondents watched this show not merely in the past, but also in their younger years, perhaps even their childhoods. Watching *Dallas* with their families was thus a crucial part of the experience. Though none of the respondents said so explicitly, use of the words *nostalgia* and *childhood feelings* indicates that something else has changed as well: the environment in which they watch the series. For this group of viewers, then, memories from the past shape their experiences of watching *Dallas* in the present. The show is not evaluated as distinctly separate; it is juxtaposed against the previous version and the memories attached to watching those old *Dallas* episodes.

[7.10] These respondents noted that they enjoyed the fact that members of the old cast were still in the series. Of the main cast, three actors reprised roles from the original show: Larry Hagman as J.R. Ewing, Linda Gray as Sue-Ellen Ewing, and Patrick Duffy as Bobby Ewing. Though these reactions show elements of the nostalgia involved in viewing the new *Dallas*, the reconstruction is not deemed wholly successful. While some enjoy the new show, others think that the original characters worked better, or that the show belongs in the past. Their viewing experience is clarified by Svetlana Boym's description of reflective nostalgia. Boym notes that "the alluring object of nostalgia" is notoriously elusive (2007, 10). Not only is perfect recreation impossible, but any effort to reconstruct or recapture memories and experiences can result in displacement of our original memories.

[7.11] This process is clearly visible in the quotations of these respondents. They looked forward to the members of the original cast reprising their roles. However, when the new *Dallas* was presented, it was apparent that the show, and the characters, did not live up to their expectations. RP's reaction illustrates this. She notes, "Nothing is better than the original Sue-Ellen, JR, Bobby." One could argue, of course, that these characters are the original Sue-Ellen and Bobby. Yet in her experience, something has changed. Although the actors are the same and the parts

they play are comparable to the previous version of *Dallas*, they are not experienced by longtime viewers in our sample group as the original characters. This can be labeled as a one of the "contradictions of modernity" that belong to "reflective nostalgia" (Boym 2007, 15).

[7.12] Ang's original research concluded that many viewers interpret *Dallas* ironically (1982, 28–29). This remains true today. Though sometimes complicated by nostalgic sentiments, respondents still enjoy the over-the-top plotlines and lack of credibility. Yet viewers of the modern *Dallas* shift between nostalgic and ironic viewing positions, even experiencing nostalgia for their memories of ironic viewing. This blend of irony and nostalgia is an aspect of reflective nostalgia, not of reconstructive nostalgia. In Boym's words, "Restorative nostalgia takes itself dead seriously. Reflective nostalgia, on the other hand, can be ironic and humorous" (2007, 15). However, as ironic nostalgia puts the emphasis on longing and distance, rather than the referent itself, many viewers report an inability to reconstruct the past. As Susan Stewart puts it, "The nostalgic is enamoured of distance, not of the referent itself" (1984, 145). This can lead to an abandonment of the show altogether as nostalgia alone, in some cases, fails to overcome the additional hurdles of the modern television landscape. Though nostalgia has led many respondents to the first few episodes of the new *Dallas*, failure to relive the original experience leads to disappointment with the old characters. That disappointment, the abundance of available programming, and the explicit investment of time required cause some viewers to give up on the show altogether.

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## 8. Discussion

[8.1] Our research question was deliberately left open to the interpretation of our respondents. Although we intended to avoid motivating certain biases, it nevertheless resulted in confusion. Many respondents replied with single-line answers that made analysis almost impossible. Shorter answers made follow-up questions necessary. However, the first responses did reveal initial likes and dislikes of the show, as well as the aspects of the program that informants thought were important. Though perhaps they guided the subjects to a certain extent, the follow-up questions were tailored to the respondents' first replies, giving them chances to elaborate and clarify. The follow-up questions, however, revealed part of our motives and objectives, so the answers could be considered less pure. A more specific research question might have resulted in more detailed answers, which might have eliminated much of this distortion.

[8.2] The media we used to conduct our research in the beginning—that is, fan forums, general forums, and Facebook pages—might be the cause of the brief and nondescriptive answers. The way we asked the question signaled that we were not dedicated fans ourselves. The research question did mention that we liked *Dallas*, but



it did not convey any particular enthusiasm on our part. The Internet community forums we used display the durations of memberships and the numbers of posts that users have made. We, as researchers, were not part of the communities and could be identified as such by our question, membership lengths, and low post counts. This outsider status could have been a cause for the reluctance of community members to reply. Internet users are bombarded with questionnaires and surveys, and therefore we were often greeted with suspicion. Take, for example, the first posts on the Fok! forum: "Please elaborate the background of this research"; "Why is it a surprise that you get mixed reactions?"; "This is just a survey." Only after a more detailed explanation of the research was provided were users willing to respond. This elaboration could have shaped reactions, just like the follow-up questions.

[8.3] The Internet provides, however, various avenues of dialogue. It is unreasonable to expect that subjects would only communicate with the researchers. Participation in public discussion has become more important than it might have been in Ang's age, which might also explain the initial short replies. People realize, consciously or unconsciously, that the researchers can respond instantly and without effort. This means that joining the discussion is not required simply to establish a connection but also because the reactions of respondents are posted in order to create a dialogue. Dialogue, then, is not simply a distortion of this research but an essential part of all communication.

[8.4] It could also be suggested that the fact that a significant proportion of our research population watched the show only for the purposes of aiding our research significantly distorted our results. However, this does not appear to be applicable to our research. Though a potential worry could be that such participants would only give very negative views on the show, as they had not actively chosen to watch it themselves, many instead expressed pleasure at watching the new show. Another potential issue could be the audience lacking context for the new *Dallas*, in particular its relationship with its previous incarnation. However, this too did not prove problematic, as many of those participants who watched the show simply for this research had been viewers of the original version 30 years previously, so they placed the new series within this context. In short, any potential distortions were not evident in our results.

[8.5] In some cases, the population differences were even beneficial for our research, rather than having a negative effect. First, it is likely that our deliberate participant viewers watched the show more attentively than the casual viewers, and the consequences of this—depth and specificity of response—were vital to providing us with a sufficient quality and quantity of material to analyze. Furthermore, by accessing a broader population—those who had not chosen to watch the show as well as those

who had—we had a much wider knowledge base open to us, much of which proved revealing in our analysis. It allowed us to understand some reasons why people may have decided not to watch the show—for a show whose audience is significantly smaller in its new incarnation, this is a particularly important research area—and how this relates to changes in the television landscape over the past 30 years, something we would not have been able to discover otherwise.

## 9. Conclusion

[9.1] Today, even more so than in the 1980s, *Dallas* faces serious competition from a vast array of other media options. Viewing *Dallas*, then, is an active, conscious choice, one shaped in no small part by that very multitude of entertainment options. Ironic readings may be less satisfying when there are competing shows on different channels, but they were still present in the responses we received from viewers. Additionally, many viewers reported nostalgic viewing positions. The blend of ironic reading and nostalgia seems to have resulted in the generation of a more ironic, reflective nostalgia, in contrast to the more serious restorative type of nostalgia. It would be interesting to study which kinds of nostalgia are displayed by different types of viewers. Our sample, however, was too small to do this. Though our viewers clearly reveal nostalgic viewing positions, their reactions are not detailed enough to allow further conclusions on this perspective. What is clear is that *Dallas* failed to permanently win back viewers on the basis of nostalgia. Though producers of the new *Dallas* attempt to invoke feelings of nostalgia to reattract previous fans, consumers ultimately determine their own interpretations.

[9.2] The responses demonstrate that viewers of the new *Dallas* still take ironic viewing positions, as with Ang's original research. The show is praised and criticized with the same words, such as *lengthy*, *tedious*, and *hideous*. One might expect the ironic position to be less prevalent in light of competition from other networks; those who do not like the show for what it is can simply switch channels. The reason for this is unclear. We cannot conclude that people generally like to watch shows from an ironic perspective. What is possible, however, is that the ironic position is a mode of watching television that was used in the past—when there were fewer alternatives—and has become a habit, even though one might argue that it is no longer required to adopt this position. What is clear is that this mode of watching has a significant influence on viewer experience. Consequently, conducting research with the intent of discovering exactly why people like the ironic position might be desirable.

[9.3] The accessibility made possible by the Internet makes the researcher's task both easier and more complicated. It creates many connections, but it also demands more input from the researcher. The open-ended question required a round of follow-

ups to which some users did not respond. The issue remains whether other methodologies might activate more responses.

## 10. Acknowledgments

[10.1] Thanks to Marcel Zantingh for his contributions. Revised by Raquel L. Raj and Mabel Wale.

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## 11. Note

1. Acute accents to stress *tóen* and *nóg* in the original are transcribed as italics.

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# Symposium

## A brief history of fan fiction in Germany

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[0.1] *Abstract*—Because the history of fan fiction in Germany is not congruent with the more dominant Anglo-American history of fan fiction, it requires separate revision and evaluation. By outlining the history of fan fiction in Germany, we present and discuss certain national aspects in the development of the phenomenon, arguing that although the Internet globally links fans, the production of fan fiction is still strongly rooted in a national writing community.

[0.2] *Keyword*—Fan culture

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## 1. Introduction

[1.1] Fan fiction has been explored from the perspectives of literature studies, media studies, cultural studies, and sociology, among others. Nevertheless, there are only few historical examinations of the evolution of fan fiction in media fandoms so far (e.g., Verba 2003; Coppa 2006). The history of local, regional, and national fan fiction communities has also been neglected. However, historical analysis is necessary to gain a deeper understanding of the emergence of certain fandoms, trends, and tropes, and to provide evidence for the heterogeneity of fan communities and their cultural assets and products in general.

[1.2] Although the evolution of the Internet and the predominance of Anglo-American fandom research have flattened the perception of national identity and certain nation-level specific elements in fandom, a closer look reveals that many fan activities, objects, and phenomena taking place within German fan culture are uniquely German: Depeche Mode parties, the Karl-May-Spiele (Karl May festival) in Bad Segeberg, the Vollplaybacktheater (the theatrical reenactment of the radio drama series *Die drei ???* (1979–), based on the American children's detective books series *The Three Investigators* [1964–87]), so-called Trek Dinners (regulars' tables of Star Trek enthusiasts), or parodic fan dubs of Hollywood movies that are colored by regional dialects. Thus there must also be something specifically German about German fan fiction, aside from the language, that may be uncovered in the context of German fan fiction's history ([note 1](#)).

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## 2. The roots of derivative writing in Germany

[2.1] It is no secret that Goethe ([1771] 1896) was a fan of Shakespeare and that Schiller was an admirer of Goethe (Hart 2005). Further, Goethe's novel *Die Leiden des jungen Werther* (*The Sorrows of Young Werther*, 1774) was not only followed by a wave of copycat suicides by readers/fans (the so-called Werther effect), who strongly identified with the tragic protagonist, but also triggered follow-up derivative novels (Wertheriaden) by other authors, including *Freuden des jungen Werthers* (*Young Werther's Pleasures*, 1775) by Friedrich Nicolai and *Der Waldbruder, ein Pendant zu Werthers Leiden* (*The Friar of the Forest*, 1776) by Jakob M. R. Lenz (Engel 1986). These texts, as well as Goethe's and Schiller's writings themselves, are characterized by their reliance on preceding works by other authors. However, these derivative texts do not match the contemporary notion of what fan fiction is (Jamison 2013). Further, their localization in high culture seems to have guaranteed them the impossibility of being critically discussed in the context of fan writings (Bourdieu 2010).

[2.2] These high-culture derivative writers can be contrasted with con man and prolific formula fiction writer Karl May (1842–1912). May provides a safe and conclusive starting point for discussing German derivative fiction using terms drawn from fan studies because he is as close as it gets to a pop cultural phenomenon. May remains one of the most read, most translated, and most adapted writers of the German tongue (Petzel and Wehnert 2002). Even during his lifetime, he had a huge following, with fans who produced stories in May's fictional universe—for example, Franz von Kandolf's *In Mekka* (1923). The earliest documentation of transformative works originating from May's novels is from 1895: May responds to the letter of a fan who had asked for permission to write a story involving the characters Old Shatterhand and Winnetou for boy's magazine *Der Gute Kamerad*. May gave his permission on the condition that the author of the new story "mich von feindlichen Indianern nicht etwa ermorden zu lassen, denn alle meine Leser wissen, daß ich noch lebe" ("not have me killed by hostile Indians, because all my readers know I am still alive") (May [1895] 1998, 41, our translation). May had spread the legend that his novels were autobiographic.

[2.3] However, two world wars and especially the repressive politics of National Socialism put a stop to whatever creative potential had existed in German culture in terms of derivative fan productivity. Whereas the 1930s were a prolific era for science fiction fandom in the United Kingdom and the United States (Coppa 2006), developments in Nazi Germany led to an "interrogation of cultural values" (Uricchio 2008, 21), and the post-World War II period was defined by the struggle for and (re)evaluation of a (new) German national identity—although some, such as Odin (2008), may argue that Germans still struggle today with this trauma and loss of identity. Only in 1955 was the first German-language science fiction fanzine *Andromeda* published (Kuttner 2006; Witting 2013) by the newfound Science Fiction Club Deutschland (SFCD). One of the key players at the SFCD was Walter Ernsting, who later became popular under the pseudonym Clark Darlton as one of the creators of the successful German science fiction pulp booklet series Perry Rhodan. The story of the titular Perry Rhodan, which began in 1961, unfolds over 160,000 pages so far, and there is still no end in sight. Although Perry Rhodan has been translated into several other languages, it is still a distinctly German phenomenon, and from the start, fan writings have been an integral part of Perry Rhodan. In 1969, Perry Rhodan exposé writer Karl-Herbert Scheer told the German national broadcast magazine *Monitor* that fan letters to the editors of the series influenced the narrative. When the Perry Rhodan-related Atlan booklet series came to its end with issue 850 in January 1988, fans initiated an Atlan fanzine series that revived and perpetuated some story lines that the series had abandoned; 23 fanzine volumes were

published between August 1989 and March 2001. Contributing authors included Rüdiger Schäfer and Michael H. Buchholz; among the five authors was also one woman writing under a male pseudonym. Although the Perry Rhodan series shares several generic commonalities with Star Trek, a key text in terms of fan fiction production in the Anglo-American science fiction fan community from the 1960s on, Star Trek's success in Germany only began in 1979 with the release of the first movie (note 2). Popular German print Star Trek fanzines included *Trekworld* (1986–99), *Warp* (1987–2002), and *Transwarp* (1987–2002). *Sternreisen* (1981) was the first German Star Trek fanzine that featured both translated and original German fan fiction. Later Star Trek fanzines devoted to slash fan fiction were *Cock-Tail* (1992–94) and *Nevasa* (2001–4). *Cock-Tail* and *Nevasa* had only five and four issues, respectively. This tells us a great deal about the popularity and the proliferation of (slash) fan fiction in Germany—especially compared to the roughly 250 English-language fanzines with sometimes numerous issues that were solely dedicated to the Kirk/Spock pairing.

[2.4] Aside from Perry Rhodan and Star Trek, some distinctly German media fandoms existed in the 1980s and 1990s, including *Lindenstraße* (1985–), *Die drei ???*, and *Anna* (1987). However, it seems that before the 2000s, only transnational fandoms like *Donald Duck*, the TV series *Beauty and the Beast* (1987–1990), *The A-Team* (1983–87), *Knight Rider* (1982–86), *Miami Vice* (1984–90), *The X-Files* (1993–2002), *Baywatch* (1989–2001), and *Beverly Hills 90210* (1990–2000), as well as the first trilogy of Star Wars movies (1977, 1980, 1983) and the Darkover novels by Marion Zimmer Bradley (1958–84) provoked fan writing production and were exploited in fanzines like *Der Hamburger Donaldist* (1976–85), *Relais* (1986–2006), and *Sternenkristall* (1986–92) in the Darkover fandom, the *Baracus News* (1987–97) in the German-speaking *A-Team* fandom, or *Hopes and Dreams* (1989–93) in the *Beauty and the Beast* fandom.

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### 3. German fan fiction from the 2000s to today

[3.1] Two factors were important for transforming fan fiction writing in Germany from a niche phenomenon into a core element of German fan culture: the (late) success of anime and manga in Germany in the 1990s (Malone 2010) (note 3) and the introduction of the Internet. Between 1998 and 2000, several mailing lists and Yahoo! groups were founded, granting higher visibility and accessibility to German fan writings, including the work of members of groups such as the German Speaking Slashers United (GSSU), Deutsche Fanfiction Liste (DFFL), Deutsche Fanfiction Mailingliste, Diskussionsforum Science Fiction, and the Usenet newsgroup de.rec.akte-x. The year 2000 may be described as a turning point for German fan fiction because two different fan fiction multifandom platforms—Animexx (<http://animexx.onlinewelten.com/fanfiction/>) and Fanfiction Paradise (2000–2008)—were established online. The years 2000 to 2004, when the German fan fiction platform with the largest impact factor, FanFiktion.de (<http://www.fanfiktion.de/>), was established, were characterized by an increasing awareness and acceptance of fan fiction within German fan practices. During this period, German fan writers also discovered English-language fan texts and started uploading their stories to FanFiction.net (<https://www.fanfiction.net/>). Parallel to the release of *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* in 2001, the first German-language Harry Potter fan fiction was published on FanFiction.net: *H.P. und Die Pudelmuetze/H.P. and the Woolly Hat* by Sinical-Sarchasm. This story is an interesting example because it highlights the transitory nature of foreign-language fan fiction in the predominantly Anglo-American sphere because the story is available in both German and English. Further, the writing style suggests that the author is

not a native speaker of German but an American testing her skills in German. The first German-language Star Wars fan fiction on FanFiction.net was *Sons of the Dark Siders* by Tifa\_Lockheart\_Nibelheim, posted in April 2001. Although the text is written by a native German speaker, the story title, summary, and disclaimer are in English. A third interesting example of German fan fiction at FanFiction.net is *Star Trek Zurruck in das Gegenwart*, published in 2003 by Coldmirror, who later became a German big-name fan (note 4), which was the first German-language Star Trek fan fiction. The title is an onomatopoeic malapropism of Americans trying to speak German. Therefore, all three early examples of German fan fiction on FanFiction.net share a certain awareness of the relations between different languages in fan cultural contexts and imply an (assumed) secondary status of German in an Anglo-American-dominated Internet-based fan environment.

[3.2] The significance of manga and anime in German fan fiction remains recognizable today. 29 percent of all pieces of fan fiction uploaded to FanFiktion.de and 49.5 percent of the 148,220 fan writings on Animexx are categorized as manga/anime (the latter unsurprising considering that the Web site caters to anime and manga fans), whereas the international FanFiction.net archive lists only 25.3 percent of its 41,183,979 texts in these categories and Archive of Our Own (<https://archiveofourown.org/>) not even 12 percent (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Data of 11 fandoms and their percentage of the respective platforms' total volume of fan fiction\*

<b>Fandom</b>	<b>FF.de (N = 303,316)</b>	<b>AO3 (N = 1,452,704)</b>
Harry Potter	36,877 (12.2%)	69,072 (4.8%)
Naruto	26,404 (8.7%)	9,987 (0.7%)
Twilight	13,954 (4.6%)	4,397 (0.3%)
One Piece	8,781 (2.9%)	3,175 (0.2%)
One Direction	6,308 (2.1%)	33,217 (2.3%)
Yu-Gi-Oh!	4,522 (1.5%)	2,339 (0.16%)
Tokio Hotel	4,453 (1.46%)	725 (0.05%)
Supernatural	3,449 (1.14%)	91,848 (6.3%)
Sherlock Holmes	2,867 (1%)	72,637 (5%)
The Avengers	1,074 (0.35%)	53,888 (3.7%)
Doctor Who	677 (0.2%)	36,896 (2.5%)

\*Data shown are for the seven largest fandoms on FanFiktion.de (<http://www.fanfiktion.de/>) and the five largest on Archive of Our Own (<https://archiveofourown.org/>). Data retrieved January 11, 2015.

[3.3] Table 1 shows that there is less diversification in the German fan fiction community (the percentage of the largest communities on FanFiktion.de is higher than for the largest communities on the Archive of Our Own). In addition, only Harry Potter and One Direction fandoms are of roughly equal popularity on both platforms. The anime/manga fandoms of Naruto, One Piece, and Yu-Gi-Oh! are very small on the Archive of Our Own; the same is true of Tokio Hotel bandom. Whereas prime time television programs like *Supernatural* (2005–), *Sherlock Holmes* (2010–16), and the rebooted *Doctor Who* (2005–) are important for fan production on the Archive of Our Own, the most important television fandom on FanFiktion.de is the crime series *NCIS* (2003–), with only 4,204 posted stories (1.39 percent).



[3.4] Participants in transnational or border-crossing fandoms have multivalent relationships to globally shared media contents that may be driven by personal emotional investments or "affective affinities" (Chin and Morimoto 2013, 92) to the fan object. They are not necessarily connected to a specific nation, language, or national identity, but it is crucial "to be more closely attuned to the socio-historical and political economic backdrop of popular culture consumption and consumerism" (98). As a consequence of an Anglo-American cultural dominance, specifically German national fan fiction communities have previously led a niche existence and have been ignored in the critical discourse about fan fiction. A closer look at the content on FanFiktion.de reveals several national phenomena that are worth further study: *Die drei ???*, *K11—Kommissare im Einsatz* (2003–14), *Tatort* (1970–), *Niedrig und Kuhnt—Kommissare ermitteln* (2003–14), *Notruf Hafenkante* (2007–), *Die Schulermittler* (2009–13), and other German crime TV programs); the Edelstein novels by Kerstin Gier; Joachim Masannek's soccer novels and movies (including *Die Wilden Kerle*, released in Germany in 2004); soccer real person fiction; real person fiction about the German boy band Tokio Hotel and the German fun punk cult band Die Ärzte; and a strong affinity for fan fiction about musicals (e.g., *The Phantom of the Opera* [1986] and *Dance of the Vampires* [1997]).

## 4. Epilogue

[4.1] This very brief analysis of the history of German fan fiction, as well as the results of our cursory comparison of the exclusively German-language archive FanFiktion.de and the international Archive of Our Own, suggest that fandoms, fan practices, and fannish affections are complex and heterogeneous. Generalizing assumptions about an (imagined) unity in a specific fan fiction community are highly questionable. There is not, for example, a single Harry Potter fan fiction community but rather numerous ones that differ in their sets of rules, the socialization and education of their members, and the popularity of certain characters, pairings, tropes, or genres. In addition, political, historical, economic, and legal factors influence a national fan fiction history.

[4.2] Nevertheless, the Internet and the online fandoms hosted there comprise an English-speaking realm. Quantitative analysis will be necessary to verify this hypothesis, but we assume that German fan fiction writers of a certain age and education tend to migrate to English-speaking areas of fan culture. There are several reasons for this. First, English has become the most common language for communication in and about fandoms. Whereas LiveJournal featured distinctly German fan fiction communities, social media Web sites like Facebook, Tumblr, and Twitter, which have become more popular in terms of their significance for online fan culture during the past 5 years, have less clearly defined language barriers. Second, from a reader's perspective, English-language fan fiction is more attractive than German-language fan fiction because it offers more stories of greater variety. In addition, the English-speaking fan fiction community has a culture of recommendation lists, which help readers navigate the confusing jungle of content. In contrast to the German fan fiction sites FanFiktion.de or Animexx, multifandom archives like Archive of Our Own feature sophisticated search tools that allow very specific queries for desired sorts of stories. Third, from a writer's perspective, publishing in English increases the impact of a story because it will be read by more readers (note 5). Fourth, compared to English-language fan fiction Web sites, German archives have stricter youth-protection rules and tend to be more careful about legal issues (maybe because German copyright law does not include the notion of fair use). And fifth, in general, the consumption of foreign media in their original language has increased in Germany because a version dubbed or subtitled in German is likely to be



delayed, nonexistent, or of low quality. With the increasing and direct availability of media content online (such as live streams or BitTorrent downloads), English-language media consumption in Germany has become a part of everyday life—a crucial cultural paradigm shift since the 1980s and 1990s that will certainly influence further developments of national fan fiction communities.

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## 5. Notes

1. A more detailed discussion of some ideas presented in this paper can be found in my 2014 German-language essay "Das 'K' in Fanfiction: Nationale Spezifika eines globalen Phänomens."
2. Similarly, German-language Harry Potter fandom emerged only with the release of the movies.
3. In addition to Malone's (2010) essay on the German boys' love fandom, Lamerichs (2013) presents an interesting comparison between different local anime fandoms that supports the hypothesis that transnational fandoms carry distinct national forms, characteristics, and certain unique developments—a thesis further explored by other essays in this issue.
4. Coldmirror became so famous for her Harry Potter fun dubs on YouTube (e.g., *Harry Potter und der geheime Pornokeller*) that the German digital public broadcaster Einsfestival hired her for her own show, *Coldmirror TV* (Einwächter 2014, 209-212).
5. The fan fictions posted by Lorelei\_Lee, a longtime and active participant in the German fan fiction community, permit a useful comparison. Lorelei\_Lee uploaded both German- and English-language versions of the same three *Sherlock* stories to the Archive of Our Own: "Never Change a Running System," "Hochzeit mit Hindernissen" (Not necessarily nuptials), and "Wo du schon glaubst, da denk ich noch" (Reason goes before a fall). Taken together, the German versions received 277 comments, 191 kudos, and 6,616 hits; the English versions of the same stories received 674 comments (2.4 times as many), 1,598 kudos (8.4 times as many), and 61,030 hits (9.2 times as many).

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# Symposium

## Sweden: Fertile ground for digital fandoms

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[0.1] *Abstract*—We discuss the spread of fans and fandoms within Sweden. With a specific focus on fan fiction and video games, we describe Swedish fan activities in relation to the fact that Sweden is a connected country—that is, a highly technologically developed society. We also describe fan activities in relation to the fact that the level of English-language proficiency is high among Swedish children and teenagers.

[0.2] *Keywords*—Fan community; Fan fiction; Video games

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### 1. Introduction

[1.1] Fans exist all over the world. It is probably easier to find similarities than differences in how fans explore their interests, share knowledge, and use characters and narratives to create identity. Here we aim to describe Swedish fan activities in relation to the fact that Sweden is a connected country—that is, it is a highly technologically developed society. For instance, 92 percent of all citizens between the ages of 16 and 24 have access to the Internet from their homes on a daily basis (Findahl 2013).

[1.2] Furthermore, because the level of English-language proficiency is high among Swedish children and teenagers, we also discuss the high involvement in fan activities as a possible result of a generally high level of proficiency in English. This is partly due to the use of subtitled English-language programs on Swedish television and considerable involvement in English-mediated online activities. In SurveyLang 2011, the first large-scale international language survey in Europe involving 15-year-olds in 14 countries, Sweden was top ranked for English as a foreign language on all measurements (<http://www.surveylang.org/>). Because of the combination of high connectivity and English-language proficiency, Swedish fans engage in a variety of fannish expressions, including fan fiction, digital games, and conventions.

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## 2.A connected country

[2.1] Sweden offers fertile ground for fandoms, primarily as a result of a nationwide well-developed infrastructure for Internet access. Growing up in such a connected country, the vast majority of children become what Prensky (2001) aptly calls digital natives. Interestingly, although many young people live a large part of their daily lives online, large-scale surveys from the Swedish Media Council (2013a, 2013b) reveal that it is common to be involved in online activities while being physically (or geographically) close to one another in real life. For instance, among boys aged 9 to 12, almost four out of 10 state that they often play digital games together with friends, which indicates that gaming is very much a local social activity for them. Watching TV is another media activity that many children and teenagers report that they enjoy doing together with friends or family. In other words, the digital, online part of young Swedes' lives seems to serve dual functions. On the one hand, online activities, including reading fan fiction sites and playing digital games, make it possible for children and teenagers to nurture international acquaintances online (Olin-Scheller and Wikström 2010; Pugh 2005; Hellekson and Busse 2006; Piirainen-Marsh and Tainio 2009; Sylvén and Sundqvist 2012; Sundqvist and Sylvén 2014). On the other hand, young people might do the same thing while sitting next to each other on the couch.

[2.2] In Sweden, older siblings are generally the ones who introduce younger siblings to various fandoms, such as digital games and fan fiction sites, thus further conflating online and real-life relationships (Swedish Media Council 2013a, 2013b; Olin-Scheller 2011). This is easily done when the Internet is only a click away in one's home—and it is becoming increasingly easy. For example, in 2005, more than half of all Swedish 9-year-olds used the Internet; in 2013, the same was true for all 3-year-olds. In fact, 55 percent of all Swedish 3-year-olds use the Internet on a daily basis. This percentage increases with age, so that 87 percent of all 6-year-olds are connected daily, as are 93 percent of 13- to 16-year-olds (Swedish Media Council 2013a, 2013b). Moreover, among older teens, approximately 85 to 90 percent have a computer of their own, and almost 100 percent have a cell phone (Swedish Media Council 2013b). Needless to say, among the activities young people engage in online, using social networking sites is popular, especially among girls. For instance, at the age of 17, 42 percent of Swedish girls spend more than 3 hours per day on Facebook or similar sites, whereas the corresponding percentage for boys is much lower, at 15 percent (Swedish Media Council 2013b). Social networking, such as being active on Facebook, is a vital part of staying in touch with other fans and sharing photos, as well as accessing information about a fandom, such as news about actors and events (Olin-Scheller 2011). Of course, our findings about fan activities among Swedish young people might very well

also hold true for youths in other comparable countries, such as Norway (Norwegian Media Authority 2014).

### 3. Fan activities in Sweden

[3.1] Scholars such as Henry Jenkins (2006) have noted that convergence culture has affected the spread of cultural products. Convergence culture may start with a book, which is remediated in films, fan fiction, and digital games, as well as in all sorts of other media adaptations. This convergence phenomenon has greatly influenced Swedish fans and fandoms (Olin-Scheller and Wikström 2010). However, even though there seems to be considerable diversity, the field of fan fiction is dominated by a few very influential stories. The Harry Potter, Twilight, and Hunger Games universes have engaged many fans in Sweden, and the fandoms around these fan-textual universes have been immensely productive, with fans creating fan fiction, fan films, and Web pages.

[3.2] Even though, for example, Twilight fan fiction appeared in Swedish shortly after the first books in the series were published, the number of stories increased rapidly after the first film was released. A large survey of 932 participants indicated that other fandoms were also widespread within Sweden (Olin-Scheller and Wikström 2010), including fandoms around manga stories such as *Naruto* (first released 2000), *Final Fantasy* (first released 1989, based on the 1987 video game by Square Enix), and *Sailor Moon* (first released 1991), as well as around now-classic texts in the Lord of the Rings (1937), Star Wars (1977), and Star Trek (1966) universes. Findings from the same survey revealed that approximately 6 percent of all Internet users within the age group of 15 to 24 regularly read some kind of fan work, 2 percent regularly commented on these texts, and 1 percent regularly created and published their own texts. These findings correspond well with those presented by other studies on user behavior, content contribution, and online communities (Horowitz 2006). The survey, which covered different forms of media narratives, showed that there were no significant differences between boys' and girls' involvement in the production and consumption of fan-created content. However, there was a significant difference regarding what kinds of media boys and girls prefer: girls were more interested in written texts, while boys preferred visual forms of expression, such as images and videos. These findings are corroborated in other Swedish studies on media habits and gender (Findahl 2009; Carlsson 2010).

[3.3] A study of Swedish Twilight fans (Olin-Scheller 2011) found that fans built communities of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991) and communicated in a number of ways with other fans, with the textual universe of Twilight as a point of commonality that might then be departed from. However, even though the fans used digital devices

to collect and update information about the fandom, the main use of this information was to create identities and meaning and to strengthen already existing relations with friends off-line. Also, when discussing the mediated text, the fans regarded the novels (as opposed to the two films that were available in Sweden when the study was performed) as the real source text, and they talked about them as something particularly important. Thus, the books as artifacts can be said to play a unique role within the Twilight universe. Fans want to touch the books, turn the pages, and read their favorite parts over and over again. They carry the books around with them, and they may furnish their rooms with the books in specific ways. However, what keeps the wheels of convergence culture spinning largely consists of digital material, such as photos, films, and Web sites.

[3.4] In addition, fandoms around digital games—in particular *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004), *Counter-Strike* (Valve Corporation, 1999), *Call of Duty* (Infinity Ward and Activision, 2003), *Minecraft* (Mojang, 2011), and *The Sims* (Maxis, 2000)—engage a large number of young people in Sweden, as reported in biannual reports from the Swedish Media Council that are based on data from representative, random samples of children and teenagers. It is worth mentioning, though, that fandoms around digital games mainly consist of boys. Half of all the boys aged 14 to 15 play at least 3 hours per day—that is, they are what the Swedish Media Council labels high consumers. However, no girls are high consumers (Swedish Media Council 2013b). Furthermore, when different age groups are compared, children aged 9 to 12 are the ones who play the most. In this age group, 98 percent of all boys and 76 percent of all girls play digital games. As they get older, the gender gap increases, mainly because girls decrease their playing. There is also a gender-related difference in terms of the games played: boys prefer action and sports games, which are much less popular among girls (Sylvén and Sundqvist 2012). However, the first-person survival sandbox game *Minecraft* appeals to both boys and girls; the game is a current worldwide success. Considering that fandoms easily grow in Sweden, it might not be a coincidence that *Minecraft* was created there by game developer Markus Persson. Persson, who was born in 1979, grew up accessing the digital world easily from his home, evidenced by the fact that he started programming when he was only 7 years old. He produced his first text-based adventure game a year later with the help of type-in programs ([http://minecraft.gamepedia.com/Markus\\_Persson](http://minecraft.gamepedia.com/Markus_Persson)).

[3.5] Another fan activity widely spread around Sweden is the fan convention. Conventions are mostly organized around manga fan communities (for studies about convention activities, see Taylor 2006; Pearce 2009; Jenkins 2010). Here, for a few days, fans build a world where they meet, socialize, and engage in their interest both online and off. The activities during a convention can be described as a miniature festival located at a school or a similar place. The conventions are often organized by

the fans themselves. Many of the fans engage in cosplay, dressing up as characters that appear in the narratives (Bruno 2002; Winge 2006; Olin-Scheller 2012). Cosplay is an activity that takes place in a real-world, not online, environment, and in that respect, cosplay is similar to other activities that also focus on being present, such as live-action role-playing games. A big part of cosplay is taking photos and publishing them on various fan sites. Like many other fan activities, cosplay is a way to continue the narrative and the meaning-making process surrounding the cultural product. In addition, local area network gatherings for those who enjoy playing digital games are often arranged in a similar fashion, generally by bringing together young people from the same geographical region. Both manga and gaming conventions are usually endorsed by Sverok, the Swedish gaming federation, which, at 100,000 members in 1,100 clubs, is the largest youth organization in Sweden (<http://www.sverok.se/english/>)—another indication of the special context this northern country offers fandoms.

#### 4. Discussion and concluding remarks

[4.1] As mentioned above, the level of proficiency in English is high among Swedish children and teenagers. A key explanation for their high level of English skills, including the top scores on various measurements in SurveyLang 2011, is claimed to be the result of young Swedes' extensive involvement in English-language-mediated activities in out-of-school contexts—activities like the fan-related ones we describe here. Other empirical studies corroborate the findings of SurveyLang 2011, in particular regarding the links between learning English and playing digital games (Olsson 2011; Sundqvist 2011; Sundqvist and Sylvén 2012, 2014; Sylvén and Sundqvist 2012). Interestingly, being a fan may motivate some young Swedish children to try communicating online in written English—a cognitively complex linguistic activity—after only 2 years of formal English instruction in school (Sundqvist 2014). For example, they may communicate via Twitter in order to stay in touch with important idols such as singer Justin Bieber or members of the boy band One Direction.

[4.2] Thus, the fact that Sweden is a highly connected country seems to contribute to a high level of proficiency in English. In turn, this language proficiency contributes to widespread online activities among Swedish young people. Technological advancement, English proficiency, and fandom activities are all closely interrelated. However, being connected to the Internet and being heavily involved in digital fan activities do not necessarily imply that one's main focus is international. Instead, digital activities are associated with closeness, both in terms of relationships (friends sitting on the same couch when going online) and geographical locations (attending local cosplay or gaming conventions). This way of being and acting as a fan is likely



not limited to Sweden or Swedish fan communities; it is probably also the case in other areas with ubiquitous Internet access and English-language proficiency. Nevertheless, Sweden offers particularly fertile ground for digital fandoms.

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## Symposium

### Negotiating the local and the global in the construction of semiperipheral identity in Polish science fiction and fantasy fandom

Joanna Kucharska, Piotr Sterczewski, Bartłomiej Schweiger, Joanna Płaszewska, and Justyna Janik

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[0.1] *Abstract*—An analysis of Polish science fiction, fantasy, and role-playing game fandom brings to the fore problems of Polish identity and patriotism, as well as views on Polish fandom as a specific local phenomenon and as a part of global pop culture. Polish fandom may be framed as a semiperipheral culture, with fans expressing Polish identity and engaging in strategies of negotiating the global and the local.

[0.2] *Keywords*—Cultural negotiation; Globalization

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## 1. Introduction

[1.1] We aim to examine how Polish science fiction and fantasy (SF&F) fans construct and perceive their identity as members of a local (national) and global fandom. We follow the basic premise of historically, socially, and economically conditioned specificity of the Polish fandom, established and developed under the circumstances of an Eastern bloc country, one economically constrained and largely isolated from cultural exchange with the Western world, and which after 1989 underwent rapid social changes and exposure to global market and pop culture (Wasilewski 2006). Contemporary Polish SF&F fandom seeks more participation in the English-speaking fan culture commonly perceived as the global mainstream while emphasizing local specificity, national values and language, and locally produced media. These form a basis for semiperipheral identity. Fans confront their tastes and activities within a vision of Western fandom. The negotiation between the global and the local performed by fandom is a specific part of a wider cultural process connected with notions of national identities in a globalized world.

[1.2] The significance of researching the cultural practices performed in cultures other than central ones lies in the possibility of exposing mechanisms of circulation of meanings in globalized pop culture and expanding the archive of descriptions of specific local fandoms. As Polish researchers immersed in general Polish national culture as well as in SF&F and role-playing game (RPG) fandom activities, we can describe this semiperipheral culture from within, not just from a dominant central perspective, and we can diagnose the observed phenomena with a better recognition of social context.

## 2. Subject and methodology

[2.1] Here we interpret and analyze one of the topics addressed during an exploratory study of Polish SF&F fandom. The results of this study were published on Henry Jenkins's blog as a part of the Participatory Poland collaborative project (Janik et al. 2013). We carried out a computer-aided qualitative content analysis of content published during September 2013 on the Polter (Poltergeist) (<http://polter.pl>) Web site, the largest Polish site dedicated to SF&F. We established a code book with an array of categories that aimed to examine various phenomena. The items were sorted according to categories used by the Web site. Coding categories were subject to modification during the course of the research. The scope of the analysis also included various strategies of validation and discursive tactics of forming fan identities, including strategies of inclusion and exclusion.

[2.2] After we conducted this exploratory study, we formed a hypothesis based on the source material: an interpretation of Polish SF&F fandom as semiperipheral in a cultural sense. Polish fandom is in a constant process of negotiating its identity and position within global fandom. We supplemented our analysis of the original source material with a longitudinal analysis of the relevant articles and posts published on Polter between July 2010 and September 2013.

[2.3] Our framing of Polish SF&F fandom as semiperipheral was derived from an examination of dominant tendencies evident in the source material—that is, the content posted on the Web site. As Ulf Hannerz notes, "The flow of culture within the contemporary world is in large part asymmetrical, [with] a stronger flow from center to periphery than vice versa; in cultural terms, this is what defines center and periphery" (1996, 60). Semiperiphery can be understood in this context as a place of mediating activities between core and peripheral regions and areas in which institutional features are in some ways intermediate between those forms found in core and periphery (Pieterse 2009). For historical and economic reasons, Poland as a country gained a semiperipheral status in the global cultural exchange, which has consequences for the shape of Polish pop culture and fan practices. In SF&F fandom,

the cultural consumption practices and fans' self-identifications constantly negotiate among globalized SF&F media, fandom, and the commonly shared notion of Polish specificity accompanied by a need to maintain a certain extent of cultural autonomy.

### 3. Fandom in a postcommunist country: Semiperipheral circumstances and identities

[3.1] Historically, Polish SF&F fandom emerged and developed within a very different set of social circumstances than those in the United States and Great Britain, where the mainstream of postwar global pop culture was established. After World War II and until its political transformation in 1989, Poland was a part of the Eastern bloc of nations, and because of the strict limitations placed on free trade and travel abroad, cultural exchange with Western countries was constrained. This resulted in a different set of texts being available during the formative times of Polish SF&F fandom and therefore in a different set of SF&F works being regarded as canonical. The core of fandom interest during communism was literary; the translations of Western books and the distribution of foreign films were not subject to many censorship or trade limitations. Other media phenomena, such as TV shows or RPG games, considered to be milestones in English-speaking SF&F fandom, did not appear in official distribution channels. Despite some amount of unofficial circulation, thanks to photocopying texts and pirating VHS tapes, these texts remained largely unknown to Polish fans. For instance, the vastly influential RPG system, *Dungeons & Dragons* (Tactical Studies Rules Inc., 1974; Wizards of the Coast, 1997) was published in Poland after a 25-year delay. The first RPG system translated into Polish (in 1994) was *Warhammer* (Games Workshop, 1986) which is still perceived as the prototype RPG by Polish fans. Similarly, the absence of any *Star Trek* series in Polish television until the 1990s is a telling example of differences in consumption of popular texts in Poland and in English-speaking countries. As Siuda (in press) points out, much of fans' activity during communism was devoted to gaining access to foreign texts and organizing fandom despite institutional hardships.

[3.2] An analysis of the frequency of references to various kinds of media in the Polter Web site's content leads to a conclusion that books and RPGs are at the center of today's fandom interest. The literary tastes of Polish fans and their perceptions of canonical SF&F works developed differently than in the case of American or British fans. This was the result of two important factors. First, the canon consisting of world-acclaimed Anglophone SF&F classics was supplemented with works by Eastern European authors, such as the Strugatsky brothers or Kir Bulychov. Second, the Polish tradition of science fiction (and to a lesser extent fantasy) was heavily influenced by works where speculative fiction was used as a vehicle for social, political, and sometimes philosophical topics that could not be spoken about openly as a result of

ensorship before 1989. This tendency was largely established by the (dystopian and anticommunist) prose of Janusz A. Zajdel and Stanislaw Lem, and it has consequences that remain to this day. Polish SF&F readers are accustomed to searching for sociopolitical meanings in speculative fiction and discussing them; in addition, the majority of Polish speculative fiction books tends to have slightly conservative, right-wing overtones.

[3.3] The political transformation of 1989 resulted in an opening of the Polish market, and with it Polish fandom, to a wide variety of previously unknown or little-known literary and media texts. The processes already noted of negotiation between fan identification as part of both local and global fandoms, as well as the dichotomy of Polish fan identity as a part of Western fandom as a whole and a localized, more patriotically minded Polish fandom, are strongest after 1989.

## 4. The Polish case: Finding Poland in globalized culture

[4.1] Analysis of our source material revealed that even the smallest mention of Poland and Polish matters in cultural texts are noted and commented on, usually favorably, but with a series of caveats related to perceived truth values and authenticity. In September 2013, Polter hosted a series of posts of news and reviews of the new Graham Masterton novel, *Forest Ghost* (2013). The sheer number of news items and discussions coincides with the fact that Masterton has professed a special affinity for Poland. However, although Masterton's books are guaranteed wide, in-depth coverage because of their Polish connections, they are also subject to avid criticism on the same basis. As opined by a reviewer writing for Polter:

[4.2] The biggest wasted opportunity has to be the fact that only the briefest attention is given to the massacre of Polish intellectuals in the Kampinos. It was announced months ago that this tragedy would have a prominent place in the novel, building up readers' appetite for an interesting, revisionist tale, and meanwhile, this part of our history has only been touched on. (Cichy 2013)

[4.3] Books describing Polish matters (and especially those written by foreigners and regarded as a representation of Poland abroad) are expected to adhere to a series of high standards, including good-quality writing, a detailed and in-depth approach to historical events, a fresh perspective, and a narrative fidelity to what Polish fans perceive to constitute a Polish character.

[4.4] The importance ascribed by Polish fans to historical and political fiction is an especially interesting issue, and one partially connected with the inclination toward considering speculative fiction in social and political terms. Although the expectations

of verisimilitude are held for all works touching on Polish matters, they are especially strong and prevalent in case of narratives that use parts of Polish history, even if these texts represent historical fiction with SF&F elements or alternate history fiction. Some of these texts form distinct thematic groups, such as books and games set in the 17th century in the so-called Sarmatian period of Polish history, commonly regarded as one of the high points of national splendor, but also an era marked by fights with external enemies. Most of these historical narratives tend to reproduce the vision of patriotism grounded in the Polish 19th-century romanticism, with its focus on national history, the values of chivalry, the social and moral significance of the noble class, and an idealization of fighting for a just cause. Although alternative and revisionist versions of history are present in Polish SF&F, works pertaining to these matters need to follow the established beats of national identity and character. In the case of alternate histories, changes are allowed as long as they adhere to Poland's dual role as a potential global power (stemming from times of geopolitical importance) or as the martyr of nations, a notion reinforced by annexations, failed uprisings, and two world wars. This dichotomy influences fans' need for accurate representation—as much as is possible to reconcile both of these notions. The amount of attention devoted to Polish historical themes, especially those underlining the significance and exceptionality of the country, is evidence of the hopes and aspirations of Polish fans for Poland to be noted and appreciated on international level.

[4.5] Polish fans direct scrutiny and attention to works even tangentially related to the country and its people. Fans follow Polish SF&F works and authors abroad, especially in those rare instances when they receive worldwide success. In recent years, this is best visible in the case of *The Witcher* (CD Projekt RED, 2007) video game series. Fans also display a tendency to feel protective of Polish works and authors, as well as their perceived Polish and Slavic attributes. However, the practice is dual in nature: Polish fandom is prone to displays of national pride in relation to works and creators who succeeded on the international stage, as well as prone to treating such success with distrust and criticisms of selling out. At the same time, fans call out for support for the national market and for Polish works, which are perceived as fragile and threatened by the outpouring of Western, and especially American, offerings. Although the realm of Polish production is sometimes depicted as troubled by conflicts and rivalries, as well as afflicted by poor quality, fans routinely appeal to others to protect Polish works' integrity and to offer encouragement and financial support.

[4.6] Similar bidirectional tendencies can be observed in case of Polish fan conventions. Most Polish fandom activity had been connected to localized grassroots efforts of city- and region-based fan organizations. Local organizations emphasize their roots in this area, tying conventions to their places of origin. Almost all cons have

historically been run by volunteers and have never been considered to be a substantially commercial venture. The last few years, however, have brought calls for a greater level of professionalization of events, citing the fact that because the majority of cons charge the attendees, the attendees are within their rights to demand more value for their money. An important factor here is also increased exposure of fans to Western-style fan conventions. The institution of cons can be thus seen as undergoing constant change in response to Western patterns and the demands of fandom.

[4.7] According to our analysis of Polter, another area that fans consider to be in need of protection is the realm of language. Fans borrow from other languages, especially English, because many media texts enter the Polish market in either the original-language version or translated into Polish with many word borrowings and English-based neologisms. The debate on the use of Anglicisms is far from conclusive, but its constant renewal attests to the fact that the Polish language is also an area of negotiation between the needs of keeping in touch with Anglophone media texts and maintaining a national specificity (Polter 2013).

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## 5. Conclusions: Finding Poland in between

[5.1] All the phenomena we describe support the view of Polish SF&F and RPG fandoms' unsteady status as semiperipheral in a cultural sense. Polish fandom is strongly rooted in its historically, politically, and economically conditioned local specificity and its need to maintain autonomy while simultaneously aspiring to participate in global fandom and pop culture. Polish fans strongly value their culture, language, and fandom-related market, but they constantly refer to and position themselves in relation to Western, English-speaking fandom, considered by the Polish fans to be the ultimate mainstream. Polish fans look for a validation of their place in fandom as well as a confirmation of the value of Polish culture and fandom. Fans' views of their own identity and produced works are in constant flux, part of a process of negotiation between national and cultural pride and feelings of inferiority. This dichotomy is reflected and repeated in the approach to the external, especially American, cultural offerings, which are derided and admired in equal measure.

[5.2] The desires for recognition and an entrance to the global stage are tied to a careful analysis of the fate of Polish works abroad and are visible in the attention devoted to tracing all the references to Poland and related matters in genre texts created abroad. The presence of such ambivalent approaches, the evidence of constant negotiation between global and local, the tension between strong national pride and the need of belonging and recognition on the international stage, and, most importantly, the fact that these processes and strategies are increasingly frequently



noted, discussed, and commented on within fan circles support our conclusion that this is a crucial area of research on the subject of Polish fan identity. We hope that our findings are helpful in diagnosing parallel or divergent tendencies in other non-Anglophone fandoms.

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# Symposium

## Case study of French and Spanish fan reception of *Game of Thrones*

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[0.1] *Abstract*—The reception of the American TV show *Game of Thrones* (2011–) by French and Spanish fans and nonfans is addressed via a qualitative methodology, the goal of which is to understand how European viewers perceive themselves as fans and what it means for them to be fans. Analysis of characteristics of a specifically European reception helps us learn what fan studies tell us about fans and what fans really think about fandoms.

[0.2] *Keywords*—Europe; Fandom

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## 1. Introduction

[1.1] Following Jenkins's seminal works (1992, 2006) on fans, fandoms and fan activities are being newly discussed in the French and Spanish academic world as active and creative receptors who use new technologies to perform activities and gather in a virtual community. This belated acceptance in Spanish and French universities can be explained by the divide that still exists in the public's and academic's mind between high and low culture, with TV shows being perceived as low culture in the Boudieuan sense. In both countries, it remains hard to introduce TV series as legitimate objects of study and culture. Nonetheless, in France, young scholars have been analyzing fandoms from various angles, including the creation of fan fiction (François 2009) and offering a typology of fan activities (Bourdaa 2014). They also envision fans as a virtual community empowered by the use of new technologies (Martin 2011; Peyron 2013). Other scholars study a particular object, such as a TV show, to understand a shift in the reception practices and find patterns in fan reception (Combes 2010; Bourdaa 2012). In Spain, some studies have analyzed the use of fan-generated content as an advertising tool, discussing the role of fandom as producer of ad content (Lozano Delmar, Hernández-Santaolalla, and Ramos 2013).

[1.2] This case study analyzes the American TV show *Game of Thrones* (2011–), based on George R. R. Martin's epic book series, *A Song of Ice and Fire* (1996–), in order to contrast fan and nonfan reception in France and Spain. *Game of Thrones* is a relevant object to study fans'

activities for several reasons. First, in France and in Spain, *Game of Thrones* was the most often illegally downloaded show in 2013, indicating that the series is a favorite among European viewers and that one fan activity, fan subbing—that is, subtitling the TV show in a local language—appears to be a fundamental activity in French and Spanish fandoms. Second, to promote the show, producers in both countries include fans in their marketing strategies. HBO, with the help of marketing company Campfire New York, created a marketing campaign that values the role of fans and that prioritizes appealing to them (Bourdaa 2014). In France, OCS, which broadcasts the episodes a day after HBO, invites fans to live tweet each episode with a special hashtag, #OCSGOT, thus creating a sense of community among viewers. OCS also launched a second-screen experience, available on tablets and smartphones, that provides complementary information, news, maps, and behind-the-scenes footage to enhance the live viewing experience. In Spain, Canal+ has developed new advertising experiences to promote *Game of Thrones*. The company implemented social TV strategies ("Vive Poniente"), created alternate reality games or advergames that transform social networks into social games, and performed actions that position the fan/viewer in the center of promotion strategy (Lozano Delmar 2013). The last advertising campaign for the fourth season included a TV spot filmed by hundreds of Spanish fans cosplaying members of the Night's Watch.

[1.3] Because fans "have often been categorized in terms of their modes of participation, with that participation often usually defined in terms of production" (Zubernis and Larsen 2012, 16), we look at how French and Spanish viewers of *Game of Thrones* watch the show and perceive themselves. What does it mean for them to be fans—or nonfans—of the series?

## 2. Methodology

[2.1] We collected data for a qualitative analysis (Patton 2002) from 175 online interviews (100 from French participants and 75 from Spanish participants) collected through a Google Form. Participation in this survey was voluntary. Invitations to participate were sent randomly by posting a public Google Form link via Twitter in both France and Spain. It was then shared and retweeted through various networks. Participation opened April 8, 2014, and closed April 14, 2014. The survey's questions, presented in both French and Spanish, were as follows:

1. How do you watch *Game of Thrones*?
2. Do you watch it alone or with someone else?
3. Do you consider yourself a *Game of Thrones* fan? If so, why?
4. Have you been participating in discussions about the show or its characters on the Internet?
5. Do you participate in *Game of Thrones* online activities like tweeting, creating fan art, fan fiction, subtitles, mash-ups, Tumblrs...? If so, describe them.
6. Do you think these activities are important inside the *Game of Thrones* fan community? If so, why?

[2.2] For the coding procedure, we used NVivo, an online software for qualitative research. We used both deductive (Patton 2002; Berg 2001) and inductive (Hsieh and Shannon 2005) processes. This software allowed us to first analyze the participants' responses to our six questions. We were then able to identify, for example, the online sites or social networks that were most often used to talk about *Game of Thrones*. Once we had established the categories,

we coded each respondent's response. This also allowed us to find the five most common reasons for why respondents considered themselves *Game of Thrones* fans:

1. I love *Game of Thrones* and consider it one of the best current TV shows.
2. I collect material related to the series.
3. I experience the show as something that goes beyond the simple act of reception.
4. I watch the show immediately after its release in the United States and probably more than once.
5. I am a faithful follower of the original books.

[2.3] From the 175 online interviews, we coded a total of 539 respondent quotations, 279 in France and 260 in Spain. The following results and percentages use these values as the denominators. All translations in text are by the authors; original-language responses are provided in the notes.

### 3. Results and discussion

[3.1] According to the survey results, in both Spain and France, the consumption of *Game of Thrones* is done in an individual manner, as opposed to viewing the program with family or friends. In Spain, 62 percent of respondents noted that they watch the show individually; 58 percent of respondents in France noted this. The feeling of belonging to a *Game of Thrones* fandom seems more marked in Spain. Ninety-one percent of Spanish respondents claimed to be fans of the series, while in France only 69 percent openly professed to be fans. Regarding the respondents' motivations to consider themselves *Game of Thrones* fans, the survey's results provide five main explanations. First, most respondents declared that they were fans simply because they like *Game of Thrones* and consider it one of the best current TV shows because of things like plot, character, and production values. A Spanish fan declared, "I watch many, many series, but *Game of Thrones* has something that makes it special, something that makes you look forward to seeing the next season" (Veo muchas, muchas series pero Juego de Tronos tiene algo que la hace especial, algo que hace que esté deseando ver la siguiente temporada). A French fan wrote, "This is an immersive show; we can identify with the characters. The political plots are riveting. When GOT arrived, I finally had the feeling of watching something new compared to all those average shows with the same stories over and over. GOT is a daring show, and they are some bad-ass [English in the original] characters and it is epic!" (C'est très immersif, chacun peut se reconnaître dans un personnage, les intrigues politique, l'histoire c'est très accrochant, quand got est arrivé, j'ai eu enfin l'impression de regarder quelques chose de nouveau par rapport a toute ces series moyenne qu'on nous jette a la figure, qui finissent pas toutes se ressembler (meme shemas de personnages, d'histoire) des copier/coller de copier/coller...got ose, et puis bon, c'est quand meme une serie pleine de Badass et vachement épique!).

[3.2] It also appears that acquisition and possession of collectibles related to the series—merchandise, DVDs, Blu-rays—is important. Collecting items seems common to *Game of Thrones* fans: "I buy the Blu-rays as well as goodies (books, figurines, T-shirts, coffee mugs,...) as soon as they are on the market" (J'achète les BluRay dès qu'ils sortent sur le marché, ainsi que du merchandising [les livres, des figurines, des T-shirts, des mugs]). Moreover, viewers underline the importance of experiencing the show as something that goes beyond the simple

act of reception. Knowing the *Game of Thrones* Houses, talking about the series, searching the Internet for additional information, and keeping constantly updated are some examples. A French fan noted that he "knows all the characters and their houses, their relationships and alliances. I go regularly on the official HBO Web site for the interactive maps and the behind-the-scene footage" (Je connais tous les personnages ainsi que leurs emblèmes et leurs affinités avec les autres maisons. Je consulte régulièrement le site officiel d'HBO avec le mapping et les coulisses du tournage). The Spanish fan does "more than [watch] the television series. I take a stance on the fiction. I feel as if I belong to one House and empathize with certain characters. Thus, I get involved with the show while I'm watching it and I also maintain this relationship beyond the reception time" (No solo consumo el producto televisivo sino que también este ha conseguido posicionarme frente a la ficción. Me siento de una casa u otra y empatizo con determinados personajes. De este modo, no solo me involucro con la serie durante su visionado sino que mantengo mi relación con la misma más allá del tiempo de recepción). Watching *Game of Thrones* episodes immediately after their release in the United States also seems to be a criterion to be considered a fan. Viewing episodes more than once and an addictive mode of consumption are among the features that define a fan of the series. As some Spanish fans stated, they are fans "because I watch the series from the beginning, always up to date and enjoying it" (Porque sigo la serie desde el principio, siempre al día y la disfruto) and "because I watch it every Monday as soon as the episode is available" (Porque la veo cada lunes en cuanto está disponible el último capítulo). A French fan wrote, "I never miss an episode (hence the downloading of episodes because I cannot wait) and I can watch them several times in a row" (Je ne rate aucun épisode [d'ou le téléchargement je ne peux pas attendre] et je suis capable de les regarder plusieurs fois).

[3.3] Although the survey's results provide the same conclusions in both countries, it is interesting to note how in France 29 percent of the respondents stated that they followed every episode in an addictive and compulsive way, whereas in Spain only 17 percent declared this to be the case. In this regard, it is also interesting to note that in France, the viewing is done by streaming platforms (39 percent) and by downloading episodes (55 percent), while in Spain, consumption via streaming is only 17 percent and direct downloading options are higher, at 69 percent. As indicated by a Spanish fan, "I download the series because I can get it before the official release and in better quality (HQ definition). We are a generation of spectators with little patience" (Veo descarga porque llega antes y en mejor calidad [alta definición]. Somos una generación de impacientes). Finally, being a faithful follower of the book series and knowing the work of George R. R. Martin—either by watching the TV show or by knowing about his writing before the TV show aired—seems to be important. Thus, many fans considered reading the books to be a main reason to be called a *Game of Thrones* fan.

[3.4] The following statistics allow us to look at the difference between French and Spanish fans.

[3.5] Regarding participation and interactions, both Spanish (63 percent) and French (70 percent) viewers stated that they do not participate in online discussions about the series. However, approximately 20 percent of viewers state they participate in off-line discussions with friends and family by talking about the episodes. Fans commented, "Not in forums and Webs [*sic*] but in real life with friends" (No en foros ni webs, pero sí en persona con otros amigos) and

"I sometimes talk about the show on the French fan site *Garde de Nuit*, but most of my discussions occur with my husband, who is also a fan" (Je discute de temps en temps sur le site de la *Garde de Nuit*, mais la plupart de mes débats ont lieu avec mon mari, aussi fan que moi).

[3.6] Regarding viewers' activities, such as live tweeting, Tumblr, creating or watching subtitled episodes, or writing or reading fan art and fan fiction, only 29 percent (Spain) and 20 percent (France) of the respondents reported engaging in online activities related to the series. In this sense, the favorite social network is Twitter, and in France, a number of fans use Tumblr to create content related to *Game of Thrones*. Moreover, in Spain, some viewers indicated that they work on fan subs. Despite few user-generated contents and activities, 67 percent (Spain) and 70 percent (France) of respondents considered these online activities to be important and part of the fandom. Respondents noted two key values: creating and engaging with a community, and extending the viewing experience beyond the mere reception of the series, especially during the hiatus between seasons: "These activities help to improve the imagery of the series and function in part as transmedia element, 'unofficially' complementing the story created by the author" (Ayudan a mejorar el imaginario de la serie y funcionan en parte como elemento transmedia complementando 'extraoficialmente' la historia creada por el autor). For a French fan, these activities are an integral part of the show: "It allows for an intellectual debate around the show, even during the hiatuses. This way, the show is more alive, human, and fans can be actors of their show" ("Ça permet de garder une certaine émulation autour de la série, même quand celle-ci est en 'pause.' Ça rend cette dernière vivante, humaine et ça permet aux fans de se sentir pleinement acteurs de leur série).

## 4. Conclusions

[4.1] This analysis of the reception of *Game of Thrones* in France and Spain, although limited by a self-selected respondent sample that may not be representative of all viewers, allows us to draw some conclusions about the perception of fandoms in those two countries. Contrary to what fan studies teaches us about fans, it appears that French and Spanish fans are not keen on defining themselves as fans, and when they do, they do not engage in many of the activities that are associated with the performance of fandom, such as creating fan artworks. The acceptance of *fan* as a term and as a role in culture is still not common in European fandoms, and fan studies needs to study these divides to better understand if fans' roles are actually related to user-generated content.

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# Symposium

## Slash fandom, sociability, and sexual politics in Putin's Russia

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[0.1] *Abstract*—Russian slash practices are much more than a protest subculture—a reductionist term that implies an unchanging isolation from other public realms. The political significance of slash practices on the Russian-language Internet, Runet, is more effectively understood by examining how slash and slashers travel from fannish to other public spaces to shape everyday political conversations about sexual politics in Russia.

[0.2] *Keywords*—LGBT politics; Public spaces; Social media

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### 1. Introduction

[1.1] Slash embodies a vocabulary of choice and difference. In Russian online forums, slash becomes a discursive device in both fannish and nonfannish public conversations about LGBT rights. A more thorough understanding of the political significance of Russian slash requires us to disrupt the subculture/dominant culture binary and consider how slash and slashers travel across many kinds of public spaces, shaping conversations about Russian culture and threats to it on the one hand, and pronouncements about individual choice and freedom on the other. How does slash become embedded in discourses about sexuality, individual liberty, state repression, and social stability, and how do we make sense of these moments of interaction across diverse Internet platforms?

[1.2] As a queer, transgressive reading of heteronormative mainstream texts, slash has tremendous subversive potential. Edi Bjorklund writes that slash "is not just a new kind of women's literature. It is a means whereby we may defy a wide variety of social conventions and taboos. [...] Slash fandom is, to sum up, a tactic of subversion for women" (cited in Rambukkana 2007). Rambukkana himself states that slash media spaces function as "zones where other practices, discourses, and consciousnesses can



form or circulate with partial autonomy from the constraints upon those practices, discourses and consciousnesses in other societal spheres." In new scholarship emerging on Russian slash fandoms, slash fandoms are similarly seen as an autonomous, resistant subculture in a hostile homophobic and nationalist climate (Samutina 2014; Palash 2013). Here I do not examine slash culture as a zone of resistance and subversion (although it can undoubtedly be such a space). Rather, I suggest that it is more productive to consider how slash and slashers cut across fannish and nonfannish spaces, shaping political rhetoric and everyday conversations about sexual choice and cultural norms in contemporary Russia.

[1.3] It is not impossible to be gay or talk about being gay in Russia; urban spaces, particularly in Moscow and St. Petersburg, allow some room for the LGBT community to socialize and interact. However, public proclamations of gayness have little space outside this community, and the state actively discourages the public visibility of homosexuality (Stella 2013). Russia has recently adopted legislation making the propagating of homosexuality among minors a criminal offense and has banned the gay pride parade for the coming hundred years. (It is still held clandestinely and has, on every occasion, been disrupted by the police.) Recent research strongly emphasizes slashers' own perceptions of working in a repressive environment and their growing anxiety that their activities will, in time, be completely silenced (Palash 2013). Slashers' posts across Russian social media platforms reflect this concern, and indeed, many forums have shown dwindling activity. In this context, the persistent production of slash fics, vidding, and art on the hitherto unfettered but now increasingly policed Russian-language Internet (Runet) is intrinsically political, its very presence a challenge to the heteronormative nationalism of Putin's Russia ([note 1](#)).

[1.4] Over the years I have read slash meta—self-reflexive diaries and discussions, threads, and posts across Runet, particularly on LiveJournal (<http://www.livejournal.com/>) and Ficbook (<http://ficbook.net>). I have been a member of forums such as Slashfiction.ru (<http://slashfiction.ru/>) and slash fandoms on VKontakte (<http://vk.com/>), Russia's main social networking platform, such as Slashfiction.ru's own group and another called Slash—Senseless and Merciless. Here, I extend the concept of meta from being simply fan discourse about being slashers to include online discussions by nonfans about slash. Because I was interested in how slash becomes embedded in discourses on freedom and sexuality, I did a Yandex (<http://www.yandex.ru/>) search combining keywords and phrases such as "slash" and "law on homosexual propaganda." This yielded hundreds of pages of online discussions that talked about slash and its fate in an increasingly repressive legal climate in Russia. By considering both slashers' reflective commentaries and the use of fan slash in nonfan discourses about gay rights, it is possible to chart the journey of slash as a

discursive device from the realm of fandoms to other public spaces on the Internet (note 2).

## 2. Communication, sociability, and politics beyond subcultures

[2.1] Russian fan slash has typically been interpreted as a way for fans to assert individual choice and the self above the socially normative (Samutina 2014), or as a vital form of protest and resistance or an infrapolitical practice (Scott 1990) in a highly homophobic and nationalist political and social environment (Palash 2013). However, not all creators assemble or produce slash with an explicit political agenda underpinning their work. Defining slash as a subcultural practice limits our understanding of its significance as a phenomenon that has a powerful discursive role beyond fan conversations.

[2.2] Recent work on youth subcultures argues for such a revised view of youth practices in postsocialist spaces. Hilary Pilkington and Elena Omel'chenko (2013) make a case for a study of social context when examining youth cultural practices, rather than framing these as subcultural formations with fixed boundaries. They persuasively rearticulate theories of new youth cultural practices to posit that communication rather than style is central to "forming affective bonds" in youth cultures in postsocialist societies, allowing individual trajectories across the cultural scene (210–11). The Internet particularly enables the traversing of spaces that might otherwise be discrete, and it allows for the potential impact of young people's cultural practices on wider society.

[2.3] This shift of perspective from the structural to the cultural follows on Pilkington and Omel'chenko's (2013) recommendation that we study youth cultural practices as strategies that are embedded in whole lives, rather than social formations separated from these whole lives. Subcultures have often been studied for their distinctiveness and in isolation of their social contexts, but framing slash fandoms as strategies allows us to acknowledge the fluidity and flow of conversation among these and other public spaces. As a strategy, slash or being a slasher occasions moments of interaction and sociability across the Internet that hold within them the potential to engender debates on human rights and on what constitutes Russianness.

## 3. Slash as political act: Both disengagement and activism

[3.1] At the outset, it is important to clarify that not all slashers claim to be doing political work, either implicitly or explicitly. Russian slashers articulate their motivations in many ways, only some of which are political. Some slashers suggest that they are drawn to slash owing to curiosity about how men might interact if they

had a relationship that privileged emotional contact; they deny any political message. The administrator of a slash forum for the Russian TV cop drama *Glukhar* (2008–11) explained to me that the serial piqued his interest only when he noticed "how often the main male protagonists embrace, call each other 'my dear,' kiss each other's cheeks, gaze at each other—I realised that it was a goldmine of material for slash. The relationship between the male characters makes them interesting and credible" (personal communication translated from the Russian, 2011). For this fan, slash is taking what is implicit in the text; it is not an invention or a radical new reading. He then emphasized that for him, slash was not about asserting a political position, and it was not meant to be a form of resistance.

[3.2] Ellie Cler, who has many slash videos to her credit, says this: "There was a brief period of time when I was all about gay rights and how slash is sooo progressive etc. Well, that was exactly because my political views were changing at the time because of slash. Once they've settled, slash is once again my favorite hobby, and politics are set apart from that, even if I'm still all about social justice :)" (personal communication, 2011). It is common to frame slash as a catalyst in the formation of political views. Slashers intrinsically work against the cultural grain, but not all espouse political goals. Yet this ready denial of a connection between fandom and politics, or the desire to articulate these as separate preoccupations, is also noteworthy. In societies where politics pervades every aspect of everyday life, a disavowal of politics can itself be construed as a political act.

[3.3] Many slashers, however, do make explicit political associations between their interest in slash and the political cause of sexual minorities. The administrators at Slashfiction.ru, one of the largest repositories of Russian slash fiction and art, are vocal about the rights of the LGBT community and move seamlessly between discussing their fics and deliberating over the rights of sexual minorities. In the Slashfiction.ru forum, Russian slashers, in response to an internal survey about what it means to be a slasher, noted that creating slash media provides ample opportunity to assert identity and to create expressions of political culture:

[3.4] To me being a slasher means thinking in a certain way; paying attention to small things (people's views, the randomly-used phrase in films, for instance); being part of a large community, where there is an improbable number of smart, talented, intellectual and interesting people; a guaranteed audience for my creativity; a broader understanding, than civil society offers, of issues of gender, orientation, the concept of "queer," than civil society offers; being inspired; having enough imagination to bring a spicy diversity to my intimate affairs; being part of gay culture; I can go on

forever—slash is an irrevocable part of my life. (Citrina, Slashfiction.ru, November 13, 2010, translated from the Russian)

[3.5] These slashers claim that they are able to bring to political debate that which civil society is generally unable or unwilling to table. Being a slasher also means finding a community where one's leisure interests and views coincide with those of several others; it means being part of a culture of socially and politically like-minded people. In the discussion threads on television shows in the Slashfiction.ru forum, for instance, slashers also share news on homosexuals' rights in other parts of the world, the rights of gay couples to adopt, and the issue of homophobia.

[3.6] Within slash communities, whether Web forums or social network groups, slashers have also been known to engage in activism, usually motivated by legislative moves that are construed as antagonistic to slashers' work. The administrators of the Slashfiction.ru group on VKontakte have frequently urged fans to support the rights of sexual minorities in an intolerant environment. When news of the impending law against "homosexual propaganda among minors" broke in 2012 (the law has since been adopted), slash communities on Runet began to circulate petitions about its implications. Slasher Marina Riabova posted the following petition in the VKontakte group: "Hello! We're gathering signatures for a petition against the passing of the law. In a nutshell, they could put a lid on slasher activity if they pass this law! This is very serious. Let's sign this!" (VKontakte, "Saito Slash," August 6, 2013, translated from the Russian). Slashers used social networking sites to garner support and agitate against the legislation being adopted.

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## 4. Slash at large: Conversations with detractors

[4.1] Slashers' sense of the significance of what they create is, however, particularly heightened and reinforced in dialogue with antislashers. By acknowledging this, we make it essential to consider how slashers engage with nonfans and other detractors, both within and outside fan forums. Within fan forums, slashers consciously respond to hate posts and criticism of slash, making a claim for political space in a hostile society. Conceding that not all antislashers are homophobic, one slasher claims that many rants of antislashers hold no water, given how little space slashers have for self-expression. In the following ironic post, a slasher addresses detractors who prefer heteronormative fan fiction, arguing that they have no need to feel under threat when they dominate fan spaces. The fan paints a picture of what being hemmed in truly feels like:

[4.2] Until you get to a point when you are accused of killing fandom, until you start getting insulting and offensive emails because you dared to

describe heterosexual relationships of your favourite pairings, until you have lost half your life hiding and inventing secret handshakes in order to find like-minded people among fans, enough with this rhetoric about the poor, marginalised heterosexual orientation in fandom. Dammit, you are in the majority. You will survive. (<http://ficbook.net/readfic/403661>; translated from the Russian)

[4.3] Slash is clearly framed here as a vital form of expression for those who see themselves as a minority with an ever-shrinking public space for their voices. It is the engagement of those who have spent half their lives in hiding, forming communities in creative ways; it is a coming out, as it were, in a context that places obstacles in the way of such disclosure.

[4.4] Slashers make a case for their work solely within fandoms, but they also have their work cut out for them, as slash has increasingly become a bone of contention in public spaces outside fan forums. In forums peopled by nonfans, slash, with its implicit challenge to the mainstream narrative of sexuality, is held up as an example of moral depravity. In a LiveJournal entry on the new legislation against homosexual propaganda, this is what the writer has to say about how to deal with the threat of slash propaganda:

[4.5] Sadly, there is propaganda. When one sixth grader sends the other sixth grader slash fiction on her mobile, through bluetooth, for instance. It is not propaganda as such, but information from which we need to protect our children.

[4.6] One exemplary (punitive—SR) act against slashers, and the phenomenon will not be as attractive anymore. Social disapproval alone does not work. (Vashima\_midori, LiveJournal, August 8, 2013, translated from the Russian)

[4.7] These views are expressed during an exchange of posts on what qualifies as propaganda of homosexuality in light of the new law. Many sites hosting threads on the new law against homosexual propaganda have concerned adults discussing matters pertaining to children's safety. Fan slash becomes emblematic of a permissive culture: it stands for all things harmful to the healthy development of children. For example, one person notes in a blog post that third graders are reading about homosexuality in widely circulated slash. Angry responses suggest alerting the school principal; others ask that gays go live in Europe so children in Russia can be raised "normally" (BDV1984, Yaplakal.com [<http://www.yaplakal.com/>], March 19, 2014). Some discussion sites see slash featuring in debates between those who view it as propaganda and those who equally do not see the appeal of slash but find the

legislation dubious. A visitor to a LiveJournal blog on the new law offers the example of slash writing, explaining what it is to those unfamiliar with it. A discussion follows in which the posters debate whether slash written by many under the age of 18 can be considered propaganda directed at those under 18 if they are the ones writing it themselves: "Is it a violation if they are propagating it themselves?" (Naritsyna, LiveJournal, March 29, 2013).

[4.8] As slash travels to nonfannish spaces, slash fans act as publics on other sites where discussions about being gay bring a mix of voices to the forefront. One such is the well-regarded Internet project Deti-404 (Children-404; <http://deti-404.com/>) for young LGBT teenagers, who use the forum (which plays on the familiar "404—Page Not Found" server error message) to share experiences of how they live with their sexual preferences, of coming out of the closet, and of how family and friends have responded to their disclosures. (There is an ongoing legal case against the journalist who set up the project for "propagating homosexuality.") On the group's Facebook and VKontakte walls, many who post these personal stories talk about writing slash, framing it in confessional narratives that articulate their personal journeys and trials:

[4.9] My mother thinks homosexuality is an ailment. She threatened to send me to a shrink, when I was into slash (I still am, but I do it surreptitiously)...and I try not to think about love...don't want to love anyone here because I don't want the homophobes around me to hurt my loved one. (D., 16 years old, Altai region; VKontakte, Deti-404, LGBT podrostki [teenagers], translated from the Russian)

[4.10] Many posts describe the writing of slash as a clandestine activity that they cannot share with family and friends. For one nonslasher in this well-known forum, slash appears to have made being gay something of a fashion (MP, VKontakte, Deti-404, LGBT podrostki [teenagers]). Posts in this forum describe the fascination with writing slash and the ways in which it has normalized the imagining of alternative sexualities for young people with no other platform for such expression. It is quite common for participants in this forum to strategically place the writing and reading of slash as a transformative moment, one that makes them come to terms with their sexual orientation.

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## 5. Conclusion

[5.1] The creation of slash and the imagining of alternative sexualities is intrinsically a political act on Runet. Yet framing slash communities as resistant subcultures in Russia conceals more than it reveals. In an essay about *Indian Idol 3* (2007) and its audiences, Aswin Punathambekar (2012) writes about how the performance of a

young man from the city of Shillong brought together plural groups that engaged with the show and came out in support of their candidate. Their show-centered conversations bridged many ethnic and social divides because they took place among diverse social groups that otherwise had little opportunity to mingle. Punathambekar suggests that the test of the show's contribution to civic and political participation is to understand how these newly formed affinities endure and seep into everyday life and into various spaces and moments of sociability. Only then can we truly understand the impact that such participatory practices have on political life and society. We need to reconsider the political potential of public conversations that are triggered by the media event but then extend beyond it to "generate...alternative imaginations of public life that, in turn, are tied to the experience of everyday life" (2012, ¶3.2).

[5.2] In Russia, slash emerges in direct response to a media event or production but goes on to become a factor in shaping new conversations about being gay in Russia—conversations beyond the original context of fan media production. Framed this way, a study of slash can shift emphasis to the significance of moments of sociability outside the fan community, in everyday life, where slashers often speak to the converted but at other times engage with nonslashers and even those wary of gay rights and the liberal values they embody. When slashers engage with one another and with those with different and sometimes contrarian views on the subject, they inhabit "spaces and moments of sociability" that may not always turn into political participation in the ways that we expect but that may "generate new and sustainable ideas for social and political change" (Punathambekar 2012, ¶3.3). By looking beyond the immediate context of the slash fan community to examine the ways in which slash becomes embedded in other debates about individual freedom, legislative control, and social stability, we encounter moments of sociability that have tremendous political significance in a society where public proclamations about homosexuality appear to be increasingly fettered, both socially and legally.

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## 6. Notes

1. I reflect on digital slash in this essay, but the world of slash extends beyond the Internet; slashers also hold annual conventions such as the Moscow Slashcon, last held in 2013.
2. Sources cited here are public. The only exceptions are the posts on the VKontakte page of Slashfiction.ru, the personal comments of the *Glukhar* slasher, and the personal comments of Ellie Cler; permission to use these were granted to me via e-mail.

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## Review

### *Online games, social narratives*, by Esther MacCallum-Stewart

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[0.1] *Keywords*—Audience analysis; Celebrity fans; Game history; Games; Indie games; Webcast

Lamerichs, Nicolle. 2015. *Online Games, Social Narratives*, by Esther MacCallum-Stewart [book review]. In "European Fans and European Fan Objects: Localization and Translation," edited by Anne Kustritz, special issue, *Transformative Works and Cultures*, no. 19. <http://dx.doi.org/10.3983/twc.2015.0645>.

Esther MacCallum-Stewart. *Online games, social narratives*. New York: Routledge, 2014, hardcover, \$115.68 (208p) ISBN 978-0-415-89190-5.

[1] The game industry is rapidly growing and developing. While game communities used to be studied in relation to role-playing games and vast virtual worlds, this no longer suffices. Game cultures are rapidly changing with the growth of independent games, the variety of online games, and the diversification of the platforms that they are played on. The communities constructed around digital games are becoming more diverse in terms of demography and play styles. While previous studies have focused on virtual worlds and role-playing games, today's online games are more diverse, including social games such as *FarmVille* (Zynga, 2009) or console titles such as *Red Dead Redemption* (Rockstar Games, 2010). Communities can be formed within these games, but players also connect outside of the game. They express their engagement on forums such as Reddit or broadcast their in-game actions on YouTube. Esther MacCallum-Stewart's *Online Games, Social Narratives* (2014) is a timely intervention that traces how player communities are constructed by players and by the game industry, and how participation is motivated in these media. The work is positioned at the nexus of fan studies and game studies, offering rich insights in the lived culture of video game players.

[2] This systematic study offers a well-argued and critical overview of recent developments in the game industries and game studies. Drawing from different disciplines, MacCallum-Stewart seeks to understand the social aspects of play and how players interpret the game narratives around them. Rather than relying on a large

data set, this cultural study contextualizes specific tendencies in game culture through careful analysis and historical positioning. MacCallum-Stewart draws from analysis of games and primary texts, but also from interviews with fans and her own insights in game culture.

[3] Broadly speaking, three emerging phenomena have informed this book. First, the author examines increasingly popular fan creations, such as "let's play" videos—that is, game footage with commentary that players upload on broadcasting channels such as YouTube. These Webcasts are an increasingly popular way to share game experiences and to reshape single-player games into a community experience. Second, she assesses the role of local celebrities in game fandom, which include designers such as Markus "Notch" Persson, the developer of *Minecraft* (Mojang, 2011), but also big name fans, such as the members of The Yogscast (<http://www.yogscast.com/>), who upload game play videos to YouTube. Third, the author is interested in the recent rise of indie games and casual games that are played on social media. Her critical views on game communities rely on case studies that center around these three topics, which are all closely related and which have redefined game culture.

[4] The book is divided in seven chapters. After a short introduction, the first chapter offers a history of online games that positions these media in relation to traditional role-playing groups and live-action role-playing. Traditional games, after all, heavily influenced the structures, mechanics, and role divisions of computer-mediated games. Gamers themselves are not always aware of these developments. Today's adolescents often find their way to digital games first and may move to board games and role-playing games later on. In the history of gaming, a genre or medium is not a point of closure, but board games and computer-mediated games exist together and propel each other forward. In the second chapter, MacCallum-Stewart discusses previous research on game communities. Unlike the stereotypical gamer, who is often depicted as adolescent and male, the demographics of gamers range widely. Previous game studies have often categorized gamers according to their activities, with various play styles that included competitive play, collecting, and socializing. MacCallum-Stewart insists on viewing players as individuals and emphasizes the diversity and ephemeral nature of game cultures.

[5] In the following chapters, the author provides various case studies. The third chapter discusses the fan culture of Webcasting, while the fourth discusses the creativity of game fans and the role of influential fans. The fifth and sixth chapters tackle the emerging economy and communities of indie gaming, where fans also have the roles of producers, funders, and gatekeepers. MacCallum-Stewart helpfully expands on these new consumer/producer roles by examining cases such as *Minecraft*.

The final chapter interrogates free online games, which include virtual worlds for children and teenagers, such as *Habbo Hotel* (Sulake Corporation, 2000), but also "freemium" games. The latter are often casual games on social media that are free to play but monetize via add-ons such as status boosters or extensions. *FarmVille* is characteristic of this genre.

[6] Central to MacCallum-Stewart's book is the claim that online games are rich texts that have unique places in the individual lives of gamers. Game communities are not cohesive communities but rely on multiple media platform that upcoming research needs to explore more fully. Game communities are fractured and heterogeneous—"too disparate to exist in cultural cohesion." Her research claim addresses this explicitly: "I argue that although gamers have become too large a group to be examined as a cohesive whole, they are becoming hugely influential in modern cultural practices" (3). While game communities are not coherent, they appear that way through spokespersons such as game critics and through a shared subcultural capital that creates a sense of unity. As MacCallum-Stewart shows, fan producers and developers, such as Webcasters on YouTube, can become powerful spokespeople for the game community. She asserts, "Fans and fan producers are not a powerful elite but an active, influential part of gaming societies" (50). Designers and fans, however, also come into conflict with each other. The author illustrates this by a heated debate among the creator of the popular game *Minecraft* and his fan following, which escalated at the Minecon convention 2011. In this case, the game community had a toxic effect and fueled a heated debate. The study shows that relationships between audiences and producers can be difficult. The promise of intimacy and participation, which is often framed in a positive light in fan studies, can also lead to animosity.

[7] While gamers can self-identify with a larger community, they are not cohesive groups. Through Sherry Turkle's concept of "alone together," MacCallum-Stewart addresses the idea that a gamer can operate individually but still feel connected to others. Inherent is the idea that gamers are a diaspora. They operate on various media; they may also perform differently in the environments in which they play. A hardcore *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004) player may not bring the same attitude to his casual playthrough of *Minecraft*. Moreover, game communities are not only formed in a game but may also depend on a variety of existing platforms that range from official forums to Reddit and YouTube. While gamers are often categorized according to their memberships or activities, MacCallum-Stewart suggests that they need to be examined as individuals.

[8] A valuable contribution of this book to current debates in game studies lies in how the author corrects dominant views of online play in game studies. MacCallum-Stewart understands that the game or text itself should be understood as a large

social environment: "Online games and rich texts cannot exist without players to bring them alive, and this is probably the most exciting, exuberant aspect of studying them" (15). With her unique approach, which also includes traditional games, she redefines views on online games as being solely about virtual worlds and role-playing. Her cases include social games, but she is also skeptical of their supposedly social nature. While these Facebook games are often framed as communities, since their mechanics motivate connecting with others, they do not necessarily imply bonding or togetherness. In games such as *FarmVille*, a gamer may even feel a false sense of community through simple mechanics, which allow him or her to gift items to other players. The gamers do not connect here in a meaningful way that propels game play and creates a social community: "The Facebook gaming structure encourages a large web of weak ties between players that are used to form social capital. During play, the player is constantly reminded that others are taking part in the same activities" (156).

[9] While game communities are often believed to be participatory cultures, MacCallum-Stewart reveals their limits. Clever game design can contribute to a false sense of community. By allowing gamers to experiment and appropriate their characters and game play, gamers get the sense that they are heard and that they can potentially address the media industry. Nonetheless, this dialogue is uneven and often false. The trend of unfinished games that are "always in beta" allow users to help co-construct the world, but at the same time, game designers shamelessly exploit gamers through such free labor, known as playbor. MacCallum-Stewart has a keen eye for the regimes that ground game cultures and the hierarchies that emerge in them. Moreover, these game communities may sharply restrict self-expression and participation, creating a false sort of socialization. In particular, online games for children mask the individual player through, for instance, censorship of language.

[10] This book's contribution to the field of fan studies resides in the fact that gaming is redefined here not only as a form of play or experience but rather as a complex social phenomenon. Often we find a sense of community where we least expect it. Webcasting includes viewers who are not playing but who are spectators of the game play of others. Such videos redefine game culture through commentary. In her poignant case study of *The Yogscast*, MacCallum-Stewart shows that such videos are more than walkthroughs. They are new narratives and parodies of the game that allow new meanings to emerge. These videos are best understood by those that have the necessary gaming capital to make sense of the references and in-jokes, thus rewarding game literacy.

[11] For fan scholars, this is an ideal and timely handbook to learn about game cultures and the social aspects of online gaming. The study is well written, extensive, and insightful. Methodologically, fan scholars might expect more from the book. While

MacCallum-Stewart relies on mixed methods, we hardly see the outcomes of her autoethnography, which is briefly mentioned, or read a reflection on her role as a researcher and player. The case studies are contextualized well, but the results are often brief and explorative. While the study could have demonstrated more methodological and analytical expertise, it stands out in its contextualization of emerging phenomena, its clarity, and its finesse.

[12] *Online Games, Social Narratives* demonstrates the power of game fans as critics and producers. Scholars will gain more understanding about the formation of game communities that can easily be translated to their views and approach to other media audiences. MacCallum-Stewart's plea to examine online games as rich texts will undoubtedly also resonate with many fan scholars, who have to face daunting transmedia landscapes and a vast array of fan creations. These rich texts are best understood through their players, but a researcher must be wary not to categorize or label their activities and needs. The relationship among the players, the game, and the industry comprises a complex social network. We can only fully understand a virtual or traditional community when we realize that it is composed of individuals.