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# 7 From Interpretive Communities to Interpretative Fairs: Ordinary Fandom, Textual Selection and Digital Media

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## Introduction

The academic analysis of fans has frequently foregrounded two dimensions: creativity and collectivity. These characteristics of fandom in turn appear to set the practices of fans apart from other less productive and tightly knit audience groups. Yet, the growing ubiquity of fandom in the era of digital media challenges notions of fandom as exceptional and distinct from 'normal audiences' (Fiske 1992). Based on the study of ordinary, everyday life fandom we therefore suggest that the quintessential, constitutive condition of fandom is *transitive* rather than collective or creative – and maintained through the affective bond with a given fan object that is constructed through processes of textual selection facilitated by digital media.

Fan Studies have highlighted forms of fans' creativity and productivity since the late 1980s. However, while these studies preceded the rise and diffusion of digital media over the subsequent decade, fan cultures have increasingly been seen and studied through the prism of digital media, coinciding with and evoking dominant themes in the analysis of the rise of new communication technologies including interactivity, participation, productivity and user-generated content. If Jenkins (1992: 210–11) proposed as early as two decades ago that fandom 'constitutes a particular interpretative community' in which 'fan interpretations need to be understood in institutional rather than personal terms' as 'fan club meetings, newsletters, and letterzines, provide a space where textual interpretations get negotiated', the emergence of virtual spaces of fan discourse, exchange and interaction moved these practices and forms of productivity to the very centre of digital media ecologies and their study (cf. Jenkins 2007). The affective attachments of fans reflected in their productivity are at the heart of the digitally driven rise of participatory culture, as detailed in Jenkins' (2006a, 2006b) careful documentation of the interplay between convergence culture and fandom.

The continuity of forms of fan productivity which now have often migrated online over the past two decades thus also serve as a note of caution against hasty assumptions of technological determinism. The internet may have changed fan cultures and dramatically enhanced their visibility and accessibility, yet fandom has had an even more pronounced formative effect on the architecture of the internet and other digital media. As Sandvoss suggested elsewhere (2011a: 70–71), the plethora of online fan activities spanning from fan fora, online communities, fan networks, enunciative productivity in online communication spanning from emails to social networking, blogs, reviewing sites and user-generated content in the form of fan fiction and fans' visual, audio and audio-visual art work as forms of user-generated content serve 'as an illustration of the social and cultural shaping of the medium: the contemporary face of the internet and the shift towards Web 2.0 … reflect the range of activities in which popular audiences already engaged before the diffusion of online media'.

Yet, at the same time, the increasing ubiquity of digital media content combined with and reflected in the increasing universality of fandom (cf. Jenkins 2007) have thus resulted in an ever wider diversification of fan objects and practices. While we believe that the umbrella term 'fan' maintains its significance in identifying fundamental and shared motivations, attachments and bonds between fans and their different fan objects, this diversification in turn results in the need to distinguish between different fan groups through typologies that identify commonalities and differences in the spectrum between cultural consumption and production occupied by fans.

One such typology that has been widely adopted in the field is offered by Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) who distinguish between 'fans', 'cultists' and 'enthusiasts'. While their chosen terminology is counterintuitive – and fans also serves as an umbrella term to all these groups in much of the literature – these categories allow us to distinguish between these groups along three lines: the degree of their connectivity with other fans; their choice and type of fan object around which their fandom evolves; and the specificity of their media use. Fans are 'individuals who are not yet in contact with other people who share their attachments, or may only be in contact with them through the mechanism of mass-produced fannish literature' (Abercrombie and Longhurst 1998: 138). The fan thus has a broad media use and does not generally have personal contact with other fans. Cultists, in turn, have an 'explicit attachments to stars or to particular programmes' as their media use is more specialized (Abercrombie and Longhurst 1998: 138). Cultists not only have a deeper attachment to particular programmes that they watch, but are also involved in networks of people and media. Finally, the enthusiast's fandom is likely to be 'based predominantly around activities rather than media or stars' (Abercrombie and Longhurst 1998: 139). These fans are likely to be highly involved in textual production (see Fiske 1992), and will be members of tightly knit networks devoted to their fandom.

This leads us to the wider question of which forms of productivity different fan groups engage in. Elsewhere, Sandvoss (2011a) has suggested that the forms of productivity Fiske (1992) identifies – semiotic productivity (the act of reading and meaning construction), enunciative productivity (interactions between fans) and textual productivity (user-generated texts such as fan fiction, music remixes or fanzines) – can be correlated to Abercrombie and Longhurst's typology with enthusiasts engaging in all three types of productivity while cultists are primarily enunciatively and semiotically productive, with fans' productivity being largely limited to the semiotic.

These classifications are supported by the fact that the vast range of fan-generated texts online are produced by a small section of fans. Registration and user data from different online spaces such as fan fora or blogging sites in areas such as sports, music or politics illustrate that a small number of regular users commonly account for the majority of content, with a second tier of occasional posters, and, thirdly, the vast majority of users reading fans texts online without becoming active themselves (Sandvoss 2011a, 2013a, 2013b). Such 'lurkers' have been widely observed (Nonnecke and Preece 2003; Rafaeli et al. 2004), but their implication for the scope and depth of interactivity and participation in contemporary digital fan cultures has thus far been insuffi ciently considered. In this spirit, this chapter aims to explore the interplay between, and transforming textuality in, the digital media age and 'ordinary fandom' – the commonplace, everyday life media fandom that constitutes the largest group of affective media engagements without high levels of social connectivity arising out of fandom, corresponding broadly with the group described by Abercrombie and Longhurst as 'fans'.

## Methodology

To meet these aims we adopted a research design diverting from the bulk of empirical social studies of fan cultures. The 'field' of study in the empirical investigation of fan audiences is commonly defined as a given fan culture. Aspects of these fields are physically manifested through the in situ spaces in which fans move and associate such as sports stadia, concert venues, festival sites or other places of fan pilgrimage. More commonly, however, much of the field in media-centered fan cultures in particular is constituted through the enunciative and textual practices of fans which are increasingly visible in online spaces. Naturally, these easily accessible virtual spaces have become the focal point of much fan research – not least because as a subject area that is concerned with questions of identity, community, affect and enjoyment and whose findings are multilayered and complex and hence bear little immediate relevance for more narrow policy concerns, the low access costs of 'virtual ethnographies' (cf. Hine 2000) and other online research have offered effective and effi cient methods of study to scholars engaging in small-scale research projects that have tended to attract little, if any research funding.

However, qualitative research that defines the field through enunciative and textual participation inevitably focuses on those groups of fans closest to the realm of production such as cultists and in particular enthusiasts. On blogs, online fora, video portals and other spaces of fan-generated textuality we only find the voices of those textually and enunciatively active. Even interview-based research which recruits participants in reference to their participation in a given fan culture primarily samples fans with high levels of participation and identification that are therefore willing to be part of such research, regardless of whether conducted in offline or online settings.

Seeking to explore the interplay between technology, changing forms of textuality and 'ordinary fandom' we therefore decided to adopt a methodological approach that facilitates the study of fans who lack high levels of fan-based social connectivity and textual productivity by conducting semi-structured interviews with fans recruited offline and who self-identified as fans using digital media. Interviews were conducted offline by one of the researchers.

We conducted ten semi-structured interviews with fans across different genres of popular entertainment including film, fiction, television and gaming, exploring their use of digital media, the practices surrounding their fandom and the impact of their fandom on their sense of self as well as community memberships. Participants to the study were recruited through snowball sampling and were aged 16 to 27 at the time of the interviews. We limited this small sample to fans under the age of 30 to ensure that participants had high degrees of digital media literacy and extensively used digital media in their everyday life. This ensured that no external barriers to participation in digital spaces existed among interviewees. The sample was controlled for educational capital to ensure that snowballing would not lead to a narrow sample of 'aca-fans' whose combined scholarly and fan interest might offer a biased sample that does not reflect broader patterns of engagements among ordinary fans. Interviews were conducted in the South of England and interviewees were White British. We interviewed an equal number of male and female participants. Following the interview phase, interviews were transcribed and a thematic analysis of all transcripts was undertaken.

## Ordinary Fandom, Community and Stigma

While sociologists such as Robert Putnam (2000) famously have pointed to the rise of mass media consumption as a central factor in the growing social isolation and the decline of social

capital, fan studies – reflecting the dominant methodological traditions outlined above – have frequently emphasized the role of community in media fandom (such as Baym 1998, 2000, 2007; Milner 2009; Jenkins 1992, 2006a; Bird 2003; Sandvoss 2013a; Clerc 2000; Hellekson and Busse 2006; Giesler 2005). Whelan (2006) and Baym (1998, 2000) illustrate the emergence of friendships from friendship networks to 'dyadic friendships' (Baym 2000: 134). As viewers, readers or listeners become fans, we thus assume that they shift from being members of audiences to becoming members of a community – groups, as Raymond Williams (1983: 75) reminded us that are not necessarily geographically bound, but based on 'the quality of holding something in common … a sense of common identity and interests'. And while in online environments social norms and boundaries might be fluctuating (Fernback 1999), this communality and association centred on the reception of a given text or object that transforms such communities into interpretative communities that propose, assess and negotiate textual interpretation is most easily expressed through digital media. Our argument then is not that such interpretive communities do not exist. However, we suggest that they are not an intrinsic aspect of fandom and that beyond members of such communities, which appear to include the groups Abercrombie and Longhurst classify as cultists and enthusiasts, a large segment of media users exists that lacks a sense of community membership. Yet, for their strong affective bond with a given fan object articulated in practices demonstrating the regularity and emotional significance of engagements with their fan objects – which in turn also serve as resources in the articulation of the self-identity – these media users are nevertheless best described as fans (cf. Sandvoss 2005a). The majority of participants in our study suggested that they did not feel part of a wider group of fans either offline and online. Amy, a 20-year-old student and regular visitor of fan sites and dedicated to the popular ABC drama *Lost*, explains that the lack of her own enunciative and textual productivity seemed to prevent her from feeling a sense of community membership:

*I didn't feel like I was part of a community because a) I wasn't actually contributing myself, and b) because I didn't get a sense of who were the other people that were communicating.*

Similarly, even interviewees who stated that they were occasional posters on fan sites stressed that they did not feel part of a community and that they had no intention of becoming part of one. Charles, a 27-year-old rail engineer and *Harry Potter* fan, responds with a sense of hostility when asked if he could see himself becoming more engaged in the lively online *Harry Potter* fan community: 'no not at all, I don't know who they are and I don't have an interest in getting to know them either'.

Others assert the strategic motivations for the use of online sources in order to gain additional information or gossip about their fan object, not to associate or enter into dialogue with fellow fans. Perry, a 21-year-old police officer and fan of comedy shows, describes his use of fan sites and fora in such terms: 'I look through the sites because I want to see if there is anything new coming up, not because I want to make friends with anyone'. Vicky, 21, a fan of television drama including *Grey's Anatomy, Gossip Girl* and *Desperate Housewives* is equally clear in her intentions: 'I don't use blogs to try and make friends'. Sam, who is a 24-year-old bank clerk and fan of BBC's popular and widely exported car show *Top Gear*, states, 'It's not even normally that people talk to each other specifically, it's more that people make general comments that link to what the topic is and that's it'. A substantive number of interviewees thus not only do not feel part of a group, but they outright reject the suggestion that they may have built any forms of social contacts through their fandom.

Contrary to Mullens (2005: 7) who argues that 'to claim the label of fan remains on some level to claim an identity in a marginal space, outside of the mainstream' reflecting the

'political' imperative of early fan studies to champion fans as an audience group that had been subject to pathologization (Jenson 1992; Fiske 1989a, 1989b; Jenkins 1991, 1992; Hills 2002; Lopes 2006) and negative stereotypical representation in both communication studies and mediated discourse, Sandvoss (2005a) suggested that in response to the diversification of media markets brought by the deregulation and digitalization since the late 1980s, fans have become ever more significant – and therefore coveted – consumers whose commitment, affection and loyalty are central to media producers operating in increasingly competitive environments. According to Sandvoss, the need for scholarly intervention in defense of fans has hence largely disappeared. More recently, Hills (2010: 113) reassesses such claims in relation to *Twilight* fandom, suggesting that 'Sandvoss is both right and wrong … fandom has indeed become part of marketing strategies … but wrong because we cannot deduce from this industrial normalization that wider cultures have embraced such and identities as uncontroversial'. While we would maintain that such industrial strategies alongside, but also reflected in, the increasing ubiquity of fan-type attachments structuring the media engagements of the vast majority of contemporary media users have normalized fandom as a common mode of media engagement, – and in turn become constitutive to the everyday life fabric of what Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) have described as 'diffused audiences' – our study seems to suggest that if being a fan has become commonly socially accepted, certain fan *practices*, and in particular those associated with the enunciatively and textually productive groups of cultists and enthusiasts, have not. In rejecting the suggestion that their fandom may extend to given fan practices, including becoming part of fan networks and communities, the above-cited fans thus engage in deliberate acts of distinction that in turn reflect a fear of stigmatization.

Charles, for instance, is quick to distance himself from the stereotypical representations of (*Harry Potter*) fans: 'I'm not one of those weirdos that sits on their computer all day watching pointless stuffand commenting on it all'. While being a fan himself, Charles thus still maintains an 'us' and 'them' dichotomy in which textually active fans are constructed as the obsessive Other. Similarly, Emma, a 20-year-old university student and fan of CBS' California-based teen drama *90210*, states:

*Things like Star Trek I can understand why people would be (embarrassed), because there's that whole stigma associated with it, but 90210 doesn't have that so there's no reason to not want to be a fan of it.*

This sense of 'othering' was also seen when participants were asked about fan fiction and its writers, a practices most interviewees considered as 'strange':

*It all seemed a bit weird with Harry wanting to be with Ron and stuff and I only got half way through it and thought it was rubbish so just came off it. (Charles)*

*I find the whole writing stories thing a bit weird. (Emma)*

*I don't think I would read any of it to be honest. It seems a bit strange. (April)*

The reluctance of participants such as Charles to engage in enunciative productivity while also discrediting textual productivity online is hence both, *pace* Bourdieu (1984), a structured and structuring value judgement that reflects continuing discourses and cultural priorities disregarding not only certain *objects* of consumption (as illustrated in Emma's account) but also consumption *practices* and forms of engagement.

Some participants experienced stigmatization themselves at the hands of their friends in the form of banter. Many fans appear to internalize the underlying value judgements that are reflected in such banter through self-deprecating and self-satirizing acknowledgements of existing cultural hierarchies. Amy, for example, reports how 'my friends accept me for who I

am, they just laugh it off, so at the end of the day it doesn't really matter. They know I'm a bit of a geek, so it's fine (laughs)'. Similarly James notes that 'if they knew I suppose it would probably be the normal "you're a geek" jokes and all that, but they wouldn't try to be hurtful, I don't think'. Tom reports similar banter by his partner: 'I mean my girlfriend will go on at me for being a geek or whatever but I mean she, I think she's rather accepting of that'. These accounts reflect that participants did continue to internalize negative connotations ('geek') about their fan activities when they were acknowledged as implicitly constitutive of their self-identity and perception by others. As Vicky reports: 'It's kinda become like a joke, where it's like "oh where's Vicky, oh she's probably catching up with every drama under the sun'", while equally constructing a positive sense of identity through identifications, or, as Sandvoss (2005a, 2005b) suggests, a self-reflective reading of her fan object:

*My favourite character in Desperate Housewives is Gabrielle because she reminds me of myself and my friends in the way she acts because she does some ridiculous things.*

Such accounts reflect the double bind of affection for a given fan object while simultaneously internalizing and affirming the cultural stigma attached to their fan practices. The fans in our study hence remained often reluctant to share their interest in fan-generated online texts in their offline environment. While fan fiction may serve as focal point to many online fan communities (and slash in particular contests the heteronormative nature of popular media (see Coppa 2006; Thomas 2007, Chandler and Sunder 2007)), *Glee* fan Louise, a 16-year-old high school student, for example, hides the fact that she occasionally reads fan fiction from her friends:

*No, I would never tell them that. Like I said some of the stories can be quite weird so, like, I wouldn't want them to then look at them and think that I have been reading strange stories about Kurt and Finn being gay, because that just makes me look weird as well.*

In light of their negative reaction to the textual productivity of other fans, one might question whether our interviewees actually qualify as 'fans'. Yet, while they are not part of the fan cultures frequently studied hitherto, the strong affective bond with their fan object was reflected in their regular, committed consumption patterns, including a keen interest in any additional information on their fan object that could be gathered. Louise justifies her use of fan-generated text by explaining that 'if you're a true fan then you want to learn about it'. Similarly, while having classified fan fiction as weird, Emma is keen on using fan fora to gain additional information on her favourite show 'I suppose it's that they [online fans] know what they're talking about and if you listen to what they have to say then you are going to learn something from it'. Both Emma and Louise are also keen to then share such information with their friends:

*I think the website is still really important though because it gives me the information to talk to my friends about, like, if I didn't look at the website and write on it, then there would be no conversation to have. (Emma)*

*It's another way for me to find out the gossip and tell everyone. (Louise)*

Fandom here, as Fiske (1992: 33) suggested, 'offers ways of filling cultural lack and provides the social prestige and self-esteem that go with cultural capital' – a function further illustrated by the sharing of information gained from fan-generated content via existing online friendship networks such as Facebook. Comedy fan Perry illustrates how such information is used to gain subcultural standing or capital (cf. Thornton 1995) within given networks:

*If I can post something on my mates' wall that is like breaking news or something, then I will do it, because it makes me look like I know what I'm talking about (laughs).*

Hence, these participants do not generally disregard user-generated content, but instead draw careful distinctions between different types of fan-generated texts. While they themselves choose not to engage in discourses about their fan object other than with preexisting social networks such as friends and family, they regard enunciative productivity as a valuable source of further information and gossip on their fan object, one they are even keen to share with others. In contrast, forms of textual productivity by fellow fans are only engaged with secretively or dismissed altogether. Crucially then, ordinary fans share a range of practices and motivations with more committed and/or active fan groups, yet seek to distance themselves from the two notions most commonly discussed in the academic study of fan audiences: creativity and community.

The disregard of fans' creative textual productivity in forms such as fan fiction or remixing among the ordinary fans we interviewed therefore maintains symbolic boundaries between industry-produced media content and user-generated content: while blogging, fora and other spaces of fan discourses online are seen as valuable sources of factual information or gossip – albeit not ones that these fans choose to participate in – these fans solely attribute artistic competence and legitimacy to content produced by media professionals. While means of digital media production are now accessible to a large section of the media audiences, such accounts indicate that the near exclusive power of representation that media industries have held in the era of mass communication is at least for now maintained by the a priori attribution of a monopoly of 'authentic' creativity and textual authorship to media professionals among sections of the audiences beyond those participating in fan generated creativity such cultists and enthusiasts.

## From Communities to Fairs

The rejection of community membership as a desirable feature arising out of engagements with fan objects and related enunciative productivity in turn indicates that to ordinary fans the significance of their fandom is constituted primarily through their bond with, and affective attachment to, their fan object, rather than an association with fellow fans. Such findings contrast with those of research dedicated to more committed and textually productive fans online over the past two decades (Hellekson and Busse 2006; Geisler 2005; Whelan 2006; Parks and Floyd 1996; Baym 1998, 2000). Ordinary fans utilized digital media as sources for information and knowledge, not as places that facilitate community membership. In contrast to the feeling of a common purpose and solidarity among Springsteen that that Cavicchi (1997) describes, James, a 20-year-old student and fan of Fox's 'war on terror' drama *24*, is unenthusiastic about interactions with fellow fans:

*I probably wouldn't use the word community to describe it … because it's not like everyone is really good friends and know each other really well … I would say that, like, I suppose we're just a bunch of people that happen to have an interest in the same thing.*

Similarly, Vicky describes her lack of sense of community membership:

*To me they're kind of like a faceless mass if that makes sense, like, I know that there are people there and writing, but I don't know who they are … So no, I probably don't feel like part of a community.*

While differences in fan object will account for some differences in ethos between fan cultures as the contrast between Bruce Springsteen and *24* amply illustrates, the more significant factor in explaining such different attitudes towards fellow fans arise of out different fan practices and are replicated across fan cultures. Both James and Vicky closely match Abercrombie and

Longhurst's (1998) description of being 'fans' rather than cultists or enthusiasts: their media use is heavy, their fan objects broad or multiple (various TV shows) and they have few, if any, social ties resulting from their fandom and only occasionally engage in enunciative productivity:

*I'm fine with just reading things really, commenting doesn't overly bother me. (Vicky)*

*I have more time for my friends, especially my housemates because we can talk about it anytime as just general chit-chat, the online part takes more of my time and isn't so easy. (Emma)*

In contrast Tom, a 24-year-old fan of computer games, who writes his own blog, has attended gaming conventions in the past and now works in the computer gaming industry, and who is best described as a cultist, bordering enthusiast, has built social ties through his fandom:

*Once you start chatting to people online and comment on people, commenting on you and the comments that they leave, you can actually build some pretty good friendships and so on through there.*

Community membership, however, was constructed in primary, sometimes exclusive reference to the fan object across our sample. *Top Gear* fan Sam illustrates such community construction through the shared fan object despite the absence of actual social interaction:

*I don't know who the other people who comment are, but it feels like a community because everyone has this common reason to be on the site … Like I said before, I really like the fact that it's Jeremy, Richard and James [the show's presenters] that start off the threads because that makes it feel like they are involved …*

Rather than functioning as actual social groups such as for the purpose of collective interpretation and negotiation of texts, the community these ordinary fans feel part of are more reminiscent of the 'imagined communities' which Benedict Anderson (1991) has described as national communities – communities which are not based upon actual interaction but shared practices and a shared leitmotif. They are hence imagined, as Sandvoss (2005a: 57) suggests, both in terms of *structure* and *content*, 'not only in terms of who the other members of such communities are, but also in terms of what such communities stand for. The symbolic and ideological core of communities imagined by fans is therefore structured through fans' appropriation of their object of fandom'.

Most significant to Sam then is not the prospect of dialogue with fellow fans but the possibility of interaction with his fan objects, the presenters of the show, Jeremy Clarkson, James May and Richard Hammond: 'it makes me feel like what I say counts, and that one of them might read it and think, "yeah he's got a good point there" or something'. Similarly, Tom – another interviewee who was enunciatively productive – reported to have a greater sense of community when participating in online fora, in contrast to the group of interviewees who were only semiotically active.

However, all interviewees participated in the reflections on different readings of fan texts that echo Jenkins' (1992) notion of 'interpretive communities'. James states that, 'I like that it gives me different angles to look at the show and the reasoning behind why certain things happen'. Similarly Emma reflects on her reading of fan texts: 'I suppose it's that they know what they're talking about and if you listen to what they have to say then you are going to learn something from it'. Such statements illustrate how ordinary fans use fan-generated content as a discursive space in which to negotiate the meanings they derive from fan objects. However, this testing of readings did not amount to an attempt to reach a collective and shared reading of these texts. As Tom says:

*I think that my blog is a testament to show that I do like to share my opinions … and I'm happy to be completely upfront and honest with them about what I think of it.*

We therefore suggest that many spaces of fan discourse in digital media serve not so much as interpretative communities but as, what we would term, an 'interpretive fair'; a space where fans browse through other people's opinions, and sometimes decide to share theirs, picking and choosing between what matches their own reading and 'horizon of expectations' (Jauss 1982; also Sandvoss 2011b) but leave with their readings largely intact and reaffi rmed rather than being challenged through a process of collective negotiation. This is illustrated in Louise's account: 'I like to be the first person to comment so that people can respond to what I say, so I like the interaction that it brings and hearing what other people have got to say'.

A lack of interaction between ordinary fans was also observed by Sam: 'sometimes people go offthe point a bit, but like I said other people normally just ignore what they said or only reply to the bits that they think are relevant'. Both Sam and Louise thus use fan-generated texts to select readings and opinions that closely match their own. Similarly April, a 23-year-old receptionist and fan of British teen soap *Hollyoaks*, enjoys such affi rmation: 'it's like reading what people say and me agreeing with it kind of makes it still feel like I'm part of it'.

The notion of fan discourses as 'interpretive fairs' further implies that users of digital media do not necessarily seek and experience community membership. Instead, ordinary fans often utilize fan-generated content as a resource for information that they often then share with friends and others, making it primarily a textual resource or archive.

The notion of interpretative fairs thereby also positions 'ordinary fandom' in the wider analysis of the interplay the micro manifestations of contemporary everyday life increasingly structured through and around media use and the economic, social, political and cultural macro transformations of early twenty-first-century capitalism: much like regimes of flexible specialization and post-Fordist production shape contemporary media production (cf. Caldwell 2008), strategies of consumption and media use are specialized, selective and increasingly transnational. The notion of the digital media as a fair thus also suggests that the notion of fandom as spaces of resistance and subculture which evade forces of commodification and marketization in late consumer capitalism may have been applied too generally to different fan groups and might be in fact be limited to only a small segment of fans and particular fan practices such as textual activity. In considering this interplay of structure and agency in fandom, we thus also need to explore further the role that interpretative fairs play in constructing the semiotic focal point of the affective foundations of being a fan: fan objects and their construction through processes of semiotic productivity and textual selection.

## Interpretative Fairs and Paratexts

The notion of the interpretative fair as a textual market contrasts with much of the work of the first wave of fan studies in which the assumption has been that interpretative communities emerge around a shared object. By describing such spaces as fairs, not communities, we imply that rather than the fan object serving as linchpin of community constructions and collective ideational and semiotic productivity, the object of fandom is itself constructed, appropriated and selected in such spaces individually rather than collectively.

In this sense the idea of the interpretative fair raises the question of how fan objects are constructed. Interviewees used texts created by fellow fans as what Gérard Genette (1997) has termed as 'paratexts' – texts which surround a text such as a book's cover, blurb or reviews. J.A. Gray (2008, 2010) offers a detailed examination of paratexts in popular culture including both industry and user-generated content from spoilers to sequels, all of which are important

textual resources in fans' engagements with their fan object. Our findings confirm the centrality of paratexts to the fandom of ordinary fans, with the commonly transmediated nature of contemporary discourses and texts including fan objects (see Jenkins 2007, 2011; Hills 2012), facilitating and indeed necessitating media users to construct textual boundaries through processes of textual selection:

*The Internet gives me the space to look around and see if there is anything interesting that I can tell my mates about. (Perry)*

*If I liked another show and wanted to find out about that, then I would head straight for the Internet rather than ask around my friends. (Sam)*

Fan fora, social networking groups dedicated to fan objects, spoilers and previews on YouTube are all popular resources in finding appropriate paratexts among ordinary fans. Digital media were thus primarily used by interviewees as a textual resource; a place to find, access and select between different information and textual episodes. While many of these paratexts are user-generated, most ordinary fans selected between, but did not create texts themselves. As Amy notes: 'you have to like register and stuff, and I just didn't want that hassle. My purpose was to just read it and not comment on it'. To these fans online enunciate activity was reserved to the more intimate surroundings of social networking sites. Amy continues to explain that 'with social networking … it's more interactive because you know the people on there'.

Interviewees' accounts of their digital media use illustrate that fan objects are not only, as all texts, intertextual but that no a priori distinctions between text – or what Sandvoss (2007) has called 'Urtext' – and paratexts are possible. Rather fans construct their fan object out of a 'textual field of gravity' composed of different episodes, discourses and narratives across different paratexts and texts reflecting fans' habitus and 'horizon of experience' and 'expectation' (cf. Jauss 1982). Strictly speaking, the personal, affective bond between fan and fan object is thus underscored by the construction of the fan object as a process of personalization as fans select between different texts to create fan objects that correspond with their expectations and experience. Perry, for example, who typically for ordinary fans has a broad fan object (television comedy), uses industry-generated digital texts such as 'the BBC websites and Channel 4' alongside video portals such as YouTube to watch trailers and reviews in an attempt to find new comedy that nevertheless corresponds with his expectations. Rather than in a singular urtext, the core of his fandom is reflected in a particular habitus that is articulated through textual selection with the help of a range of paratexts. Similarly, paratexts also serve as an 'entryway' to texts as fan objects as described by Gray (2010). Louise recalls how she first discovered *Glee:* 'there was loads of hype about it this time last year … just talking about it, seeing previews and trailers on the TV'. Equally, in the plethora of digital media content, paratexts provide important tools to find later entry points into serial texts:

*I didn't have the time to start watching all the series from the beginning so I thought I would watch a couple of clips of it from the Internet. (James)*

Paratexts then fulfil a range of functions in the fandom of ordinary fans, from serving as entry routes to new fan objects (which nevertheless match existing horizons of expectations), as a means of catching up with narratives and crossing between different media and, most importantly, as a means of contextualization that affi rms and maintains the particular readings and meaning constructions upon which fans' subjective and affective bond with their fan object rests. Their main use of the digital media was thus not as a place of association but one in which

they could select particular texts (clips, virals and other information) as both an archive (Sandvoss 2011a) and a fair.

Nevertheless, as ordinary fans draw not only on industry-generated texts but frequently also on fan-generated paratexts in their fan-based use of digital media, their meaning construction utilizes the increasing representational power of media audiences and users as digital media have made means of media production and distribution widely available. In this sense, even ordinary fans, who lack the close social ties that mark the fandom of cultists and enthusiasts, draw on the collective resources, knowledge and intelligence in fans' enunciative and textual productivity. And yet, for the ordinary fans we studied here, such use does not facilitate a membership to an interpretative community. Rather, their use of digital spaces remains tactical and is structured through a clear aim of individual gratification. Some interviewees such as Charles even described their use of digital media within a competition frame: 'I like to go on the Internet and watch the trailers and stuff so that I feel like I've got an advantage over other people'. To ordinary fans then, digital media primarily constitute a textual fair, in which the specificity of their textual interpretation and engagements are facilitated through textual selection and discovery.

## Conclusion

A number of conceptual, theoretical and methodological considerations and conclusions follow from our study of ordinary fandom for both the field of Fan Studies as well as the wider study of the social and cultural consequences of the rise of digital media.

Firstly, our study indicates that social ties and community membership are not a necessary condition of ordinary fandom, and thus reinforces the need to reflect on and refine the typologies and definition we resort to both implicitly and explicitly in the study of fans. While many studies have illustrated the importance of social ties, communities, collective interpretation and knowledge accumulation to cultists and enthusiasts, this study of the segment of fans that past studies have suggested to be by far the largest – ordinary fans who do not tend to be textually, and only spasmodically enunciatively productive – indicates that to a large, albeit generally less visible, number of fans, community membership and interaction with fellow fans are not a *conditio sine qua non* of their fandom, which instead is expressed near exclusively through the their affective bond and regular engagement with their chosen fan object.

This in turn serves as a reminder of the continuous need of fan and audience studies to broaden their empirical scope to reflect the range of different fans engagements and the degree to which they permeate patterns of media engagement, including the more extensive exploration of everyday life, ordinary fans. It is precisely for the ubiquity of such quotidian, yet low-investment fandom that ordinary fandom is of particular significance to the analysis of the interplay between both power and identity in the age of convergence media. If different forms of fan productivity correlate with levels of empowerment, emancipation and, on occasion, resistance to dominant patriarchal and/or consumerist culture as past work suggests (Sandvoss 2005a, 2011a), it is of particular significance to reassess the cultural and social consequences of widespread, ordinary fandom which overwhelmingly lacks the forms of productivity and levels of community membership that facilitate forms of empowerment through media consumption and appropriation.

Yet, thirdly, this is not to argue that such fandom does not play an important, albeit not *a priori* progressive, role in ordinary fans' everyday life. The accounts of our interviewees illustrate how their fandom and their fan practices inform and are informed by specific identity

positions. All derived not only enjoyment from their engagements with their fan objects but also utilized their fandom in acts of distinction, demonstrating the structured and structuring nature of fans' habitus. While the particular relevance of fans' tastes and objects of consumption in the processes of distinction and hierarchization in a Bourdieusian (1984) framework are by now well established in the field, our study suggests that ordinary fans draw upon and reinforce existing cultural hierarchies not only through their object of consumption but also with regard to fan practices. Despite the figure of the ordinary, everyday life fan itself reflecting the processes of both normalization and increasing ubiquity of fandom in the digital age, the negative, sometimes hostile perceptions of many ordinary fans of creative practices among cultists and enthusiasts serve as a powerful reminder that transformations of fan cultures, and more generally audiences and patterns of media use, are not solely driven by technological change. Instead our findings suggest that powerful social and cultural norms and conventions at present still mitigate against the uninhibited engagement of many media users in digital participatory culture. To explore the underlying causes and motivations behind these barriers to a fuller utilization of the participatory potential of digital media constitutes, in our eyes, an important field of further research.

Fourthly, this research and the field of audience studies at large face profound methodological and conceptual challenges in doing so. The notion of digital media landscapes as interpretive fairs highlights the increasing significance of not only the production and the diffusion of content by audiences and media users in the digital age, but of processes of textual selection: the strategies informed by audiences' horizon of expectations and experiences which in turn reflect the habitus by which audiences select content from the plethora of transmediated digital content. All interviewees in this study utilized digital media in a 'select and mix' approach through which they constructed the textual boundaries of their fan object utilizing both industry and fan-generated content. Fan objects, in turn, served as centres of textual gravity that structured ordinary fans' engagements with (digital) media. Methodologically, this presents a number of challenges: the more ubiquitous and embedded in quotidian routines ordinary fandom is, the less visible and accessible it becomes to researchers. Fan cultures of cultists and enthusiasts form a field with obvious boundaries created through acts of enunciative and textual productivity and hence lend themselves to the use of qualitative, often ethnographic methods to explore such fields and their communicative content, dominant practices and rituals. Moreover, its participants, being enunciatively and textually active, are keen make their own voiced heard and happily participate in such research. Ordinary fans, while greater in number, are diffused and less easily contacted and recruited given their absence in such fan spaces. A further methodological challenge arises out of the increasingly personalized and specific nature of fans' digital media use: while strategies of textual selection are central to how ordinary fans construct their fan object and how, in turn, fan attachments structure their engagement in entertainment, leisure and even wider public discourse such as politics and news (Sandvoss 2012, 2013b; Ouellette 2012; Jones 2012), they are at the same time increasingly unsuitable to be studied through traditional methods of tracing media consumption such as self-completion media diaries that are far too broad in their scope to record the complex interplay between texts and paratexts and the narrative flows across different media that are negotiated in fans' constructions of their fan object.

This, in turn, leads us to a final conceptual observation. The notions of ordinary fandom and digital media as 'interpretive fairs' in which fans select different texts and paratexts further position and contextualize fandom as a specific mode of media use (with its associated forms of productivity) in the wider transformations of audiences throughout different phases of

modernity. In its highly selective and personalized media use combined with its relative lack of enunciative and textual productivity, ubiquitous, ordinary fandom facilitated by the interpretative fairs of digital media hence appears less as a radical departure from the age of mass communication and more as the continuation of the process of 'mobile privatization' that according to Raymond Williams (1974) reflected the interplay of economic, social and cultural macro transformations that informed changing everyday life practices, and the rise and diffusion of electronic mass media. As we witness the rapid diffusion of digital media technologies, it is thus one of media and cultural studies' central challenges to further explore the cultural, economic and political consequences of the interplay between ordinary and increasingly ubiquitous fandom as dominant mode of media use and participatory culture in digital capitalism.

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