

**Television Fan Distinctions and Identity:**  
**An Analysis of 'Quality' Discourses and Threats To 'Ontological**  
**Security'**

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**Television Fan Distinctions and Identity:  
An Analysis of ‘Quality’ Discourses and Threats to ‘Ontological Security’**

**Abstract**

This thesis contributes to the existing literature in fan and audience research, particularly within television studies. By focusing upon issues of identity, ontological security, and cultural value, this thesis proposes a conceptualisation of fandom which accounts for inherent dualisms such as the tension between community and hierarchy, and the internal importance of fandom to individuals and the impact of external social factors. Whilst prior work has failed to adequately theorise such contradictions, this thesis draws on the work of sociologists Pierre Bourdieu and Anthony Giddens to propose that we view fandom as forms of ‘pure relationship’ which enable fans to negotiate their self-identities, gain trust and comfort, and accrue levels of fan power. These ideas are demonstrated via empirical data generated by a cross comparative multi fandom case study of three online fan communities devoted to the television programmes *Big Brother UK7*, *Neighbours*, and *The West Wing*.

This thesis demonstrates that fans across different fandoms make distinctions regarding the ‘quality’ of their chosen fan objects, those who create them, and the position of fellow fans. They also rely upon the routines and repetitions of television scheduling to provide them with ontological security and a sense of trust in the fan object. This thesis also examines the results when this trust is undermined by unwelcome narrative developments or the total cessation of the fan object, which this work uniquely theorises as ‘post-object fandom’. Furthermore, fan practices are enacted within the specific arena of the broadcasting field, and this thesis situates the battles over fan objects between producers and fans within the context of this field. Thus, this thesis proposes a theoretical model which considers fandom as a community and a hierarchical site of struggles over power and capital, accounts for the internal impact of an individual’s fandom on their sense of self, and treats fan/object and fan/fan relationships equally.

**Television Fan Distinctions and Identity:**  
**An Analysis of ‘Quality’ Discourses and Threats To ‘Ontological Security’**

Declaration	i
Abstract	ii
Contents	iii
Acknowledgements	vi
<b>1. Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
The story so far...Fandom as resistance or poaching	2
Fandom as affective investment	4
Fandom as ‘love object’, ‘good/bad object’ or ‘transitional object’	5
Fan studies: Limitations and omissions	9
Research questions	14
Fan ‘pure relationships’ and forms of fan capital	15
From monolithic to multi-site: introducing comparative fan studies	21
Being a ‘scholar-fan’: Negotiating self-identity as researcher and fan	24
What’s next?	26
<b>2. Quality television and cultural value in the broadcasting field</b>	<b>30</b>
Conceptualising the broadcasting field	31
Academic approaches to quality television and value	38
Fan approaches to quality television and value	46
Conclusion	52
<b>3. ‘Degrees of purity’: From Bourdieu to Giddens and ‘fan pure relationships’</b>	<b>54</b>
Bourdieu, capital and fan love	54
Giddens, ‘pure relationships’ and fan love	58
‘Fan pure relationships’ and rewards: ontological security and self-identity	61
Identifying fan continuums	70
Conceptualising fan/fan pure relationships	75
Conceptualising fan/object pure relationships	79
Conceptualising different types of fans	83
Conclusion	87
<b>4. Methodology: Theoretical approaches to methodological and ethical dualisms in the on-line research environment</b>	<b>90</b>
Sites of interest: Online message boards and televisual texts	91
Community, hierarchy, and identity in online fandom	102

Academic/fan identities in online research	110
Access and ethics in online research	113
Conclusion	116
<b>5. Reality, routine and reward: Examining fans of <i>Big Brother UK 7</i></b>	<b>120</b>
<i>Big Brother</i> and reflexive narratives of self	121
“Been there done that”: Ontological security, twists and ‘predictable unpredictability’	130
“Does that mean we are all celebs now”?: Community, hierarchy and fan/fan relationships	138
‘Housemate X is fit brigades’ and ‘pink Nokia voters’: Distinctions, fans, and genre	142
“It’s only a game show”: Active audiences, rules, and game-playing	147
“Endemol approved clones”: Authenticity, <i>illusio</i> , and celebrity	153
Conclusion	158
<b>6. ‘Good’ <i>Neighbours</i>? Identity, scheduling and intra-generic distinction</b>	<b>161</b>
Examining soap audiences and soap studies	162
“Where is the character I can identify with?” Characters, identification and ‘betrayal’	165
“I’ve watched <i>Neighbours</i> my whole life!”: Scheduling, routine and ontological security	171
“No-one’s expecting Shakespeare”: Genre, distinction and emotional realism	178
‘Meeting in a dark alley!’: Fan/producer relationships in the broadcasting field	186
Conclusion	194
<b>7. Loveshock, security and transition: Post-object fandom and the demise of <i>The West Wing</i></b>	<b>197</b>
Transitions and endings in fandom	198
“You changed my life for the better”: Identity, self-narrative and transformation	202
“Wandering off into soap land?”: Shipping, gendered readings and ‘proper’ <i>West Wing</i>	207
Ontological security and ‘loveshock’: Coping with the end of a fan object	218
“The constant in my life”: The ‘reiteration discourse’	222
“My interest will probably wane”: The ‘renegotiation discourse’	228
“Putting the show out of its misery” – The ‘rejection discourse’	231
Fluidity, emotional management, and ontological security	236
Conclusion	240
<b>8. Conclusion</b>	<b>243</b>
The story so far...	243
Self-identity, ontological security & fan pure relationships	244

Quality, mainstream cults and power	250
Distinctions: 'Proper' fans and fan/producer interactions	254
What's next?	258
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>263</b>
<b>Appendices</b>	<b>339</b>
1- Diagram of the broadcasting field within the field of cultural production	340
2- Multi-dimensional continuum of fan sectors & key	341
3- Table of types of fan according to sector	343
4- Statement for participants in research	344
5- Copies of requests to moderators & online postings	345
6- Copies of online questionnaires	348
7- Online links to threads and message boards	357

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## Chapter One

### Introduction

In the struggle over fan studies' place on the academic agenda it appears that those sympathetic to the experiences and practices of fandom have been triumphant. An audacious and optimistic claim, perhaps, but whilst it was once alleged that fandom was neglected by media and cultural studies, the proliferation of fan studies over the last two decades means that such a position can no longer be maintained.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, whilst some negative stereotypes of fans remain,<sup>2</sup> fan practices are no longer entirely stigmatised and devalued within society (Jenson 1992). Indeed, fandom is now a part of everyday life for many people and this largely results from an increase in online fan activity;

the Web has mainstreamed fandom, making visible a wider variety of texts and allowing more viewers to participate in activities usually reserved for alternate communities [...] stereotypes of the fan as a fringe obsessive will give way to views of the fan as a typical Internet user (Pullen 2004:83).

Thus, this thesis argues that, in a world where fandom is proliferating to become an aspect of ordinary life for many people, exploration of the ways in which media and issues of self-identity intersect is perhaps more pertinent than ever. This research contributes to the existing literature in fan and audience research, particularly within television studies, drawing on the work of sociologists Pierre Bourdieu and Anthony Giddens to examine issues of identity, ontological security, and cultural value. These ideas are demonstrated via empirical data generated by a cross comparative multi fandom case study of three online fan communities devoted to the television programmes *Big Brother UK7*, *Neighbours*, and *The West Wing*. This research postulates a theoretical

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Bacon-Smith (1992); Bailey (2005); Brooker (2002); Bury (2005); Gray *et al* (2007); Harrington and Bielby (1995); Harris (1998); Helleckson and Busse (2006); Hills (2002); Jenkins (1992); Kelly (2004); Lewis (1992); Penley (1992); Sandvoss (2005); Williamson (2005).

<sup>2</sup> For example, in an analysis of representations of Michael Jackson fans, Hills notes that some types of "media fandom are still far from entirely 'normalised' within contemporary culture" (Hills 2007e:463), and that these are primarily those forms of fandom which accentuate emotivism and "embodiment rather than rationality or cognitive critique, whether these are discourses of bodily emulation and spectacle [...], impersonation and plastic surgery [...] commodification [...] or sexual desire" (Hills 2007e:465).

model which considers fandom as a community and a hierarchical site of struggles over power and capital, accounts for the internal impact of an individual's fandom on their sense of self, and treats fan/object and fan/fan relationships equally.

The need for a more comprehensive understanding of fandom results from dissatisfaction with many of the previous theorisations of fan studies. As fan studies emerged in the early 1990s, scholars were fighting against commonly held stereotypes of the fan as obsessive, lonely, and unhinged (Jenson 1992) and popular culture was still treated with derision and suspicion in many quarters. Although work on fandom has increased substantially since then, there remain a number of contradictions and omissions which prior studies have perpetuated or failed to address. Although a comprehensive analysis of previous work on fandom falls beyond the scope of this study,<sup>3</sup> I wish here to offer an over-view of prior work on fans' attachments to their object of fandom (which I am terming fan/object relationships) and to fellow fans (which I refer to as fan/fan relationships) within cultural studies, focusing upon approaches which emphasise resistance and poaching, affect investments, or psychoanalysis. After critically evaluating such work I position my research within this framework and suggest that an approach to fan cultures be formulated to account for their inherent dualisms and contradictions.

### **The story so far...**

#### **Fandom as resistance or poaching**

Early audience work was indebted to Stuart Hall's (1973) encoding/decoding model which examined reception contexts of media message. This was used to consider both factual programmes (Morley 1980, 1981) and fictional genres (Dyer 1977) such as soap opera (Hobson 1989) and romance novels (Radway 1984). Many early fan studies thus highlighted the meaning-making of audiences who were resistive and could actively 'poach' from texts to creatively appropriate chosen elements for their own ends (de

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<sup>3</sup> See Gray *et al* (2007), Hills (2002), and Sandvoss (2005) for more detailed summaries of work on fandom.

Certeau 1984; Fiske 1987; Jenkins 1992). Such work contrasted with the earlier Frankfurt School who viewed audiences as ‘dopes’ (Adorno 2003:60) who were unable to form genuine attachments to texts as their pleasure was a result of culture being “imposed from ‘above’ on to a passive and malleable audience” (Brooker and Jermyn 2003:6). Drawing on Michel de Certeau’s (1984) work, Henry Jenkins conceptualised fans as poachers who “transform the experience of watching television into a rich and complex participatory culture” (1992:23) and could engage in acts of re-appropriation and textual productivity.<sup>4</sup> However, such approaches (which Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) term the Incorporation/Resistance Paradigm (IRP)) fail to account for the fragmentation of the audience and it has become increasingly difficult to define what is being resisted or what an oppositional reading constitutes. Fandom is also far from the stigmatised pastime that it once was and fans often specifically align themselves with the dominant values of mainstream culture, perhaps most notably in their attempts to ally their fan objects with the discourses of ‘quality television’ perpetuated by producers and academics (see page 225).<sup>5</sup> Fandom is also often actively encouraged as it provides a lucrative market with fans acting as “media consumers *par excellence*” (Gwenllian-Jones 2003:167) whose spending contributes to the economic and symbolic power of producers. Furthermore, recent studies have suggested that activities such as producing fan fiction or ‘shipping’ (the act of actively supporting an on-screen romantic relationship) are not resistant as they are often implicitly encouraged by the show’s creators via deliberately polysemic subtext (see page 210).

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<sup>4</sup> Indeed, fans often draw on their favoured texts to create fan videos or fanfiction (Armstrong 1998; Blankinship *et al* 2004; Brobeck 2004; Brooker 2002:173-197; Busse 2002; Caudill 2003; Cicioni 1998; Jenkins 1992; Kustritz 2003; Lee 2003; McCormack 2001; Pugh 2005; Shave 2004). Such assertions echo Fiske’s argument that fans can be ‘semiotically productive’ (making meaning from chosen texts), ‘enunciatively productive’ (creating social identities and community from their shared love of texts) and ‘textually productive’ (producing their own texts based upon their fan objects) (Fiske 1992:37-39).

<sup>5</sup> This is also noted by Milly Williamson (2005:100) in her discussion of Sue Brower’s (1992) work on the group ‘Viewers For Quality Television’ (VQT).

## Fandom as affective investment

Other fan studies drew on the concept of affect,<sup>6</sup> most notably in the work of Lawrence Grossberg (1992, 1992b)<sup>7</sup> who considers affect as a non-emotional and non-libidinal force which explains how we form attachments to certain cultural objects (Puoskari 2004). Affect is the pre-personal reaction we have to external events such as our expectation of fear whilst watching a horror film or our tears over a melodrama (Colebrook 2003:xix; Goodchild 1996:189). It is not a conscious feeling and exists in the world as a force or energy *before* individual emotions or reactions to events (Colebrook 2001:39; Massumi 1987: xvi; Pisters 2001:13; Shouse 2005:online). Grossberg draws on this to argue that cultural practices can be conceptualised as ‘affective investments’ and he posits the existence of ‘mattering maps’, which order our affective ties. Thus, “for fans, popular culture becomes a crucial ground on which he or she can construct mattering maps. They may construct relatively stable moments of identity [...] Fans let them organize their emotional and narrative lives and identities” (1992a:59).<sup>8</sup> Fans can use popular culture to construct self-identity and, since what people may ‘invest’ in via their mattering maps necessarily differs from person to person, affect is “integral to the notion of individuality, to the sense of what makes each of us ‘distinct’ (Harding and Pribam 2004:875). Furthermore, affect accounts for the power relations of the social forces governing our conduct and also for the circulation of power among individuals (Harding and Pribam 2004:875), thus introducing the dimension of power into

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<sup>6</sup> The concept of ‘affect’, has attracted significant academic interest in psychoanalysis (Armon-Jones 1992; Borch-Jacobsen 1993; Sandler and Sandler 1998; Stein 1991) and media studies (Buchanan 1999; Gregg 2005; Gunster 2005; Massumi 2002; Shouse 2005). For example, affect has been discussed in relation to texts as diverse as the war on terror (Aly and Balnaves 2005), *Seinfeld* (Gunster 2005), *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Clarke 2003) and films such as *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (Downing 2005) and *Donnie Darko* (Gregg 2005).

<sup>7</sup> Grossberg uses the definitions of affect developed by Freud, as read by Laplanche and Pontalis (1973) and Gilles Deleuze (1977). See Buchanan (1999); Colebrook (2001, 2002); Crofts Wiley (2005); Massumi (2002); Pisters (2001); Puoskari (2004); Shouse (2005) for more on Deleuze and affect.

<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, for Grossberg, affect can never explain itself and ideology alone cannot account for why some things matter more than others considers how we form attachments to certain cultural objects (1992b:86). For example, one’s fandom of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* cannot be solely attributed to its alleged refuting of heteropatriarchal ideology (Daugherty 2001; Jowett 2005), and thus fan attachment is due to an affective element of excess. It is perhaps no coincidence that fandom is frequently constructed as excessive, often contributing to the negative stereotype of the fan as obsessive (Hills 2002:4-7). This construction can be most commonly seen in studies which liken fandom to religious fervour (Doss 1999; Frow 1998; Giles 2000; Jindra 1994; McCloud 2003), or those which examine the popularity of ‘cult’ texts to which special emotional charges are often attributed (Harper and Mendik 2000; Telotte 1991).

considerations of fan investment in cultural objects. However, Grossberg tends to over-rationalise individuals' connections to fan objects by labelling them as affective 'investments' (see Massumi 2002:260) even though "affect precedes thought and is as stable as electricity" (Shouse 2005:online).<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, in ignoring affect's link to desire Grossberg writes out the fact that attraction is often integral to fan devotion (see Zanes 2002). This separation of affect from libidinal attachment reproduces a "critical division between the personal and the political, private and public, feeling and thought, body and mind" (Zuberi 2001:25), undermining the often powerful desires that people may feel toward their fan objects (see below).<sup>10</sup>

### **Fandom as 'love object', 'good/bad object' or 'transitional object'**

Finally, fan studies has drawn on psychoanalytic thought to understand fandom as a site of powerful emotional investment. Psychoanalysis has been used by theorists who have drawn chiefly on the work of Sigmund Freud (1905, 1920, 1923), Melanie Klein (1932), and Donald Woods Winnicott (1964, 1971, 2005). Freudian work draws on the ideas of pleasure and libidinal and aggression drives, derived from Freud's framework of the id, ego, and super-ego (1923). These theories posit that until a child develops his/her ego he/she assumes him/herself to be omnipotent and in control of his/her surrounding world (Freud 1920). When the child realises that this is not so, the resultant pleasures are lost and "the self is henceforth a construct of lack, marked by a profound sense of loss of (sexual) pleasure" (Sandvoss 2005:70). The subsequent attempts to re-create this sense of pleasure through fantasies form the basis of Freud's "pleasure principle" (1923) with the mass media offering one space in which such pleasures can be attained (see Creed 1993 and Mulvey 1975 on film). Furthermore, the importance of libidinal pleasure for fans can

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<sup>9</sup> One counter-argument here would be that it is possible to make unconscious investments in things without actively knowing that you are making these objects important. For example, to relate this to fandom, I may have found myself beginning to enjoy a certain TV show, may look forward to viewing it each week and may begin to seek out information about this show in newspapers, websites, and so on. However, I did not undertake this with the specific *intent* of investing in this particular programme but rather its emotional significance and possible position on my 'mattering map' are a result of my gradual, unconscious attachment to this show.

<sup>10</sup> Further criticisms of Grossberg include his allegedly selective "theoretical bricolage" (O'Connor 1996:189; Marcus 1986; Nugent 1986) and the fact that, despite distinguishing between affect and emotion (Grossberg 1992:80), he ultimately ends up using these terms interchangeably (Massumi 1996:237n3).

be seen in the production of sexually explicit slash fiction<sup>11</sup> and in fan fantasies (Sandvoss 2005:71-79).<sup>12</sup> However, to consider fan/object relationships purely as evidence of fantasy or sexual desire is restrictive as, although perhaps applicable in fandoms surrounding celebrities or fictional characters, it is unclear how fan fantasy can be applied to other fandoms, such as football clubs. Drawing on Freud's own work on repression and sublimation (1930, see also Gay 1992) - the channelling of our innate libidinal drive into successful creative endeavour<sup>13</sup> - we might suggest that fandom constitutes an example of this transformation. However, such ideas remain contentious and may still pose uneasy questions about the acceptability of such activities, given the social and cultural stigma often attached to fan practices such as writing slash (Jenkins 1992:201) or demonstrating sexual desire for fan objects.

More common in fan studies is the use of Melanie Klein (1932) who argues that in early development a child realises that it is not an entirely independent entity and that it has a position within the external world. Klein views Freudian libidinal and aggressive drives as "ways of experiencing oneself, as 'good' (both loved and loving) or as 'bad' (both hated and destructive)" (Mitchell and Black 1995:91). For Klein,

object-relations exist from the beginning of life, the first object being the mother's breast which to the child becomes split into a good (gratifying) and bad (frustrating) breast; this splitting results in a severance of love and hate (1952b:293).

Klein terms these experiences the 'paranoid-schizoid position' which leads to a splitting of experience in which the world is divided into good/bad with good feelings introjected into the self and bad feelings projected outwards onto people or objects that are constructed as 'other' (Craib 2001:71, Salzberger-Wittenberg 1970:61; Spillius 2001:366). Such approaches account for the fact that formation of self-identity is "a

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<sup>11</sup> For example, Constance Penley argues that using the notion of fantasy to examine *Star Trek* slash fan fiction "allows one to account for multiple (if contradictory) subject positions" (1992:480) which enable predominantly female writers to both "be Kirk or Spock (a possible phallic identification) and also still have (as sexual objects) either or both of them" (1992:488). See also Bacon-Smith (1992) on how fan fiction subverts the typically masculinised 'gaze' (Mulvey 1975).

<sup>12</sup> See Bacon-Smith (1992); Busse (2002); Cicioni (1998); Driscoll (2006); Green *et al* (1998); Lamb and Veith (1986); Lee (2003); Penley (1992); Saxey (2001); Vermorel and Vermorel (1985), Woledge (2005).

<sup>13</sup> See Mitchell and Black (1995:38), Fortier (2002:233) and Rycroft (1972:159).

process related to social and cultural others/objects” (Hills 2002:97). Julian Hoxter has drawn on Klein in his work on *The Exorcist* fans in which he argues that horror offers a safe ‘contained’ space for fear (what Pinedo (1997) calls ‘recreational terror’) (Hoxter 2000:181). However, as *The Exorcist* is widely perceived to have attained “cultural status as ‘the film which cannot be contained’” (2000:181) fans may turn to online websites to help them “work through any anxieties the experience of spectatorship has brought up” (2000:182). Hoxter’s psychoanalytic work uniquely examines fan/fan relationships in tandem with links between fans and object, concluding that fan websites offer “basic comfort and security simply through the recognition of commonality of experience” (2000:185). Kleinian approaches have also usefully accounted for fans’ ‘splitting’ of objects into ‘good’ and ‘bad’ elements (see pages 179 and 232) and they enable consideration of issues of hierarchy and value as “questions of ‘taste’ in relation to [fandom] might be established through [projection or introjection]” (Stacey 1994:230). However, such work tends to unhelpfully pathologise fans as unstable or dysfunctional<sup>14</sup> in its suggestion that the paranoid-schizoid position is a necessary stage of development which is left behind when the individual moves onto the ‘depressive position’ (Klein 1952:210) – the process of integrating whole objects (Segal 1973:68). Thus, if fandom exemplifies the paranoid-schizoid position, fans are deemed to have failed to properly move through the necessary stages of development and are therefore lacking in some way (Sandvoss 2005:84). Even though the paranoid-schizoid position may be returned to in periods of stress or anxiety and fans cannot be viewed as entirely ‘regressive’ (Hills 2002:96) this still suggests that fandom is only useful in periods of ‘stress’. Ultimately, this threat of pathologisation limits the usefulness of Kleinian theories of fandom.

Others have theorised fans via the work of object relations theorist Donald Woods Winnicott (1964, 1971) which suggests that infants need to negotiate their inability to distinguish between object and subject through the use of a ‘transitional object’, for example a toy. This object offers a third realm between the inner and external worlds; an “intermediate area of experiencing” (Winnicott 2005:2), a space which is “neither inside

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<sup>14</sup> This is most clearly evident in Elliott’s (1999) extreme example of John Lennon and his killer Mark Chapman.

nor outside but in between [the self and the outside world]" (Bateman and Holmes 1995:42). Such objects continue to be important to the infant but eventually they lose meaning

because the transitional phenomena have become diffused, have become spread out over the whole intermediate territory between 'inner psychic reality' and 'the external world as perceived by two persons in common', that is to say, over the whole cultural field (Winnicott 2005:7).

Such work has been utilised to consider fan/object relationships via the notion of transitional objects (Lembo and Tucker 1990; Silverstone 1994; Turkle 2004) or fandom as a transitional realm (Harrington and Bielby 1995; Hills 2002; Sandvoss 2005). Furthermore, Hills distinguishes between the "*proper transitional object (pto)*" of childhood (Hills 2002:107) and a 'secondary transitional object', which is "*a transitional object which has not altogether surrendered its affective charge and private significance for the subject ... [or] enters a cultural repertoire which 'holds' the interest of the fan and constitutes the subject's symbolic project of self*" (2002:109, his emphasis). Thus, the secondary transitional object may be one which was used in childhood and remains personally important to the individual (e.g. a television programme) or a new object which contributes toward his/her construction of self-identity (e.g. a rock band). It is these later transitional objects which theorists are discussing when they consider fan objects as transitional phenomena. Like Hills, Sandvoss develops the idea of transitional objects within fandom, arguing for the existence of a 'second order transitional object' (2005:90). This refers to material objects such as posters and records which "constitute transitional objects that create a common realm between the fan and the star, while the star remains the primary object of fandom" (Sandvoss 2005:90). Prior work on transitional objects and fan cultures has usefully enabled consideration of links between fan emotional involvement and cultural value (Hills 2002:109). For example, a teenager may distance himself from an object perceived as 'childish' and this may also be dependent upon whether fan objects are "culturally designated highbrow or lowbrow" (Harrington and Bielby 1995:136). Furthermore, such work accounts for fans' displeasure and anger at fan objects which violate their expectations as the transitional object is subject to both 'good' and 'bad' emotion (Winnicott 2005:7). Therefore, the notion of



fandom as a transitional realm or object can account for instances when fans become dissatisfied with their chosen fan objects, often expressing anger towards those in charge of the show (see pages 144-149, 186-189 and 233).

### **Fan studies: Limitations and omissions**

However, despite the useful theoretical insights provided by this prior work, there are limitations to these approaches. These include:

- A failure to account for fandom as a site of communal interest *and* power struggles and hierarchy;
- A tendency to privilege fan attachment to fan objects over their interpersonal fan/fan interactions;
- A limiting view of who ‘proper’ fans are and what they do;
- An inability to account for the fact that both external influences (e.g. sociocultural factors or issues of cultural value) *and* internal factors (e.g. fans’ emotional investments in fan objects and fellow fans) can impact upon fans’ self-identities;
- A continuing monolithic approach to fan studies and an associated failure to consider the commonalities or disparities across a range of fan sites.

I therefore wish here to outline these critiques and suggest that any theory of fandom needs to account more fully for the contradictions and dualisms inherent within fan practices.

Prior work has failed to recognise that fandom functions as both a communal site of shared interests *and* a site where battles over hierarchy, power and capital may take place. Work which focused on resistance and ‘poaching’ emphasised the utopian nature of fandom, highlighting harmony and shared interpretations of fan communities and often neglecting clashes over interpretations and fan practices (Hills 2002: Mitra 1997). Although work which emphasises hierarchy does account for the fact that fandom is also a communal space, those studies that did consider fan disagreements often characterised

this as an inevitable consequence of fan community (Baym 2000:87) or failed to adequately account for the impact of power hierarchies on fan interactions (MacDonald 1998). Similarly, although Grossberg's affective approach to fandom introduces the concept of fan power he replicates the emphasis on fan emotional attachment *or* fan hierarchy and there is nothing in his work to explain *why* some fans are more successful than others and move from being 'powerless' to 'executive fans' (Tulloch 1995). Also, object relations' inability to account for the impact of social factors (such as power and capital) upon the use that people make of objects further fails to explain why some fans ascend fan hierarchies and assume positions of power whilst others do not.

Prior work also privileges fan/object relationships whilst the "intersubjective relationships on which fan identity hinges [...] remain largely unexplored" (Zanes 2002:296). For example, resistance-based approaches presume that fan/fan relationships are built primarily upon participation in interpretive communities which rely upon 'enunciative productivity' (Fiske 1992). However, interpretation alone cannot account for the emotional elements of these relationships or that fan/fan relationships may outlast fan/object ties (Gatson and Zweerink 2004:237). Studies that do highlight fan interpersonal relationships are often restricted to female fandoms (Bacon-Smith 1992; Baym 2000) whilst within male-dominated fandoms these ties are often sublimated into an extension of the communal interpretive readings of the texts themselves (Jenkins 1995). Similarly, although Grossberg's work on affect theorises fan attachment to objects, he considers the elements on an individual's mattering map to be purely separate from those of other people, something which the individual alone has opted to invest in. He thus fails to account for the impact of other people on decisions to invest in cultural objects, nor does he allow that the investments people make may result in relationships with fellow fans. Furthermore, both Kleinian and Winnicottian psychoanalysis cannot offer insight into the ways in which fan/fan relationships develop. Although Kleinian approaches might suggest that fan/object relationships provide ways of projecting bad or good aspects of the self onto external objects, only Julian Hoxter's work on *The Exorcist* fans really addresses the communal nature of fandom. Even then, his emphasis on the ways in which fan knowledge is used to ward off the fear produced by horror films

undermines emotional fan bonds, submerging them into a pedagogical relationship akin to that of pupil and teacher (Hoxter 2000: 175).

In addition to failing to consider both fan community *and* hierarchy and fan/object *and* fan/fan relationships, applications of object-relations theory in fandom cannot account for the impact of both internal factors (e.g. the self) and external factors on fan/object and fan/fan relationships. Similarly, Freudian theories and their reliance on the specific drives, desires, and fantasies of individuals offer no way of theorising the impact of external factors upon one's fandom. Freudian theories cannot account for "the sustained interaction between self and its social and cultural environment" (Sandvoss 2005:79) and fail to explain fan hierarchies and power which are clearly impacted upon by sociocultural factors and cannot be explained via psychoanalysis alone. There is also nothing in Freudian work to allow understanding of the fact that some fans have greater levels of interest in fandom and fan community than others (Sandvoss 2005:73). Fan studies have thus tended to focus on either the 'micro level of fan consumption' through consideration of "the intrapersonal pleasures and motivations among fans, this refocusing on the relationship between fans' selves and their fan objects" *or* the 'macro-level' which considered that "fans' readings, tastes, and practices are tied to wider social structures" (Gray *et al* 2007:8). In privileging external or internal factors fan studies has also neglected fans' individual links to fan objects and fellow fans and the "focus on communities and tightly networked fans fails to conceptualize important aspects of the relationship between the modern self, identity and popular culture" (Sandvoss 2005:6). Work which subscribes to the 'dominant discourse of resistance' perpetuates the notion that all fans must be part of interpretive or imagined communities and neglects the individual agency which fans display when choosing which fan objects to use to construct self-identity. Similarly, affective approaches are potentially disempowering for fans as the affective feelings they have for objects on their 'mattering maps' cannot be subjective and are merely cultural constructions. According to Grossberg, "any sense of self is merely ascribed according to cultural rules, and the self is thus seemingly an effect of cultural context and its 'mattering maps' [...] *Any sense of self experienced and inscribed through fandom can only appear to be false*" (Hills 2002:91 my emphasis). Fans here are

clearly lacking in agency as, if negotiation of self via fandom is ‘false’, then fans are unable to construct self-identities via their fan objects and are instead passively in sway to cultural constructions. Similarly, Freudian psychoanalytic approaches also disempower fans, rendering them passively in thrall to hidden drives and desires and characterising them as lacking the agency to self-reflexively construct their identities or self-narratives. This construction of fans as rationally unable to explain their own fandom is also often maintained by theorists themselves who, it has been argued, are permitted “a privileged insight into the experiences of their subjects that is not available to the subjects themselves” (Fiske 1990:90, although see Hills 2002 and Couldry 2002b for arguments against this view).<sup>15</sup> Psychoanalytic approaches have therefore been accused of being theoretically and ethically limited as they explain away fan emotional ties from the position of the skilled researcher who is able to uncover the unconscious motivations behind fans’ attachments. However, such construction of the passive individual opposes the sociological view of the person as an active agent, able to perceptively and discerningly construct and maintain their sense of self-identity, which this thesis seeks to maintain (see chapter three).

In addition to characterising fans as self-absent or as lacking agency, prior work on fandom has demarcated certain types of behaviour and practices as ‘fandom’, ignoring the different levels of attachment in fan/object and fan/fan relationships. Although one notable exception is Cornel Sandvoss’ work, which acknowledges that, “for some fans [...] the communal context of their fandom [...] form[s] the true core of their fandom, while for others, their fandom is driven more by an idiosyncratic bond with their object of fandom” (2005:10) this narrow definition of fandom has tended to endure. Although many fans do not engage in communal fandom theorists have focused on those who engage in active participation at conventions or engage in textual productivity within the particular fan community being examined (Tulloch and Jenkins 1995:23). For example,

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<sup>15</sup> It is worth noting here that, despite such ethical critiques, psychoanalysis is not “an integrated, homogenous point of view” (Mitchell and Black 1995: 206) which can be easily dismissed in its entirety. As I have argued throughout this section there are advantages and limits to each of the three psychoanalytic approaches I have examined, and to critique the entire discipline as ethically dubious does a disservice to the useful insights into culture (and fandom) that such approaches can provide. However, this lack of integration and the differences between approaches means that psychoanalytic theories cannot be easily combined in order to account for all the issues I wish to examine in this research.

studies which emphasise resistance privilege fans who share interpretations and readings with others within fan communities, thus rendering lone fans who have an individual interest in their fandom invisible. Similarly, Grossberg's work on mattering maps and affect has the opposite affect; in his failure to account for the intersubjective elements of fandom his approach cannot account equally for the importance of fan community. Similarly, many of these approaches fail to account for changes within one's fandom over time or for the fact that fans might abandon their fandom and move onto new ones. In resistive approaches even fans who are dissatisfied with their fan objects remain actively involved with interpreting and discussing them or campaigning for their improvement and there is no consideration of what might happen if the fan instead decides to leave the fandom entirely. Similarly, psychoanalytic approaches, with their reliance on unconscious drives and desires, appear not to allow us to "delineate any variation, change, resistance or indeed deviation" (Stacey 1994:232) within fan/object relationships. It appears here that the concept of such drives precludes fans from being able to actively change their fan identity in any meaningful way even though, as I will argue, fans often do change their opinions of fan objects or experience variations in their levels of emotional attachments (see chapters five-to-seven).

Finally, along with constructing 'proper' types of fan practice and behaviour, previous work has been monolithic in approach and studies have focused upon singular fan communities and groups.<sup>16</sup> Considerations of fandom that "explore the parallels between fans of different texts or genres" (Sandvoss 2005:8) remain atypical and immersion in ethnographic approaches to specific fandoms continues to be the norm. However, this neglects the possibilities of multi-site fan research which may elucidate similarities or disparities in the ways in which fans engage with their varying fan objects and with one another. One rare exception to this is Steve Bailey's (2005) work on identity and self-construction in fandom. He offers three case studies of a local underground film network, fans of the rock group Kiss, and online fans of the adult cartoon series *Futurama*. Bailey argues that, rather than forming disparate studies, these work together to highlight the

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<sup>16</sup> For example, studies have examined *Star Trek* (Jenkins 1992), *Star Wars* (Brooker 2002), *Buffy* (Gatson and Zweerink 2004), *The X-Files* (Scodari and Felder 2000) or soap operas (Baym 2000; Harrington and Bielby 1995).

“practices of self-construction and self-reflection” (2005:8) that occur within each fandom and form ‘a collective case study’ (Burawoy 1991) which may “provide insight into an issue or refinement of a theory” (Stake 1994:237). Although this thesis draws upon a different theoretical framework my work is analogous to Bailey’s as it undertakes a ‘collective case study’ to draw points of cohesion or conflict across apparently incongruent cultural sites. I hope this may provoke future fan studies to move beyond enquiry into singular fan communities and to embrace the comparative potential of multi-site case studies.

### **Research questions**

Thus, the research questions which this thesis seeks to address are as follows;

1. How can we account for the inherent dualisms within fan cultures such as the tension between community and hierarchy, the fact that fans engage to different extents with fan objects and fellow fans, and the internal importance of fandom to individuals and the impact of external social factors?
2. How do fan discussions and practices intersect with issues of cultural value, distinction, and ‘quality’?
3. Can we formulate a theorisation of fandom which enables consideration of different ‘types’ of fan, and allows for changes in fandom over time and life span?
4. How do fans draw on their fandom to perform identity work and to form individual, personal emotional ties to both fan objects and other fans?
5. Are fan practices and discourses shared across disparate fan groups and can empirical work which examines fans of different (but coherent) objects elucidate similarities or disparities in fan discussions, activities, and attachments?

The central aim of this thesis is to develop a theoretical framework which addresses these research questions and to provide empirical data from a collective case study to illuminate the model of fandom which I shall propose.

### **Fan ‘pure relationships’ and forms of fan capital**

As I have suggested above, prior fan studies have rarely paid equal attention to fans’ attachments to their fan objects and fellow fans and have, with few exceptions (Bailey 2005; Sandvoss 2005), failed to consider fandom’s impact upon individual’s sense of self-identity. One of this thesis’ central tenets is that “people use media to validate and support specific identities, a general sense of self, and a sense that they are part of an on-going society” (Snow 1988:204). However, fan/fan interactions also impact upon identity and fans may become emotionally invested in such relationships, positioning themselves as members of specific interpretive communities. Thus, in order to address the limitations of prior work on fandom, I posit a sociological model which accounts for fan community and hierarchy, fan/fan and fan/object attachments, and the internal importance and impact of external factors on one’s fandom. Although “[scholarly] typologies [...] often promote the activities of certain ‘types’ of [fans] over others” (Crawford 2004:31-33) the model I propose in this thesis enables us to account for a range of fan practices and levels of involvement from those who enjoy their fandom in isolation through to those who may be highly involved with fan objects or communities at a more official level (see chapter three).

The key work which influences my theoretical framework is that of sociologist Anthony Giddens, and his ideas about “*the self as reflexively understood by the person in terms of her or his biography*” (Giddens 1992:53, his emphasis). Furthermore, Giddens argues that, in the contemporary era of late modernity, people are routinely engaged in varieties of what he calls ‘pure relationships’; that is, a relation

entered into for its own sake, for what can be derived by each person from a sustained association with another; and which is continued only in so far as it is thought by both parties to deliver enough satisfactions for each individual to stay within it (Giddens 1992:58).

Indeed, “a pure relationship is one in which external criteria have become dissolved: the relationship exists solely for whatever rewards that relationship can deliver” (Giddens 1991:6) and these rewards are (1) the reflection of a desirable and appropriate self-identity and, (2), a sense of ontological security or ‘trust’. Extrapolating from this, particularly Giddens’ admission that pure relationships need not be reciprocal or inter-subjective (1992:58), I propose that at the core of fandom lie two types of ‘fan pure relationship’: fan/object pure relationships (fan attachment to fan objects) and fan/fan pure relationships (fan attachment to fellow fans). Given the importance of fans’ use of fandom to negotiate self-identity, this thesis considers how the television fans examined in my case studies draw on the texts to perform identity work through two main points of identification; fans’ attachments to individual characters or housemates, and also their responses to onscreen romantic relationships. To support relationships and to identify as a “shipper” (a fan of a specific onscreen romance) enables creation of a specific fan identity, leading to increased discussion and textual analysis and often resulting in ‘textual productivity’ (Fiske 1992) such as the creation of fanfiction. This thesis thus examines how fans use their shipping to negotiate their self-narratives, “recollecting for each other significant moments when it occurred to them that the characters could become a couple, even before it was apparent their story line would draw them together” (Harrington and Bielby 1995:13). It also considers how they attain levels of ‘discursive power’ (Tulloch 1995) and subcultural and social capital as they attempt to enforce specific readings of the text through covert or explicit attacks on those who make different interpretations. It is these relations between shipping, identification, and discursive power and hierarchy which I seek to examine in this thesis, relating such ideas to my theoretical framework of Giddensian ‘pure relationships’. However, I am also concerned with moving discussions of shippers beyond the genres with which they are



usually associated (typically cult media<sup>17</sup>) as, despite the presence of shippers in reality TV, soap, and drama, these have not been widely explored or have been understood only in limited terms. In addition, given that the other reward gained from pure relationships is the provision of a sense of ontological security or trust in the surrounding world, I also examine how fans may gain such trust from engagement with fan objects and fellow fans. As Giddens argues, “the routinisation of day-to-day life [...] is the single most important source of ontological security” (1981:37) and, drawing on work which has suggested that television schedules may contribute to ontological security (Moore 2005; Silverstone 1994), I examine how the constancy of fandom might be a way for fans to negotiate this sense of trust. However, as ontological security can never be constant and can be threatened by external factors (Giddens 1992:40), I am also interested in considering how fans might respond to threats which may occur as a result of unwelcome changes in the fan object or surrounding fan community or, as I will consider in my case study of *The West Wing*, when the fan object ceases production (see chapter seven).

However, whilst these Giddensian theories enable consideration of fans’ affective attachments, they still fail to account for the power hierarchies and battles over status which often characterise fandom. Therefore, the work of Pierre Bourdieu also proves instrumental here, given his concern with issues of distinction and cultural value and his concepts of field and capital. Bourdieu’s work, in contrast with that of Giddens, has been more widely utilised within fan studies<sup>18</sup> with the typical starting point being *Distinction* (1984) in which Bourdieu argues that we are born into a particular ‘*habitus*’ and our tastes are shaped by this unconscious way of living which is learned from the earliest stages of class socialisation (1984:6). The concept of the *habitus* is Bourdieu’s attempt to bridge the gap between structure and agency (R.Jenkins 2002:74) and between subjectivism (which assumes “a ‘contingent ongoing accomplishment’ of social agents who construct their social world via ‘the organised artful practices of everyday life’” (Wacquant 1992:9) and objectivism (which imagines individuals as determined by the

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<sup>17</sup> See Burr (2005); Bury (2003); Chin (2002); Felder (1999); Gwenllian-Jones (2002); Rust (2003); Scodari (2003); Scodari and Felder (2000); Silbergleid (2003); Williams (2004).

<sup>18</sup> See Brown (1997); Fiske (1992); Hills (2002); Jancovich (2000); Thomas (2002); Thornton (1995); Williamson (2005).

“social structures and values, ideas, desires and narratives produced by, and characteristic of, cultural institutions such as the family, religious groups, education systems and government bodies” (Webb *et al* 2002: 32)) As Bourdieu himself notes, “the subjectivist and the objectivist, stand in dialectical relationship. It is this dialectic of objectivity and subjectivity that the concept of the *habitus* is designed to capture and encapsulate” (Bourdieu 1988b:792). Bourdieu seeks to challenge the view that agency is centered upon consciousness and is overly voluntaristic. However, it is not that people have no agency but that their choices are always influenced by social structures via the *habitus* into which they have been socialised; “individuals have agency but the kind of agency which they have is prescribed by the culture of which they are part. [...] The culture forms a determinate framework in which any individual can act” (King 2004:40). However, the *habitus* operates to reinscribe the values, norms and dispositions of a society as people “reproduce the objective structures of the society, culture or community they live in, and which are articulated in terms of ideas, values, documents, policies [...] and dispositions” (Webb *et al* 2002: 33). Indeed, “structures exist only insofar as agents ‘do’ them and do so skillfully and inventively [...] Society creates the social agent, who then recreates society” (Crossley 2004:92, see also Bohman 1999:133).<sup>19</sup>

Despite some critiques<sup>20</sup> this notion of an unconscious, internalised system able to explain people’s tastes has proven irresistible in cultural studies which has used these ideas to consider endless elements of culture.<sup>21</sup> Closely linked to this are the concepts of social capital (‘who you know’) and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986) which is defined as

*institutionalized, i.e., widely shared, high status cultural signals (attitudes, preferences, formal knowledge, behaviors, goods and credentials) used for social and cultural exclusion, the former referring to exclusion from jobs and resources,*

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<sup>19</sup> For more on the interplay between structure and agency in Bourdieu’s work see Bohman 1999:130; Crossley 2004:90; R.Jenkins 2002:74; Mahar *et al*, 1990:22n1; Rossides 1998:293; Schwartz 1997: 8; The Friday Morning Group 1990; Tucker 1998:71; Webb *et al* 2002:34-35.

<sup>20</sup> For example, for neglecting the impact of the media upon people’s cultural tastes (Frow 1987; Thomas 2002), for cultural specificity (Garnham and Williams 1980; Kane 2003; Mander 1987), for being ahistorical (Gartman 1991), and for a deterministic view of human socialisation (DiMaggio 1979).

<sup>21</sup> These include international cuisine (Sloan 2003), women’s lingerie choices (Storr 2002) and sex toys (Smith 2007) and the popularity of ‘lifestyle television’ (Palmer, 2004).

and the latter, to exclusion from high status groups (Lamont and Lareau 1988:156, their emphasis).

Related to this is symbolic capital, the “prestige, reputation, fame etc.” (Bourdieu 1991:230) or the “honour [...] that is accorded to specific cultural producers in their relevant fields” (Hills 2005:166). Levels of symbolic power usually result from high amounts of cultural and social capital, illustrating that the forms of capital must be considered in relation to one another. Furthermore, symbolic capital is only relevant within specific fields (*champs*) which are categorised as “a series of institutions, rules, rituals, conventions, categories, designations, appointments and titles which constitute an objective hierarchy, and which produce and authorise certain discourses and activities” (Webb *et al* 2002:21).<sup>22</sup> Agents within fields are also caught up in what Bourdieu calls *illusio*, described as a “belief in the game” (Bourdieu 1984:54). That is, individuals participating in a given field must believe that playing the game is worthwhile and that the potential rewards are desirable, even if they are not consciously aware of this (Abouafia 1999) (see page 32).

Thus, although Bourdieu is largely contemptuous towards fandom (1984:386), the notion of capital has been widely employed within fan studies, particularly through Sarah Thornton’s extrapolation of ‘subcultural capital’ which “confers status on its owner in the eyes of the relevant beholder” (1995:11) and has currency only within specific groups. Thornton argues that fans make their own distinctions to demarcate against outsiders and to dismiss fans who have opposing interests and interpretations. Fan distinctions may be made regarding who, or what, is part of the fandom and these can be identified in fandoms as varied as paracinema (Sconce 1995), horror (Hills 2007e; Jancovich 2000; Kermode 1997), dance music (Thornton 1995), celebrities (Hills and Williams 2005; Nash and Lahti 1999) and comic books (Brown 1997). Indeed, fans make “constant attempt[s] to project internal purity by identifying inauthentic outsiders who must be rejected and shunned” (Jancovich and Hunt 2004:28). However, few studies have related subcultural capital to specific fields (notable exceptions are Hills 2005 and Williamson

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<sup>22</sup> See for example, Cook (2000); Grenfell and Hardy (2003), and Prior (2000) for application of field theory to art.

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2005) and none have linked fandom to the concept of *illusio*. However, the concept of field enables us to begin to examine fan hierarchies as fandom “sits within the field of cultural production; it cannot step outside of this field into a utopian space and it is thus subject to the struggles and dynamics, the position-takings and the hierarchies, that structure modern cultural engagement” (Williamson 2005:183-184) (see chapter two). It is my contention that, following Hills’ discussion of how academics emphasise Bourdieuan cultural capital over social capital to privilege their own educational achievements and positions (2002:56), academic attention may have been diverted away from the concept of *illusio*. This may be because to rigorously interrogate *illusio* jeopardises academics’ own investments within the field of academia, threatening to highlight the artifice of the importance they place upon participation within this field. Thus, this thesis aims to address some of these omissions, arguing that fan capital can only be understood in relation to the specific broadcasting field (see page 31) and also linking *illusio* to fan cultures (see pages 155-1583).

This thesis outlines a theoretical framework which, drawing on Giddens and Bourdieu, aims to rectify many of the flaws inherent in prior work on fandom and to account for the dualisms of community/hierarchy, the internal self and external ‘rewards’, and fan/object and fan/fan relationships. This is achieved through a model which takes the form of a multi-dimensional continuum according to levels of fan/object and fan/fan attachments (see appendix two). Although continuums have been critiqued for constructing inflexible typologies and forcing audiences into rigid ‘types’ of fans (Wann *et al* 2001) it is my contention that, provided they allow for fluidity of movement over time and circumstance, they offer a useful theoretical tool for imagining audiences (Abercrombie and Longhurst 1998; Crawford 2003, 2004; Moorhouse 1991). Thus, I posit a model that accounts for the ways in which fandom provides ontological security and a site for identity work, functions as both a community and hierarchy, and which argues that fan pure relationships are never entirely decontextualised from outside criteria and are ‘impure’ to certain extents (see page 69).

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### **From monolithic to multi-site: introducing comparative fan studies**

This theoretical framework is deployed to undertake examination of three distinct case studies, a methodological strategy which, as suggested above, has rarely been employed within fan studies. However, to engage in cross-comparative study of fan cultures is to acknowledge that, although

the ways in which fans relate to such texts and the performances that follow from this relationship vary between different fan cultures, and indeed from fan to fan [...] they are all forms of consumption in which we build and maintain an affective relationship with mediated texts and this share fundamental psychological, social and cultural premisses and consequences (Sandvoss 2005:8-9).

My three chosen case studies focus upon online communities devoted to the reality television show *Big Brother UK*, the imported Australian soap opera *Neighbours*, and the now-cancelled American 'quality' drama *The West Wing*. It is pertinent here to clarify why, given my call for fan studies to consider a wide range of fans, I have restricted this study to already cohesive groups of online fans. The rationale is partly methodological; access to lone or isolated fans who do not engage in any cohesive fan community is difficult due to their lack of participation. Likewise, contact with 'official' high-level fans is problematic given that their status may render them mistrustful of academic research or explicitly prevent them from participating. However, although access was a key reason for my selection of online fandom, such sites also provide locations where different levels and 'types' of fans do congregate. As I hope this research makes clear, not all fans who lurk or post at message boards are the same and, as my empirical data illustrates, fans from passive lurkers through to 'executive fans' (Tulloch 1995) can be found at message boards. Furthermore, given my interest in fandom as both communal and hierarchical, and in the ways in which fans themselves negotiate and police the boundaries of their fandom, online boards offer a site for divergent opinions and interpretations to be identified. Thus, whilst the conceptual model I propose could account for the practices of fans in an off-line environment, examination of these individuals is beyond the scope of this thesis.

I also wish to offer my rationale for the selection of the case studies chosen in this thesis. Obviously, each case study focuses on on-line fans of a contemporary television programme but their diversity is also “manifested along three distinct axes, thus providing a kind of triangulating effect on – suitably enough – three levels” (Bailey 2005:9). These axes are cultural value/‘quality’, temporality, and their trans-national status as imported shows or international formats. Indeed, each show occupies a varying position along a “highbrow/lowbrow axis” (Mittell 2004:15) with reality television and soap the most derided and quality television being accorded higher levels of cultural value, whilst fans of each show are also accorded different levels of value (Jermyn and Holmes 2006:55). The issue of television genre thus necessarily intersects across the case studies, given calls within television studies for a move away from formalist approaches which identify fixed attributes that texts from specific genres must possess (Carroll 1990). Instead, genre is considered as a cultural category which is discursively utilised to make judgments about certain programmes (Mittell 2004; Neale 1980:8) and to produce cultural meanings (Langford 2005:1). Indeed, “genre plays a major role in how television texts are classified, selected and understood” (Turner 2001:5) and audiences also make their own taste judgements regarding certain genres (Austin 2002; Vares 2002). Thus, given this thesis’ interest in both academic and audience conceptualisations of ‘quality television’ and value, my selection of shows with varying cultural positions enables me to examine the specific distinctions made by fans of a range of televisual texts.

The second axis which influences my choice of case studies is temporality as each show occupies different positions within television schedules. For example, whilst *Big Brother* is screened almost constantly for a finite period of time over the summer, *Neighbours* has aired for over twenty years in the same twice-daily time slots (even if the broadcasting channel within the UK changed during this period). In contrast, *The West Wing* ran for seven years and was screened in semi-regular time-slots in the UK and was assumed to be returning in the next ‘season’ of television, until its cancellation in 2006. This axis of temporality enables me to engage with Giddens’ work on routine and repetitions and to re-examine claims made in media studies regarding the impact of television scheduling upon ontological security (Moores 2000, 2005; Scannell 1988; Silverstone 1994). Such

arguments have yet to be empirically investigated, partially as a result of the fact that “to date [...] critical television researchers have shown little interest in scheduling” (Havens 2006:119), an omission which this research seeks to rectify.

Finally, the issue of national cultural specificity influences my selection of case studies. Whilst *BB* is the UK version of an international format which has been modified for transmission in numerous countries, *Neighbours* is an imported soap opera. In contrast, *The West Wing* is a quality drama which, despite garnering large audiences and a prominent scheduling spot in the US, was positioned differently in the UK, used to present its broadcasters Channel 4 and More4 as alternative, intelligent, quality channels (C. Johnson 2007:12-13; McCabe 2000; Rixon 2007). My selection of such transnational texts is intended to move discussions of quality television away from nationally specific debates over British and American forms of quality (see chapter two) and to suggest that distinctions can be made by fans of shows which are not necessarily aligned with either definition (although, in the case of *The West Wing*, they may be). However, in addition to my argument that debates and definitions over quality television should move away from being nationally specific, I also seek to investigate how the concept of quality TV might intersect with notions of ‘cult’ texts in my three case studies. This is undertaken by drawing on the work of Matt Hills (2004) and Catherine Johnson (2005; 2005b) and their discussions of ‘mainstream cult’ and ‘quality/cult TV’ respectively. For Hills, the mainstream cult text has three hallmarks; (1) it allows the surrounding fandom to fragment into a number of fan groups, (2) it tends to have a guiding author figure at the helm, and (3) it is dispersed across other media through books, fanfiction and so on (2004:62). Thus, cult and quality television share some overlaps and both quality and mainstream cult status cannot be found *within* a text but “can be drawn on in publicity, and utilised by fans of a TV programme, even while being denied or legitimated by other audience factions (non-fans/critics/academics)” (Hills 2004:64). This linkage to the notion of cult is relevant since texts are often labeled as cult in order to elevate them and to reclaim texts or objects which would otherwise be devalued due to their generic status, poor production values and so on. Thus, both cult and quality are used to make bids for the value of texts but neither can be located via textual attributes and are instead

constructed by specific groups for various purposes (see chapter two). Thus, this thesis seeks to question whether each of the three texts I have chosen to analyse – *Big Brother*, *Neighbours* and *The West Wing* – can be considered to display hallmarks of the mainstream cult text through their scheduling position, certain textual elements and the characteristics of the fandoms that surround them.

Therefore, my range of analytical sites have been selected due to their variant positions along the three axes outlined above and my interest is in examining how issues of identity, ontological security, cultural value, and capital cohere and intersect across this range of fan cultures. Of course, each of these axes will be problematised as the fan communities in question are examined but it is my hope that these points of interest form a logical and coherent starting point for examination of the key research interests of this thesis.

### **Being a ‘scholar-fan’: Negotiating self-identity as researcher and fan**

Given my interest in this research in the emotional attachments fans have to their fan objects and to each other it is pertinent to disclose my own investments in each of the shows I am drawing upon in my case studies. Although some critics caution against such self-disclosure (Hine 2000:56; Moores 1993:4), fan theorists have long negotiated their personal interests with the research objectives<sup>23</sup> whilst Internet research has also contained “reference to the personal [which may result in] scholarly discomfort” (Wilbur 1997:6). Thus, given my identity as a ‘scholar-fan’ (Hills 2002:2), issues of subjectivity and reflexivity so prevalent in traditional anthropological (Geertz 2000) and media ethnography (Moores 1993; Morley 1993:19) remain pertinent. Indeed,

researchers will be shaped by their socio-historical locations, including the values and interests that these locations confer upon them [...] [research cannot be carried out] in some autonomous realm that is insulated from the wider society and from the particular biography of the researcher (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995:16).

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<sup>23</sup> See Ang (1985); Bailey (2005); Baym (2000); Burr (2005); Bury (2005); Farred (2002); Hobson (1982); Hunter (2000); Symonds (2003); Thomas (2002).



Thus, whilst heeding warning on the fashionability “for academic writers to declare their own cultural ‘positionality’ in relation to the texts they are addressing” (Brooker 2000:4) I wish here to briefly outline the implications of my involvement, and suggest that these inform the research questions at the very heart of my work.

Given my introductory suggestion above that we view fandom as composed of forms of fan/fan and fan/object relationships, I have relatively pure relationships with the programmes that form my case studies, *Big Brother*, *Neighbours* and *The West Wing* (see appendix two). The main ‘rewards’ I gain from these fandoms are the provision of ontological security (via routine scheduling or repeated screenings of DVDs) and the reflecting back of a desirable reflexive self-narrative (Giddens 1991:36, 1992:139). I can clearly trace links between moments of significance within my life and my fan objects indicating that my “various fandoms become relevant and irrelevant to [my] cultural identity at specific times” (Hills 2002:82). For example, my fandom of *The West Wing* coincided with moving out of home to attend university and also reflects back my perceived self-identity as a politically-aware individual who has an interest in world events. However, my fan/object involvement extends only to owning DVDs and a few academic books about the series. Similarly, my viewing of *Big Brother* tends to be sustained and intense whilst the show airs each summer, and I frequently lurk at online message boards and discuss the show with family and friends. However, I do not purchase merchandise or attend any *Big Brother*-related events. In contrast, I have been a fan of *Neighbours* since my early childhood, which further provides ontological security as its presence is interwoven with past experiences and events. However, the purity of this fandom is tainted as it is a long-held ambition of mine to visit Melbourne to attend the ‘Neighbours Nights’ to meet cast members and to visit the real-life setting of Ramsay Street. Furthermore, I have also purchased relevant merchandise (e.g. DVDs, books, CDs) and attended some *Neighbours* related events (e.g. watching a cast member perform with his band).

However, despite these emotional fan/object attachments, I do not participate in any organised fandom, lurking but not posting at a handful of online message boards. This is

most likely due to my ability to discuss my fandoms with people off-line as a result of my family's viewing of *Big Brother* and *Neighbours*, their one-time interest in *The West Wing*, and their general tolerance of my fandoms (Hills 2002:78). However, it must be acknowledged that this brief autoethnographic account is influenced by my own research and the theories I have drawn upon and developed. It is not my intention to suggest that I have attained a transparent understanding of my fandom accessible only via the 'knowing self' as any discussion of interlinks between self-narrative and fan objects cannot be written "without a degree of fabulation" (Hills 2007b:152). Rather, it is my hope that this relation of my self-narrative is viewed as one 'version' of myself which I present in the specific context of academia and my own identity and self-narrative, like those of the fans I examine, is subject to threat, shifts, and re-narration. Furthermore, this discussion of my fandom is partial; failing to account for gender, class, or sexuality and its focus is restricted to the issues of identity and security so prevalent within my research. Despite this, I cannot deny that my own fan interests provided an impetus for this research and will undoubtedly impact upon my understandings of my empirical data and the fandoms I explore (see conclusion).

### **What's next?**

The next chapter of this thesis explores the ways in which networks, producers, and academics construct 'quality television', outlining the differences between definitions in the UK and the US. The chapter also examines how fans may internalise and replicate these discourses or, alternately, begin to formulate their own fandom-specific criteria for quality and cultural value. However, this discussion departs from prior work on quality television by suggesting that we view such debates through Pierre Bourdieu's (1993) field theory which posits fans, producers, and academics as agents within a cultural field, and proposes that we consider the wrangling over definitions of quality TV as indicative of struggles for positions and capital within that field.

Moving from issues of quality and distinction toward examination of fan cultures, chapter three proposes a sociological conception of fan cultures which draws on Bourdieu's

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theory of capital and Anthony Giddens' work on self-identity and ontological security. I offer the central argument of this thesis, suggesting that we view fandom as encompassing types of Giddensian 'pure relationship' which provide fans with a sense of ontological security and reflect their self-identities but which are also impacted on, to varying degrees, by external factors such as power, monetary gain, or types of capital. I then outline my theoretical conceptualisation of fandom as a multi-dimensional continuum consisting of fan/fan and fan/object relationships which enables academics to consider both types of fan pure relationship, to account for different 'types' of fans, and to examine the personal, internal importance of fandom and the impact of external factors and 'rewards'. Chapter four outlines my methodological approaches and details how the empirical data which forms this research was gathered through an overview of the sites at which I undertook my research. The methodology considers previous work on online community, hierarchy, and identity before negotiating many of the ethical issues which characterise Internet research. These include the question of whether online spaces are public or private, whether postings are textual or spoken, and whether 'lurking' (not revealing one's presence to an online group) is an ethically acceptable research practice. After detailing the ethical constraints of my study, I move on in chapters five, six, and seven to present the findings of my empirical research, relating them to my key research questions surrounding fans' distinctions and capital, community and hierarchy, and identity and ontological security.

Chapter five offers a case study of a fan community surrounding *Big Brother UK7*, focusing upon how the show's scheduling routines and repetitions engender identity work and a sense of 'trust' in the show. This chapter, along with the other case studies, begins to address television studies' relative disinterest in the concept of scheduling. This fifth chapter also examines fans' debates over the 'real' show, even though the very rules they seek to uphold are rendered arbitrary by *BB*'s status as a global format. Finally, this chapter draws on Bourdieu's notion of *illusio* to examine why fan distinctions regarding housemates and winners of the show rely so heavily on discourses of authenticity, self-hood, and normalcy. Chapter six continues many of these themes through the lens of a case study of fans of the Australian soap *Neighbours*. The emphasis in this chapter is,

once again, on the impact of the show's constant schedule presence and the 'parasocial interaction' (Horton and Wahl 1956) between viewers and characters which this engenders. However, I begin in this case study to examine the intra-generic distinctions fans make over good and bad examples of the soap genre and also consider the tensions between fans and producers/writers of the show through the 'field theory' introduced in chapter two. Finally, in chapter seven, I examine fans of the quality American drama *The West Wing*, refracting the key concerns of this thesis through analysis of fans' responses to the cancellation and final episodes of the show. This case study offers a unique chance to examine fans at the moment their fan object moves from being constant and on-going to what I have termed a 'dormant fan object' and provides an opportunity to examine fan discourses within what I refer to as 'post-object fandom'. Finally, chapter eight provides a conclusion to the thesis, tracing points of cohesion or disparity across my multi-site case study and critically evaluating my theoretical and methodological approaches. I conclude by positioning this thesis' contribution within the wider context of media and fan studies and offering some suggestions for future research. These propositions include a call for future work on fan cultures to follow this thesis by engaging in cross-comparative multi-site research across various fan cultures, to expand the theoretical model I propose to examine fans beyond already cohesive online groups, and to begin to interrogate the impact of sociocultural factors such as gender, ethnicity, and sexuality on the formation of fan pure relationships and ontological security.

Having mapped out the objectives and limits of this thesis and having made some introductory reference to the theoretical model which frames my research, I wish now to examine one of the key issues that underpin my work; debates over quality television and cultural value. The concept of distinction pervades this thesis and notions of value and judgement intersect with my other key areas of interest; fan self-identity and fan power and hierarchy. I expand upon these latter research areas in chapter three, but I wish now to set out the ways in which this thesis draws upon and expands previous work on quality television and value. This thesis' unique approach is to situate such debates within the context of the broadcasting field, a sub-field of the field of cultural production (Bourdieu 1993) (see appendix one). After outlining previous approaches to this concept in both US

and UK critical contexts the chapter considers how fans' own value judgements have been theorised, examining the efforts of producers, academics, and audiences to demarcate what constitutes 'quality television' as a characteristic of their position within the broadcasting field. Such issues, which bisect much of what follows in my research, are critically evaluated before I move on, in chapter three, to outline the theoretical framework which influences this thesis. Ultimately, this research seeks to contribute to the disciplines of television and audience studies by offering a unique approach to the issues and contradictions which characterise fandom. By offering a model based on multi-site empirical research this thesis suggests that fan studies needs to move beyond its established understandings of what fandom is and the practices and behaviours that fans engage in.

## Chapter Two

### Quality television and cultural value in the broadcasting field

Issues of quality and cultural value have long been debated within television studies, both in the UK (Brunsdon 1997; Corner *et al* 1994; Dyer 1992; Higson 1993; Mulgan 1990) and US (Brower 1992; Feuer *at al* 1984; Thompson 1996). However, such debates remain contentious as many suggest that cultural studies views discussion of aesthetics as elitist, imposing the “coercive rules of hierarchies of taste” (Felski 2005:28).<sup>24</sup> Although these critics argue that media studies’ focus upon interpretation and textual analysis avoids issues of cultural value (Nelson 2005; Shumway 2005), these issues remain relevant to studies of quality television and its aesthetics.<sup>25</sup> Given my engagement with the work of Pierre Bourdieu and issues of distinction and cultural value, such theories of quality television inevitably impinge upon this research. My emphasis is on how opposing discourses of quality television are mobilised by competing groups to make bids for status and capital, particularly within fandoms. However, due to my interest in the ways in which fans internalise or reject the dominant discourses surrounding quality television made by those in positions of cultural power, I also consider the definitions proposed by academics and television producers.

Before examining previous work on academic and fan constructions of quality TV I wish to introduce Bourdieu’s concept of ‘field’ (Bourdieu 1993) to suggest that the ‘broadcasting field’ (Born 2003) enables us to examine the conflicting discursive constructions of quality television made by producers and consumers of television shows. Furthermore, despite the prevalence of Bourdieuan approaches to fandom, his field theory has, with the exception of Hills’ (2005) and Williamson’s (2005) work on horror fandom and vampire subcultures respectively, been under-utilised. After outlining field theory and its relation to Bourdieu’s concepts of *habitus* and capital introduced in the

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<sup>24</sup> See also Feagin and Maynard (1997); Knight (2003); Shumway (2005); Street (2000).

<sup>25</sup> See Bignell (2005, 2005b, 2007); Cardwell and Peacock (2006); Cooke (2005); Geraghty (2003); Ishikawa (1996); Jacobs (2006); Jancovich and Lyons (2003); Johnson (2005); McCabe and Akass (2007); Nelson (2007, 2007c); Turnbull (2007).

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previous chapter, I examine how academics have discursively mobilised various definitions of quality TV before moving on to consider how fans discuss value in more genre or fandom specific ways.

### **Conceptualising the broadcasting field**

Bourdieu's concept of field has been widely discussed as it has been argued that his concepts of *habitus* and capital cannot be isolated from and understood outside of his broader theories of society (Williamson 2005). This section offers an over-view of this model, outlining Bourdieu's own definitions before considering previous applications of the concept to journalism and broadcasting. I argue that attempts made by producers, academics, and audiences to define 'quality television' can be related to their respective positions within the broadcasting field and to the constant struggles and position-takings which occur within it (Bourdieu 1993:30). Given my empirical engagement with television fans in this research I also suggest that the concept of field allows us to better theorise the ways in which fans negotiate power within their fan cultures, particularly within fan/producer relationships. Suggesting that the notion of inter or intra-fields has been relatively under-explored I posit that examination of movement between positions within fields allows us to account for clashes between fans and producers and that these disputes may stem from discomfort with the often contradictory positions that agents come to occupy within the broadcasting field (Bourdieu 1993:164).

Fields are characterised as "social arena[s] within which struggles or maneuvers take place over specific resources or stakes and access to them" (R. Jenkins 2002:84). They are "a separate social universe having [their] own laws of functioning independent of those of politics and the economy [...] endowed with specific principles of evaluation of practices and works" (Bourdieu 1993:162). Thus, the rules of fields (and the capital accrued within them) relate solely to that field, having no relation to the general rules of society. For example, symbolic power can only be understood in relation to relevant fields (Hills 2005:166) and symbolic power accrued by fans within the broadcasting field will have no legitimacy in the literary or educational field. Indeed,

the only way to understand the concept of symbolic capital is to link it to a specific cultural field. Only a field can grant symbolic capital. The name of the symbolic capital current in a field changes with the field: the educational field grants educational capital, the intellectual field intellectual capital and so on (Moi 1999: 309).

However, fields are never stable with participants “occupying the diverse available positions (or in some cases creating new positions) engag[ing] in competition for control of the interests or resources which are specific to the field in question” (Johnson 1993:6). Fields are thus “field[s] of struggles” (Bourdieu 1993:30) or “(battle)field[s]” (Moi 1999:272) in which “cultural producers take up (and also generate) certain positions” (Hills 2005:166) to compete over stakes such as capital, power, and recognition. Conflicts over legitimacy and “the question of knowing who is part of the universe” (Bourdieu 1993:164) are common and struggles between old and new agents in a field are frequent, with newcomers “bring[ing] with them dispositions and position-takings which clash with the prevailing norms of production and the expectations of the field” (Bourdieu 1993: 58). Also crucial to Bourdieu’s field theory is the concept of *illusio*, described as a “belief in the game” (Bourdieu 1984:54) in which agents or participants must “maintain the game by maintaining belief in the absolute value of the stake” (Bourdieu 1984:250). This refers to “an agent’s emotional and cognitive ‘investment’ in the stakes involved in any particular field, or simply, the belief that the game is worth playing” (Benson and Neveu 2005:3). For Bourdieu, one’s learning of the appropriate rules of the game must be discreet and appear effortless in their accumulation; indeed one of his main objections to fans is their acquisition of knowledge which is “too marked, in their style, by the haste of their acquisition” (1984:330).

Fields are structured in opposition between the ‘field of restricted production’ (‘legitimate’ or high-brow culture) and the ‘field of large-scale production’ (mass culture which appeals to the greatest number of people and has no artistic merit) (Bourdieu 1993:115). Furthermore, each field is structured between the ‘heteronomous’ pole representing “forces external to that field” (such as economic capital) and the ‘autonomous’ pole which represents “the specific *capital* unique to that field” (Benson 1998:464). The field of restricted production has autonomy as it can “define its own



criteria for the production and evaluation of its products” (Bourdieu 1993:115) and can delineate how cultural objects are constructed as valuable (Johnson 1993:7). By implication, the field of large-scale production lacks autonomy as it is dependent upon the public to ensure its perpetuation and cannot define its own evaluative criteria (Webb *et al* 2002:160). Bourdieu’s definition of large-scale production includes the mass media, particularly television of which he has been notoriously scathing (Bourdieu 1996), and this suggests that this field cannot make its own evaluative judgements regarding ‘good television’. However, discussions of aesthetics and quality television appear to contradict this view (see below). Furthermore,

the expected audiences for [autonomous] work produced [...] is the *cognoscenti* – other artists, art critics, those who have acquired the specialized education that will allow them to understand the ‘in’-jokes, the intertextual references and the self-referentiality of the works (Webb *et al* 2002:160).

However, such a *cognoscenti* is not limited to the arena of restricted production and it can be found in areas of large-scale production, as I will discuss below. Bourdieu’s view does not account for the fact that fields such as the ‘broadcasting field’ (Born 2003:776) and the ‘field of horror’ (Hills 2005:166) can exist *between* autonomy and heteronomy and restricted and large-scale production.

Bourdieu’s metaphor has been used to understand the fields of the mass media, particularly film (de Jong 2008; Gelder 1996, 2000; Hills 2005) and journalism (Benson 1998; Benson and Neveu 2004; Born 2003; Couldry 2003) and the media’s key power is deemed to be one of ‘consecration’ (Champagne 2005:58), the ability to “name an event, person, or idea as worthy of wider consideration” (Benson 1998:469). As a medium’s ability to consecrate is directly proportional to its importance within the media field, television is highly powerful due to “its wide, nearly universal diffusion, which gives it unparalleled capacity to shape opinion” (Benson 1998:470). Relating this to the broadcasting field we can argue that a television show which has large audiences and high levels of publicity is consecrated and elevated as worthy of critical and academic attention. However, previous applications of field theory to television have focused upon the factual mediums of journalism and news broadcasting (Benson 1998; Benson and

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Neveu 2005; Born 2003; Marliere 1998) and there has been little effort to examine fictional television despite Bourdieu's (1993) own explorations of the literary field. It is my suggestion that examining non-news programming within the broadcasting field enables us to examine the complex relationships between the various agents within this field and to consider how constructions of quality television are made.

For instance, Bourdieu argues that the true value of a text does not lie solely within the text itself or that the author/artist alone is responsible for that text (see Barthes 1977). He questions, "who is the true producer of the value of the work – the painter or the dealer, the writer or the publisher, the playwright or the theatre manager?" (Bourdieu 1993:76). There is no value in an object unrecognised by others as valuable, and "works of art exist as symbolic objects only if they are known and recognised, that is, socially instituted as works of art and received by spectators capable of knowing and recognising them as such" (Bourdieu 1993:37). Thus, following Bourdieu's logic, television programmes are not 'good' in and of themselves and their worth is determined by those who produce the meaning of the shows. Bourdieu's examples of 'consecrating agents' such as "artistic mediators (publishers, critics, agents, *marchands*, academies and so forth)" (1993:11), might here translate into television critics, producers, academics, and fans. It is the collective construction of quality discourses by these groups that establishes a programme as 'good television' and whose "combined efforts produce consumers capable of knowing and recognising the work of art as such" (Bourdieu 1993:37). Indeed, most crucial to this research, fans can be perceived as consecrating agents as they

possess special knowledge and are conversant in aesthetic codes that are endemic to a particular field of cultural production [...] fans are beginning to be recognized as important contributors to the formation of collective belief [...] surrounding the value of symbolic goods (Shefrin 2004:269-270).

However, agents may occupy multiple, sometimes contradictory positions within a field, acting as, for example, academics *and* fans or as producers *and* critics. I now wish to consider how Bourdieu's field theory helps us understand how agents may occupy these various positions within fields and how this allows us to explore the tensions between

fans and producers (see pages 190-191) and competing definitions of quality television (see below).

Bourdieu does tend to overstate the autonomy of fields and their distinctness from other fields (Bennett *et al* 1999:261; Cook 2000; Hills 2005; R. Jenkins 2002:89; Prior 2000). Indeed, different fields necessarily intersect and Bourdieu's assertion that the field of cultural production is entirely autonomous is unlikely in real terms, failing to account for the relations between this field and, for instance, economic or political constraints. For example, the broadcasting field, "with its mixed economy, hybrid institutions and ambiguous genres was always historically messier than many cultural fields" (Born 2003:776) (see appendix one). Furthermore, Bourdieu imagined "fields inside fields inside fields (like a series of Russian dolls) parallel to each other in their internal organisation" (Benson and Neveu 2005:4) and the broadcasting field also exists within the fields of cultural production and the field of power (see appendix one).

Field theory needs to more closely consider the possibility of inter-fields or intra-fields and, to expand upon such ideas within the broadcasting field, we must consider the possibility of agents' movement between numerous fields, fulfilling appropriate roles in each. For example, in the broadcasting field fans, particularly 'executive fans' (Tulloch 1995:149) may be accepted by the producers of a given show by virtue of their activities and may play roles within the field of production by writing novelisations, guides or episodes of the shows (Cassetta 2000; Ganz-Blattler 1999). Fans and academics may also occupy multiple positions in a field, particularly if they take the form of "scholar-fans" or "fan-scholars" (Hills 2002). Furthermore, those who are involved in the production of television shows sometimes contribute to academic collections, thus straddling the producer/academic divide (Holder 2003; Espenson 2004). Similarly, some academics also cross over into the production side of the field, appearing on television shows and assuming a 'star persona' (e.g. Germaine Greer who appeared on *Celebrity Big Brother* or Slavoj Zizek (Hills 2005b:153)). However, producers/actors may also occupy simultaneous positions as fans of these texts, as Ken Gelder (1996) and Milly Williamson (2005:136) comment on Anne Rice as object of fandom and a fan of her own characters, and Hills and Williams (2005:357) note regarding *Buffy* star James Marsters' positioning

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as both object of fandom and fan of the show he starred in. Thus, the capital accrued in various fields can be transferred to others and this 'rate of exchange' means that capital in one field can be 'cashed in' in another (de Leeuw 1994:45). Thus, an agent may have produced a cultural product that garners autonomous success within particular fields but not heteronomous success within society as a whole.<sup>26</sup>

The notion of intra-field movement also helps us account for clashes between fans and the producers of their chosen fan objects (see pages 187-189). Such battles have been widely documented in fan studies<sup>27</sup> and fans do not merely accept the texts presented to them by media producers. Despite (and often because of) their adoration of their chosen texts they may refuse to accept certain narrative developments or off-screen decisions (e.g. the writing out of a character or a new direction for a show) and might vent their anger and dissatisfaction. Fans rarely have any genuine power over their fan objects (Gwenllian-Jones 2003) and are largely "a powerless elite [whose power is] discursive rather than institutional" (Tulloch 1995:149). Thus, whilst fans may develop control within fan/fan relationships by assuming elite positions within the fandom, their power over the fan object remains limited (Jenkins 1992:27). It has been argued that there has been an increase in the reciprocity of fan/producer relationships which was largely engendered by the increase in online fan activity, with such access resulting in "the tendency to imagine oneself as a part of the team producing the show" (Nussbaum 2002:online). However, these views are highly optimistic and there is little evidence to suggest that fans who enjoy chatting online with producers or writers believe that they have an impact on their fan objects or, even, that they desire such an influence. The leap from identifying that fans enjoy reciprocal online conversations with those in charge of favoured programmes to suggesting that fans consider themselves to be 'part of the team'

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<sup>26</sup> For example, David Lynch, having established himself as an acclaimed cinematic director produced the successful television series *Twin Peaks* which was "pre-sold on the basis of Lynch's reputation as an internationally renowned maverick" (Williams 2005:41). Having proven himself in both the cinematic and broadcasting fields, Lynch created a new show *Mulholland Drive* for the ABC network (Roche 2004). However, when this failed, Lynch's previously accrued capital allowed him to transform the series' pilot episode into a widely acclaimed movie, ensuring his continued capital within the cinematic field. However, the convertibility of capital from one field to another is not restricted to auteur or 'hyphenate' figures and can also be seen in examples of actors who have moved between the cinematic and broadcasting fields (e.g. *The West Wing's* Martin Sheen).

<sup>27</sup> See Cover (2004); Dobson (2003); Koppers (2004); Lancaster (2001); Scodari and Felder (2000).

is difficult to argue and does not appear to be empirically substantiated by any previous fan studies.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, this illusion of reciprocity often conceals an empty relationship that encourages fans to believe that they have an input when in fact they still “have little effect on the ways that the television industry works or on the television programmes that are produced” (Bignell 2004:293). Furthermore, it has been argued that viewer interactivity actually functions as a form of unpaid labor for the television industry (Andrejevic 2008:43; Terranova 2006) and this investment (both affective and temporal) may be one of the key contributory reasons for fan antagonism towards producers and opposing fans (D. Johnson 2007a:74). Thus, fan impact upon narrative developments can never truly be quantified, resulting in a situation where fans often declare their influence over the text to make bids for positions within the broadcasting field and to attempt to attain levels of capital (Menon 2007:367).

Given the potential clashes between fans and producers, it is my suggestion that these conflicts result from tensions over knowing one’s appropriate place within specific fields (Bourdieu 1993:164). For example, fan/producer clashes were identified in all three of my empirical case studies, although these debates were obviously specific to each particular fan group. *Neighbours* fans protested when one of the show’s writers posted online attacking fans that were unhappy with the current storylines and threatening to ‘meet them in a dark alley’ (see page 188). In this case, this results from tensions between positions within the broadcasting field, particularly the discomfort felt by producers when fans do not appear to ‘know their place’ and challenge the position and capital of those who contribute towards the production of cultural objects (Bourdieu 1993:164). Similarly, within the *Big Brother* fandom, fans attempted to undermine the producers’ intentions when they critiqued certain twists in the show (e.g. the re-introduction of previously evicted housemates). However, the interactivity of *BB* fandom means that some fans were also able to move between positions as fans and as part of the show itself, often appearing on the companion programmes such as *Big Brother’s Big Mouth* and *Big Brother’s Little Brother*. Finally, within *The West Wing* fandom fan/producer interactions were more limited, with the only challenges made to the producers via fan critique of

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<sup>28</sup> Although see Ross (2008) for more on the different levels of involvement and control that fans/audiences negotiate with producers.

unwelcome episodes and storylines (see page 231). This is likely to result from the reduced interactivity between fans and producers within the genre of drama which remains relatively distanced from its audience whilst soap opera and reality television offer greater possibilities for fan/producer contact. Thus, the struggles for legitimacy by those who have less contact with the creators of their fan objects may prove may be less threatening to those producers in positions of power within the field.

This discussion of Bourdieu's field theory has argued that that those involved in the construction of discourses of quality television such as producers, academics, and audiences act as agents within the broadcasting field. Thus, fans can consecrate their chosen fan objects (Shefrin 2004), labeling such shows as 'good' and as worthy of their attention. However, academics also act as consecrating agents and the next section examines the ways in which academics have defined quality television, suggesting that the various competing discourses that are mobilised are indicative of the struggles over position-takings and legitimacy that are characteristic of all fields (Hills 2005:166; R. Jenkins 2002:85; Johnson 1993:6). Such discussions are necessary given my interest in the ways in which fans negotiate quality television, either assimilating or rejecting the dominant discourses perpetuated by theorists (see pages 225-228) and an understanding of the relevant key academic theories is, thus, crucial to my discussions of fan distinctions in my empirical chapters.

### **Academic approaches to quality television and value**

Cultural studies has often been accused of being resolutely anti-aesthetic (Felski 2005; Knight 2003; Street 2000) and of subscribing to the notion that any discussion of value is elitist (Shumway 2005:110). However, discussions of television aesthetics and quality television have enjoyed something of a renaissance recently demonstrating that the issue of quality remains pertinent.<sup>29</sup> In this section I outline the ways in which academics have approached quality television, particularly the apparent division between UK-based and

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<sup>29</sup> See Bignell (2005); Cardwell and Peacock (2006); Cooke (2005); Ishikawa (1996); Jacobs (2006); Jancovich and Lyons (2003); Johnson (2005); McCabe and Akass (2007); Nelson (2007b).

US definitions. I then examine more recent work which suggests that approaches to quality TV must be genre-specific in order to account for the differences between types of programme, before moving on in the final section of this chapter to consider how audiences have already begun to make these sorts of distinctions in their own debates over quality television. For, as my empirical data illustrates, fans of the soap *Neighbours* often make distinctions between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ examples of the soap genre, as well as debating what makes various eras of the show ‘better’ than others (see page 179) whilst the *Big Brother* fans I examined made judgements over what they believed constituted ‘proper’ *Big Brother* which were highly specific to that particular fan forum (see page 133). Finally, fans of *The West Wing* voiced opinions over the show which that were based on the prevailing fan norms and discourses used at the message board I examined (see page 232).

Academic work has proposed various theorisations of quality television and there has tended to be a division between British and American definitions (Nelson 2007d:41).<sup>30</sup> Indeed, in early British work on quality TV American culture was often associated with lowest common denominator programming such as quiz shows and cheap soap operas (Brunsdon 1990:113) whilst ‘quality’ was aligned with “Englishness, [...] diametrically opposed to all things American” (Thomas 2002:37). British quality television was assumed to encompass traditional aesthetic discourse, realism, entertainment, diversity, discourses of public service and national identity, a literary source, high-profile actors, high production values, links to theatre, and heritage export (Alvarado 2000:307; Brunsdon 1997; Cook and Elsaesser 1994; Corner *et al* 1994; Dyer 1992; McGuigan 2002; Mulgan 1990; Nelson 2005:117; Nowell-Smith 1994). These discourses were impacted upon by the tradition of public service broadcasting (PSB) and the Reithian doctrine of ‘education, entertainment and information’ (Scannell 1990; Williams 1998) but quality in these debates was also a struggle over different types of programme,

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<sup>30</sup> It is worth noting here that transnational differences regarding distinction were acknowledged by Bourdieu in his work (Miller 2003:554) which was often not accepted in the American academic context (Bourdieu 1997:450; Bryson 1996; Erickson 1996; Guillory 2000; Halle 1993; Holt 1997; Lamont 1992; Lamont and Lareau 1998). However, whilst the French/American contrast has been emphasised, some have begun to undertake a broader international approach (Kane 2003), using Bourdieuan theory in Australia (Bennett, Emmison and Frow 1999; Turner and Edmunds 2002), Canada (Erickson 1996), and Sweden (Bilhagen and Katz-Gerro 2000; Miegel 1994).

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defining what was worthy and what was devalued, most commonly typified as foreign imports, game shows, and soaps (Corner *et al* 1994:12-16, see also Lealand 2001). British discussions of quality TV were also inextricably correlated with ‘heritage texts’ such as costume dramas which relied on nostalgia whilst recalling a particular image of Britishness and national identity (Dyer 2002:14). However, academics were not entirely positive in their discussions of such quality media (Craig 1991; Wollen 1991), arguing that heritage texts were reacting to contemporary political problems, seeking to ignore unwelcome developments in society and instead recalling a nostalgic “imperialist and upper class Britain” (Higson 1993:110) or were inward-looking, treating the world outside of the narrative as an unwelcome intrusion (Dyer 1992:15). Furthermore, such work was accused of viewing audiences as passively absorbing the spectacle of such quality drama and being “beguiled by the powerful representations of Englishness on offer” (Thomas 2002:36, see also Samuel 1994 and Monk 1999).

In contrast, whilst British quality television was typically embodied by costume drama or literary adaptation, American quality television encompasses contemporary dramas such as *Lost*, *The West Wing* (Feuer 2005:28) and almost any show screened on the subscription cable channel HBO such as *The Sopranos* and *Six Feet Under* (C. Johnson 2007:10). Academics developed numerous criteria for American quality television including auteurship, aesthetic innovation, character development, critical acclaim, controversial subject matter or liberal politics, and self-reflexivity (Brower 1992; Feuer *et al* 1984; Thompson 1996). Furthermore, an emphasis on unexpectedness led to quality television being defined by “what it is not [...] it is not regular television” (Thompson 1996:13) and it is expected to “amaze or confuse or surprise” (Madsen 1994:49). More recently, Robin Nelson has suggested that shows on subscription channels such as HBO which have few regulatory limits may provide “pleasure [...] in the anticipation of transgression of social codes” (2007b: 19). Nelson refers to such pleasures as ‘ontological insecurity’, suggesting that challenging generic or social expectations can provide liminal pleasures via the depiction of nudity and sexual activity, or violence. Phrases such as “creative freedom” (Feuer *et al* 1984:32), “characteristics with high art connotations” and “structural complexity” (Brower 1992:135) were routinely used to academically define



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quality television with little clear definition of what such terms actually meant. Other oft-cited traits included an upscale demographic, a struggle against economically-driven networks and ignorant audiences, a large ensemble cast, a ‘memory’ to remember past storylines, generic creativity, being literary and writer-based, and realism (see Thompson 1996:13-16). For many academics the association of their studied shows with ‘quality television’ is often undertaken to elevate the object of study to higher cultural status, to justify their scrutiny of it, and to legitimate their own academic positions within the educational field. For example, Wilcox and Lavery unproblematically apply Robert J. Thompson’s (1996) criteria for quality television to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* to argue for the show’s value (2002:xxi-xxv). They suggest that “the case for *Buffy* as quality television – and concomitantly the rationale for why it is worthy of serious critical investigation – is, we would suggest, a no-brainer” (2002:xxi) as it fulfils each of the criteria Thompson established. Their argument that *Buffy* is ‘worthy of serious critical investigation’ is perhaps explained by *Buffy*’s status as horror (Freedman 2005) or teen drama (Wilcox 1999) (see also Wilcox 2005) which are both oft-derided genres. A similar discursive alignment with quality television occurs in Akass and McCabe’s (2005) collection on *Six Feet Under* in which the notion of quality is used to elevate the show as worthy of attention in contrast to similar programmes such as *24*, *The West Wing*, and *Sex and the City* (Lawson 2005:xviii). Similar maneuvers are made in a recent book on *24* which devotes a chapter to arguing that the show shares many traits of quality television, but that its visuality (e.g. use of split screens), narrative structure and ideology also “actively challeng[e] established markers for quality television” (Chamberlain and Ruston 2007:14). Such defence of the texts being studied demonstrates the need to defend one’s position within the broadcasting and educational fields which are site of constant struggle over who or *what* belongs in the field. We can also see how such competing academic positions relate to the notion of old and new agents that Bourdieu discussed (1993:58). For academics the establishing of new theoretical positions is crucial in enabling them to assume a position within the educational field as “‘making one’s mark’, initiating a new epoch, means winning recognition, in both senses, of one’s difference from other producers, especially the most consecrated of them” (Bourdieu 1993:60). Thus, academic constructions of quality television must always be read as symptomatic

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of scholars' positions not only in the broadcasting field via their status as consecrating agents but also within the educational field.

However, I have elected not to follow these established theoretical lines and have avoided undertaking empirical work comparing US and UK quality television. Although I do examine one American drama (*The West Wing*) my other case studies examine genres whose audiences are often dismissed or derided. However, one commonality linking all three case studies is their status as imported or cross-cultural shows or formats. For example, *Big Brother* is the British version of an international format which is screened in numerous countries (Hill 2005:22), with variations to the format depending upon national context (Andrejevic 2004:154). Similarly, *Neighbours* is an imported soap opera which works differently in the UK context, relying upon British notions of what Australian society is like (Crofts 1993, 1995) whilst *The West Wing* is an imported US 'quality drama' (Feuer 2005:28) which was received very differently in the UK than in its home country. Although within the US NBC scheduled the show in prime-time, the programme's UK broadcaster Channel 4 screened the fifth season in an unpopular 7pm Friday slot, before moving the programme onto its digital sister channel More4. Thus, whilst as McCabe (2000, 2005) notes, shows such as *E.R* and *The Sopranos* have been used by C4 to position itself as an alternative, quality channel and to appeal to a specific demographic (Born 2003) *TWW* was not used in quite the same way. In the UK *TWW* was less a popular, widely-appreciated television hit and more of a 'secret', a show that only dedicated audiences could find in the schedules and which borders on "mainstream-cult" (Hills 2004) status (see page 23). Indeed, the mainstream or cult status of programmes can alter depending upon various cultural contexts (Hills 2006:61) and,

TV programming is often scheduled very differently in importing markets than exporting ones. A prime-time export becomes a daytime import, or a once-per-week export becomes a twice-per-week import, potentially attracting a different viewer demographic, commanding a different level of advertising sponsorship, drawing different critical reception *and raising potentially different questions about viewer reception* (Harrington and Bielby 2005c:839, my emphasis).

Thus, whilst notions of quality television have been nationalised in the US and UK-based debates it is my argument that fan discussions surrounding quality TV are no longer dependent upon national specificity. That is not to say that the national context of television does not continue to engage in “the task of national unification, definition and dissemination of a national culture and defence against the inroads of other nations” (Hilmes 2003:1). Nor does it mean that national identity has no impact upon varying constructions of cultural value (Bourdieu 1984:443; Miller 2003:554) or that nations do not act as ‘brands’ (O’Shaughnessy and O’Shaughnessy 2000) who have a particular exportable “reputation or image” (Harrington and Bielby 2005b:911) such as Brazilian telenovelas and Japanese anime. Rather I wish to argue that, given the increase in ‘global television’, transnational export and import and the popularity of formats within the television industry is of great interest. Indeed, television formats enable buyers to “adapt them in culturally specific ways to local audiences and to create multiple versions of shows in diverse markets around the world” (Harrington and Bielby 2005c:839). Such debates have emphasised the concept of ‘flow’ (Sinclair and Cunningham 2000) which refers to “the movement of television programs and formats through different world markets” (Harrington and Bielby 2005c:834). However, as White (2003) notes, studies of flow tell us little about why the popularity of specific formats, shows or genres varies around the world. Thus, this research focuses upon case studies which are cross-cultural, imports or international formats to move away from out-dated theories of quality television which were demarcated along national boundaries.

However, academic work has also been concerned with how those outside of the academy constructed quality TV and researchers have questioned TV producers about these issues. Prior research has concluded that producers emphasised aspects such as creative and production skills (including well-written scripts, editing, acting, lighting and directing), production values (such as treatment of serious issues) and treatment of the audience (e.g. respect for audience, affective influence upon viewers, and unpredictability) (Albers 1996:123-142; Costera Meijer 2005:39-47; Leggatt 1996:146). These elements reflect those most commonly employed by academics, suggesting a convergence of discourses used by producers and theorists. It is worth considering the

impact of such academic convergence with the quality branding undertaken by producers and networks as,

if concepts of aesthetics and value have been colonised by the TV industry as tools of branding, then we might at the very least ponder to what extent TV Studies should wish to extend, re-circulate and replay those discourses (Hills 2007d).

Previous work has also begun to examine the ways in which the television industry itself draws on the concept of quality television to promote shows and accord them value within a highly competitive marketplace.<sup>31</sup> Television is a commercial medium which produces quality television to deliver “affluent, highly educated consumers who value the literary qualities of these programmes” (Jancovich and Lyons 2003:3) to advertisers targeting specific niche audiences and demographics (Becker 2004; Negra 2004; San Martin 2003). It appears that the television industry perceives quality television to be a desirable label and that it has a stake in defining the value of texts as ‘good’, even if such discourses ultimately “do nothing more than obscure the basic industrial factors behind [the branding] strategies” (Jaramillo 2002:63). Thus, such work acknowledges the impact of production systems upon constructions of quality television (Blumler 1986; Nossiter 1986).<sup>32</sup>

However, although production and academic definitions of quality television appear to converge, there are also differences in the ways in which quality TV is discursively constructed, with the major point of divergence being genre. As Jacobs acknowledges;

it is not appropriate to apply criteria of authenticity, creativity and innovation in the same way to *Who Wants To Be A Millionaire* (ITV, 1998- ) and *E.R.* (NBC,

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<sup>31</sup> See Costera Meijer (2005:37); Johnson (2005b:118); McCabe (2000; 2005); Nelson (2007b) and Rosengren *et al* (1996:41).

<sup>32</sup> Another way in which the television industry constructs cultural hierarchies over which shows are defined as ‘good’ or as ‘quality television’ is, as Hills notes, via the industry decisions over what shows are released on DVD. He argues that “those series, serials or one-off dramas which can be most readily linked to discourses of ‘art’ or ‘quality popular’ TV[...] are seemingly far more likely to be immediately released on DVD” (Hills 2007:49). Most likely to receive a DVD release are those shows “closer to being ‘high-end’ or self-consciously ‘extraordinary’ TV” or television “valorized as ‘cult’ or ‘nostalgia’ fare” (Hills 2007:49). Thus, DVD releases “work to sustain industry hierarchies, and industry bids for value or exceptionality” (Hills 2007:50).

1994- ). The terms of judgement will vary according to what is under consideration: we will not consider a gameshow or a news programme in the same way as a serial drama (2001:430).

Such approaches suggest that television cannot be easily divided into ‘good’ and ‘bad’ shows and that each genre must be judged on its own relative merits without comparison with culturally valued genres. For example, soap opera should not be compared with drama in terms of acting, set design, dialogue and so on (Bird 2003:139) and, as I will argue, fans do acknowledge these disparities in their discussions of quality television and value (see page 179). However, such work is often primarily concerned with how critics and scholars make value judgements, sidelining the myriad ways in which audiences negotiate these issues (Jacobs 2001:432).

Relevant here is Sarah Cardwell’s distinction between quality television and *good* television. In a consciously polemical argument (2007:20) Cardwell argues that good television is “more aptly defined by the audience’s experience of it” (Cardwell 2007:21) and that it is “television that we experience positively: we find it engaging, stimulating, exciting, original and so on” (2007:31). However, Cardwell’s argument appears to merely move from ‘quality television’ to ‘good television’ without any real discussion of the differences between these. To assume that audiences only find certain types of ‘good’ television to be ‘engaging, stimulating, exciting’ etc. fails to account for the fact that some audiences find these qualities in programmes widely considered to be low-brow genres. For example, one can argue that these are traits of some reality television (e.g. *Big Brother*), or gameshows (e.g. *Deal Or No Deal*), although it seems unlikely that Cardwell would class these shows as ‘good television’. Thus, whilst Cardwell’s insistence on considering audience response is pertinent, her argument appears to replicate traditional literary ideas of what makes television ‘good’, thus perpetuating the value judgements made by earlier discussions of ‘quality television’ (see above).

Despite this, audience accounts of why a show is ‘good’ are often more contradictory than the constructions of quality proposed by producers or academics allow. Viewers frequently bring notions of taste and aesthetics into their judgements of what programmes

are deemed to be good or bad and I shall now consider how previous studies have examined fan constructions of quality and value. I will firstly examine how audiences draw on dominant discourses of quality television proposed by producers, critics and academics (e.g. notions of authorship, high production values), before considering more genre-specific approaches which are dependent upon the interpretations of their individual fandoms. Finally, I will examine the intersection between quality television and identity, considering how fans' deployment of the notion of quality TV enables them to elevate their fan objects and to construct a desirable self-identity for, as I will argue in my empirical chapters, fans often draw on quality television in this way (see pages 225-228).

### **Fan approaches to quality television and value**

As discussed above, quality television must be considered as a cultural construct rather than a set of criteria we can use to establish a genre's credentials as 'good'. What is deemed to be quality television is "produced discursively and intertextually" (Hills 2004:64) and "established through intersubjective agreement within [...] speech communities" (Nelson 2005:121). However, whilst I have previously considered academic definitions of quality television I now wish to offer an over-view of prior approaches to audience discussions of quality TV. In this section I examine how fan constructions of quality TV may replicate the discourses circulated by producers and academics, drawing on concepts such as authorship and high production values to argue for the value of their favoured shows. However, I also consider how academic and fan definitions may diverge, with some fans constructing their own criteria for evaluation which are highly specific to their fan community. Lastly, I will consider these debates in relation to self-identity, outlining how fans often align themselves with quality television in order to elevate their chosen fan object or to distance themselves from the potential stigma of fan practices.

It has been suggested that increased examination of audiences and 'popular aesthetics' (McKee 2001: online) enables consideration of the ways in which quality television is

defined and debated (Bird 2003:119; Knight 2003:792) as there persists a “difference between ‘quality’ television expressed in terms of a range of textual characteristics and ‘worth’ in the sense of ‘good for’ its viewers” (Nelson 2005:119). Whilst many critics have commented that audiences are capable of defining for themselves what constitutes quality television,<sup>33</sup> there has been little genuine study of these issues (McKee 2001: online). As Frith notes, “we remain really quite ignorant about popular television aesthetics, about viewers’ judgements of what makes for good viewing” (2000: 46) even though audiences frequently use “terms that echo but do not exactly match the professional concern for originality, authenticity and innovation” (Frith 2000: 46). In some cases fans appear to replicate the dominant discourses of quality television perpetuated by producers of television shows and by the academics who study them. For example, Sue Brower’s (1992) study of the group ‘Viewers for Quality Television’ (VQT) suggests that fans argued that quality television focused on character development, challenges and involves the viewer, displays liberal values, is realistic, depends on authorship and possesses good writing and acting (1992: 171-172). Similarly, Lyn Thomas (2002) found that fans of *Inspector Morse* referred to acting ability and the presence of famous faces and use of classical music as potentially educational (2002:92), whilst *The Archers* fans constructed the soap as ‘quality’ via mystique, quality of writing and longevity and dealing with controversial issues and realism (2002:129). *Morse* fans also associated ‘quality’ with Englishness (via references to country lanes, Morse’s classic Jaguar car, and so on), and as having “cultural superiority [...] in relation to American popular culture” (2002:93-94), clearly recalling those signifiers of quality associated with heritage texts discussed above. My own research found that fans of *The West Wing* were most likely to draw on dominant discourses of quality television alluding to elements such as authorship, high production values, quality of writing and character continuity in their debates over the show (see page 226). The discourse of authorship was particularly strong with fans often aligning ‘good’ episodes or eras of the show with its creator Aaron Sorkin whilst the less successful periods (often dismissed as ‘not proper’ *West Wing*) were associated with the writer-producer John Wells and another writer

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<sup>33</sup> See Brunsdon (1997); Collins (1993); Gans (1999); Leggatt (1996); Nelson (1997); Thompson (1996); Turnbull (2004).

Lawrence O'Donnell. Here we can see a clear convergence of quality discourses perpetuated by producers (Albers 1996; Costera Meijer 2005; Jaramillo 2002; Leggatt 1996), academics (Feuer *et al* 1984; Thompson 1996) and, subsequently, audiences.

However, although some fans do draw on the dominant discourses of quality television, others make their own distinctions which are highly fan-specific. These debates may be genre-specific (i.e. fans of soap opera have different criteria to those who are fans of drama) but, in many cases, such value judgements may not even be accepted throughout an entire fandom, and may be exclusive to one fan website or group. Such debates surrounding quality television often take the form of struggles over what constitutes the 'real' or 'proper' text, and fan discussions often centre around the best or worst eras or episodes of a show. In such debates fans tend to draw on "the 'informed' exegesis" (Tulloch 1995:145) of their specific interpretive communities, rather than on the wider discourses of quality television. These issues have been examined within the construction of fans as a 'powerless elite' (Tulloch 1995) who have no real power over the producers of their fan objects but who possess the "power to gloss and to write the aesthetic history" of programmes [...] [dividing them into] a series of 'golden ages' and 'all time lows'" (Tulloch 1995:145). Although these notions of 'golden ages' and 'all time lows' can be seen in each of my case studies (see pages 127, 180 and 232), Tulloch assumes that good and bad episodes are fixed noting, for example, that "fans quite generally agree" on the value and merits of specific *Doctor Who* stories (1995:147). However, Alan McKee emphasises "the changing nature of evaluations – stable but not static – and the ways in which they are challenged in public discussions about value" (2001: online). Fandom's distinctions suggest that fans make intra-generic judgements regarding what is classified as 'good' or 'bad' examples of a fan object. There were clashes, for example, within all of the case studies I undertook over what constituted the 'real' show (*Big Brother*), over 'proper' episodes (*The West Wing*) and over 'good' eras of the show which emphasised character and emotional realism and 'bad' eras which were far-fetched, sensationalist and served narrative over character (*Neighbours*). Indeed, the debates of fans of both *Neighbours* and *Big Brother* indicate that even fans of culturally devalued or 'low' genres make value judgements (Mittell 2004:101), operating their own specific mechanisms of



distinction to distinguish between 'good' or 'bad' examples of the genre and to privilege their sense of the 'real' or 'proper' show.

Another common theme in previous work on quality television is the ways in which fans position themselves in relation to it. Both Brower (1992) and Thomas (2002) found that fans often drew on the notion of quality television to elevate their interests as culturally acceptable whilst simultaneously devaluing the act of fandom itself. Fans who defend their shows as 'good' often employ such terms as a discursive strategy to defend their precarious cultural position as a "powerless elite" (Tulloch 1995:145) and draw on the discourse of quality to elevate their chosen text, to signal its specialness, and to make bids for status within the field. However, work on this issue found a commonality in the ways in which fans positioned themselves in relation to other audience members. For example, Brower found that members of VQT "both appropriated and contributed to the 'quality' discourse in order to permit themselves the pleasure of fandom" (1992:182). Lyn Thomas similarly notes the reluctance of fans to self-identify as such, invoking discourses of 'sadness' or 'not having a life' to self-deprecatingly defend against any such accusations (2002:121) or constructing themselves in opposition to non-discerning, ordinary fans (2002:86). They draw on the notion of quality to defend themselves against any negative connotations associated with fandom, making distinctions about both the object of fandom itself and about other fans. However, the notion of viewers fearing the negativity associated with fandom, whilst still pertinent in the early 1990s, is perhaps undermined by more recent claims that fandom is proliferating to cover varying cultural objects (Pullen 2004). Despite this critique, such fan maneuvers imply a discomfort with association with typical fan practices, also suggesting that these fans attempt to justify their position within the broadcasting field by aligning themselves with the cultural producers who dominate the field. We can therefore read these attempts to distance oneself from the 'non-discerning' or 'ordinary' fan as a way to legitimate one's position in the field and to police the boundaries of who (e.g. what type of fan) and what belongs in the field, in this case, typified by struggles over the quality of texts. Thus, field theory may also help us to understand the ways in which fans make distinctions, not only regarding issues of quality television and cultural value, but also concerning fan objects

and fellow fans. Indeed, some fans possess subcultural knowledge to make their own distinctions as “fandom is shot through with conflicts that emanate from this struggle [between the opposing sets of values in the cultural field] and it has its own drive toward hierarchisation based either on heteronomous or autonomous values” (Williamson 2005:117). Therefore, as Hills argues with reference to the ‘field of horror’, such fields are “not only commercial or ‘heteronomous’, [they also have their] own ‘autonomous’/subcultural pole of cultural production and consumption” (2005:170).

As I will argue in my empirical chapters, fans often align themselves with shows perceived to be quality television, identifying with the characters and using the fan object to perform identity work. For example, in my *West Wing* case study, fans of the show often drew on discourses of quality television in identity work, alluding to the show’s depiction of liberal politics to align themselves with seemingly positive traits such as being active, politically aware citizens (see chapter seven). Such association with highly valued cultural objects enables fans to present themselves as discerning, intelligent, and refined as quality television is often presumed to be “‘good’, ‘artsy’ and ‘classy’” (Thompson 1996:16). However, we may argue that this positioning works only in genres which are accorded high cultural status and that this cannot work in the same fashion within fandoms surrounding culturally devalued genres such as soap opera or reality television. As I will argue, fans of *Big Brother* and *Neighbours* identified or resisted alignment with characters in the same ways as *West Wing* viewers but they were less keen to align themselves with the shows themselves, explicitly resisting parallels with ‘crazy’ or ‘cruel’ reality television (see page 124) or *Neighbours* when it was perceived to be sensationalist or amoral (see page 183). Thus, for these fans, although they may argue for the relative value of *Big Brother* or *Neighbours* in comparison with other examples of their respective genres, the low cultural status of these shows means that identity work cannot be undertaken in the same way as in ‘quality’ genres.

Finally, fans’ discussions of quality television usefully allow me to examine the intersections between quality TV and cult texts, drawing on Hills’ (2004) work on

‘mainstream cult’ (see page 23). Hills defines mainstream cult texts as those which support

an active, online fan culture and carries textual and intertextual markers of quality TV without necessarily being inserted into the ‘intertextual’ network of texts that are described by fans – and in secondary texts (fanzines, publicity) – as ‘cult’ (Hills 2004:55).

In his discussion of *Dawson’s Creek* he argues that the show shares links with cult television in a number of ways. Firstly, its variant depictions of relationships allows the surrounding fandom to fragment into a number of fan groups (or shippers); secondly, it constructs the show’s creator Kevin Williamson as the author of the text; and thirdly, the show is dispersed across other media through books, fanfiction and so on (Hills 2004:62). Thus, “notions of ‘cult TV’ as TV art hence partially overlap with industry definitions of quality TV” (Hills 2004:62) through discourses of authorship and the “sub-subcultures or microcommunities” (Hills 2004:62) which the fandom might split into. However, it is the non-textual elements of shows such as *Dawson’s Creek* which Hills argues most strongly render them as mainstream cult programmes. The similarities between the social organisation and interpretations and readings of such shows overlap with fandoms surrounding cult shows such as *Buffy*, *Twin Peaks*, and *The X-Files*. However, whilst cautioning that not all shows with online fandoms can be perceived as ‘mainstream cult’ texts, Hills asserts that “what we see in the ‘mainstream cult’ is a *cultural power struggle for and over legitimacy between different fan cultures* rather than between, say, fans and producers” (2004:64, his emphasis). What he means here is that mainstream cult texts can be defined via the attempts of competing fandoms to delegitimize them and argue that texts such as teen TV and so on cannot be read as “authored, sophisticated and so on” (2004:64). Furthermore, the concept of the mainstream cult is also created by the producers of television shows as they can ‘pre-programme’ shows with specific intertextualities, rather than these “emerging through fans’ grassroots interests as they move from favoured text to text” (2004:64).<sup>34</sup> The status of television shows as

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<sup>34</sup> Such a blurring of the binary opposition between ‘mainstream’ and cult’ texts can also be seen in analogous work on the cinematic ‘cult blockbuster’ which discusses how fans’ responses to films such as

‘mainstream cult’ is, much like the concept of quality television, not something which is *within* the shows themselves. Indeed, both quality and cult cannot be “defined by any feature shared by the shows themselves, but rather by the ways in which they are appropriated by specific groups” (Jancovich and Hunt 2004:27). Thus the ‘mainstream-cult’ potential of the shows examined in my three case studies is largely dependent upon examining the practices and discourses of the fandoms that surround each programme. This is another way in which this thesis seeks to move away from rigid notions of quality television which depend upon either national or genre-specific definitions, and to problematise these in order to more fully understand the ways in which fans actively and reflexively negotiate issues of genre, quality and cultural value within their own fan cultures.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter introduced a Bourdieuan framework of field theory to explore how the broadcasting field enables us to account for the competing discourses of quality television established by producers, critics, and audiences. As fields are ‘fields of struggles’ (Bourdieu 1993:30), both producers of cultural products (e.g. television shows) and consecrating agents (e.g. critics, academics, and fans) are engaged in constant battles for positions within the field and for the associated power and capital. This theoretical framework will be employed throughout my research when I consider the ways in which fans clash with producers of their selected fan objects in my case studies, as producers seek to defend their existing levels of power and capital and “struggle to establish the dominance of their own positions” (Williamson 2005:107) whilst fans make bids for status within the broadcasting field. The concept of field will also be drawn on in my empirical chapters to consider fan distinctions regarding what constitutes the ‘proper’ fan object and the policing of the boundaries of the fandom against non-fans or those not deemed to be ‘real’ fans. The issues raised in this chapter are also relevant to my examination of how fans form their own intra-generic distinctions over what constitutes

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*Titanic*, *Star Wars* and *The Lord of The Rings* involves readings and fan practices often analogous with cult texts (Brooker 2002; Hills 2003b, 2006b).

the 'proper' or 'real' show and which episodes, events or series' of the show were the 'best'. Such issues necessarily lead into consideration of audiences although, like much of Bourdieu's work, a field-driven theory ignores the concept of pleasure (Guillory 2000:42). However, whilst pleasure is not overtly discussed in Bourdieu's field theory, it is

narratively implied in his theoretical framework, for we cannot plausibly suppose that the accreting of his cultural distinctions, and the recognition of one's 'symbolic capital' or prestigious reputation in the eyes of fellow specialists is anhedonic or affectless (Hills 2005:170).

In the next chapter I thus return to more specific theorisation of fandom and, drawing on my critiques in chapter one of prior academic approaches to fan cultures, I propose an alternate model which uses sociological theory. It is, therefore, my contention that models for investigating fan relationships with fan objects and fellow fans must be able to account for both forms of relationship and must also acknowledge the possibility of fan power and control whilst respecting the often emotional and personal bonds formed with both object and fellow fans. Thus, if cultural studies approaches based on resistance, affect, or psychoanalysis are found wanting it is my suggestion that we consider whether sociological theories may better account for the complexity of fan relationships (see Elliott 1996, 1999; Giddens 1991, 1993; Hills 1999, 2002). Therefore, in the next chapter I turn to specific sociological approaches to argue that these may enable us to reconfigure our understandings of fan/object and fan/fan relationships. Firstly, I will return to the work of Pierre Bourdieu whose concept of social capital (1984:122) has been modified and used to account for 'fan social capital' (Hills 2002:57), but also his relatively under-theorised ideas about love and emotion (1984:241-243). I then move on to consider Anthony Giddens' (1990, 1991, 1993) theories of self-narrative and pure relationships, suggesting a model which combines the economic approach of Bourdieu with Giddens' ideas about relationships within modern society. This, I will argue, allows us to more comprehensively conceptualise the ways fans form emotional bonds with objects and fellow fans, whilst also accruing levels of power within potential fan hierarchies.

### **Chapter Three**

#### **'Degrees of purity': From Bourdieu to Giddens, and 'fan pure relationships'**

The previous chapters introduced Pierre Bourdieu's theories of distinction and field and outlined prior academic approaches to the notion of 'quality television'. I also examined how cultural studies has conceptualised fandom through resistance, affect, or psychoanalysis, concluding that such work has failed to accord equal importance to fan/object and fan/fan relationships (see page 10). Furthermore, I suggested that fan distinctions (making value judgements about their fan objects and about each other) mean that we must consider fandom as a site of cohesive, shared interpretation but also a place of tensions and power struggles. In this chapter, I outline a conceptualisation of fandom which relies upon Bourdieu and the work of Anthony Giddens, arguing that sociological theory allows us to account for both fan/object and fan/fan relationships and for the tensions between community and hierarchy and internal and external factors that characterises fandom. This chapter firstly revisits Bourdieu (1984, 1986), outlining previous use of his concept of capital in fan studies, before examining his underused work on love. I then introduce Giddens' (1991, 1992) theories of 'pure relationships' to consider fandom as a site of emotional investment, arguing that his conception of identity in the current period of modernity can be used to understand fan interactions with their fan objects and each other. Finally, I suggest a theory of fan cultures dependent upon 'degrees of purity' which combines Bourdieu's economistic model of capital with Giddens' work on pure relationships and considers fans' often intense personal attachments to their fan objects in tandem with the struggles for power, capital, and hierarchy that they also engage in.

#### **Bourdieu, capital, and 'fan love'**

Having previously outlined Bourdieu's theories of distinction (see chapter one) and field (see chapter two) I now wish to consider use of his concept of 'capital' within fan studies. Bourdieu's work is based on an economistic metaphor (Gershuny 2000) in which people

compete in a social hierarchy for economic, cultural, and social capital.<sup>35</sup> Cultural capital is the cultural awareness that people are socialised into which enables them to behave appropriately within their social class (Schwartz 1997:75). Bourdieu assumes that cultural capital is beneficial for society (Hills 2002:50) even though it can be exclusionary. However, it is “possible to observe subspecies of capital operating within other less privileged domains” (Thornton 1995:11) and Thornton coins the term ‘subcultural capital’ to refer to capital which “confers status on its owner in the eyes of the relevant beholder” (1995:11). Subcultural capital also contributes towards many of the distinctions within fan cultures as it is set in opposition to those seen as ‘Others’, often those belonging to the despised mainstream (Thornton 1995:105). Such work has proven highly influential within fan studies which has examined the concept of capital explicitly or via discussions of ‘taste’ (Alters 2003; Brown 1997; Fiske 1992; Hills 2002, forthcoming; Jancovich 2001; Sandvoss 2005; Thomas 2002; Williamson 2005). One notable argument against this is Williamson’s suggestion that there can be no such thing as subcultural capital, arguing that this misreads Bourdieu. Whilst she accepts that fans do accrue cultural capital via fandom, she suggests that “subcultural capital is simply the cultural capital that is jockeying for position with more traditional and established forms of cultural capital, what Bourdieu terms the non-consecrated avant garde” (Williamson 2005:105).

Social capital is “a capital of social connections, honorability and respectability” (Bourdieu 1984:122) and this can be employed to explore the bonds between members of fan communities. ‘Fan social capital’ has been defined as “the network of fan friends and acquaintances that a fan possesses, as well as their access to media producers and professional personnel linked with the object of fandom” (Hills 2002:57). This includes ‘executive fans’ (Tulloch 1995) who run fan clubs or web sites and who are known throughout a specific fandom but who cannot know all of the people who recognise them. Networking with other fans can ensure one’s survival in the fandom and affiliation with executive fans can bolster “fan symbolic capital” (Hills 2002:57), ensuring that one’s

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<sup>35</sup> Although economic capital is one of the key forms of capital which Bourdieu identifies, my research emphasises cultural and social capital. This is because fandom rarely results in high levels of economic capital (see Fiske 1992).

own standing within the fan community is increased via association (Bourdieu 1986:51). Fan social capital is also inextricably bound to subcultural capital as knowledge enables “participation in the social groups that form around [programmes]” (Baym 1998:118) and high levels of both can increase symbolic capital (Auslander 1999:58n38). However, in both mainstream society and fan communities ties need to be continually maintained and developed in order to reap the benefits of social capital (Bourdieu 1980:2).

However, social capital has been relatively under-used in fan studies, a neglect begun by Bourdieu himself via the vagueness of his definition of the concept (Schuller *et al* 2000:5; Smart 1993:393). Hills argues that the under-employment of social capital in fan studies is due to Bourdieu’s own emphasis on cultural capital, and also because researchers seek to privilege their academic positions, predicated upon attaining high levels of cultural capital via educational achievement (2002:56). These reasons are persuasive but I also suggest that the economic concept of fan social capital undermines the notion of fan community, resulting in its negation by critics seeking to champion a utopian view of fandom (see page 104). Despite this, social capital can be used by non-dominant groups (Coleman 1988, 1992) such as fan cultures and, as social capital is not benign (Field 2002:19), it may account for fan hierarchies as it can create a demand for adherence to group norms (Portes 1998:15-17) and encourage solidarity by promoting “hostility towards out-group members” (Fukuyama 2001:8).

However, the concept of capital has been critiqued for reducing all human endeavour to an economic calculation, “refus[ing] to recognise the ludic and expressive quality of human experience” (Mander 1987:446). Others have argued that there is an implied social determinism in Bourdieu’s work (Everett 2002) which undermines the notion of human autonomy and choice, telling us that our notions of “the true, the beautiful, the good, the natural, the self-evident” are only products of our capital, class and *habitus* (Berger 1986:1447). However, rather than believing that talk about aesthetics “distracts us from the coercive rule of hierarchies of taste” (Felski 2005:28; see also Loesberg 1993), Bourdieu actually relates aesthetics to sociocultural factors and hierarchies. It seems that dismissals of Bourdieu result from critics’ desire to perceive ‘value’ as



transcendent and as existing beyond power relations. Thus, given my interest in quality television and fan hierarchies, I continue to find the work of Bourdieu instrumental in understanding the power relations which underpin the cultural world.

Another criticism of Bourdieu is that he fails to enable consideration of people's emotions;

[Bourdieu's] only explanation for relations of affect is that these lend durability to the exchange; he therefore does not allow for the simple fact that some people like (and dislike) each other more than others, even though they may move in the same cultural world (Field 2002:18).

However, Bourdieu's work does enable exploration of these emotional attachments as, despite applications of capital in fan studies, his economic model of love remains under-explored. For Bourdieu, "taste is what brings together things and people that go together" (1984:241) and "two people can give each other no better proof of the affinity of their tastes than the taste they have for each other" (1984:241-243). Although this could be related to fandom, Bourdieu's work cannot fully account for those who love their fan objects due to his distaste for fans and the 'perversion' of their interest in accumulation of 'pointless' knowledge (1984:330). Fandom is, for Bourdieu, simply a way to compensate for a lack of legitimate cultural capital (1984:282) and fan love for objects is merely demonstrative of attempts to increase fan subcultural, social, and symbolic capital.

Indeed, to follow a Bourdieuan theory of either love or social capital poses contrasting problems. His idea that love is dependent upon the 'taste for each other' implies that people are passively lured toward others via the unconscious system of the *habitus*, and are denied the agency to choose the objects of their affection. For instance, even when people might seem to be making cross-class or inter-group love choices which belie their *habitus*, this is explained away as a product of the *habitus*, for example, a member of the bourgeoisie becoming involved with someone from the working class would be explained this away as an act of class rebellion (Bourdieu 1984:55). In contrast, social capital

characterises people as calculating tacticians, actively seeking to increase their levels of capital via each relationship that they choose to engage in. To lead us out of this potential theoretical dead-end, I wish to turn to the work of sociologist Anthony Giddens, with whom Bourdieu has often been conceptually linked.<sup>36</sup> Drawing on Giddens' theory of 'pure relationships' (1991, 1992) I will outline a conceptualisation of fan/fan and fan/object relationships which accounts for fans' emotional ties, but also the importance of social factors. Such an approach preserves Giddens' view of the active, autonomous agent (1984:14) whilst also acknowledging that people are engaging in "sustained interaction between [the] self and its social and cultural environment" (Sandvoss 2005:79).

### **Giddens, 'pure relationships' and fan love**

As I have argued, relying on a Bourdieuan model of fandom implies that people are either shrewdly working to accrue levels of capital or are passively influenced by their *habitus*. In this section I consider the work of Anthony Giddens whose emphasis on the active autonomy of agents opposes the idea of individuals being swayed by such unconscious systems. I shall outline Giddens' theories of 'pure relationships' and their relation to issues of self-reflexivity and identity before considering how these ideas may be used in conjunction with Bourdieu's to offer a new approach to fandom.

Giddens' work is concerned with the concepts of 'agency', 'structure', and modernity and his theory of 'structuration' (1984) attempts to bridge the sociological divide between the 'macro level' of society as a whole and the 'micro level' of what life means to the individuals who are experiencing it.

Giddens views people as "knowledgeable agents" who understand "the conditions and consequences of what they do in their day-to-day life" (Giddens 1984:281) and he suggests that the current state of late modernity has led to increased reflexivity (Giddens 1990:37-38). Although Giddens has been accused of over-emphasising the power of reflexivity in contemporary culture (Adams 2003, 2004; Alexander 1996), he draws on

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<sup>36</sup> See Adams (2006); Atkinson (2007); Kaspersen (2000); Parker (2000); Tucker (1998).

these ideas to argue that self-reflexivity enables development of a self-narrative which must “continually integrate events which occur in the external world, and sort them into the on-going ‘story’ about the self” (Giddens 1991:54). Giddens also suggests that, in late modernity, sexuality has become severed from its associations with child-rearing, reproduction, and kinship (Giddens 1992:27) and is a self-identity that “each of us ‘has’, or cultivates” (1992:15). This has led to what he calls ‘confluent love’,<sup>37</sup> and such “active, contingent love” (Giddens 1992:61) shapes people’s reflexive self-narratives by introducing the idea of a life trajectory based on relationship development (1992:41). Related to confluent love is the ‘pure relationship’;

a social relation [which] is entered into for its own sake, for what can be derived by each person from a sustained association with another; and which is continued only in so far as it is thought by both parties to deliver enough satisfactions for each individual to stay within it (Giddens 1992:58).

Although the pure relationship has been used to examine online interactions (Clark 1998; Henderson and Gilding 2004; Livingstone 2008) and to consider the ‘quality’ of television texts (Hills 2004), it has not yet been employed in fan studies. It is a key argument of my research that we view fan/object and fan/fan interactions as ‘fan pure relationships’.<sup>38</sup> This is partly accounted for in Giddens’ own work as he acknowledges that pure relationships “are not limited to two-person settings [such as romantic pairings or friendships]. A given individual is likely to be involved in several forms of social relation which tend towards the pure type” (1991:97). He also suggests that such relationships need not always be reciprocal, emphasising the autonomy of the individual

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<sup>37</sup> Before the current era of modernity, the most common type of love was passionate love, which is “marked by an urgency which sets it apart from the routines of everyday life” and which “can be religious in its fervour” (1992:38). However, although fandom could be likened to the ‘religious fervour’ of Giddensian passionate love (Doss 1999; Frow 1998; Giles 2000; Jindra 1994), there are problems with this model of fan studies (Hills 2002:118-120). Furthermore, the ‘urgency’ of passionate love which separates it from ‘the routines of everyday life’ would render fandom incompatible with an individual’s day-to-day existence and commitments to family, jobs, and so on.

<sup>38</sup> It must be noted that Giddens’ notion of the pure relationship has been subject to critique. It has been accused of operating only as ‘an ideological ‘ideal’ of human behaviour’(Craib 1994) and of ‘stretching’ a theoretical concept beyond the bounds of actual human behaviour (Shilling 1997:198). It has also been critiqued for neglecting the sensual aspects of relationships (Jary and Jary, 1994:147) whilst others have suggested that the concept ignores the inequalities of gender relations (Jamieson 1999:482) and social stratification (Hay *et al* 1993/4; Williams 2001:96), and that it views the body as directed by the reflexive mind and ‘closed off; from collective influence or ‘contagion’ from others (Falk 1994; Turner 1996)” (Shilling 1997:201).

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and their self-reflexivity to the point of completely obliterating the presence of the other person within the relationship (Giddens 1992:58). The necessity for emotional ties between the two participants is avoided and Giddens seems to suggest that the self-reflexivity which enables such a decision to be made is stronger than the emotional ties of love that bind those individuals together in the first place. This is perhaps due to his desire to counter the traditional idea of love as enduring but this emphasis upon the individual also allows us to consider the pure relationship as a model through which we might understand emotional attachments to fan objects or fellow fans.

For example, when considering online dating amongst teenagers Clark argues that pure relationships need not be reciprocal as “the function of the relationship has shifted even further toward the affirmation of self, its gratifications resting in its ability to provide opportunities for self-reflexivity and even self-consciously imagined (or constructed) intimacy”(1998:179). Although the pure relationship does require inter-subjectivity the emphasis here is on one person self-reflexively deciding to end a relationship that offers them no ‘reward’. If the emotions of the other individual within that relationship are rendered almost irrelevant, then the pure relationship can surely be applied to those instances when there is only one person within a ‘relationship’. One example would be unrequited love when the ‘reward’ of loving someone outweighs the knowledge that the feeling is not reciprocated. Thus, we can use the ‘pure relationship’ to consider fan attachments precisely because required emotion is not a requirement for their existence. If fans are attached to their fan objects despite the fact that inanimate objects, distant personalities, or fictional characters cannot love them back, then there must surely be some reward reaped by these fans. Furthermore, fans may not have reciprocal relationships with one another but may still feel an emotional bond with others which offers them some reward. To clarify here; it is a central idea of this thesis that, *provided that fans continue to enjoy that which can be “derived [...] from a sustained association with another” (Giddens 1992:58), they will continue in their fan/object or fan/fan relationships. It is only when there are no such rewards that they will cease to be a fan, often despite considerable readjustments to their identity and self-narrative (see below).*

Giddens defines the pure relationship as;

not anchored in external conditions of social or economic life – it is, as it were, free-floating [and it is] [...] sought only for what the relationship can bring to the partners involved [...] it is precisely in this sense that the relationship is ‘pure’(Giddens 1991:89-90).

The ‘rewards’ that the pure relationship can offer are (1) ‘ontological security’ (Giddens 1991:36) and (2) the reflecting back to the individual of their established self-narratives (1992:139). In positing that fan/fan and fan/object interactions may be configured as ‘fan pure relationships’, it is necessary to suppose that these rewards are gained by fans engaging in such relationships. I shall discuss each of these rewards and their relevance to my research below.

### **Fan pure relationships and ‘rewards’: Ontological security and self-identity**

The two main rewards gained from Giddensian pure relationships are ontological security and the reflection of a desirable reflexive narrative of the self. In this section I discuss these, examining how they may intersect with each other, before moving on to propose my model of fandom which draws upon these ideas alongside those of Bourdieu.

Ontological security is a key reward gained from pure relationships (Jamieson 1999:479) and is closely linked to the ‘basic trust’ established in early childhood (Erikson 1950; Winnicott 1964). Those who fail to develop such basic trust are inherently ‘ontologically insecure’ (Laing 1960:39) and do not properly develop a sense of self-identity (Layder 1997:67). Ontological security also presupposes a “shared – but unproven and unprovable – framework of reality” (Giddens 1991:36) and, when events suggest that this ‘framework of reality’ is not universal our ontological security is undermined (Zaretsky 2002:101). Indeed, a pure relationship is only successful if it “recreates psychological stability by resonating with the ontological security and basic trust of others which is developed in an untraumatised and successful childhood” (Jamieson 1999:479). Thus, Giddens’ work on ontological security necessarily draws on psychoanalytic concepts,

particularly the transitional object, as discussed in chapter one (see page 7).<sup>39</sup> He argues that transitional objects establish ontological security and “are both defences against anxiety and simultaneously links with an emerging experience of a stabilised world of objects and persons” (Giddens 1991:39). These links between the transitional realm and ontological security enable consideration of the ways in which fandom allows fans to “understand the fluctuating and contradictory experience of daily life and to make connections with other people around them” (Cavicchi 1998:185). However, unlike the psychoanalytic approaches considered in the introduction, Giddens’ work also accounts for the fact that “unconscious desires are invariably mediated by social interaction” (Tucker 1998:83).

The impact of social factors stems from the fact that “the routinisation of day-to-day life [...] is the single most important source of ontological security” (Giddens 1981:37), enabling development of a “basic sense of ‘confidence’ in the ‘continuity’ of self-identity and the ‘constancy’ of the surrounding, everyday social world” (Giddens 1990:92). Indeed, “routine – the placing of the world in time-space sequences of practical consciousness” can ward off ontological insecurity and anxiety (Tulloch 1990:280). This predictability may come, in part, from the media; for example, “fixed [television] schedules, in which the same programme is put on at the same time of the day [...] mean that audiences can come to find the overall shape of output to be ordered and predictable” (Moore 2005:20). However, neither Moore, nor Roger Silverstone (1994) in his similar work on these issues, consider the impact of specific fandoms and I suggest here that fandom of specific objects may provide individuals with a sense of ontological security which derives from the fan’s devotion to his/her fan object and also from the resultant fan community. For example, ontological security may develop from the constancy of a fan object, for example television programmes which are screened regularly and which return with each new ‘season’ of television (Gauntlett and Hill 1999; Moore 2005:20). There is also a “communal context of a significant proportion of fan consumption” (Sandvoss

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<sup>39</sup> Thus, although I am not explicitly drawing on the theories of object-relations outlined in the previous chapter, Giddens’ theoretical debt to Winnicott (1964) and Erikson (1950) and the links between transitional objects and ontological security means that the concept of object-relations informs my own research.

2005:100) and fan/fan relationships (whether imagined or real) may provide security if they remain unchanging and constant (e.g. an online forum being permanently accessible). Even when fans have no explicit involvement in fandom, they may still visualise themselves as part of an 'imagined community' (Anderson 1991) which they find reassuring. Such fan community often provides validation of a fan's established self-identity by virtue of the fact that others share their interests, reinforcing the 'appropriateness' of these choices. Furthermore, relationships may develop into friendships that transcend commonality of interest (Baym 1998:6; Jenkins 1992: 81), offering emotional support and superseding the existence of the fan object itself (Gatson and Zweerink 2004).

However, individuals may experience threats to their ontological security through the demise of, or loss of interest in, a fan object or through the failure of fan community (for example, if a favourite message board shuts down). Thus, a fan pure relationship may only be sustained whilst it offers ontological security and a sense of trust in the other party. For example, if a favourite character is killed off in circumstances that the fan finds implausible or unwelcome, trust in the text can be destabilised and the fan's self-narrative must be reworked in order to cope with this disruption. Although fans may gain comfort from the routine of their fandom (for example, anticipating the regular scheduling of *Big Brother*, *Neighbours*, or *The West Wing*) ontological security is not solely dependent upon such repetitions. It cannot provide "an emotional inoculation which protects against [...] ontological anxieties" (Giddens 1990:94) but rather ensures that one can deal with the unexpected and adjust to changes in routine (Craib 1997:357). Giddens himself notes that "a sense of self-identity is often securely enough held to weather major tensions or transitions in the social environments" (1992:55) and, although his notion of a 'self-inoculation' against anxiety is overly simplistic, he does acknowledge that the "protective cocoon" (Giddens 1991:40) or "protective barrier [ontological security] offers may be pierced, temporarily or more permanently" (Giddens 1992:40). Thus, ontological security can never fully protect against disruption to one's sense of self and traumatic events such as bereavement (Hallam *et al* 1999:155; Mellor and Shilling 1993:13) may interrupt an established self-narrative, causing self-identity to be renegotiated from, for example, a

wife to a widow. However, ontological security equips us to deal with such happenings without the potential breakdown of self that Laing (1969:39) suggests is characteristic of the ontologically insecure. It enables these events to be negotiated and accepted into the ongoing narrative of the self.

Such issues were apparent in each of my empirical case studies as fans dealt with different types of threats to their fan ontological security. In *Big Brother UK7* fandom, this resulted from variations to the format of the show and changes to what fans perceived to be the 'proper' *Big Brother*. Alleged violations of the fundamental rules of the show undermined fans' sense of trust, threatening to destabilise the ontological security they gained from the show's otherwise regular temporal patterns of nomination and evictions (see page 131). Similarly, *Neighbours* fans experienced a threat to their ontological security when the show's producers focused storylines upon crime and deceit which made it difficult to identify with the immoral characters presented within the narrative (see pages 165-166). Indeed,

because supposedly shared desires [about the show] had been foreclosed by narrative developments, [fans] perceived a failure in ontological security, in the somehow truer hyperdiegetic 'heart' of the series in which he or she had become invested (Johnson 2007b:289).

Such feelings were compounded when the fans faced an overt attack by one of the show's writers (see page 188), indicating that threats to ontological security may also result from the shattering of the fan belief that fans and producers were engaged in a mutually respectful relationship (see page 189). However, in my final empirical study, fans of *The West Wing* found that their basic 'trust' in the show was not threatened by a perceived violation of the programme's ideology or 'rules' (although some fans did express dissatisfaction with the show's later seasons) but rather because the show itself was ceasing production and the programme universe would no longer be continued (see chapter seven).



Such threats are often deeply felt because the fan object or communities' sudden inability to provide ontological security impacts upon fans' established self-identities. Giddens argues that the second 'reward' gained from pure relationships is the provision of a "facilitating social environment for the reflexive project of self" (1993:139). As discussed above, individuals constantly negotiate reflexive self-narratives and they "increasingly draw on mediated experience to inform and refashion the project of the self" (Thompson 1995:233). Thus, fans may actively seek out the most appropriate objects to enable them to construct their identities. The fact that individuals can "actively discriminate among types of available information" (Giddens 1991:199) suggests that people are not entirely passive and can choose between a range of available products and lifestyles. Fans can use the media to form self-narratives either via explicitly linking their own personal life experiences with their fan objects or more implicitly through identification as a fan and devaluing those who are 'outside' the fan culture. Another key element of Giddens' work is his definition of 'lifestyle' as "a more or less integrated set of practices which an individual embraces" (Giddens 1991:81) suggests links to people who have made similar choices and who appear to be similar to us. Furthermore, Giddens' reference to 'lifestyle sectors' (1991:83), allows for the fact that people may display different identities to people in various parts of their lives; for example, displaying the appropriate norms and behaviour in the workplace, but presenting different characteristics with friends, family, or romantic partners (Goffman 1967). People may also display a specific identity within their own fan communities (e.g. appropriate behaviour at a football match with other supporters) and this may account for fans who attend organised fan events, described by Jenkins as "a weekend-only world" (1992:277) which is kept distinctly separate from 'real life'. 'Lifestyle sectors' may also account for people who present a wider range of identities on the Internet than they do in the off-line world (Bruhn Jensen 2000:183). Giddens does not fully account for this but the time-space distanciation that he argues is characteristic of late modernity can clearly be applied to the online world as it enables people in different locations and time zones to interact with one another (Slevin 2000:69-72). However, although such ideas may allow us to account for the fact that fans do not construct reflexive self-narratives in isolation from one another and that these self-narratives are not immune from issues of cultural value, they cannot fully explain the

deep emotional attachments that fans form to their object of fandom. Fans can intertwine aspects of their fan objects with themselves, “bring[ing] the drama into their own lives, making sense of the story in terms of the norms by which they make sense of their own experiences” (Baym 2000:71). Blurring the lines between narrative and ‘real-life’ events and drawing upon personal expertise to inform fan discussion is common and often highly gendered (Clerc 1996; Jenkins 1995; McKinley 1997:115; Menon 2007:342). However, fans also often demarcate their identity against non-fans or ‘antifans’ (Gray 2003, 2005), establishing fan hierarchies as “incorporating the identities of viewer and fan into one’s self-concept distinguishes the self from nonviewers and nonfans in meaningful ways” (Harrington and Bielby 1995:97). This enables us to begin to tactically appropriate elements of Giddens’ work alongside that of Bourdieu and bring issues of value, judgement, and hierarchy into our assessment of fan/fan and fan/object engagements.

However, identity work is not a simple process of ‘reflecting’ back an imagined identity but is “negotiated through linked processes of self-exploration and the development of intimacy with the other” (Giddens 1991:97).<sup>40</sup> Self-identity is never stable and can be undermined as self-narratives have “continually to be reworked, and life-style practices brought in line with [them], if the individual is to combine personal autonomy with a sense of ontological security” (Giddens 1992:75). Fandom may also impact significantly upon an individual’s sense of self-identity, causing them to confront hitherto unchallenged opinions (see page 123 on fans of *Big Brother*) or actively make changes to their life, such as changing career (see page 205 on *West Wing* fans).

I have, so far, outlined conceptualisations of fan cultures via a Bourdieuan and Giddensian approach, extrapolating useful elements from each theorist. However, there are several key differences between Giddens and Bourdieu’s approaches which might appear to render them incompatible. To follow the Giddensian theory discussed above,

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<sup>40</sup> Cornel Sandvoss (2003, 2005) also argues that fandom is an extension of the self although he draws on McLuhan’s (1964) work, rather than Giddens. Sandvoss suggests that our fan objects echo our ‘socio-cultural or subcultural position’, permit “narcissistic self-reflection [...] between the fan and his or her object of fandom”, and emphasise similarities between fans and fan objects (2005:96-102).

fans are hyper-rational individuals, consistently monitoring their own feelings about their fandom and other fans and ready to abandon them if the rewards are no longer worth the effort. Despite his use of the psychoanalytic concepts of ontological security and transitional objects, Giddens “comes to recognize a structured human psyche wherein the consciously acting agent is differentiated from an unconscious realm of repressed feelings and uncognizable knowledge” (Loyal and Barnes 2001:515). Giddens has thus been critiqued for characterising the “human agent [as] ultimately a rationalist, a modernist caricature of what it means to be human” (Mestrovic 1998:80) and for undermining the affective ties that people feel. This contrasts to Bourdieu’s ideas of love and social relationships which, drawing on the unconscious system of the *habitus*, suggest a lack of agency and undermine the ability of the individual to make rational decisions regarding their lifestyle choices.<sup>41</sup> Such notions also disenfranchise fans, suggesting that they are incapable of articulating their own reasons for their fandom, instead being dependent upon the expert knowledge of an outsider to express their feelings.<sup>42</sup>

Furthermore, whilst Bourdieu accounts for generational and class stratification (Bourdieu 1984, 1993) Giddens treats culture as largely homogenous and egalitarian even though “lifestyle choices are not equally open to all strata of society but may in fact be dependent on the life chances and socio-economic circumstances of particular groups” (Atkinson 2007:539).<sup>43</sup> Although Giddens concedes that affluent lifestyles are promoted as desirable by the media (1991:199), there is little indication of the distinctions made *between* those

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<sup>41</sup> It is also worth noting that some have argued that Giddens’ reflexivity can actually be perceived as another form of *habitus*, as it is only available to those within a certain social group who have the luxury of being able to think and behave reflexively (Adams 2006, 2007; Burkitt 2008:172; Skeggs 2004). There may, in fact, be reflexivity ‘winners and losers’ (Lash and Urry 1994) and, as Atkinson asserts, “the issue of whether the kind of reflexivity celebrated by Giddens is essentially a middle-class disposition” is of great interest (2007:546). Such ideas are empirically substantiated as Skeggs *et al* note that “self-reflexivity does not offer the uncoupling of agency from structure: as the individualization thesis posits, self-reflexivity itself depends upon access to resources and concomitant forms of capital that are classed, raced and gendered” (Skeggs *et al* 2008:6). For example, as their study of women watching reality television found, middle-class women were more likely to be self-reflexive and critically distanced from the shows, whilst working-class women treated reality TV as entertainment and were less reflexive.

<sup>42</sup> This relates to the notion of *illusio* which supposes that the researcher is able to stand outside of culture (see chapter two) as it can only be observed “from the outside, from the point of view of the impartial spectator who invests nothing in the game or in its stakes” (Bourdieu 1990:195). This echoes the critiques of psychoanalysis which accuse it of elitism for allowing the theorist access to “the experiences of their subjects that is not available to the subjects themselves” (Fiske 1990:90) (see chapter three).

<sup>43</sup> See also Anthias (1999); Craib (1998:62); Kaspersen (2000); Moores (2000:114).

lifestyles that are not promoted as prosperous. However, as outlined above, fan cultures often imitate dominant culture by being predicated upon various hierarchies (Hills 2002:46; MacDonald 1998:136). Fans often also attempt to devalue outsiders (Thornton 1995), demarcate themselves from others within the same subcultures (Jancovich 2000), or make distinctions regarding quality and cultural value. Such practices are unaccounted for in Giddens' theory of culture but remain pertinent in the field of fan studies where clashes over cultural legitimacy continue. Furthermore, as discussed above, fans often accrue Bourdieuan subcultural and fan social capital yet it is not immediately obvious how we can correlate this with Giddens' work, given his avoidance of the fact that human agency is limited by social factors including societal power structures and hierarchies (Mestrovic 1998:66). Thus, one of the key differences between the two theorists relates to their theorisation of power as "Bourdieu derives differences of power and interests solely from positional structures, while Giddens derives them solely from individual human persons" (Parker 2000:106). Thus, we must account for the fact that both Bourdieu and Giddens have different ontologies, looking at the world either via the notion of the *habitus* or through visualising people as 'knowledgeable' agents and, thus, to fully integrate their work is impossible (Atkinson 2007).

Despite these differences there are structural links between their work which suggests that tactical reappropriation of some elements of their theories is possible (Kaspersen 2000; Layder 1981:73; Parker 2000; Tucker 1998:67). Both Bourdieu and Giddens "implicitly recognise the centrality of shared agreement to co-ordinated social action" and all "appeal to a social ontology" (King 2004:58) which is concerned with how beings are produced and reproduced within a society. Furthermore, both deal with the dualism of structure and agency and the active subject (Bryant and Jary 1990); Bourdieu through his use of the *habitus*, which "constitutes a hinge between agency and structure [and which] [...] is a 'structured structure' [...] it is formed by way of the internalization of structures" (Crossley 2004:92), and Giddens via his theory of structuration which is concerned with the "production and reproduction of society – accomplishment under bounded conditions of rationalized action, i.e. actors produce social action ( as a 'skilled performance') but do so in situations in which there are also 'unacknowledged

conditions” (Giddens, 1977: 122, see also Bryant and Jary 1990:9). Furthermore, Giddens’ theory is perhaps not so far removed from Bourdieu’s notion of *habitus*. His use of the psychoanalytic concept of ontological security has some commonalities with Bourdieu’s theory in that both suggest a reliance on unknowable unconscious processes which one is either born and socialised into (*habitus*) or develops in early childhood (ontological security). Although it has been argued that Giddens’ use of such work “go[es] way beyond the proper bounds of sociology” (Loyal and Barnes 2001:524), the fact that both he and Bourdieu draw on theories of the unconscious psyche to account for structure and agency means that their work has some commonalities. Furthermore, accusations that the *habitus* is too rigid to be compatible with Giddens’ notions of reflexivity under-emphasise the *habitus*’ capacity for transformation (Bourdieu 1984: 170) and its relationship to the structures of society;

*habitus* is not the fate that some people read into it. Being the product of history, it is an open system of dispositions that is constantly subjected to experiences, and therefore constantly affected by them in a way that either reinforces or modifies its structures. It is durable but not eternal! (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:133).

Given these shared theoretical interests and aims, it is my suggestion that we *can* introduce Bourdieu’s notions of capital and power into Giddens’ theories of reflexivity and self-identity in order to account for the importance of both ‘external goods’ which are “valued by others, such as money, status and prestige” and “self-satisfaction, achievement and self-development (‘internal goods’)” (Burkitt 2008:156, see also Sayer 2005). Although Giddensian approaches assume “that the self is somehow independent of its social, cultural and economic condition” (Sandvoss 2005:161), it is only through an approach that balances both the internal and the external that we can fully understand fan practices. Thus, we can draw on Bourdieuan theories of capital and power to re-evaluate the claim that ‘pure relationships’ are decontextualised from all “external criteria” (Giddens 1991:6) and that rewards are obtained solely from that relationship. Instead, we must account for the reality that some fan relationships are not entirely ‘pure’ or divorced from outside influence and may be “taint[ed] [by] practical, economic and other material circumstances” (Jamieson 1999:482) according to the various social contexts which fans operate within. Thus, as I shall discuss below, the rewards of the pure relationship that

Giddens suggests are experienced to varying degrees by fans, prompting us to consider why fans may have differing levels of engagement with, or investment in, fan/fan and fan/object relationships.

If, as Giddens argues, completely 'pure' relationships exist "solely for whatever rewards that relationship as such can deliver" (1991:6), fan/object and fan/fan relationships that are not entirely decontextualised from outside factors need to be re-imagined in terms of '*degrees of purity*'. I am arguing that 'fan pure relationships' are 'pure' to varying extents and that the most 'impure' relationships are the least decontextualised and the most impacted upon by external factors, such as cultural value and power. It must be stated here that the use of terms such as 'impure' or 'contaminated' does not pass any judgement on the quality of these fan/object or fan/fan relationships, nor is it to suggest any inherent privileging of 'pure' relationships over others. The use of these terms is intended only to suggest that those fan relationships with the greatest level of outside influence are the furthest removed from Giddens' own idea of the pure relationship and that they need to be differentiated from these via theoretical 'degrees of purity'. As Giddens himself notes with reference to the pure relationship, this has "nothing to do with sexual purity" (1992:58). Following Giddens' lead, then, my use of terms such as 'tainted', 'contaminated' or 'impure' should not be subject to their typical negative discursive connotations. It is, therefore, possible to suggest dual continuums of fan/object and fan/fan pure relationships with varying degrees of purity depending upon their decontextualisation from external criteria. Before clarifying my continuums, I wish to introduce studies which have previously drawn on such analytical tools, offering a critique of the ways in which they threaten to 'fix' fans in specific positions and the fact that previous continuums do not adequately account for both fan/object and fan/fan relationships.

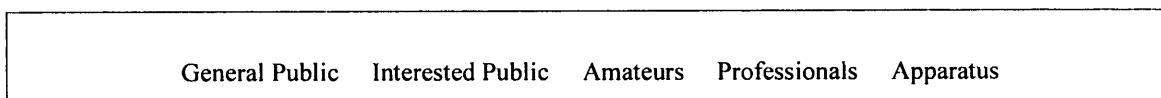
### **Identifying fan continuums**

Continuums have been employed to consider American hot-rod racing enthusiasts (Moorhouse 1991), fans of soap (Harrington and Bielby 1995) and sports (Crawford

2003, 2004), and to audiences more generally (Abercrombie and Longhurst 1998). They have been critiqued for constructing “restrictive typologies” (Crawford 2003:38) which force audiences into rigid ‘types’ of fans but, as I shall argue in this section, more fluid continuums allow us to “illustrate the nuances of viewership and fanship” (Harrington and Bielby 1995:113). Furthermore, my intention here is not merely to replace these earlier continuums with one of my own but, rather, to move beyond one-dimensional continuums towards a multi-dimensional model which enables conceptualisation of both fan/fan and fan/object relationships and the ways in which these intersect and cohere for fans.

Moorhouse’s (1991) work on followers of American hot-rod cars led to him devising the following categories.

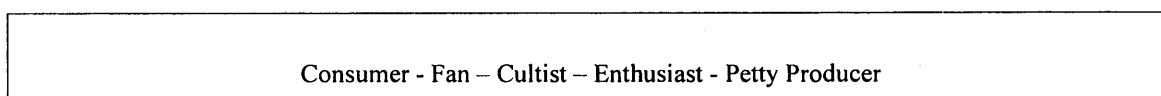
**Figure 1** Moorhouse’s audience continuum



Professionals are those who make a living from the enthusiasm, including “administrators, officials, promoters, suppliers, dealers, writers” (1991:22) whilst those who own or control the “means of communication of the enthusiasm are the apparatus” (1991:22). Amateurs are those who attend events and have high levels of knowledge whilst the interested public encompasses the media, business investors and so on (Moorhouse 1991:22).

Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) devised a more nuanced continuum to examine audiences.

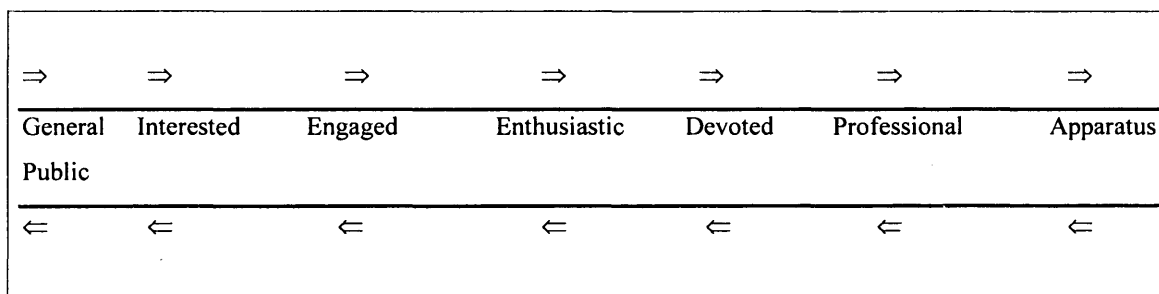
**Figure 2** Abercrombie and Longhurst’s audience continuum



Consumers are those who have unfocused media use with no devotion to specific objects; fans have attachments to certain objects but no contact with fellow fans; cultists possess attachments to objects and a ‘network’ of contacts with fellow fans, and enthusiasts base their interest around activities, such as gardening, rather than mediated objects. Finally, petty producers are those whose interest has become professional (1998:138-141). Like Moorhouse’s caveat that “individuals move in and out of various categories” (1991:23), Abercrombie and Longhurst’s “synchronic and diachronic continuum” (1998:141) accounts for fluid movement along the continuum and avoids making value judgements about the various positions (Abercrombie and Longhurst 1998:141).<sup>44</sup>

Similarly, Garry Crawford (2003, 2004) devises a continuum of sports fans.

**Figure 3** Crawford’s fan continuum and career progression



Crawford defines these as; the ‘general public’ who have little interest in the subject although they may be aware of sports (or programmes). ‘Interested’ fans develop a higher level of interest in the subject, looking for information on the object (2004:43) whilst ‘enthusiastic’ fans participate in the fandom (e.g. attending football games) (2004:47) and

<sup>44</sup> However Abercrombie and Longhurst’s characterisation of ‘enthusiasts’ is puzzling and appears to privilege non-media based fandoms (e.g. gardening) over those concerned with celebrities, programmes, and so on as it is enthusiasts who occupy the furthest point on the continuum before one becomes a ‘petty producer’. The distinction between cultists and enthusiasts hinges on the fact that enthusiasts are so immersed in their activities that they cannot produce or consume fan magazines and so on, whilst cultists avidly engage with such materials. However, I would argue that this actually suggests that it is cultists who are more engaged with their fan objects than enthusiasts. Furthermore, Abercrombie and Longhurst’s continuum has been accused of replicating the binary opposition of setting the ‘proper’ (discerning) fan in contrast to the consumer as “consumers lack the developed forms of expertise and knowledge that fans, enthusiasts and cultists all possess in ever-increasing and ever-more-specialised forms” (Hills 2002:29). However, Longhurst later counters this critique, arguing that there is no ‘moral’ judgement made about any of the positions on the continuum (2007:44).



also self-identify as fans. 'Devoted' fans are "long-term followers" (2004:47) whilst 'professional' fans are elite groups who sometimes earn small amounts of money from their fandom (e.g. editors of fanzines). Finally, the 'apparatus' is composed of "individuals involved in the running and administration" (2004:49).

More recently, Costello and Moore devised an audience continuum of online television fans based on the amount of influence that fans expected to have over the text; "audience activity was expressed as a continuum with variable manifestations of interactivity and involvement" (2007:132). These ranged from low-levels of activity such as seeking information (2007:132), and using online sites to accrue knowledge (2007:133), through to more engaged users who contributed to online communities (2007:135), produced and consumed fanfiction (2007:136) and created their own fan sites (2007:136). The most active "are those who use the internet as an interactive tool to participate in some sense with what they see as 'their' program" (2007:137).

However, as suggested above, continuums have been accused of "caricatur[ing] patterns of behaviour and forc[ing] individuals into often ill-defined and rigid 'types' of [fans]" (Crawford 2004:41) and such typologies often fail to allow for the fluidity of fan's attachments over time or levels of investment. For example, Costello and Moore fail to engage with any of the complications inherent in assigning audience members to spaces on a continuum and they do not deal with the possibility that people may move along this continuum with their fan practices and investments changing over time. However, such restrictions can be avoided by introducing the notion of the career path or career passage which suggests that fans are "actors in a process of change and that individuals can move from one [type of fandom] to another over time" (Abercrombie and Longhurst 1998:133). Such ideas typically draw on the ideas of Glaser and Strauss (1971), Arnold van Gennep (1908), and Goffman's (1968) work on social career, and allow "a more fluid and dynamic understanding of the structure of a 'community' and an individual's (or collective's) progression" (Crawford 2003:225). The notion of a fan career thus allows for the fact that "two individuals occupying a similar career position may have differing (but equitable) characteristics and patterns of behaviour" (Crawford 2004:41).

Of course, as is inevitable with all analytical tools, “there will always be ambiguous cases which do not fit perfectly” (Crossley 1996:23). However, more fluid continuums allow for many of the contradictions between those who may appear to be the same ‘type’ of fan. Thus, given my use of Giddens and Bourdieu who both account for the impact of individual agency and societal structures on people’s choices (see above), I find the notion of the fan career passage which “ties in both elements of structure and agency, ascribed and achieved status, and individual and institutional definitions of rank” (Crawford 2004:39) highly persuasive. However, none of these prior continuums satisfactorily account for how fans may negotiate fan/fan and fan/object relationships differently, having varying levels of involvement with each. For example both Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998:138) and Crawford (2004:45-49) suggest that, as people move along the continuums their skills and connections to fellow fans increase, but they do not acknowledge that fans may be highly involved with fan communities but not with fan objects, or vice versa. Thus, analytical models must account for fan/fan *and* fan/object relationships in order to adequately elucidate varying fan practices. Furthermore, although conceding that some ‘professional’ and ‘apparatus’ fans or ‘petty producers’ may make money from their fan status (Abercrombie and Longhurst 1998:140; Crawford 2004:49), both models fail to explain *why* fans might move from being members of the general public toward more involved levels of fandom; issues which, I suggest, a theory of fan cultures must necessarily explore.

As I have argued above, audience/fan continuums remain of theoretical and analytical value and it is the one-dimensionality of these single continuums which is restrictive due to their apparent ‘fixing’ of people in specific ways. However, the multi-dimensional model I propose below maps two continuums over one another in order to identify their points of intersection and to enable the fluidity of fan/fan and fan/object relationships to be understood (see appendix two). It is not my intention to simply replace Crawford or Abercrombie and Longhurst’s models but, instead, to develop the ways in which they can be used to understand fan practices and the inter-links between fan/object and fan/fan interactions. Such continuums enable us to move away from rigidly hierarchical models of fandom as the categories I outline below are not intended to privilege one type of fan

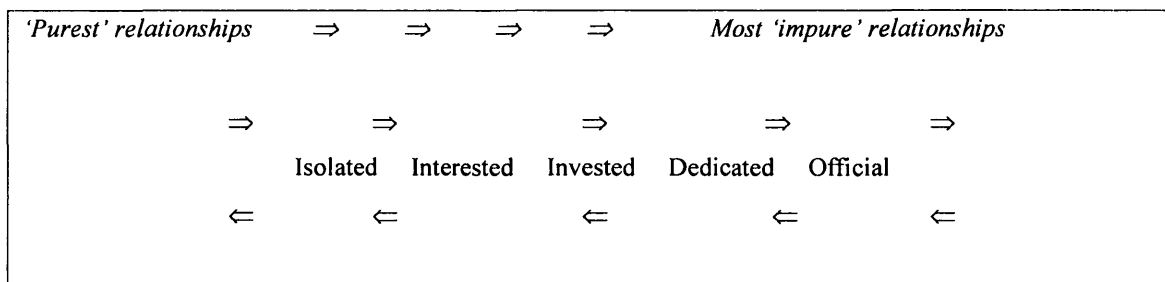
over another or make “judgements about the relative worth of [the] different positions along the continuum” (Abercrombie and Longhurst 1998:141). Furthermore, to avoid forcing fans into specific categories I characterise fans as, for example, ‘invested’ or ‘isolated’, “to signify the actions of these individuals, rather than attributing these with a label and a type” (Crawford 2004:42).

Thus, in the remainder of this chapter I outline how we can reconceptualise fan/fan and fan/object relationships according to the notion of ‘degrees of purity’, offering examples for each of the ‘types’ of fan I have proposed. Finally, as fans may have varying levels of purity in their fan/fan or fan/object relationships, I offer potential reasons for why some fans may have more or less ‘pure’ fan/fan and fan/object relationships.

**Conceptualising fan/fan pure relationships**

I have suggested above that we view fan/fan pure relationships as ranging from the ‘purest’ to most impure, depending upon the levels of interaction with other fans. The ‘purest’ are those in which “external criteria have become dissolved: the relationship exists solely for whatever rewards that relationship can deliver” (Giddens 1991:6). That is, these relationships become more ‘impure’ as fans begin to gain outside rewards such as power and capital from their fandom. These can be imagined in the following way:

**Figure 4** Fan/fan pure relationships



Firstly, there are isolated fans who have the purest fan/fan relationships as they do not seek any interpersonal interaction with fellow fans. However, if there is no fan/fan relationship this also contributes to the fan/object relationship, maintaining its purity as it

remains untainted by interaction with fellow fans. Fans may resist immersion into fan community to protect against the possibility that the conflicting views of other fans may 'taint' the fan's emotional investment and sense of trust in a text. For example, the clashing interpretations present in an online community may highlight moments of implausibility in the text, causing fans to doubt their investment in the show. Isolated fans also maintain the 'purity' of the fan/object relationship, preventing its 'contamination' from outside influence and avoiding any threat to the ontological security gained from the relationship. Some isolated fans may have some sense of themselves within a wider audience which enjoys the specific show/band/football team etc, *imagining* themselves as part of a fan community (Anderson 1991). They may also have no involvement in any aspect of organised fandom or may discuss fan objects only casually with friends who share their interests. For these fans, their fan/fan relationships might become tainted or less impure only by the increase of subcultural capital via their knowledge of the fan object or via casual talk with friends about these objects.

However, one interesting theoretical feature of such fans concerns the question of at what point capital *becomes* capital. As Thornton has argued, subcultural capital is only important in the eyes of "the relevant beholder" (1995:11) but, we must question, what if there is *no* beholder? To imagine isolated fans who don't share their knowledge within a cohesive fan community is to assume that capital is '*potential capital*' until it is displayed for others (e.g. children who may know a great deal about a television show such as *Doctor Who* but who do not discuss this with any other fans). Does capital only become capital once it is displayed for others in exchange for the associated rewards such as prestige or power? There is little research into this issue and Bourdieu himself does little to clarify the matter. He mentions potential capital when he describes social capital as "the aggregate of *the actual or potential resources* which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition" (1986:248, my emphasis). Thus, social capital is dependent upon the potential contacts which one may utilise within their social relationships. It is thus possible to suggest the possibility of a form of cultural capital which is potential capital until the point where it is actively drawn upon. Similarly, in his description of the three

types of cultural capital as being “in the embodied state, i.e., in the form of long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body; in the objectified state, in the forms of cultural goods (pictures, books....) [...] and in the institutionalized state [such as educational qualification]” (Bourdieu 1986:47), he argues that it is only ‘objectivated’ cultural capital (1986:243) which can be considered potential. This is because cultural objects “have no value unless they are activated strategically in the present [...] Objectivated cultural capital is permanently potential, always dependent on the selections of individuals” (Robbins 1991:35). For example, a book is construed as objectivated capital as it contains knowledge that can only be utilised once someone reads it and draws upon that information. However, cultural capital within the embodied state may also be potential capital, as it is “external wealth converted into an integral part of the person, into a *habitus*” (Bourdieu 1986:242). Capital which is internalised via acquisition of knowledge and so on, may still be considered potential cultural capital as, much like the objectivated capital, embodied capital surely has ‘no value unless [it is] activated’. Indeed, “human knowledge, skills or cultural attributes remain potential sources of capital unless they are utilized in the market for labour, information, etc.” (Brown and Scase 1994:31). Thus, fans who have a great deal of knowledge about their fan object but who do not discuss their fandom with others have low social capital but high levels of ‘potential subcultural capital’. Their fan knowledge cannot yet be considered capital as they have not entered the ‘market’ of fandom in order to demonstrate it and use it to form social relationships or accrue prestige and reputation.

Secondly, there are those fans who can be characterised as ‘interested’, that is, those members of the audience who observe fan activity but refrain from active participation (e.g. ‘lurkers’ in online communities (Baym 1995:51; Hine 2000:155; Nonnecke and Preece 2001: online)). Another example is fans who attend events such as gigs or sports matches but desist from socialising with other fans outside of their immediate friendship circle. These fans gain no rewards from their interactions other than enjoying the knowledge that other like-minded people exist but not requiring membership of those groups in order to self-identify as a fan or to maintain a sense of ontological security. However, they may also find that they begin to accrue rewards outside of the

relationships itself, such as social, subcultural and symbolic capital, from their attendance at such events.

Thirdly, there are 'invested' fans who form sustained relationships with others either offline or via online message boards as online relationships are often heavily dependent upon personal disclosure, trust, reflexivity, and reciprocity (Clark 1998; Hardey 2004:210; Henderson and Gilding 2004). These fan/fan relationships may begin due to shared interests but often develop into intense emotional attachments which transcend commonality of interest (Gatson and Zweerink 2004; Geraghty 2004; Steln 2002). These fan/fan interactions are more 'impure' as they may increase a fan's social standing within their fan community, enabling them to accumulate rewards outside of the fan/fan relationship itself such as social capital and power, prestige, and reputation. This also extends to fans who attend conventions, gigs, or sports matches and interact with fellow fans outside of their immediate friendship circle, again accruing forms of capital.

Fourthly, there are 'dedicated fans' who are committed to engaging in fandom, often participating in online community at the level of administration staff or moderators or running fan websites or message boards. This level of involvement renders fan/fan relationships impure as such positions often result in the ability to exert levels of control over fellow fans (MacDonald 1998:138) via enforcing appropriate participant behaviour (Baym 2000). Similarly, fans that interact heavily with others in off-line settings such as fan parties, fundraisers, or conventions or those who attend away football games with a local supporters group may also have 'impure' fan/fan relationships. Attendance at such events and engagement with other fans increases one's reputation within the fan community, allowing bonding over shared experiences. This hierarchises fans and "separates fans by amount of fan participation – those who attend conventions and other organized events versus those who do not" (MacDonald 1998:137). Indeed, attendance at such events often cements subcultural, social and symbolic capital (Hills forthcoming) and such rewards outside of the 'pure fan/fan relationship' render the relationship more impure.

Finally, there are those who interact with others in an official capacity, for example, running official conventions or fan clubs. Although ontological security and a sense of self-identity continue to be provided, other rewards are often garnered from outside the relationship itself, such as recognition within a specific field (e.g. running a fan club or convention may lead to increased prestige as a businessperson), similar to Bourdieu's notion of 'symbolic capital' (1991:230). Thus, these relationships are the most tainted due to the additional rewards that can be accrued from engaging in them. This conceptualisation of fan/fan relationships enables consideration of fans who occupy a wide range of positions within fan cultures. Whilst access to lone and isolated fans remains problematic, this typology allows for the consideration of such people and enables us to question *why* some fans require community and links with others whilst some are content to enjoy their fan objects in solitude. Hypotheses related to these questions will be considered at the end of the chapter, but in order to more competently address such issues we need also turn to the issue of fan/object relationships and the varying levels of 'purity' within these relationships.

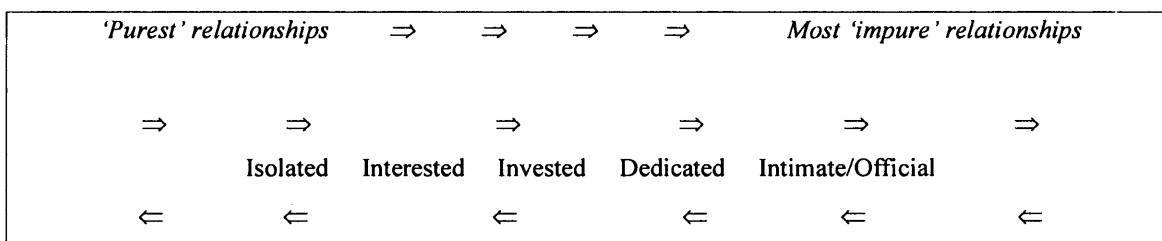
### **Conceptualising fan/object pure relationships**

As argued above, fan/fan relationships can be imagined as an incremental continuum, constructed according to degrees of purity. However, as I have argued throughout this research, fan/fan and fan/object relationships should be accorded equal attention in academic explorations of fandom. Fan/object relationships are more complex to categorise due to the multiplicity of different types of fan objects (e.g. fictional objects such as TV shows and films, or non-fictional such as sports teams and celebrities). Perhaps the easiest way to differentiate between types of object is through a fact/fiction dichotomy to distinguish between sports/music/celebrity fandoms and fictitious fandoms such as television shows, books, or films. Due to the fictitious status of such objects the level of contact available for fans is necessarily different – for example, fans cannot ever hope to meet fictional characters even if they are able to meet the actors who play them at conventions or signings. In contrast, fans of factual objects can attend gigs, matches, or events and may have direct contact with sports stars, musicians or celebrities, despite the

unlikely of ever encountering a star's 'real' self (Marshall 1997:57). Furthermore, these different forms of fandom are accorded varying levels of cultural value within society, with sports fandom the most highly accepted and those who enjoy fictional media texts are often "portrayed as either losers – love-struck teenagers or lonely housewives – or lunatics" (Harrington and Bielby 1995:1). Similarly devalued are fans of celebrities who are treated with suspicion and ridicule in some quarters (Evans and Wilson 1999:99-112; Hills 2007c:475).

Despite this, a very similar continuum can be envisioned to that of fan/fan relationships. Fan/object relationships can, thus, be visualised as follows:

**Figure 5** Fan/object relationships



Firstly, the purest fan/object relationships are those of isolated fans who develop an attachment to their chosen object such as books, television shows, celebrities, sports teams and so on. In the majority of cases, fans will remain at a distance from the fan objects (although they may appear 'close' via "non-reciprocal Intimacy at a Distance" (Thompson 1995:219) or "para-social interaction" (Horton and Wahl 1956; Giles 2000:61-67)). They may, for example, like a band but their interest does not extend any further, that is, they do not attend gigs or purchase merchandise or seek close contact with the band. These fan/object relationships remain satisfactory to the fan as they provide rewards such as ontological security and the development of reflexive self-narratives (Giddens 1992:58). However, much like the fan/fan relationships discussed above, fans may not always seek to develop their fan/object relationships as too great an involvement with the object may diminish the security gained from these fandoms. Fans may feel that attachments to objects are too personal to risk the potential rejection of their investments by those with competing interpretations or attachments. For example, reading online



postings from the creator of a beloved television show might highlight that a fan's own views of the text are contrary to the intentions of producers, or an encounter with a celebrity who plays a favoured character might be disappointing, thus threatening to destabilise the rewards gained from purer forms of fandom. Thus, we cannot assume that active involvement with the fan object is always desirable and that the extra rewards (e.g. capital) that could be accrued by developing more impure relationships always simply co-exist *alongside* ontological security and self-narratives. It is possible that fans may actively avoid engagement with fan objects due to a fear of threats to ontological security or the interruption of an established self-narrative.

Secondly, 'interested' fans are those whose interest in an object extends to purchasing of merchandise such as DVDs, CDs, T-shirts and so on. However, much like the isolated fans, their interest does not extend beyond this towards any closer contact with the fan object. Thirdly, 'invested' fans often frequent gigs, sports matches, conventions, and so on (Ferris 2001). Such attendance can lead to subcultural, social and symbolic capital for "merely being able to say you were there translates into symbolic capital in the appropriate cultural contexts" (Auslander 1999:58), thus enabling fans to accrue rewards outside of the fan/object relationship itself (Giddens 1991:6). This also applies to those who read online postings from their fan object. However, these fans have no direct contact with the fan objects, that is, they may attend gigs or conventions but not meet bands or celebrities.

Fourthly, if engaging in 'dedicated' fandom where fans are highly committed and loyal to a fan object, the fan/object relationship becomes even more greatly tainted by outside rewards. Such fans are those who meet their fan objects at conventions, gigs, or other events and may also include those fans who run fan clubs or prolific websites and who may come to the attention of the fan object. Such contact 'contaminates' the pure relationship as it can often lead to rewards outside of the fan/object relationship itself, such as capital. Prestige (i.e. symbolic capital) is often bestowed onto those who have encounters with people who are well known or respected within the fandom, such as producers (MacDonald 1998: 137). This may also include fans who undertake 'fan

pilgrimages' to sites of importance such as the homes of celebrities or the sets of television shows (Aden 1999; Couldry 2000, 2007; King 1993; Rahilly 2004). Indeed, the importance of proximity to the fans object means that those who have frequented important sites often accrue high levels of cultural, social and symbolic capital (Hills 2006:69-74).

Finally, if contact evolves even further, fans can engage in 'intimate fandom' such as becoming nannies (Harrington and Bielby 1995:63) or personal assistants (Williamson 2005:130) or developing close friendships with those involved with fan objects. Fans may also become involved at an official level, working on the fan object by moving from fandom into occupations as magazine writers (Ganz-Blattler 1999) or scriptwriters (Cassetta 2000) or, in extreme cases, joining their favoured band (Sturdy 2003:223). In either case, these fans have highly 'contaminated' fan/object relationships in which the rewards accrued from sustaining a relationship do not come solely from the relationship itself. That is, the acquisition of capital, power, and economic gain provide the fan with rewards other than the reflection of a desirable self-identity and ontological security (Giddens 1991:6).

Across both fan/fan and fan/object continuums, as the relationships become more institutionalised or 'official', they become less pure and increasingly contaminated. For example, fans with high levels of fan/fan and fan/object engagement (e.g. via the running of fanclubs) or through active involvement with the fan object (such as working on a television show) will necessarily benefit from these positions, both financially (economic capital) or career-wise (symbolic capital). The ability to convert fandom into a job or opportunity recalls the discussion in chapter two regarding the broadcasting field in which fans were potentially able to cross into fields of production or academia (see page 35). In the broadcasting field agents may find themselves balancing their roles as both producers and consumers or fans and may be able to exist within multiple areas of the field. Fans with 'intimate' or 'official' fandom are entering into more impure relationships with their fan objects as the rewards gained from such inter or intra-field movement begin to supersede the rewards gained purely from the relationships

themselves. Career development, financial remuneration, or recognition from others increases capital as well as reducing the purity of fan/fan and fan/object relationships, suggesting a clear link between levels of capital and the purity of such relationships. Similarly, those who become 'scholar-fans' (Hills 2002) are also moving between fields, sometimes gaining prestige amongst fans, fellow academics, or the creators of the shows themselves (Whedon 2003). However, the status of such 'scholar-fans' remains precarious and academic discussion of some objects may be questioned by fans (Hills 2002:19) or producers (Noxon and Fury 2003). In these cases, social and cultural capital may not increase and instead be threatened by the potential derision of other agents within the field. It also appears that those who move towards more official positions are those whose dispositions are best suited to the positions of the broadcasting field (Williamson 2005:179). It may also be that those who attain these 'impure' positions are those who have higher levels of self-confidence as "the unequal distribution of cultural capital can effect self-esteem" (Williamson 2005:181) and prevent certain fans from engaging in practices such as writing fan-fiction, creating websites, and so on.

Having outlined my conceptualisation of fan/fan and fan/object relationships I wish in the final section to suggest that fans may have differential levels of investment in their fan objects and with fellow fans. I posit that we should theorise fan/fan and fan/object relationships to recognise that fans may experience these relationships more or less intensely or 'purely' and that such investments may change over the course of a fan's 'career' (Crawford 2004). Thus, returning to my argument above, I suggest a multi-dimensional continuum which enables examination of the intersections between fans' fan/object and fan/fan relationships.

### **Conceptualising Different Types of Fans**

As outlined above, fan/fan and fan/object 'pure relationships' can be configured as continuums based on degrees of purity [see figures 4 and 5]. However, visualising the fan/fan and fan/object continuums as separate entities disavows the links between the two types of relationship and the fact that fans may have different degrees of purity in each. In

this section I outline four possible configurations of fans [see appendices 2 and 3]. This multi-dimensional model enables us to view both continuums simultaneously and to locate fans on each, examining the inter-links between fan/fan and fan/object relationships. However, as I have argued throughout, this model is not intended to rigidly 'fix' fans and the positions occupied by them are fluid as "individuals may regress, leapfrog certain positions or move in and out of this [model] at any time" (Crawford 2003:228) (see page 236 on *TWW* fans). Thus, in this final section I consider what might differentiate the types of fans in each of these sectors to examine, for example, why some fans might be more focused upon texts or fan communities. Such differences are likely to be a result of varying sociocultural contexts and differing needs for trust and ontological security.

Fans in Sector A (see appendix two) exhibit pure fan/fan relationships and more impure fan/object relationships, emphasising objects over fellow fans. These may either be isolated fans or those involved with the creation or management of objects who have little contact with other fans due to their high official position (e.g. the actor who currently plays *Doctor Who*, David Tennant, who is a self-confessed fan of the show). To be highly involved with the fan object such fans may be the most financially secure, such as teenagers who have few financial commitments and can spend money on their fandom whilst shunning engagement with other fans. Furthermore, the lack of fan/fan interaction may enable these fans to avoid tainting their fan/object relationship with the competing interpretations of fellow fans, thus preserving their sense of self-identity and 'trust' in the object. However, my research's interest in fan community necessarily precludes me from examining fans that fall into this sector. Such fans are difficult to access as they are likely to be either institutionally involved with the object and unwilling to participate in academic research or those fans who, due to their lack of involvement in fan communities, are unlikely to have learnt about my academic research.

Those in Sector B (see appendix two) have pure fan/fan and fan/object relationships which are the most decontextualised from outside factors, reaping no rewards except for those generated within the relationships themselves. Although their lack of involvement

may be due to time constraints, they may also desire no extra rewards due to an adequate sense of ontological security gained from their isolated fandom. Similarly, these fans have the purest relationships as there are no threats to their ontological security or self-identity from the interpretations of fellow fans or producers and no rewards of capital can be gained. Such fans may have low levels of disposable income and be unable to engage with their fan object or other fans as they lack the funds to purchase fan objects such as magazines, books, or DVDs. They might be children who remain under parental control; as whilst children “tend to be relatively heavy TV viewers and form clear attachments which are constructed and reconstructed through day-to-day contact at school” (Abercrombie and Longhurst 1998:138), they are rarely actively involved in their fandoms. However, these fans are also difficult to recruit given their lack of involvement in cohesive fan community.

In opposition to these fans are those in Sector C (see appendix two) who have the most impure fan/fan and fan/object relationships which are highly impacted upon by outside factors. They reap reward from outside the relationships such as economic and symbolic capital. However, such people may continue to draw high levels of ontological security from their fandom, and also rely upon them to develop self-narratives. It is necessary to clarify here that the suggestion that some fans may derive more ontological security from their fandoms than others does not suppose that such fans ‘have no life’ and it is not my intention here to pathologise or stereotype such fans. As outlined above, ontological security is established in early childhood and it is via the routines and repetitions of everyday life that it is sustained (Giddens 1991; Moores 2005; Silverstone 1994). It is, therefore, not my argument that fans who have highly impure or involved fan/fan or fan/object relationships somehow lack ontological security in their ‘real’ lives, nor that they are ‘ontologically insecure’ (Laing 1960:39). Rather, my typology assumes that, for these fans, the sense of security derived from their fandom is more important to them than it may be to other fans. Such fans are likely to be the most highly educated or skilled, echoing Crawford’s argument that ‘professional’ fans are “well educated and/or have non-manual and fairly affluent occupations” (2004:48). Thus, ‘impure’ fans may possess similar skills allowing them to set up websites, run conventions, or work for fan

objects. It is also likely that these fans have *habitus*' most in tune with the dominant dispositions of the field; "fans are expected to accumulate the appropriate cultural capital (or internalise the appropriate *habitus*) deemed to merit inclusion by those who police the boundaries of legitimacy" (Williamson 2005:179). Indeed, their *habitus* may incline them towards educational success, qualifications and skills and high-level jobs. It is in these fans that we can most clearly see the inter-links between cultural, social, and symbolic capital as it is this which often allows fans to get closer to their fan objects.

Finally, Sector D fans (see appendix two) have pure fan/object relationships but more tainted or impure fan/fan relationships, privileging community over fan objects. It is hard to envisage fans with "high social capital and relatively low cultural capital. It is difficult to imagine how this fan would move through fan circles without betraying their lack of knowledge, and hence their lack of prestige within the fandom" (Hills 2002:57). Thus, given my argument that more impure relationships are those which accrue outside rewards such as capital, it seems unlikely that fans might have pure fan/object relationships but impure fan/fan relationships. However, the fluidity of my model means that fans may, if their emotional attachment to their fan object lessens, find their cultural capital has diminished whilst their status within the fan community remains the same. Such people may be those who were fans of an object which has now ceased (see chapter seven) or an object they no longer enjoy (see chapter six). Some online posters continue to view programmes they "no longer really liked because they want to participate in the ongoing online dissection of the program, its characters and its writers" (Andrejevic 2008:44). Such fans would likely attain high levels of ontological security from their fan community and the reward of mirroring back their self-identity may be more important from the community than from the fan object itself. Thus, they may wish to continue their fan associations despite the termination or reduction of their fan/object engagement as the fan community remains an integral aspect of their ontological security and self-identity.

Of course, fans are not restricted by these types of relationship as, whilst previous studies have tended to view fans as focused on one specific object, people often have simultaneous "multiple fandoms and interests in different media forms" (Hills 2002:81).

Such fans, which I suggest we view as '*promiscuous fans*', have no singular devotion to and cannot be defined solely as fans of one object. Fandoms may also change over time with, what I call '*serially monogamous fans*' being entirely faithful to one object before ending their fandom and moving onto another, forming chains of different fan objects which possess some similarities (Hills 2005). As discussed above, such a fan 'career progression' means that

interest, involvement and levels of knowledge of a sport or team [or other fandom] will often change over time. This may recede in significance in their lives, or they may progress forward along a career path, becoming increasingly socialized in this supporter community (Crawford 2004:46).

Thus, fans can progress along my multi-dimensional continuums but may also move backwards as their personal circumstances alter over time (see Glaser and Strauss 1971:4-5). For example, fans may move from pure fan relationships towards impure ones as they mature and are more able to actively engage with both fellow fans and their fan object (see also fans engaged in 'post-object fandom' (see chapter seven)). Such fans move from occupying one position on the continuums to another and are demonstrative of the fluidity of such positions.

As I have argued in this final section, the multi-dimensional continuum I have formulated, drawing on the work of both Bourdieu and Giddens, can account for many of the contradictions inherent within fandom. These include the tension between fandom as a community and hierarchy and the negotiation between attachments to fan objects and fellow fans. Finally, this approach is also able to account for the fact that fandom is not fixed but is fluid and subject to development over an individual's lifetime as their investment in their fandom changes.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I returned to Pierre Bourdieu's sociological theories of culture, expanding upon and critiquing his concepts of cultural and social capital and their application in fan

studies. I also considered how his ideas about love and taste as a ‘match-maker’ (1984: 241) may be useful when examining fans. However, whilst social capital views people as engaging in “ploys, artifices, strategies, bluffs and disguises to increase their own social and cultural capital to the disadvantage of others” (Mander 1987:443), the ‘match-maker’ approach characterises people as passively in sway to the unconscious *habitus*, contradicting the notion of individuals as autonomous agents. I thus introduced the theories of Anthony Giddens whose work enables conceptualisation of people as active agents who are also impacted upon by sociocultural factors. Giddens’ work on the ‘pure relationship’, particularly its links with identity, self-narrative and ontological security, opens up new avenues for exploration of fandom. Indeed, “basic trust links self-identity to the appraisals and loving attention of significant others” (Rosengren 1994:273) and ontological security is maintained via interaction with, and validation by, those with whom we have relationships (whether familial, romantic, or platonic). My argument has been, extrapolating from Giddens’ own suggestion that pure relationships need not be reciprocal (see page 59), that we can view fan/fan and fan/object interactions as forms of pure relationships. These offer the key rewards of ontological security and the reflection of a desirable self-identity but may also be ‘tainted’ by outside factors such as power or Bourdieuan capital. This allows us to acknowledge the contradictions of fandom in which fans simultaneously possess genuine affective ties to their fan objects and one another, whilst implicitly competing for fan subcultural and social capital. Furthermore, I suggest that, “to fully appreciate what it means to be a fan, we need to recognize the possibility of the viewer/fan continuum” (Harrington and Bielby 1995:116) and that audience-identity continuums remain a useful analytical tool. To visualise fandom via a two-dimensional continuum based on ‘degrees of purity’ (see appendix two) means that the comprehensive theoretical framework I have proposed in this chapter enables us to examine all ‘types’ of fan, does not presuppose the superiority of some types of fans over others, and enables examination of different fandoms (e.g. sports fans, music fans, and so on).

In the next chapter I turn to methodological issues, outlining how this research will be undertaken via online fan questionnaires and analysis of Internet postings. Such postings



comprise a “shadow- text” which acts as a “serialisation of the fan audience itself” (Hills 2002:176-177) and often reveals performative displays of fandom. The next chapter examines debates regarding online community and hierarchy and, given my interest in self-narratives and identity, the ways in which fans negotiate their virtual selves. I then reflexively examine my dual identities as an academic researcher and a fan of all three of the shows I am examining in my case studies, before discussing ethical issues of access and privacy. After examination of these theoretical and ethical dualisms the following three chapters of this thesis discuss the empirical work undertaken via my case studies. These chapters deal with the data generated in my investigations into specific online forums dedicated to *Big Brother*, *Neighbours*, and *The West Wing*, examining how fans draw on the texts to negotiate identity and self-narratives and how they derive a sense of ontological security from their chosen fan objects. However, in keeping with my emphasis upon the importance of both fan/object and fan/fan relationships, I also consider how fans negotiate the boundaries of their online communities, making distinctions regarding non-fans and those fans deemed to be ‘Other’ (Thornton 1995:105). Furthermore, given my interest in cultural power and hierarchy, I also relate my analyses to Bourdieu’s work on cultural, social, and symbolic power and to his theory of ‘field’ (see chapter two).

## **Chapter Four**

### **Theoretical approaches to methodological and ethical dualisms in the online research environment**

The previous chapters have established the theoretical framework which informs this thesis and have outlined my use of the work of sociologists Pierre Bourdieu and Anthony Giddens in my examination of fandom. In this chapter, I turn to discussion of my methods and consider many of the key ethical and methodological issues inherent in online research. Indeed, fan studies and online research appear, in many ways, inextricable for, as fan studies became more widespread, academic attention turned to the Internet (Bell 2001; Hine 2000, 2005; Jordan 1999; Porter 1997; Shields 1996; Smith and Kollock 1999; Thurlow *et al* 2004). This increased interest in online fandom resulted from the fact that this medium allowed “fan expression and fan identity to leak out into, and potentially permeate, the fan’s everyday life” (Hills 2002:148) and the ease of conveniently and inexpensively collecting data from readily accessible field sites (Bell 2001:186). Despite problems such as participants’ presentation of multiple personae (Bruhn Jensen 2000:183) or an over-abundance of data that cannot be comprehensively analysed (Hills 2002:174) the Internet has become a dominant means of conducting research into television fan communities as varied as cult media (Clerc 1996; Hamming 2001; Hamner 2003; Jenkins 1995; Lancaster 2001; Scodari and Felder 2000; Symonds 2003a; Zweerink and Gatson 2002), drama (Bury 2004; Bird 2003), reality television (Foster 2004; Jones 2003), and soap opera (Baym 2000; Scodari 1998, 2004). This methodological chapter introduces the texts and online sites I examined before discussing my methods of analysis of postings and online questionnaires. I then consider how online fan groups have been characterised as either virtual communities or potential hierarchies, with fans competing explicitly and covertly for Bourdieuan capital and making distinctions regarding ‘appropriate’ fan behaviour. Such debates are common in fan communities and were identified in all three of my empirical case studies. However, I also detail how fans construct self-identities via their fandom, an issue which has yet to be fully explored in online fan studies. Finally, I critically engage with the theoretical and

ethical problems associated with Internet research, relating these to my own research methods.

### **Sites of interest: Online message boards and televisual texts**

I wish, before I begin to examine the theoretical and ethical issues involved in online methods, to introduce the texts and online sites I chose to analyse in this research as, although my methods remain coherent throughout, each case study has methodological specificities. After offering an overview of the three programmes and the surrounding fandoms, I aim to offer a rationale for my selection of these research sites and to illuminate some commonalities between them.

The first text that I examine in this thesis is *Big Brother*; specifically the seventh series which aired in the UK in the summer of 2006 (hereafter referred to as *BBUK7*). This show aired for a thirteen-week period between Thursday 18<sup>th</sup> May and Friday 18<sup>th</sup> August, 2006 and was on-screen for a finite period of time. For those unfamiliar with the format, *BBUK7* belongs to the reality television genre and follows the lives of housemates in a house which is separated from the outside world. Each week the housemates nominate their fellow contestants for eviction and the public votes to oust one (or sometimes more) during a Friday-night eviction. The programme has become something of a worldwide media phenomenon and operates on levels beyond the actual programme itself as a multi-textual entity. In contrast to *Neighbours* and *The West Wing*, “*Big Brother* tends to spill beyond textual boundaries, becoming part of TV’s phenomenological ‘eventfulness’ and ‘dailiness’ rather than being discursively positioned as a discreet and bounded text” (Hills 2007:46). I am thus classifying the live streaming, the highlights programmes and the three accompanying shows *Big Brother’s Little Brother*, *Big Brother’s Big Mouth*, and *Big Brother’s Big Brain* as the elements that constitute ‘the show’ whilst surrounding newspaper, magazine or news coverage of *BB* is viewed as a ‘secondary text’ (Fiske 1987:117).

The impact of the Internet on *BB*’s success cannot be overstated as

the relationship between the programme and its website is no longer one of an 'original' text and a supplement that enhances the programme or perpetuates audience interest in it beyond transmission. The two are integrated, planned at the same time and interdependent (Bignell 2005c:146).

Via the *BB* website viewers could watch live streaming from the house, gain information about contestants, and browse the official forums. This online component of the show is crucial to its dissemination of narrative events, "establishing a multiplicity of ways that a television program could reach its audience" (Wilson 2004:327). However, the importance of the *BB* website to the general audience is contestable as one study found that only 15% of adults questioned cited "visiting the site" as a characteristic that they liked about *BB* (Hill 2002:332).<sup>45</sup> Given the comprehensive data generated by both Hill (2002) and Jones (2003), it must be stated here that I do not intend to replicate such large-scale studies of the *BBUK* audience. My research is concerned with the complex ways in which fans of *BBUK7* relate to one another and discuss the show within one specific online fan community. I analysed postings made at the unofficial site *BBGossip* <<http://www.bbgossip.com/>> which offers one linear thread for each day of the show in which fans post updates of happenings on the live streaming and post speculation and comments. I selected this forum as, after a period of lurking at several sites (including the official Channel 4 forums) this site appeared to offer the greatest level of fan discussion and analysis of the show. Whilst the official forum attracted a younger fanbase (e.g. those who posted in 'text speak' and often posted only short messages), the *BBGossip* site featured longer, more in-depth posts which more fully displayed fans' discourses. Furthermore, this site was also selected for methodological reasons as its linearity and comprehensive archiving meant that I could download and analyse postings from selected dates of interest and could also follow entire conversations across the threads. Such linear systems list posts chronologically, reflecting 'real-life' synchronous patterns of talk (Boettcher 1999:online). However, *BB*'s thirteen week duration meant that to analyse every thread from the forum would lead to data that was "virtually unmanageable in terms of the sheer weight of communications traffic" (Hills 2002:174). To circumvent this issue I followed the temporal structures of *BBUK7* itself and selected two weekly

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<sup>45</sup> The impact of only being able to access the potential 15% of the *Big Brother* audience online will be addressed later in the chapter.

points of analysis, the processes of nomination and eviction. Thus, each Tuesday (when nominations were announced to housemates) and on Friday evenings from the time of eviction (usually between 8:30pm and 9pm) until midnight, I archived the linear thread posted at *BBGossip*, totalling twenty-six threads and 2,116 pages of postings. I also posted requests for respondents to complete questionnaires at six unofficial *BB* sites, receiving twenty-five completed surveys. These were: *Talk Big Brother* <<http://www.talkbigbrother.com/>>, *BB3* <<http://b3.theBBnetwork.com/forum/>>, *This Is Big Brother* <<http://www.thisisbigbrother.com/forum/>>, *BB Fans* <[www.BBfans.com/](http://www.BBfans.com/)>, *Big Brother Website* <<http://www.bigbrotherwebsite.net/>> and *BB Plus* <<http://www.bigbrotherplus.com/talk/index.php>>.

The show which forms the basis of my second case study is the long-running Australian soap opera *Neighbours*, which aired on BBC1 in the UK between October 1986 and February 2008. In 2007 the rights to broadcast the show were purchased by channel Five in the UK and the programme was screened on Five from February 2008. The community I focused upon in this case study is *NeighboursFans* <<http://www.Neighboursfans.com/forum/index.php>>, an unofficial fansite which, like *BBGossip* but unlike the *TWoP* boards examined in chapter seven, has not been subject to previous academic scrutiny. As with my other case studies, my methods comprised of textual analysis of online postings and fan questionnaires. I sought permission from the webmaster to post a request for respondents, receiving twenty-two completed questionnaires. *NeighboursFans* is a large and diverse forum with ten subforums for discussion of the site and show, three members-only areas for posting of fanfiction, articles and artwork, and three off-topic forums for non-*Neighbours* discussions. At the time of writing it had over 16,400 members and over 310,000 posts and it is this status as the largest online *Neighbours* fan forum which prompted me to examine this site rather than others. Given this large size I restricted the threads I examined to avoid a wealth of data which I could never conceivably analyse, selecting a period of one week and downloading the threads for each of the five episodes screened in both the UK and Australia that week. I also analysed the five most recent threads in the UK *Neighbours* Chat, Australian *Neighbours* Chat, Spoilers, Character Discussion and Real-Life

*Neighbours* (devoted to discussion of actors) forums. The episode discussion threads consisted mostly of short responses to the specific episodes and were not as conducive to gathering divergent fan opinions as I had hoped. In contrast to the unifying episode threads of the *TWoP West Wing* forum (see below), fans at *Neighbourfans* appeared to be largely dispersed into different threads depending on their fandom of specific characters or relationships. However, more so than in the episode threads these dispersed fans posted in the threads devoted to *Neighbours Chat* and the spoiler forum. Thus, the majority of the data I draw on comes from the two chat forums, the character discussion forum, and the spoiler forum. In total I analysed twenty-five threads and over 2,500 pages of postings and have drawn on postings from forty-six different online posters. As in my other empirical case studies, I have used assigned pseudonyms, thread titles, and post numbers to maintain the anonymity of those I have quoted whilst posts quoted without pseudonyms can no longer be found in online archives. This site also posed some ethical issues which were not present in my other case studies as the site had open access to some forums whilst requiring registration to access fanfiction, articles and artwork, and a further password to gain entry to the subforum on spoilers. Given my prior knowledge of the structure of this site and my engagement with this community as a lurker, I questioned whether those postings made in areas of websites that required registration or were password-protected could be examined in my research or whether I should demarcate such spaces as private and exclude them from my analysis. Much work on the ethics of online methods cautions that researchers must be sensitive to the specificities of each community they examine, becoming familiar with the structures and practices of each online space (Bell 2001:200; Leaning 1998). Given my previous lurking at this site I was aware that the areas which required passwords are largely configured in this manner to allow non-spoiled fans to avoid information they do not wish to read, a fact confirmed by the necessity of entering an extra password to gain access to these sub-forums. Thus, I concluded that use of postings in these areas was ethically appropriate although I adhered to the other ethical strictures established below in order to ensure posters' anonymity.

The final programme I examined is the American drama *The West Wing* which aired on the NBC network in the US between 2000 and 2006, and was screened in the UK on a

variety of channels belonging to Channel 4. *The West Wing (TWW)* has been aligned with the genre of ‘American quality television’, and is thought to be of a more highbrow and culturally valued status than the reality television and soap opera which constitute my other case studies. Indeed, *TWW* has attracted considerable academic examination<sup>46</sup> although, with the exception of van Zoonen (2004), there remains little critical examination of the show’s fans. I seek to address this by examining *TWW* fans based at the on-line community *Television Without Pity (TWP)*

<[www.televisionwithoutpity.com](http://www.televisionwithoutpity.com)>, an unofficial US-based fan site for numerous shows.

At the time of analysis, *The West Wing* forum was split into four areas; (1) ‘General Gabbery’ for general discussion, (2) ‘The First Family’, for chat about the President and his family, (3) ‘Staff and Government Types’ which includes discussion of other characters and relationships and, finally, (4) ‘The Steam Pipe Trunk Distribution Venue’, for all other discussions. After the series finale, *The West Wing* discussions were moved into the general Drama forum where its four subforums were collapsed into one thread which can be accessed at

<<http://forums.televisionwithoutpity.com/index.php?showtopic=3143108>>. The original forums can be accessed as read-only pages at

<<http://forums.televisionwithoutpity.com/index.php?showforum=598>>

I opted to analyse fan postings at *TWP* rather than at other fansites as it is a prolific site which has attracted some academic attention<sup>47</sup> and which offers opinions from devoted fans but also those defined by Gray as ‘anti-fans’ (2005). Thus, *TWP* has much in common with the comprehensive movie site *Internet Movie Database* <[www.imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com)> which has been usefully employed by academics as it is “not wholly fan-centric, instead offering a more diffuse forum [...] that encompasses fan responses and those of more ‘generalised’ movie-goers” (Hills cited in Williams 2005b:xiii, see also Gauntlett 2000:85). Thus, analysis of this large site offered a wide range of fan opinions and

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<sup>46</sup> Work has examined the show’s representations of political ideologies (Finn 2003; Hall 2005; Parry-Giles and Parry-Giles 2002), American nationalism (Parry-Giles and Parry-Giles 2006), public relations (Richardson 2006; Smudde and Luecke 2005), gender and race (Garrett 2005; Lane 2003; Levesque 2001; Smith 2001), popular culture (Rutenburg 2003), and terrorism and national security (J. Elizabeth Clark 2005; Gans-Boriskin and Tisinger 2005; Jones and Dionisopoulos 2004).

<sup>47</sup> See Andrejevic (2008); Gray (2005); Jenkins (2006b); Peters (2006); Ross (2008); Stilwell (2004).



debates. Jonathan Gray notes that posters at *TWoP* are “aware of speaking potentially to thousands and already reasonably anonymous; and the performative nature of much *TWoP* commentary itself belies an awareness of (or even a desire for) a considerable audience” (2005:847; see also Hills and Luther 2007:209). Such performativity, size, and openness renders privacy at *TWoP* impossible and, as such, all postings made at this site can be considered to be in the public domain. Despite this, in keeping with the ethical framework of my research I have referenced via assigned pseudonyms when citing online quotes, referring also to the thread name and post number.

*TWoP*'s large size results in a high volume of postings, again forcing me to “select and process materials from the endless flow of information and commentary” (Jenkins 1995:52). To restrict my sample I selected threads devoted to new episodes of the show from the seventh season premiere on September 25<sup>th</sup>, 2005 until the airing of the series finale on May 14<sup>th</sup>, 2006 (the show's cancellation at the end of the seventh season was announced on January 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2006 (Licht 2006)). During this period, I archived twenty-two threads, totalling almost 2,000 pages of postings and have used quotes from fifty-four different online posters. I chose to analyse episode threads as they enabled me to follow the temporality of the site itself, archiving the threads on a weekly basis after new episodes aired. It is in the episode threads that fans demonstrate their devotion via ‘just-in-time fandom’ (Hills 2002:178) and the immediacy of their postings, creating a demarcation between those who have seen the episodes and those who have not. Such threads also attracted fans with divergent investments in specific characters or relationships, providing a space where fan distinctions could be identified. Alongside my analysis of postings, I conducted online questionnaires, posting messages at various unofficial *TWW* sites to ask for respondents, receiving twenty-three completed surveys to analyse. These sites were *Bartlet4America* <[www.bartlet4america.org](http://www.bartlet4america.org)>, a Yahoo Group dedicated to discussions of the Josh/Donna relationship named *J/D Talk* <<http://tv.groups.yahoo.com/group/JDtalk/>>, and at a Live Journal community, *Full Lid* <[http://community.livejournal.com/TWW\\_full\\_lid/](http://community.livejournal.com/TWW_full_lid/)>. A request to the moderators of the *TWoP* site to post regarding my research was unsuccessful, due to an apparent site policy forbidding the forums to be used for the solicitation of research (LaurenS 2006: personal



email communication) whilst similar efforts to post at the UK broadcaster Channel 4's forums were denied due to concerns about the posting of non-official links and email addresses at the site (C4-Communities 2006: personal email communication).

In addition to analysis of posts at the above sites I also employed the method of open-ended online questionnaires to examine how fans discussed their fan practices and relationships in their own words. I received 25 completed questionnaires from *BBUK7* fans, 22 from fans of *Neighbours*, and 23 from fans of *The West Wing*, in total analysing 70 questionnaires. These questionnaires were unpiloted and the exact response rate is unknown as many online posters completed these within online threads. Therefore it is impossible to know exactly how many posters may have read my request for respondents or read the entire questionnaire and opted not to respond to it. Despite lurking to analyse online postings, I had to announce my presence to the fan communities I studied to recruit questionnaire respondents. However, as I lack fan social or symbolic capital I contacted the head of each community, seeking their permission to solicit respondents by posting a request for interested fans to email me (see appendix five) or asking them to complete the questionnaire within an online thread. Moderators often have the power to create permanent (or 'pinned') threads on forums to ensure that important messages do not get lost amongst the volume of postings and each contact agreed to pin my request to encourage its visibility. Although it has been questioned whether single members can be presumed to speak for the entire community (Reid 1996:170; Walther 2002:209) I felt that approaching forum administrators would grant me greater legitimacy, proving that I had the endorsement of the community figureheads and encouraging fan participation. As with my analysis of postings, consistent pseudonyms are used throughout this research in order to protect the anonymity of respondents.

Open-ended questionnaires have been critiqued for being difficult to answer and process, having a low response rate, and enabling respondents to misinterpret ambiguous questions (Berger 2000:190; Bertrand and Hughes 2005:73; Campbell 1945:347). Thus, I designed a generic 'base' questionnaire which could be adapted to account for the specificities of the three fan communities I examined but which contained the same major

questions and areas of interest (see appendix six). I used open-ended questions to enable fans to answer without preconceived assumptions about their responses (Foddy 1993:128). The imposition of closed questions suggests which fan activities are deemed to be 'appropriate' and allows no possibility for divergent practices or attitudes. Indeed, some fans may be aware of their activities being stigmatised (Barker and Brooks 1998) or be 'self-conscious' about revealing the 'guilty pleasures' of fandom (Radway 1984 in Schroder *et al* 2003:249). Thus, any suggestion that their fan activities are not catered for in a survey may reinforce this, discouraging participation by either imposing researcher's assumptions or by offering options which the fan does not recognise as part of their own fan experience. Furthermore, although there is often a low response rate with online questionnaires (Schondlau *et al* 2002; Witmer *et al* 1998) little consideration has been given to recruiting participants via groups of fans who may have a greater interest in responding to research. Such emphasis on ready-made groups of respondents means that I have used non-probability samples (de Vaus 1996:77) which are widely accepted in audience studies given their "insights into a worldview that is assumed to be shared by the members of a culture or subculture" (Priest 1996:203).

After downloading the relevant online threads and receiving completed questionnaires I began coding these using the qualitative software programme NVivo. Each post and questionnaire was coded according to the key themes I was interested in examining within the research. Coding was undertaken through the theoretical framework of fan/object and fan/fan relationships (see chapter three), focusing upon several key areas; temporality and routine, identity and routine, community and hierarchy, and the distinctions made regarding the show itself and other fans. Coding these using the NVivo qualitative software meant that one can call up all quotes on a particular theme then examine these for further patterns and commonalities. After entering the data and coding it through the programme, I was able to select relevant sections of fan discussion in order to identify commonalities and themes across my data sets. Where quotes have been given in the text of the thesis, these most typically illustrate common fan discourses or topics of discussion, and there are usually two or three quotes offered in order to illustrate the prevalence of these themes. However, quotes are also offered to demonstrate divergent or

opposing fan views or to illustrate that some fans did not adhere to the dominant discourses of their particular interpretive communities. The text will make clear how specific quotes are being used, and whether this is to illustrate the commonality of fan discourses or the opposing views represented by other fans. Although the ethical issues pertinent to my research are discussed in greater depth below, it is worth noting here that when using fans' quotes in this research all questionnaire respondents' names have been changed and I have identified all postings by pseudonym, post number and title of post. Furthermore, throughout the research none of the quotes drawn from online posts or questionnaires have been amended for spelling or grammar. This is, as Christine Hine suggests, to try to "preserve some of the feel of the original [online texts]" (2000:82) but also because I wish to avoid the presumption that fan commentary and comments need to be modified or 'improved' by the detached researcher.

Although the rationale for using online methods remains strong, it is worth considering some of the methodological limitations of this self-selected sample and of my focus on Internet fandom. There are, for instance, issues of reliability in online research concerning whether we can trust the comments and claims posted online and whether people really who they say they are. However, perhaps more relevant to my research is the fact that, without considering people as entire social beings, it is hard to assume that their identity is impacted upon so greatly by their fandom. For example, to assume that *West Wing* fans went into politics or did screenwriting courses purely as a result of their fandom cannot account for the other socioeconomic or cultural factors which may have impacted upon these decisions such as class, gender, location, race. Indeed, not all fans have the same ability or opportunity to enter politics or attend University but without offline contact or wider knowledge of people beyond their online persona this cannot be known. However, this approach judges authenticity as "correspondence between the identity performed in interactions with the ethnographer and that performed elsewhere both online and offline. This presupposes a singular notion of an identity, linked to a similarly singular physical body" (Hine 2000:49). However, it remains crucial to instead treat respondents' replies and interactions, and even their posts to online spaces, as performances which are partial and incomplete, and which can never be considered as

representative of the person as a whole. Furthermore, my use of a self-selected sample of online fandoms means that this research was only able to access those who are involved in fandom through their online presence or lurking. These fans can be assumed to have a certain level of fan interest and devotion as posting, or even lurking, online suggests an investment which led one to want to find out more information on the fan object or see what other fans are saying about it. Thus, this method of recruiting questionnaire respondents means that fans that are not already present online are left out of the research. More casual viewers and non-online fans cannot be accessed which likely means, given access to Internet, that it is older, less wealthy and potentially less educated fans who are left out of the research.

Given these issues the possibility of supplementing online methods with offline interviews was considered and would have been most likely for the *Neighbours* and *BB* case studies, given the UK audiences for these shows. However, this led to a debate over whether to try to engage online respondents in follow-up research in an off line context of interviews. This has been debated in online ethnography and it has been argued that to engage in offline research might be ethically precarious as it takes the respondent out of the environment or situation they normally respond within. However, I concur with Christine Hine on this point who argues that such debates tend to position “face-to-face communication as inherently better in ethnography” (Hine 2000:49). Furthermore, and perhaps more pertinent, is the fact that, “while pursuing face-to-face meetings with online informants might be intended to enhance authenticity via triangulation [...], it might also threaten the experiential authenticity that comes from aiming to understand the world the way it is for informants” (Hine 2000:49). Again, given my desire to examine fan responses without intruding upon the online spaces in which these were expressed (see Leaning 1998), I opted to refrain from meeting online respondents in offline environments in order to continue to understand ‘the world the way it is’ for them.

Having outlined the methods used in my research, I now wish to offer some further explanation for my selection of the specific television programmes which form my case studies. As introduced in chapter one, my rationale for selecting the three programmes

which form my case studies is dependent on three axes of cultural value/‘quality’, temporality, and their trans-national status as imported shows or international formats (see pages 22-24). Firstly, given my interest in notions of ‘quality television’ and value, my selection of shows with varying cultural positions enables me to examine the specific distinctions made by fans of a range of televisual texts. The second axis which influences my choice of case studies is temporality as each show occupies different and often unique positions within television schedules. The third and final rationale for my chosen case studies is their differences in transnational format. *Big Brother* is the UK version of an international format which is screened in numerous countries (Hill 2004 2005:22) whilst *The West Wing* is an imported ‘quality drama’ (Feuer 2005:28) and *Neighbours* is an imported soap opera.

However, there must also be some justification of why I selected these specific examples of each genre, rather than potential alternatives. For instance, reality television shows such as *The X-Factor*, *I’m A Celebrity...* or *Britain’s Got Talent* could have been selected for analysis due to their similar ‘lowbrow’ status. However, these either run for considerably shorter periods of time or they fail to offer a comparable level of interaction or ‘closeness’ to the show. Indeed, *Big Brother* is the only contemporary programme which airs almost constantly throughout its duration, offering a unique opportunity to examine how this impacts upon fans’ pure relationships, self-identity, and ontological security. Similarly, *Neighbours* is not the only imported soap opera which could have been examined in my research. For example, *Home & Away* is also an Australian import onto UK screens. However, my rationale for selecting *Neighbours* was that (at the commencement of this research) it had occupied the same position in the schedule for twenty years whereas *Home & Away* had moved from ITV to Channel 5 in 2001. Although *Neighbours* later made a similar move, my interest in the impact of a series’ longevity on the surrounding fandom meant that, at the time, *Neighbours* offered a better example of a constant and routinised television show. Finally, any number of American dramas could have been drawn upon for my final case study. Indeed, *CSI*, *Six Feet Under*, *The Sopranos*, *Lost* or *24* could all have provided illuminating examples and could even have been examined at the same online site given *Television Without Pity’s*

wide range of forums. However, I selected *TWW* as I was intrigued by the lack of work undertaken on the show's fans particularly since, as noted above, academic work on the show has been otherwise extensive.

Having outlined the sites of interest in this research, both textual and empirical, I now wish to consider some theoretical issues prevalent within online research. I will firstly examine the tensions between community and hierarchy before considering how prior theorisation of online identity is pertinent to this thesis. I then offer a self-reflexive analysis of my own position as both research and fan of the shows I am examining before outlining some of the ethical impositions and challenges I faced during the course of my research.

### **Community, hierarchy, and identity in online fandom**

The concept of online community has been contested in academic work (Feenberg and Barney 2004; Foster 1997; Smith and Kollock 1999; Watson 1997) although most definitions draw on Benedict Anderson's 'imagined community' (1991) or Howard Rheingold's assertion that virtual communities are "the 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" (1993:5). However, Rheingold's definition is vague about the level of 'human feeling' that is necessary before a virtual community comes to exist (Wilbur 1997:7) and he does not account for what happens when some online participants feel more involved in virtual relationships than others – is it only *these* people who view their interactions as community? In contrast, others suggest that "an online community is a community if participants imagine themselves as a community" (Bell 2001:102), avoiding the ethical problem of researchers imposing the 'community' label, even if group members do not self-identify as such. However, this view fails to account for group disputes over whether or not they classify themselves as a community (Watson 1997). In contrast, Jordan argues that virtual community depends upon sustained interaction in an online location and the formation of shared codes of practice and behaviour (1999:100). Although community

members may not be geographically close they are in the same virtual 'place' when they are engaging in what may be real-time discussion.

However, it has been suggested that a lack of commitment and intimacy and the fact that participants can simply leave whenever they want undermines the concept of virtual community (Beniger 1987; Costigan 1998:xxii). Such views fail to acknowledge that offline communities may also be dispersed (Wellman and Gulia 1999:169) or that fandom has always been an 'imagined community' based on shared interpretations rather than spatiality (Jenkins 2002:158; Levy 1997). Nancy Baym has further complicated these ideas, proposing the concept of "a community of practice" (2000:21) which assumes "that a community's structures are instantiated and recreated in habitual and recurrent ways of acting or practices [...] [in] the ordinary activities of its participants" (2000:22). Similarly, in their study of *Buffy* fans, Zweerink and Gatson distinguish between a 'fandom community' (online spaces based around a specific fan object) and a 'community of fans' (communities whose discussions are not restricted to their fandom) (2002:248). For example, they note that, despite the end of *Buffy* and the closure of the official forum *The Bronze*, group members maintained a sense of community although this became necessarily more dispersed through new websites and blogs (Gatson and Zweerink 2004:237). This relates to my discussion in chapter three of fans who may grow away from fan objects themselves whilst continuing to participate in the surrounding community (see page 86). Hills similarly proposes a 'community of imagination', rather than 'imaginative community', to emphasise emotional ties;

the coincidence which defines the 'community of imagination' therefore occurs on a very different level to that which defines the imagined community: rather than a coincidence in the temporality of information and consumption (the 'mass ceremony'), the defining coincidence here is affective (2002:180).

Therefore, information technology is not only a flow of information (Jenkins 1995) but also an "affective flow [...] [which] mirrors the fan's attachment back to him or her, validating this affective experience itself" (Hills 2002:181; see also Moores 2005:168). Online community may, thus, offer an example of the fan/fan pure relationship, reflecting

a fan's self-narrative,<sup>48</sup> providing ontological security via discussion of day-to-day issues, and offering solace in the face of larger-scale tragedy, such as the September 11 terrorist attacks (Steln 2002). Indeed, online relationships have been seen to exemplify the pure relationship (Clark 1998; Henderson and Gilding 2004; Livingstone 2008) and ontological security can be gained from the "routinized social bonding" (Chayko 2002:96) of online community. However, online spaces tend to define community differently as the Internet "allows for a level of self-reflection that makes the community itself a focus of its members' analysis" (Bird 2003:81), although members may not reach a consensus (Brobeck 2004). Another issue to negotiate is the assumption that *all* online fan spaces constitute communities (Bromberg 1996). However, communities can fail if participants find that conflicts outweigh the rewards gained from community membership (Kolko and Reid 1998) and

not all virtual social gatherings are communities. Without the personal investment, intimacy, and commitment that characterizes our ideal sense of community, some online discussion groups and chat rooms are nothing more than a means of communication among people with common interests (Fernback 1998:216).

Why, then, is a community discourse mobilised by academics (to paint a utopian picture of online groups) or by fans (who are keen to emphasise their cohesion and avoid accusations of hierarchy)? Indeed, "why argue about an online forum being a community or not? Why does such a debate matter" (Watson 1997:102). Fandom itself "is an identity which [...] performs cultural work" (Hills 2002:xi) and to claim status as a fan community similarly performs cultural functions as "to say that something is or is not a community is to perform political work" (Hine 2000:19). This suggests that competing definitions of community demonstrate underlying discursive strategies. Echoing Sandvoss' argument that fan studies has been characterised by a 'dominant discourse of resistance' (2005:11) I suggest that a similar '*dominant discourse of community*' has been emphasised by fan-scholars to highlight the communal, positive aspects of fandom. Community connotes security, commitment, commonality of interest, and investment in the endurance of the community and imbuing fandom with these positive traits elevates it

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<sup>48</sup> See Chandler (1998); Donath (1999); Foster (1997); Hardey (2004); Slevin (2000); Wilbur (1997).



above cultural stereotypes of the obsessive who is widely perceived to need to “get a life” (Jenkins 1992:9). Early portrayals of utopian fandoms with “no established hierarchy” (Bacon-Smith 1992:41) positioned fan groups as ‘worthy’ of serious consideration within cultural studies. Such moves also took place within a cultural context where fandom was still stigmatised. However, online fandom has proliferated and must now be considered within the context of increased Internet usage and a mass media which often actively synchronises websites with other media.<sup>49</sup> Thus, Internet usage is no longer merely the domain of those with the technical knowledge to gain entry to newsgroups but is part of everyday life for many people (Bakardjieva 2005; Nunes 2006; Pullen 2004; Wellman 2002). Furthermore, the ‘dominant discourse of community’ opposes postmodern or post-structuralist accounts of online behaviours which substantiated theories by Baudrillard (1988) and Jameson (1991) regarding the embodiment of identity (Miller and Slater 2000:5). By elevating the community discourse, critics moved away from theories of computer-mediated-communication that emphasised fluid identities and toward the idea of fans as a cohesive group with stable identities and shared interpretations. Thus, fan scholars developed the connotations of off-line community such as trust and intimacy to continue the utopian views of fandom first proposed by Jenkins (1992) and Bacon-Smith (1992). The notion of a ‘dominant discourse of community’ contradicts the assertion that fan self-definition is the key to understanding this issue (Bell 2001:102), suggesting instead that such definition is a discursive manoeuvre which performs ‘cultural work’ (Hills 2002:xi) to elevate certain groups as deserving of academic scrutiny.

The community discourse also allows scholars to account for fan conflicts without threatening these positive representations of fandom. Community membership constructs identity via “occupancy of the community’s social space; if outsiders trespass in that space, then its occupants’ own sense of self is felt to be debased and defaced” (Cohen 1985:109). Thus, when fans disagree with non-fans or competing fan groups, this can be explained as an inevitable consequence of the formation of fan community (Baym 2000:87). Indeed, one of the main critiques of online community has been that this

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<sup>49</sup> See Derek Johnson (2007a) on *24* and *Lost* and also Brooker (2001); Castonguay (2004); Gauntlett (2000); Ross (2008); Telotte (2004).

disavows potential hostilities between group members (Mitra 1997). However, as argued in chapter one, online fandoms are both communal *and* hierarchically stratified as fans operate their own mechanisms of distinction to marginalise non-fans or certain types of fans within particular fan cultures (see page 9). Thus, “the Internet should not be assumed to have created utopian fan communities [...] [it] has not necessarily created a single, unified fan position or practice” (Pullen 2000:60). Fandom continues to be, as I have argued, “a social hierarchy where fans share a common interest while also competing over fan knowledge, access to the object of fandom, and status” (Hills 2002:46).

Andrea MacDonald established five types of fan hierarchy; hierarchy of knowledge, fandom level or quality, access, leaders, and venue. These “exist along multiple dimensions”, and fans who are at the top of all five hierarchies are ‘executive fans’ (1998:136). However, MacDonald’s hierarchies fail to account for the power struggles that result from fans’ attempts to ascend to the upper echelons of hierarchies; “what of the process with which a decision is made in allowing one fan to speak uncontested for the entire fandom or fan community? Who gets to decide which canon (i.e. interpretation of the text) is the correct or preferred one?” (Chin 2001:5). Furthermore, MacDonald’s assertion that “fans do not explicitly recognise hierarchies” (1998:136) makes it unclear whether she means that fans overtly refuse to recognise hierarchies within their own fan cultures, even though they accept that they do exist or, rather, that fans remain ignorant of their very existence. Either way, fans clearly do recognise hierarchies, most notably in cases where they are aware of ‘elite’ fans (Williamson 2005:130; Zweerink and Gatson 2002). Furthermore, as Williamson’s study of online fanfiction writing in vampire subcultures found, “there is a hierarchy of value at work [...] which mirrors traditional autonomous cultural capital” (2005:164) and fans often

take [Bourdieuian] positions to sanction themselves as experienced fan fiction writers, who can legitimately designate who is and who is not experienced enough to be considered, and to endorse others like themselves, thus securing their position within the fandom (2005:179).

However, studies of online hierarchy remain rare and the possibility of these hierarchies equating with Bourdieuan capital or field has yet to be explored.<sup>50</sup> However, my research found hierarchies in each of the fan communities I examined, with subcultural, social, and symbolic capital accrued by the acquisition of fan knowledge or occupation of certain positions within the fan community. It is, thus, my argument that fan hierarchy can be considered via Bourdieu's field theory as, if fields are "field of struggles" (Bourdieu 1993:30) in which members constantly vie for various positions, then the fan hierarchies present within online communities are demonstrative of such position takings (see chapter two).

Critics have also debated whether to view online identity play as "people exploiting the potential of the medium to try out a different role, or [...] as a fundamental threat to the idea of a unified self" (Hine 2000:20). The concept of "the playful, imaginative multiple self" (Poster 1995:71) and the potentially emancipatory nature of an environment in which ethnicity, age, or gender no longer pose an obstacle to communication have been a key focus of previous work (Stone 1991; Turkle 1995). It has been suggested that fragmented online identities are now common (Kolko and Reid 1995:218) enabling the separation of various identities (Steln 2002:484). Furthermore, those activities that appear to threaten the cohesion of online spaces may, in fact, be examples of identity negotiation identity (see Vrooman (2002) on 'flaming' as identity performance). However, many people actually seek to foster stable identities congruent with their off-line selves, often using their real names as monikers and revealing aspects of their personal lives online.<sup>51</sup> Furthermore, gender (Bury 2005; Clerc 1996, Herring *et al* 1995), sexuality (Hamming 2001; Hamner 2003) and age (Scodari 1998) continue to impact upon the formation of fan/fan relationships and "identity hierarchies continue to constitute a significant context for online interaction. Participants clearly can and do reproduce off-line power relationships in their online interactions" (Kendall 1998:66).

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<sup>50</sup> Although see Blanchard and Horan's (2000) application of Putnam's definition of 'social capital' (1995).

<sup>51</sup> See Baym (1995, 1998, 2000); Bird (2003:74); Correll (1995); Frankel and Siang (1999); Kendall (1998:58); Wynn and Katz (1997).

My engagement with Giddensian theories of self-identity necessarily means that such issues are pertinent. Individuals often use the Internet to relate their self-narratives (Poster 1995:36) and such disclosures enable fan/fan relationships as these self-narratives “and their performance consolidate the ‘social bond’ of the Internet ‘community’” (Poster 1995:38). Charles Cheung (2004) and Daniel Chandler (1998) examine how personal homepages “reflect the construction of their makers identities” (Chandler 1998: online). Cheung relates this to Giddens’ work (2004:60) although Chandler does not, but both neglect to acknowledge power relations or the fact that individuals must constantly refine their reflexive self-narratives (Slevin 2000:159). Fans’ use of online communities to construct fan/fan pure relationships is a central concern in my research. For, as argued in the previous chapter, fans may gain a sense of ontological security and self-identity from these relationships, often via the links made with others in a virtual community (see page 63). Thus, although the work of Chandler (1998), Cheung (2004), Poster (1998), and Slevin (2000) can be critiqued, their emphasis upon the impact of the Internet upon formation of self-identity and social bonds clearly informs this thesis.

However, Giddens’ theory of identity is not the only aspect of his work that is pertinent in my online research. The Internet’s ability to enable people in different locations to interact is an example of the time-space distancing (Slevin 2000:69-72) which Giddens argues is characteristic of late modernity (1991:20).<sup>52</sup> My interest here is in the ways that time-space distancing might cause fan cultures to become segregated by offline geographical constraints (Hill and Calcutt 2001; Hills 2006) and how this relates to hierarchies and capital. An increase in ‘just-in-time fandom’ in which fans post during shows to demonstrate “the ‘timeliness’ and responsiveness of their devotion” (Hills 2002:178) means that overseas fans are often excluded from the ensuing discussions. This inevitably leads to rifts and the privileging of some fans over others as

falling out of time with this spatio-temporal rhythm means falling out of the newsgroups’ mutually reinforcing spheres of anticipation and speculation, or

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<sup>52</sup> The Internet’s impact upon the concept of nation-states (Everard 2000; Mitra 1997) and the negotiation of national identity within fan cultures (Bury 2004; Hudson 2004) have also been explored.

indeed revealing a geographical difference which marks the poster as inevitably and informationally 'alien' to the group's [...] composition (Hills 2002:176).

Thus, the Internet has not eradicated geographical constraints, instead contributing to ways in which national boundaries must be policed within fan communities (e.g. the use of spoiler warnings to protect those in countries where shows have yet to be screened). However, the issue of timeliness is not restricted to 'just-in-time' fandom. For example, the ability to post during work hours is crucial in remaining in-step with a community and avoiding having to 'catch up' with what one has missed since last posting (Kendall 1998).

Issues of temporality and time-space distancing are relevant in my work, as my case studies of *Big Brother UK*, *Neighbours* and *The West Wing* were selected due to their status as imported or cross-cultural shows or formats, in order to move away from the theoretical dualism of American versus British quality television (see pages 39-41). For example, my case study of *BB* fans' found that the notion of a 'true' or 'proper' *Big Brother* is nominal given the differences in rules in various countries (see page 134) whilst *The West Wing* was positioned in the UK as a form of 'mainstream cult' programme due to its screening on Channel 4 (see page 225-226). However, my selection of these programmes also results from the way that their cross-cultural status related to the routines of their scheduling. There are lapses in US/UK screening times in *The West Wing* fandom or Australia and the UK within *Neighbours* fandom and, although *Big Brother* is an international phenomenon (Mathijs and Jones 2004), *Big Brother UK* offers viewers varying levels of immediacy depending upon their primary point of engagement with the show (see chapter five). Thus, the time-space distancing of the Internet enables those within the countries of origin to display their increased knowledge (Hills 2006b:71) and accrue capital or power. This forces those who must wait for shows to be screened to refrain from participation in online discussions or risk being 'spoiled' by discovering upcoming events before they are aired. However, with the exception of *BBUK* fandom, these issues were less pertinent in each online community than I imagined.

This section has outlined previous theorisations of community, hierarchy, identity, and time-space distancing in work on online fandom and has delineated how these issues inform my own research. However, prior studies have also negotiated the theoretical and ethical issues involved in Internet research, and I now consider more practical methodological issues, beginning with my conciliation of my fan/academic identity when researching objects I am also a fan of. In the final section of this methodology I consider the ethical implications of online research before moving on to outline the structure of the empirical chapters that follow.

### **Academic/fan identities in online research**

This chapter has outlined the key debates which have characterised Internet fan studies, primarily discussions over online spaces as communities and hierarchies and the issue of online identity. Having linked these arguments to the key concerns of my own research (i.e. power and capital, and self-identity), this next section outlines more specific methodological issues. Given my declaration in chapter one regarding my own emotional investments in each of the programmes I am examining in this thesis, this chapter considers how my status as a 'scholar-fan' (Hills 2002) influenced my methods. Indeed, this discussion follows prior work which urges an emphasis upon self-reflexivity (Hine 2000; Walkerdine 1986) when conducting online fieldwork.

Despite my fannish interests, I was not an active participant at any of the online boards I chose to analyse. This proved problematic as involvement with the studied communities can prove beneficial as those thought of as 'good' community members encourages a belief that fans will be represented fairly in the resultant research (Baym 2000:24). However, being a fan does not necessarily allow one access to a fan community and the requisite tale of how such contact was achieved is characteristic of many studies;

[one must have] negotiated access, observed interactions and communicated with participants. These descriptions set up a relationship in which the ethnographer has an extensive and sustained experience of the field site that the reader is unlikely to share (Hine 2000:46).

Thus, my status as a ‘lurker’ at each of the communities I examined and my emphasis on relatively short snapshots of a variety of fan communities rather than a continuing ethnographic approach meant I did not have large amounts of time to build trust with communities. However, researchers “get close to those studied as a way of understanding what their experiences and activities *mean to them*” (Emerson *et al* 1995:12),<sup>53</sup> and whilst my research cannot be understood as a traditional ethnography, its emphasis on the experiences of fans and my familiarity with the texts I am researching, means that it does attempt an ‘ethnographic way of seeing’ (Bird 2003:8).

My status as a fan was, thus, crucial in winning the trust of questionnaire respondents and I engaged in email exchanges with several, often divulging aspects of my own self-identity. Indeed, it is often “only by disclosing narrative about the self, and therefore entering into autoethnographic techniques, that rapport [is] possible” (Roberts and Sanders 2005:306) and personal disclosures may encourage fans to participate in research. However, given the increased interactivity of the Internet such dialogue also raises the possibility of

subjects ‘talking back’, questioning and displacing the researcher’s authority [...] the interactive nature of the [Internet] potentially leads to a questioning of the researcher’s conceptual and methodological assumptions by ‘subjects’ (Gajjala 2002:182).

Whilst the contribution of fan participants to finished research is documented (Jenkins 1992:130) and disagreements over interpretations may be acknowledged in the finished research without necessarily changing the conclusions made (Berger 2001:515; Josselson 1996), the Internet’s reciprocity may lead to fans expecting to have an influence over research (Bury 2005:30). Clifford Geertz argues that the traditional ethnographer’s inscriptions of the social discourses he witnesses are ‘contestable’ (2000:29) by fellow scholars but also by the subjects under scrutiny (Rosenau 1992:79). Similarly, the Internet has “ma[d]e it possible for the subjects studied to far more easily turn the gaze and the inscription back upon the ethnographers” (Gatson and Zweerink 2004b:196).

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<sup>53</sup> See also Bird (2003:7); Miller and Slater (2000:21); Hammersley and Atkinson (1995:1); Wolcott (1999).

These closer links between subjects and researchers may also lead to an academic desire to please respondents and avoid interpretations they may find disagreeable (Thomas 2002:182).<sup>54</sup>

However, online researchers outside fan studies have debated participant influence, concluding that a policy of non-intervention is the most ethically appropriate (Heath *et al* 1999:455). Given these conclusions why have fan studies so insistently demanded the incorporation of fan feedback into academic work? It is my contention that this results from the insistence on the reciprocity that the Internet is presumed to have encouraged although, as argued in chapter two, this reciprocity is largely assumed to occur between fans and producers (see page 36). Furthermore, fan-scholars investigating online fandom often seek to maintain the ‘dominant discourse of community’ and the associated reciprocity which I outlined above. Despite this, much as with the fan/producer relationships discussed in chapter two, genuinely reciprocal interaction between researchers and fans is rarely possible. Dissenting fan feedback is often outlined to “put into brackets, to some degree, the truth claims being made” (Jenkins and Hills 2001:online) but it is the researcher who ultimately “includes, excludes, arranges and manipulates the ‘secondhand’ memories in order to construct a coherent narrative in which she has material and symbolic investments” (Bury 2005:30). Such comments indicate that, whilst researchers may detail fan feedback, fans can rarely influence the outcomes of research and their contributions are often little more than footnotes to demonstrate the ethical accountability of the researcher. Although genuine collaboration between fans and researchers (Green, Jenkins and Jenkins 1998; Jenkins 2006c:61) would be a fruitful way forward in fan studies, I question the theoretical, empirical, and ethical merit of incorporating fan comments without granting them the necessary space they deserve. Ultimately, to include such feedback in a limited manner does a disservice to the insightful and articulate points that fans have to make. However, the desire to comment

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<sup>54</sup> Such moves are not without their dangers for research participants. As John notes, “goals of authenticity, reciprocity, and intersubjectivity” (1996:118) may be more dangerous “than the masculinist, objectifying methods they criticize, precisely because professed beliefs of mutual respect are apt to hide relations of authority, exploitation and manipulation unavoidable in fieldwork” (Gajjala 2002:184).



on research is an unavoidable side effect of fans' increase in awareness of the academic interest in them and it is to this issue and other ethical matters that I now turn.

### **Access and ethics in online research**

The increasing usage of the Internet for research means that fans cannot “fail to be aware of their status as an ‘object of study’, or as a resource in the production of academic work” (Hills 2002:173). Thus, although participants usually co-operate with academic research and sometimes openly relish the opportunity to be studied (Reid 1996:171; Rutter and Smith 2005:90), many are suspicious of outsiders who may misrepresent them in the resultant project.<sup>55</sup> In some extreme cases, online research must be abandoned if access cannot be granted (Gajjala 2002). Tolerance by a community is essential as there is often open hostility toward those who violate the established codes of the group (Sanders 2005) and overt attempts to conduct research can be construed as ‘spamming’ (the act of bombarding a group (or individual) with unwanted emails, messages, or postings). Oftentimes the very declaration of research interest alters the dynamics of an online community, resulting in being ignored or ostracised by a group (Bell 2001:199). Thus, I opted to assume the role of a ‘lurker’ when analysing postings. Lurkers have been characterised as “parasitic, as invasive” (Hills 2002:173) or ‘leeches’, taking from communities without offering their own input (Paccagnella 1997) whilst they have been welcomed as valuable participants by others (Baym 1995:51). Indeed, lurking is accepted within many online communities (Baym 1995:51; Hills 2002:173; Menon 2007:356) and has been undertaken by some scholars (Gray 2005; Leaning 1998; Schaap 2002). However, it has been argued that failure to reveal one’s status as a researcher poses ethical problems<sup>56</sup> and that lurking “plac[es] the ethnographer at one end of the participant observer continuum [...] to whom all is accessible, without needing to enact a subject position” (Beaulieu 2004:147). However, following Leaning (1998), Schaap (2002) and Gray (2005), I argue that lurking is a valid research form as it is a method that non-intrusively fits into the research environment. Thus, I refrained from revealing my

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<sup>55</sup> See Berger (2001:515); Ellis (1995:87); Kendall (1998:71); Symonds (2003b).

<sup>56</sup> See Bell (2001:198); Capurro and Pingel (2002); Heath *et al* (1999); Hine (2000:23); Lindlif and Shatzer (1998:179).

presence to communities whilst collecting postings for analysis, concurring with Leaning's position that we should

concentrate on methods that seem in tune with the world in which we exist rather than seeking to satisfy a set of abstract and possibly theoretically inapplicable ethical codes. Non participation observation [...] fits the local environment better than interviewing or any other method (Leaning 1998: online).

These online postings comprise a fan "shadow- text" (Hills 2002:176), which enables examination of fan interactions (fan/fan relationships) and specific reading formations (fan/object relationships). However, Internet research has not merely allowed off-line fan activities to be unproblematically transposed onto the computer screen (Clerc 1996:51) and the Internet is not a "transparent form of mediation" which holds the "essence [of fandom] up to the academic gaze" (Hills 2002:175). Postings are "representations of [social] experiences, constructed first by the participants themselves and then by the researcher in the analysis of the data and the presentation of the findings as a coherent text" (Bury 2005:29). Thus, throughout my research, I was cautious of taking fans' own declarations as "transparent and authoritative" (Bury 2005:30) and viewed these instead as performative displays of fandom (Hills 2005:ix-xiii) (see page 248).

There are also ethical issues which must be negotiated as the Internet blurs "categories such as public/private, audience/author, producer/consumer, and text/human subject" (Gajjala 2002:184). Although personal emails and conversations (e.g. MSN Messenger) constitute private communication, how do we categorise postings made on message boards, forums, and social networking sites (Kitchin 2003:103)? The "technological point of view" (Frankel and Siang 1999:13) suggests that easy accessibility means that such forums are public (Allen 1996; Allington 2007; Herring 1996; Reid 1996), whilst others posit that such communications are private (Knapp 1997; Poster 1997; Waskul and Douglas 1996:132). Others suggest that participants themselves must define the public/private nature of online spaces (Cavanagh 1999; Homan 1991) and that the issue may be one of alienation if there is an implicit rule that members cannot benefit from the use of group communication (Bakardjieva and Feenberg 2001:236) Thus, paradoxically,

it is often the very investment members have in online community that researchers wish to examine that makes it so difficult for them to complete any research at all.

These debates are inextricably linked with time/space distancing (see above) and whether online communication is written or spoken for, if postings can conceivably be studied as texts, “our only responsibilities as researchers lie in issues of intellectual property rights” (Cavanagh 1999: online). Although Baym suggests that Internet communication is “a novel hybrid between written, oral, interpersonal, and mass communication” (2000:13), Hine argues that delayed online interaction means that postings are textual and that research is a process of understanding “the meanings which underlie and are enacted through these textual practices” (2000:50). Online spaces can therefore be seen to resemble newspaper articles or other archival data and “as analogous to letters published in magazines or newspapers, being accessible to anyone who can access the World Wide Web” (Allington 2007:50). Study of postings is therefore ethically acceptable since it “does not constitute an interaction with a human subject, and [...] avails itself of existing records” (Walther 2002:207). Thus, following Allington (2007), Frankel and Siang (1999), Herring (1996), Sudweeks and Rafaeli (1995) and Walther (2002), I argue that, given their textual nature, once postings enter the public domain they can be studied without the explicit permission of each poster. However, in taking measures to ensure the anonymity of those referenced in my work it is my hope that harm to participants can be avoided. I obtained informed consent from those who responded to my online questionnaires by providing them with information about my work and asking them to complete a standard ethics form in an online format (see appendix four) (Walther 2002:213). However, permission for use of postings is difficult to attain due to the transitory nature of online environments in which posters often leave communities. Thus, I am adhering to the notion of ‘implied consent’, due to the public nature of Internet postings (Mann and Stewart 2000:45; Walther 2002:212) as “the author could not reasonably expect to exclude any person from gaining access to his or her words, even if any particular individual were not specifically envisioned as part of the audience” (Reid 1996:170). However, to maintain anonymity all postings in my research

are identified by an assigned pseudonym along with the title and date or number of this posting.

More comprehensive lists of measures one can take in order to assure greater anonymity including omitting references to the name or type of group examined (King 1996), but such actions appear to undermine the very objectives of studying online fandom in the first place. If one cannot refer by name to the community under examination, how can one offer their research as an example of how this community works? It is worth noting here that King (1996) and Waskul and Douglas (1996) undertake social studies research and it is understandable that they make efforts to avoid revealing identities of participants given the highly sensitive issues concerning health problems, abuse, or deviant behaviour that they explore. Thus, their recommendations are located within psychological or science-based subject areas and may not be applicable to other areas of humanities research (White 2002:249). However, I argue that fandom is less stigmatised than revealing one's status as a survivor of abuse or an AIDS patient and that we often overtly display our media preferences through clothing, merchandise, or conversation. For example, whilst people may not wish to discuss their intimate health problems in off-line public spaces, it is hard to imagine anyone who would feel uncomfortable talking about their favourite band or film. Thus, I am not adhering to the strictures proposed by King (1996).

Having outlined my methods and the ethical implications inherent in online research, I wish to conclude this methodology before presenting my empirical data in the remainder of this thesis.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has outlined some of the theoretical and methodological issues inherent in Internet fan studies, detailing how these debates have impacted upon my own research. Given my interest in the duality of fandom as both community and hierarchy, and my use of Giddens' work on self-identity the ways in which these concepts have been used in

online research is of great relevance. I argued in this chapter that prior work on online fandom has been characterised by a 'dominant discourse of community' which emphasises the communal nature of online spaces and appears reluctant to acknowledge the potential for hierarchical stratification and power struggles. As noted, even work that does consider hierarchies (MacDonald 1998), rarely links this to capital despite, as discussed in chapter three, the prevalence of Bourdieuan work on fandom. I suggested, instead, that online fandom must be considered as both communal and hierarchical; as a site of cohesive interpretation *and* battles over discursive power. Furthermore, I drew on the work of Chandler (1998), Cheung (2004), Poster (1995) and Slevin (2000) to argue that the Internet offers a site for negotiation of identity and self-reflexive narratives. Given my interest in the ways in which this 'reward' results from fan/fan and fan/object 'pure' relationships, this issue will be considered in each of my three empirical studies. I then turned to methodological concerns, negotiating the objectivity/subjectivity dualism which characterises much Internet and fan studies and arguing that my research cannot be decontextualised from society or from my own reflexive self-narrative (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995:16). I also considered ethical issues of access and privacy, offering a rationale for my selection of the methods of textual analysis of online postings and questionnaires. Although, as noted above, my decision to collect data from communities as a 'lurker' is controversial, this approach lends itself to my research as it allowed collection of data without influencing the site of study (Beaulieu 2004:146) and it replicated the activities of many of the fans who post at the forums I analysed (Leaning 1998).

Having outlined how this research was undertaken and considered the major theoretical and ethical dualisms which inform my methodological approach I wish, in the next three chapters, to discuss my empirical data. The first chapter examines an example of the 'lowbrow' genre of non-fictional reality television, *Big Brother UK 7*. This case study focuses on a temporary text which was screened almost constantly over a thirteen week period in 2006. My case study of *BBUK7* is interested in how the temporal rhythms built into *BB* and fans' knowledge that the show is moving towards a definite end-point impacts upon how they draw fan ontological security from the show. The dailiness and

live-ness of the programme means that these fans are uniquely placed to experience a sense of ‘closeness’ to the housemates, and I consider how fans formulate a sense of self-identity through ‘being like’ the contestants or, in some cases, overtly distancing themselves from them. The chapter also considers fan responses when they perceive the ‘proper’ *Big Brother* to be under threat by violations of the show’s basic rules (e.g. allowing previously evicted housemates to return to the house). These debates reveal fan responses when aspects of a show which contribute to their self-identities are threatened or undermined. Finally, this analysis explores the distinctions fans make about the contestants and, I argue, their debates over the authenticity of housemates means that the Bourdieuan concept of *illusio* may prove to be one of the key ideologies of *Big Brother*.

My second case study examines fans of the Australian soap opera *Neighbours*. In contrast to the temporary *BBUK*, *Neighbours* is a ‘constant’ programme, having aired in the same time-slot in the UK for over twenty years. As I will detail in chapter six, soap opera is widely perceived to engender a sense of closeness with the characters and I explore how the stability of *Neighbours*’ presence in the schedules contributes to fans’ identity and ontological security and how they responded when news of the show’s move from the BBC to Channel Five was announced. I also found, much as in my consideration of *BB* fans, that fans of *Neighbours* made their own value judgements over what constituted the ‘proper’ show and what was classified as ‘real *Neighbours*’. However, whilst *BB* fans’ discussion emphasised the breaking of core rules of the show, these fans were concerned with the violation of the ethos of the show and the characters. Such debates resulted in a vitriolic exchange with one of the show’s writers, highlighting the constant process of negotiation that fans engage with in their online relationships with one another and with the producers of their fan objects.

In my final empirical chapter I examine the ‘highbrow’ genre of drama, considering an example of what has been characterised as contemporary ‘quality television’, *The West Wing*. Although *TWW* was an ongoing serial the show’s cancellation was announced as I began my fieldwork, enabling me to consider the specific point in which a TV show moves from being an on-going text to what I refer to as a ‘dormant’ one. Thus, this final

chapter examines many of this thesis' central concerns through the lens of fans' awareness of the impending conclusion of *TWW*, enabling me to consider the impact on their fan identities and their ontological security in a period of 'post-object fandom'. By offering three distinct case studies my interest in fan/object and fan/fan relationships, and in both Bourdieaun and Giddensian approaches to fandom can be explored, offering divergent examples from each fan community which, nevertheless, present some coherent themes and discourses. As noted in chapter one, "few studies of fans have sought to explore the parallels between fans of different texts or genres" (Sandvoss 2005:8). Despite this it is my hope, following Steve Bailey's (2006) work, that my selection of different but complementary texts and their surrounding fan communities will work together to highlight the fan practices, readings, and reflections that occur within each specific cultural site.

## Chapter Five

### Reality, routine and reward: Examining fans of *Big Brother UK7*

I have previously outlined the theoretical frameworks which structure this thesis; Pierre Bourdieu's ideas about cultural value, field, and capital and Anthony Giddens' work on self-identity and ontological security. Drawing on these approaches I presented a conceptualisation of fandom which characterises fans as involved in Giddensian 'pure relationships' with their fan objects and with fellow fans (see appendix two). These relationships vary in their levels of engagement and, thus, in their levels of 'purity', enabling us to account for the impact of Bourdieuan factors such as distinction and capital within fan cultures (see page 69). I then detailed the theoretical and ethical dualisms which impacted upon my methods of analysing online postings and fan questionnaires. I now wish, in the next three chapters, to discuss my empirical research and consider how issues of ontological security, identity, and cultural value manifested themselves in fans' own words. The chapters follow a logical progression, moving from the 'lowbrow' genres of reality television and soap opera through to the more 'highbrow' genre of drama (Mittell 2004:15). They also follow a structure based on the temporality of each programme, beginning with a temporary show (the annual *Big Brother* which is aired almost continuously for a finite period of time), a permanent show (*Neighbours* which has aired in regular time-slots for over twenty years) and concluding with a 'dormant' show (*The West Wing* which ceased broadcast in 2006). This chapter structure presents a coherent narrative regarding threats to fans' ontological security and its renegotiation in the face of changes to a show's fundamental rules and routines (*Big Brother*), unwelcome re-writing of characters and a programme's history (*Neighbours*), and the total cessation of a show (*The West Wing*).

In this first case study I examine fans of reality television, in particular the seventh UK series of *Big Brother* (hereafter *BBUK7*) which aired for thirteen weeks over the summer of 2006 and is therefore a 'temporary' text. Furthermore, although the show is an international format, this particular series was specific to the UK and it is also the only non-fictional text I examine in this research. This chapter considers how fans of *BBUK7*



formed fan/fan and fan/object relationships and how the non-fiction status of this show shapes the surrounding fandom. I analysed the data collected through the theoretical framework of fan/object and fan/fan relationships established in chapter three, focusing upon several key areas; temporality and routine, community and hierarchy, and the distinctions made regarding the show itself, contestants/housemates, and other fans. However, I wish firstly to examine the ways in which fans drew on *BBUK7* to perform identity work and use their identifications with the housemates and on-screen romantic relationships to form reflexive self-narratives.

### **Big Brother and reflexive narratives of self**

As argued in chapter three, individuals develop a reflexive self-narrative which must “continually integrate events which occur in the external world, and sort them into the on-going ‘story’ about the self” (Giddens 1991:54) and is “negotiated through linked processes of self-exploration and the development of intimacy with the other” (Giddens 1991:97). As I have posited this process is often impacted upon by the media and fans may draw upon personal experience to discuss *BB*, intertwining events with their own lives or using on-screen events to help them work through real-life issues. Reality television invites discussion of personal issues as it offers “a site in which the psychological and emotional are foregrounded, enjoyed and deliberated over” (Roscoe 2001:478) and, *Big Brother* particularly, emphasises self-reflexivity, performance and the representation and negotiation of the self (Corner 2004; Hill 2002; Holmes 2004; Holmes and Jermyn 2004). As the housemates display their ‘selves’ via “affection, solidarity, insincerity, confrontation and downright aggression” (Corner 2002:261), fans discuss their actions and motivations. However, such debate also demonstrates negotiation of fan identity and talk about *Big Brother* “is as much about ourselves as it is about the participants – our water cooler conversations are the site for viewers to do our own identity work” (Dovey 2004:247). In this section I consider these ideas via my empirical data, considering how fans identify or resist identification with various housemates and how this impacts upon their self-identities.

*BB* fans often display a “conventional development of identification with particular contestants and narrative outcomes” (Turner 2005:419), aligning themselves with specific housemates to position themselves in various ways (Abrams and Hogg 1990; Chandler and Griffiths 2004:41). Some fans who completed questionnaires for this research were keen to talk about their perceived similarities with housemates, with these usually correlating with their favourite contestants. For example, one stated; “I am definitely a little bit like Nikki, I even hear myself speak like her quite often when I don't even mean to. She's also childlike and I can be a bit that way” (Hailey). Others make similar claims, commenting that “I feel most similar to Pete [...] When you come from a working-class background and don't fit in for some reason, it just seems natural to gravitate to things like the punk scene” (Ed) or “[Glyn] is only 1 year older than me and seems like he wants to go far in life like I do (eg. university etc...) He is also very friendly and quite sensitive like me and can also be quite naive at times, again, like me” (Felix). Fans also described personal situations that they felt were similar to those experienced by the housemates, particularly the issue of bullying in relation to the housemates' treatment of the contestant Shahbaz which led to his departure in the show's first week;

well when they all rounded on Shahbaz it kinda brought me back to school.. so i felt really bad for him (Harry)

when everyone singled out Shahbaz, and “shoved him too the side” as a “misfit”, reminded me of when I was at school. If you don't fall into a certain “category” you're an easy target (Macy).

For other fans, it was the relationships between the housemates that were most familiar. A female respondent discussed the apparently suffocating Pete/Lea friendship in *BBUK7*, explaining that “I did used to have a male lodger who became obsessed with me to the point I felt suffocated. He moved out in the end and I haven't had a lodger since” (Kacy). Another fan suggests that such similarities with the contestants is inevitable as the

‘storylines’ are simply real life & everyone goes through similar real-life situations at one point or another. The unrequited love (Lisa & Pete) and the bitching (having gone to an all-girls school, this is definitely something I can relate to) or the drunken flirting (Nikki & Pete) or the early budding romance (Nadia).

Such statements of similarity indicate that fans did use *BBUK7* to perform identity work and to develop self-narratives. As discussed in chapter three, Cornel Sandvoss argues that our chosen fan objects are “intrinsically interwoven with our sense of self, with who we are, would like to be, and think we are” (2005:96). However, whilst Sandvoss suggests that “objects of fandom [...] gain the ability to profoundly shape the fan” (2005:112), this appears to refer only to the fact that fandom may lead fans to accept and adjust to “changing external textual characteristics of their object of fandom, even when they are understood to be in opposition to the fan’s world view and self-image” (2005:112). Thus, for example, fans may adapt to changes in texts even if they appear to contradict their own ideological views of issues such as gender, nationality, and so on. For instance, Sandvoss offers the example of a football fan who, despite previously declaring his dislike of Dutch people, was happy to accept a Dutch player on his team (2003:52). There is, however, no indication that this completely eradicated his feelings for the Dutch outside of his football fandom. However, it can be argued that intense identification with the fan object may actually *alter* fans’ ‘world view and self-image’ as “media fandom can potentially act as one motor of subjective/hermeneutic and social transformation” (Hills 2007b:151). Thus, rather than attachment to the text merely causing fans to disregard their self-identity or views this may, in fact, facilitate change in the way one views the world outside of the object itself. This “powerfully and vitally self-transformative dimension which frequently accompanies ‘becoming a fan’” (Hills 2007b:151) or, indeed, ‘being a fan’, is highlighted by my empirical data. In chapter seven I discuss how some *West Wing* fans’ attachment to the show prompted real-life involvement in politics (see page 205) but for *BB* fans their fandom more commonly resulted in an alteration to their social attitudes. For example, some used *BB* to reflect changes in their own self-narratives, finding their views of the world challenged or using the show to modify their own behaviour:

BB teaches me that it's wrong to [make snap decisions about people] as I can hate someone at first and end up thinking they're great (Hailey).

the show makes me question my perceptions of people. Take Lea for example. If I saw her walking down the street or in a club, I would immediately form an

image of her, a negative image, but seeing her on the show has made me realise that blonde hair and enormous breasts do not a woman define (Nadia).

you begin to see characteristics in different [housemates] that you might identify with yourself, and it's interesting to compare how they handle things to how you yourself might. For example, Pete's ability to see the good in people, and his sunny disposition, is something I try to remember when I'm in a stressful situation (Ed).

However, some respondents refused identification with housemates, dismissing them as 'mad' (Bea), 'freaks' (Daisy), 'loons' (Jackie) or 'weirdos' (Harry). Some expressed a desire not to be like any of the housemates, commenting that they were "not at all [similar to any of them] - thank God" (Daniel) or 'hoped' they weren't in any way like the housemates (Gabby, Kacy). Some fans' responses were more complex, overtly indicating that they didn't feel they were like any of the current series' 'crazy' housemates whilst simultaneously discussing such similarities. One female fan stated that she was "not at all [like the housemates], At least I hope, although I do have the same sort of opinions as Aisleyne" (Faith) whilst another offered the proviso that, whilst they were "wierdos this series... [...] if i was to compare myself to past series contestants and recent contestants... i'd be a cross between Maxwell and Richard... a bit of a joker with a bit of diplomacy and brains!" (Harry). Such acts of distancing are indicative of identity building, suggesting that fans wish to distinguish themselves from those whose behavior they perceive as inappropriate or 'crazy'. It is perhaps no coincidence that fans themselves are often accused of being 'crazy' (Jenson 1992) and fans may wish to avoid aligning themselves with contestants who they perceive to share similarities with negative associations of fans. Refusing to identify with housemates also allows fans to assert individuality and display agency which has been described as the key ideology of *BB* (Holmes 2004b:online). Indeed, the possibility of negative identification and wishing to avoid identification with a fan object can be just as important in constructing self-identity and, drawing on Sandvoss' (2005) work, as discussed above, we can add the concept of what can be termed 'negative mirroring' to his useful understandings of fan identification.

As outlined in chapter one, fan identity can be established through 'shipping', the practice of supporting a particular on-screen romantic relationship (see page 3). However, as I

argued, shipping has rarely been considered in the soap or drama genres and, whilst I seek to rectify this in my other case studies, even more neglected is shipping in the reality television genre. This is most likely due to its focus upon ‘real’ people rather than characters and, thus, it has received little academic attention. For example, in their large-scale audience studies of *Big Brother* fans neither Janet Jones (2003) nor Annette Hill (2002) discuss viewer responses to onscreen romantic relationships. The only notable exception is Andacht’s examination of fans of Latin American *Big Brother* which found that many viewers viewed romantic relationships negatively, either as part of a housemate’s strategy to win the show or as inappropriate (2004:130). Although, as I shall discuss below, these views were echoed in my own study, Andacht’s work fails to consider the positive attachments some fans may feel to romantic relationships. It is this omission which I begin to rectify in my case study of one fan’s support for *Big Brother* ‘ships’ and this area which I suggest deserves greater consideration in academic work on reality television.

Shippers in many fan cultures often devise names for their ships to establish a subcultural reference, an in-joke which distinguishes those who recognise the meaning of the terms from those who do not (see, for instance, Scodari and Felder (2000) on ‘no-romos’ in *The X-Files* fandom.) *BBUK7* fans coined nicknames such as ‘Grikey’ (Grace/Mikey) (Adrian, June 9 2006, 23:40:13) and ‘Slimogen’ (Sezer/Imogen) (Angus, May 31 2006, 22:50:28) which were restricted to the fan cultures themselves. However, the fan term ‘Pikki’ (Pete/Nikki) was taken up by C4 (*Big Brother* Official Website 2006) and by the tabloid press (Daily Star 2006; Teeman 2006), thus co-opting fannish practices into the wider culture and demonstrating the show’s position as both ‘cult’ or ‘niched’ and ‘mainstream’ (Mathijs and Jones 2004:4) (see below). However, for the majority of fans at *BBGossip*, the use of such terms was derogatory, used to denote the relationships as fake or tasteless. This contrasts strongly with the more affectionate use of word-play which shippers in other fandoms engage in (Williams 2004) and, I would argue, is partially indicative of what Gray (2003) calls ‘anti-fandom’; that is, these *BB* viewers disliked the on-screen relationships and therefore constructed an anti-fandom around them. Indeed, even those who do not actively ship particular couples may find that their

opposition to this contributes to their sense of fan identity. Fans are often divided in their responses to *BB* relationships, with some attesting that romances “bored [them] to death” (Rae), were “tedious” (Felix), or could make them “just want to turn it off” (Macy). Others dismissed them as an aspect of gameplay and a way to increase celebrity status, gain media attention (Felix, Gareth) or to stay in the house for longer (Kacy). The prospect of using romance to gain further celebrity once evicted is one that fans are aware is a “stratagem to persuade the audience that what is a calculated gesture to win be taken as a passionate attraction for someone in the house” (Andacht 2004:130). In a debate over Pete’s relationships with female housemates, posters suggest:

I think the real reason they are all after Pete is that they are convinced he is the "winner of BB7".... OK and Hello shoots together ?? for example... for a few months and then move on (Adriana, June 23 2006, 21:21:13).

There is no great mystery over Pete's attractiveness to most of the female HMs. As I've said previously, they realise that he will be the winner and if they can manage to get on his arm for the next year they will be quids in!! (Arthur, July 10 2006, 16:14:14).

Fans were equally sceptical about the motives of housemates Grace and Mikey, again using the ‘magazine deal’ discourse as a shorthand for the falseness of the romance and referring to their “megabuck mag deal” (Alice, August 8 2006, 22:05:07) and their “tacky round of ever more ridiculous 'appearances', papping and goodie bags” (Audrey, August 8 2006, 22:04:35). Many fans found the ‘romances’ awkward, commenting that “I can’t bear the cringe fest that is bed time on this years BB” (Beatrice, May 24 2006, 23:55:54) or “This constant fawning all over each other leaves me looking for the remote” (Bianca, May 24 2006, 23:58:41), whilst another queried the appropriateness of the relationships; “urgh! They were in a shared bedroom, and they had cameras pointing on them” (Cordelia, June 16 2006, 21:49:09). The issue of ‘appropriate’ behaviour for couples was often raised, with one female respondent noting that “I dont mind the romantic relationships [...] but I dont like crude talk and behaviour (which is ironic coming from me as my son did exactly what I hate to see)” (Emma). This respondent offers her opinion on what interaction is deemed appropriate but also displays her subcultural and symbolic

capital via her allusion to her son having taken part in the show. Further correspondence with this respondent revealed that her son had taken part in one version of the show and this parent's first-hand experience of the show positions her with strong levels of fan capital.<sup>57</sup>

Many fans also made distinctions between 'real' and 'fake' relationships, often alluding to previous series' and 'golden ages' (Tulloch 1995:145) of the show. For example, *BBUK2*'s Paul and Helen "seemed more genuine although they have now split up" (Kacy), and "was one of the loveliest things on TV" (Gareth). However, fans acknowledge that, even if the relationships are not entirely genuine, provided that both partners are aware of the artificiality of the 'romance', they can be engaging;

if the romance is genuine then that is nice for them. If people do it to try to win favour that is also fine as long as both parties are aware of that. If someone takes advantage of another to stay in the game then that is a bit unfair as they are hurting other people (Edie).

For some fans, though, relationships become a focal point for their viewing of *BB* and they begin to actively ship certain contestants. I wish to offer a brief example of one fan who expressed in her questionnaire that "the romances are very possibly my favourite aspect [of *BB*]" (Faith). Although she followed other respondents in discriminating between 'genuine' and 'fake' romances, commenting that "Helen & Paul Was Sweet, The First *BB* Romance [...] The rest of the relationships appear to be rather fake, all except [*BB6*'s] Maxwell & Saskia!", this fan was notable due to the fact that her practices seem to correlate strongly with those seen in 'shipping' in fictional fandoms (see above). Her admission that "the fact that I love a good old love story has kept me awake until 4am on many nights, waiting to see if anything's going to happen!" (Faith) mirrors shippers of fictional relationships who avidly await new romantic developments to validate their

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<sup>57</sup> Due to the ethical constraints of my research I am prevented from giving any further details regarding the version of the show which this respondent's son appeared in. As I have assigned pseudonyms to all respondents in order to protect their anonymity, to reveal any further information runs the risk of potentially identifying this participant.

discursive claims over the 'correct' interpretation of the text (see chapter seven). Faith discusses her preferred ship, noting that,

I'm a romantic at heart [...] It sounds extremely sad, but I was devastated when I heard last week that [BB2's Paul and Helen] had split up. I honestly felt like two of my best mates had split up!! I suppose that's because I watched them fall in love, and in a way, it was the end of an era when I'd heard they'd split.

Here she attempts to ward off any suggestion of being obsessive with her self-defensive qualifier of being 'sad' (Barker and Brooks 1998:273). Faith also notes that "I've had many disagreements in the past 6 years, trying to convince the cynics that certain couples in the house are genuine! The majority of times, I've been right, even if the couples are no longer together now!" (Faith). However, there is no way to gauge whether this fan's claims to have been correct about relationships are valid. Her contention to have been 'right' is impossible to validate given that she has no access to the personal feelings of housemates. Rather, this statement must be viewed as a strategy to claim discursive superiority over those fans who refused to accept the plausibility of specific 'ships' as she has been vindicated by developments which suggest that various relationships were genuine. Again, this parallels fictional genres in which fans who support specific romantic pairings often clash with those who fail to similarly interpret the text (Chin 2002; Scodari and Felder 2000). Indeed, shippers make continual bids for legitimation as the power dynamics can change with the airing of new episodes or when characters leave or return to a show. Shippers also seek to defend their own practices and devalue the interpretations of opposing groups but there can be no real power as no one group is ever able to enforce discursive reading practices. Each group interprets the text differently and therefore, whilst those whose ships are currently portrayed on-screen and legitimated by the text may make a claim for power, they are continually competing with other shippers. Thus, Faith's suggestion that her interpretation of *Big Brother* relationships is "correct" is a means of bidding for subcultural capital, suggesting that her fan/object relationship has become less 'pure' via her acquisition of rewards other than ontological security or identity work (see pages 69-70).



As well as enabling fans of *BBUK* to attempt to enforce their own reading of the show, shipping may be another way in which fans can use the show to perform identity work. One of the pleasures of shipping is the “voyeuristic quality to witnessing the unfolding of intimate and emotional details from another’s (albeit fictional) life” (Harrington and Bielby 1995:123) and those who support *BB* romances may experience the same vicarious pleasures (Snow 1988:205) in seeing the emotional lives of other people. This is not to suggest that these fans lack their own romantic lives but that these ‘limerant pleasures’ of seeing others fall in love provides another facet to the fan/object pure relationship. This may enable fans to relate the development of *BB* romances to their own experiences, allowing them to negotiate reflexive self-narratives as such events are often “internalized by viewers and stored for potential use at appropriate moments in their own lives” (Hill 2005:90). For example, one fan likens the *Celebrity Big Brother* relationship between housemates Preston and Chantelle to a situation in her own life: “I found myself in an almost identical situation [...] I found myself seeing how Chantelle had actually dealt with it and trying to apply that to my own situation” (Gabby).

Although the examples of Faith and Gabby are only limited examples of shipping within the *Big Brother* fandom I examined, I wish to suggest that this is an aspect of reality television fandom which warrants future research. The practice of shipping has been largely ignored within the genre due to the problematic fact that such romances are occurring between ‘real’ people and not fictional characters that can be written into a relationship. I suggest that a starting point for exploration of this issue is the rise in ‘real person slash’ in which fans write sexually explicit stories about celebrities (Allington 2007:44; Pugh 2005:159) whilst acknowledging that these figures and their personas are simultaneously ‘real’ and ‘fictional’ (Busse 2006:209). Although such investigations are beyond the scope of this thesis it is my proposal that such fannish reappropriation of people whose actions are beyond narrative or authorial control may help us to begin to theorise shipping of couples in reality television in future research.

So far I have discussed how fans use *BBUK7* to perform identity work and develop reflexive self-narratives through their responses to *BB* housemates and relationships. This

is, as I established in chapter three, one of the rewards that fans attain from their engagement in ‘fan pure relationships’ and the identification (or refusal of identification) that *BBUK7* fans engage in highlights the importance of this to their sense of self-identity. In the next section I consider the second reward fans gain from fan pure relationships; ontological security. *BB* occupies a unique position within UK television schedules and I wish to consider how its distinctive temporality impacts upon fan self-identity and the distinctions and value judgments they make about the show.

### **“Been there done that”: Ontological security, twists and ‘predictable unpredictability’**

As argued in chapter three, the routinisation of everyday life contributes to ontological security (Giddens 1981:37) and this can be fostered by viewing a television show which is screened at regular times (Moore 2005:20). I thus proposed that fandom of specific objects may also contribute to a sense of ontological security given its omnipresence in the fan’s life. In this section I argue that *BB*’s scheduling in the UK contributes to ontological security for fans and that this is threatened when the primary rules of the show are undermined. I also consider the opposing responses fans have to the ‘twists’ which producers add to the show each year, suggesting that contrasting fan discourses are indicative of two very different ways of negotiating the ontological security attained from fandom of the show.

Much work has emphasised the ritual elements of *BB*, analysing it as a television event (Couldry 2002) and contrasting with the notion of television as something which is only casually ‘glanced’ at (Ellis 1982:137). Indeed,

certain types of TV are culturally and discursively defined as events – as wholly of their moment – rather than as texts which can be authored, or which might require repeat viewing, or which can be isolated from their surrounding contexts and appreciated aesthetically (Hills 2007:46).

An increase in event television may be “indicative of a[n] [...] economic strategy of investing in a particular high-profile product” (Holmes and Jermyn 2004:15) which is

guaranteed to make money, echoing cinematic practice. It is thus possible that discursive strategies by producers and critics to position reality television as an 'event' are undertaken in order to vouch for the 'quality' of the genre, drawing upon culturally valued discourses from the field of cinematic production (see chapter two). However, whether event television can be correlated with 'quality TV' is contentious, given the blockbuster's precarious nature within the cinematic field (Stringer 2003). As Barker and Brooks note, blockbusters are ephemeral and transitory, describing them as "events, phenomena, spectacular experiences [...] honestly 'commercial' about their wish and intention to make money [...] hyped, everywhere, 'must see' or they don't exist, yet at the same time evanescent and leave few traces" (1998:185). Furthermore, the "carpet-bombing promotion strategy" (King and Krzywinska 2000:95) associated with blockbuster films can be seen in *BB*'s blanket saturation of the media. Thus, given *BB*'s event status due to its temporality, constant media coverage and hyper-commerciality, it may be likened to a television blockbuster. It is also worth noting here that the high level of media attention on *Big Brother* in the UK is often attributed to the so-called Summer 'silly season' when Parliament is not in session and newspapers are starved of genuine stories (Savage 2006).

However, in addition to *BBUK*'s status as 'event television', another aspect of its unique temporality within TV schedules is its mimicry of 'real-life' rhythms, possessing "a powerful drive toward a climactic moment of resolution" and a "linear and irreversible [timeline]" (Scannell 2002:272). This ritual is emphasised by the processes of weekly nominations and evictions, an example of routine and repetition which echoes real-life time patterns. For example, audiences come to depend upon the evictions, which are designed to coincide with the end of the week;

if the pivotal time in the week is Friday evening, as that which is most looked forward to, then using that night as the weekly program-climax meshed perfectly with the time structures of daily life 'out there' in the real world (Scannell 2002:273).

However, as well as providing ontological security via the consistent scheduling of Friday night evictions, this emphasis upon the similarity between the contestants and the audience contributes to a feeling of intimacy between viewers and housemates (Kavka and West 2004:143). As fans watch the housemates prepare for the eviction (e.g. housemates often wear special eviction outfits, pamper themselves, or drink alcohol before the announcement is made), they can feel as though their world has similarities with the world of *BB*. Thus, the sense of 'being like' and identifying with the contestants is furthered via the temporal structures of the show.

However, this identification and intimacy was threatened as many *BBUK7* evictions were perceived by fans to have been manipulated by the producers in various ways.<sup>58</sup> One poster commented on "the inevitable nomination/eviction fix. Is that 8 fixes in 9 weeks? The whole show is a fix" (Charles, July 21 2006, 22:29:23) whilst another notes, "[I] hope normal nominating starts next week. Main part of the show's fun [in my opinion]" (Helena, June 12 2006, 14:16:08). Although the process itself remained stable throughout these weeks (i.e. nominations and evictions were still announced with regularity) the fundamental tenets of these rituals had been undermined for some fans. However, for others, pleasures do not simply come from repetition and familiarity with the routines of the show (Harrington and Bielby 1995:125) and many enjoy the variations created by these twists;

the twists and turns of BB is what keeps me addicted (Hermione, August 5 2006, 01:21:03)

we are hoping that this promised "twist" will liven things up!! And possibly bring an Australian BB housemate (Adriana, June 23 2006, 21:53:07)

I'm a bit surprised at everyone being a bit po faced about all this. I like it. This series was desperate for something massive. This is needed and I hope it works (Dennis, June 30 2006, 22:57:47).

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<sup>58</sup> For example, producers banned several housemates from nominating due to rule breaking, automatically put them up for eviction or forced them to nominate publicly, thus ensuring that a greater number of contestants would face the public vote.

It could be argued that this element of surprise provides ontological *in*security for fans for, as discussed in chapter two, ontological insecurity may result from finding pleasure in shows that shock and confound us (Nelson 2007b:19). However, I wish to suggest that it is the expectation of twists themselves within *BBUK* fandom that provides pleasure for fans. Fans anticipate differences to previous series' and this expectation offers ontological security as it is a 'constant' and 'predictable' (Moore 2005:11) aspect of *BBUK*. However, this is paradoxical, leading to a sense of 'expected surprise' or 'predictable unpredictability'. This closely links to the concept of genre which, as Neale notes, is predicated upon "repetition and difference" (1980:48) or, more specifically, "difference *in* repetition" (1980:50). Similarly, whilst *BBUK7* fans do not wish the show to remain the same each year, they only accept differences which do not deviate from the generic conventions of the show (see below). It is this contained or "limited difference" (Neale 1980:49) (that is, difference *within* expectation) which ensures that, provided the fundamental rules are not broken, fans continue to gain pleasure from the show.

Thus, fans accept certain variations whilst rejecting others as fandoms must be able to tolerate change to avoid monotony. Posters establish their own criteria for twists, rejecting those that appear to be badly handled by the producers; "it was lovely to have a twist that came as a surprise and not signposted half a mile away and showcased on a special or a *BBLB*" (Iris, July 10 2006, 16:41:56). Fans also object to twists that are too dissimilar to the original concept of *BB*, and which have undermined the rules, primarily that evicted housemates should not return to the house (see below). Fans also dislike unoriginal twists and, when Nicki returned to the show, they complained that reintroducing an old housemate had already been achieved in *BBUK4*, with many referring to the re-entry of housemate Jon Tickle in that series;

Jon tickle has still got his 'been there done that t-shirt' hanging on his living room wall (Juliet, August 4 2006, 01:45:41)

[it is] galling that they should do this when it blatantly didnt work during *BB4* (Maria, August 4 2006, 01:47:35)

it's lazy of *BB*. We sent Tickle back in because he promised to be interesting but [...] it was dull (Duncan, August 4 2006, 10:59:22).

In such pronouncements, fans display the “power to gloss, and to write the aesthetic history of the show” (Tulloch 1995:145). The assertion that the *BBUK4* twist “blatantly didn’t work” displays subcultural capital via the longevity of fans’ involvement but it also enforces “an officially constituted reading formation which supervises reading of the show” (Tulloch 1995:145); that is, that both the series four twist and the current developments were unsuccessful and unwelcome. However, such attempts to discursively situate what constitutes the ‘proper’ *BB* can only ever be a fan construction given *BB*’s status as a variable television format (Moran 1998; Turner 2001b). As such, *BB* is highly exportable and its premise and rules are routinely modified for cultural specificity (Mathijs and Jones 2004; Roscoe 2001). Such transnational fluidity renders the notion of a ‘true’ *BB* nominal as the rules which *BBUK* fans seek to uphold are not necessarily enforced in foreign formats as, for example, American *BB* allows some contact with the outside world (Andrejevic 2004:154).

As I have discussed above, *BBUK* occupies a unique place within schedules due to its status as event television, its linear narrative, and its regular nominations and evictions. However, the temporality of the show also offers a distinctive way to examine the fan phenomenon of spoilers (the fan practice of revealing upcoming events in a television show and so on, before they are screened)<sup>59</sup>. This often contributes to power struggles between spoiled and unspoiled fans, with those ‘in the know’ able to demonstrate their knowledge and discursive power (Cantwell 2004; Jenkins 1995; Williams 2004). There has been limited discussion of spoilers within the reality TV genre, primarily in Derek Foster’s examination of *Survivor* fan communities which argued that the competitive nature of fans who revealed spoilers reflected the rivalry of the show itself (2004:270-272, see also Jenkins 2006). However, while Foster characterises spoiled fans as ‘anti-fans’ who sought “to spoil the ending of the show for others [...] [and to] declare one’s apathy about the show” (2004:277), *BBUK7* fans are most likely to read spoilers because of their attachment to contestants and impatience with waiting for narrative developments to unfold rather than due to a desire to ruin the surprise for other fans.

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<sup>59</sup> It is also possible to argue that rumours about players being signed to sports clubs or details of who is playing before matches are spoilers within sports fandom, or that news about album tracks, gig set listings, and so on are spoilers in music fandom.

In comparison to the pre-filmed *Survivor* spoilers in *BBUK7* seem less likely due to its ongoing 'live' status. However, scheduling differences mean that spoilers are possible as many viewers find out what is happening at different times. Channel 4 began live streaming of *BB* on its digital channel E4 in 2001 (Kavka and West 2004:144) and those viewing such streams see events as they happen (allowing the 15 minute time lapse for sound cuts for swearing or libelous content). Those with access to the website find out on average 15-20 minutes later via the official site or sooner if they access 'Live Update' threads. Others discover the day's main gossip on the daily E4 companion show *BBLB* and still more will discover the most recent happenings in the next day's tabloids or when the previous day's events are shown on the daily 10pm Channel 4 shows (although this is often felt to be 'out of date' by many fans (Jones 2004:227)). As one poster notes, "until tomorrow's highlights show the "highlight's house" hasn't done the nominations. It ruins the surprise of tomorrow if you know who is up today" (Edgar, July 10 2006, 22:25:48). Fans compare live feeds and highlights shows, discussing how producers manipulated events and created a "disjunctive and troubling awareness [...] that the two audiences were receiving two different versions of the 'reality' of the lives of the houseguests" (Wilson 2004:338).

In *BBUK7* fandom there is a distinction between what we can call 'naturally occurring' spoilers necessitated by the temporal lapse between live feeds and highlights shows and 'deliberate' spoilers regarding twists such as surprise evictions, new housemates, and so on. Many respondents acknowledge that, whilst they do not actively seek out spoilers, they cannot avoid information on forums or in the media;

if there printed in papers i read bout it but i dont try to guess or anything i like BB to suprise me (Calum),

I don't try and find out but a lot of the time I do find things out - usually by the forums I go to or other websites it cant be helped (Bea),

I always keep an eye on the various forums or the gossip mags, but I don't go out of my way to discover things. It spoils the anticipation (Gareth).

Many fans avoid spoilers, feeling that they ruin the surprise of watching events first-hand (Abby, Kacy, Macy, Daniel). One fan comments that “I'd rather find out when the producers want us to find out. They're planning the show to give the best suspense and drama, so why diminish the impact by looking for early info?” (Ed). Furthermore, another fan discursively distances herself from more devoted fans, noting “I dont go looking for them because im not that obsessed with it” (Gabby).

However, discussion of spoilers can help build community; “Its fun trying to guess, in the forum particularly, what changes and twists there may be [...] Its part of the prog[ramme] for me now” (Aaron). Spoilers have thus become an integral part of the *BB* experience for those who suggest that knowing about upcoming events heightens their interest; “If I know something is going to happen I will make a point of watching the show that night rather than just putting it on if there is nothing better on” (Edie). Some fans feel that spoilers are important to their identification with favourite contestants as they are able to “anticipate the reaction of various housemates, to the twists and turn of events” (Paige). For others the lure of knowledge supersedes their desire to be surprised, reflected in comments such as “I try not to [read spoilers] but i just cant help myself” (Barry). Given my suggestion that it may be the expectation of twists that provides ontological security for fans (see above) it is possible that many avoid spoilers in order to maintain the element of surprise. If ontological security can be gained from the expectation of shocks, then many fans may wish to preserve this by avoiding being spoiled. However, the fact that fans appear able to garner ontological security from being spoiled *or* unspoiled means that ontological security is being negotiated in different ways. For example, whilst some desire the experience of ‘predictable unpredictability’ through not knowing what lies in store on *BB*, others may seek out spoilers to gain “pleasure and comfort from viewing the known” (Gray and Mittell 2007:online). These differences in how a sense of trust in the fan/object relationship is navigated relates to the fact that ontological security cannot eradicate anxiety, but rather enables the individual to deal with the unexpected.<sup>60</sup> As Ian Craib notes,

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<sup>60</sup> See Willmott (1986) on Laing (1960) and Winnicott (1964).



reliance on routine is a defence against, not a cure for, anxiety [...] in psychoanalysis, ontological security involves the ability to deal with change and to recognise the routine as both necessary and comparatively ephemeral (1997b:357).

Thus, unspoiled fans appear to have a stronger sense of trust in the text itself, able to place their faith in potential on-screen events and feeling secure that they will be able to adapt to any changes in the show. Spoiled fans appear to have a weaker relationship with the text and have less trust in being able to tolerate future developments without knowing in advance what these will be via reading spoilers. Thus, their fan/object relationships are less able to withstand instability and these fans desire trust in the knowledge of future events, rather than in the text itself.

However, most fans refrained from discussing the ways that spoilers intersect with power hierarchies. Only one fan overtly declares such an interest, although conceding that her desire to know what is happening results from “helping to run a BB site, and having a slot on the radio about it” (Gabby). However, she claims to “feel like I have to keep on top of the news! I also get all of my family and friends asking me what the latest gossip is, so I feel it’s my duty to find out the gossip before most people do!” (Gabby). This response indicates the importance of spoilers when attaining social capital and symbolic capital via involvement with fan sites and radio shows. Indeed, to be in possession of spoilers, to be ‘in the know’ often equates to subcultural capital as “within the informational economy of the net, knowledge equals prestige, reputation, power” (Jenkins 1995:59). Again, the generation of capital means that the ‘purity’ of fan/fan and fan/object relationships is reduced as they may lead to rewards such as recognition within the fan culture or, as in the example of the above fan, potential economic reward via working on a *BB*-related radio slot.

This section has considered above how fans of *BBUK7* drew on the show to develop their self-identity and gain a sense of ontological security from the show’s routines and repetitions. In these discussions I alluded to the distinctions fans make between themselves and fellow fans (for example, in their competing interpretations over on-screen romantic relationships). In the next section I examine issues of fan community and

hierarchy, paying particular attention to how fans used the forum to vent their dissatisfaction with the show and how they began to reflexively examine their own attachments to *BB* itself and the surrounding community. Drawing upon these reflections and relating this back to the theoretical framework established in chapter three, I examine what happens when fan community and, thus, fan/fan relationships become more important to fans' self-identity and ontological security than fan objects themselves.

### **“Does that mean we are all celebs now”?: Community, hierarchy and fan/fan relationships**

In chapter three I suggested that ontological security can be provided by fan/fan relationships which remain constant and support a fan's self-identity. However, *BB* has been accused of emphasising the “individual rather than the social” (Hill 2005:90)<sup>61</sup> as it is a contest in which only one individual can win and in which the ties formed with fellow contestants must necessarily give way to the achievement of winning the game. However, we may instead view this apparent binary between individuality and community as a dialectic in which contestants move between the two, as it may be that those who reach the final of *BB* typically contribute to the house even if only one housemate can win. In contrast, those who bitch about other contestants and fail to contribute to the house community are often perceived as inauthentic and unworthy of success on the show (see below). How, then, do these tensions between individuality and community impact upon *BB* fandom? In this section, I examine how *BBUK7* fans form and maintain links with fellow fans via interpretive talk but also use fan community as a tool to develop self-identity and a sense of ontological security.

The *BBGossip* community used typical methods to maintain harmony and avoid conflict and disagreements often involved netiquette issues such as typing in capital letters (Edgar, June 12 2006, 23:32:17, Miranda, June 12 2006, 23:35:00, Ophelia, June 27 2006, 22:02:00) or personal attacks on other posters (Phoebe, June 23 2006, 21:41:06, Matthew, August 8 2006, 13:03:40, Ferdinand, August 8 2006, 13:07:10). Fans also used

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<sup>61</sup> Although see Roscoe (2001) and Turner (2005) on community in Australian *BB*.

the community to vent their anger at what they perceived to be a disappointing series of the show;

i am really bored with this f\*\*king tedious programme (Gregory, June 23 2006, 21:38:20),

Message to Channel 4. May I have please have the last hour back of my life that I wasted watching highlight show tonight. Signed Bored of Yorkshire (Horatio, July 4 2006, 21:59:08).

For some fans this disappointment resulted from being unable to draw on the show to perform identity work as “there really are very few, if any, in the house that I warm towards in this series” (Dennis, June 2 2006, 23:07:04) and it is “hard to relate to any of them” (Bianca, June 2 2006, 23:10:13). Bemoaning the lack of ‘normal’ people with which to identify is common; “where is chris from the supermarket or ken from the garage?” (Sylvia, June 20 2006, 23:50:59). Others went further, wondering whether this lack of interest signified a complete loss of involvement with the fan object:

I'm wondering if it's just that the real personalities that I like will never be on a BB again or if the appeal of BB to me is waining (Angus, June 2 2006, 23:19:46).

the weirdest thing is that I may potentially be going to a night out on the final night [...] I'm suprised at myself that I'm not that fussed about maybe missing the final (Angus, August 5 2006, 20:33:36).

a few times we've videoed BB instead of watching it, and then I haven't really cared enough to watch it back the next day. It sits on the videotape for a few days, and then I record over it (usually with another BB that I won't watch) (Cordelia August 4 2006, 09:52:50).

For these posters the cessation of their previous fan practices (e.g. scheduling social events around evictions) is a direct result of their dissatisfaction with *BBUK7*. However, despite widespread disappointment fans continued to post online, with many attesting that this was the only thing maintaining their interest in the show;

I now loathe *Big Brother*. Pity, because I love you people. But what a stupid show it now is (Dennis August 8 2006, 22:26:52)

This series, I would not I think - no, I'm sure - have stuck with BB if it weren't for the wonderful BBG, and I know I am not alone in that (Phoebe August 5 2006, 12:20:21).

The dissatisfaction reinforces community, allowing fans to share “mutual distaste” and become “united in their alienation” (Harrington and Bielby 1995:151). Thus, these fan/fan relationships forged via the forum supersede fan/object relationships as ontological security and identity work can be furthered more from participation in *BB* fandom than from the show itself. Such fans would fall into sector D in my two-dimensional model (see appendix two) as they have pure fan/object relationships but more tainted or impure fan/fan relationships, privileging community over fan objects (see page 86). Such fans have high levels of involvement at online sites and accrue fan social and symbolic capital (via their interactions and becoming recognised posters) and subcultural capital (through the knowledge that fan discussion engenders). These rewards of capital thus render their fan/fan relationships more impure, whilst their declared lack of involvement with the show (rarely watching it on television and having no interest in attending evictions etc.), means that their fan/object interactions are purer forms of fan relationships.

This emphasis upon community is highlighted when a link is posted to a website discussing *BBGossip* and posters are sceptical about the claims made regarding power hierarchies on their board. The article states that “it is almost impossible to become one of the Seniors” and that frequent posters “have enormous respect on the boards” (Social.ntp 2006: online). These assertions are subtly parodied by posters on the board who make comments such as “Take a bow you influential in crowd you” (Adriana, May 24 2006, 22:16:53) or question “Does that mean we are all celebs now?” (Edgar, May 24 2006, 22:17:08). However, posters are ultimately proud that the article praises their moderation system which they use to emphasise the largely cohesive nature of the board; “I think we have a great system here in that we don't seem to get any idiots (either that or we have very good mods)” (Horatio, May 24 2006, 22:21:58). These fans disavow claims regarding the hierarchies present on the boards, deriding the suggestions of an ‘in crowd’, and promoting ideas of community and harmony. This is common throughout fan

cultures with many fans being reluctant to accept the presence of hierarchies and power struggles (MacDonald 1998:136).

This promotion of community enables fans to negotiate *BBUK7* through communal talk which is a hallmark of the show (Holmes 2004:118; Thornborrow and Morris 2004) and its media coverage (Hill 2004:31). Indeed,

talk was necessary to formulate your views about who should go, and for that decision to have some validity claims, it needed to be grounded in assessments of the performances of the inmates of the house [...] Such assessments had a cumulative weight. The more you watched the program, the more you knew about all the inmates, their personal traits, and the ways they interacted with each other (Scannell 2002:278).

Whilst the bounded nature of *BB* initially suggests that an accumulation of knowledge akin to that within fictional fandoms may not be possible, Scannell implies that *BB* fandom is subject to the same emphasis upon subcultural knowledge as other fandoms. Fans may draw upon a lineage of *BB* information, comparing the current housemates, events, and relationships with the past and displaying subcultural capital. This can be seen in discussion of the twist to re-introduce evicted housemates;

I loved it when the surprises were purely on the housemates, but now they're so media savvy that *BB* is having to change the game beyond recognition. It used to be that us as viewers were privvy to the secrets and we would giggle and get excited for the moment housemates would be shocked. That doesn't happen anymore (Hugh, August 5 2006, 19:12:27).

Furthermore, people may view *BBUK* because “everyone else was watching it and it enabled them to join social groups and conversations” (Bignell 2005c:150). Thus, fans who talk about the show accrue subcultural capital via their knowledge about it. Of course, fan gossip may also lead to an increase in fan social capital for talk cannot take place in a vacuum and is dependent upon the knowledge and interest of fellow viewers. Thus, in the next section I look at the distinctions fans of *BBUK7* made, firstly examining constructions of different ‘types’ of fans and how this contributes to their fan identities. Secondly, I move on to consider how fans made judgements about the show itself,

examining their responses to those who dismiss it as 'lowbrow' and considering how fans seek to position both their fan objects and their fan practices as culturally acceptable.

### **'Housemate X is fit brigades' and 'pink Nokia voters': Distinctions, fans, and genre**

Having considered fan resistance to power hierarchies within *BBGossip* (see above) I now examine more closely the distinctions that fans make about the show and about each other. Such distinctions regarding 'proper' fans are not restricted to *BBUK7* fandom<sup>62</sup> and debates over what constitutes the 'real' or 'proper' text are also common (Tulloch 1995). However, in addition to this Bourdieuan approach I also relate these fan debates to Giddensian notions of identity, self-narrative, and ontological security. This section considers how fan debates over the cultural value of *Big Brother* attempt to elevate the show but also act as a defence of fans' own investments in the programme.

In my research questionnaires fans were reluctant to describe their ideas of the typical *BB* fan, declaring there to be no such fan (Bea) or suggesting that fans are just "every day average pe[o]ple" (Faith). One respondent refused to answer, commenting "No I can't describe a "typical" BB fan, because then I'd be stereotyping of who "I think" is a fan and who "I think" isn't a fan" (Macy). This may be related to issues of agency as suggesting what the typical fan may be like either implies a fan's similarity to and membership of that group, thus eroding the individuality of one's own fandom, or implies difference to such fans and thus demarcates the respondent as outside of the fan culture. Despite this, assumptions *are* made about fans of specific housemates. For example, fans of Nikki are associated with a so-called 'Pink Nokia vote' (*BBGossip* 2006) or characterised as the "'silly little girl" Nikki fanbase" (Lennox, August 4 2006, 23:19:52) who empathise with her childish behaviour. Similarly, attractive male housemates such as Mikey or Sezer are assumed to have younger fanbases who 'fancy' them (in the accusation of 'Housemate X is fit brigades' (Charlotte June 23 2006, 21:35:24) see also Violet, May 31 2006, 19:40:48, Sad Writer May 31 2006, 19:51:10)) and wish to see

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<sup>62</sup> See Hills and Williams (2005); Jancovich (2000); Kermode (1997); Nash and Lahti (1999); Sconce (1995); Thornton (1995); Zweerink and Gatson (2002).

romances and sex; “I bet the txt gen just want Grace and Mikey to have sex” (Phoebe August 8 2006, 21:52:47). Such discourses suggest discomfort with the apparent childishness of many *BB* fans and disquiet about the feminisation of the show via fans who wish to watch romances and ‘fit blokes’. However, uneasiness with the perceived immaturity of some fans (Brooker 2002; Hills 2003) or with the feminine excesses of those who express attraction to male characters or actors is well documented in other fan cultures (see Bury 2005; Hills 2007c; Jancovich and Hunt 2004:33; MacDonald 1998; Nash and Lahti 1999).

Distinctions are also made regarding the show itself although *BBUK7* fans were less concerned with ‘quality’ television than those in other case studies (see pages 176-177 and 225-228). Despite the cultural devaluing of soap opera, reality television is perhaps the most derided genre, associated with the ‘dumbing down’ of broadcasting and widely damned as appealing to the ‘lowest common denominator’ (Hill 2005:7; Holmes and Jermyn 2004:8-10). However, whilst some questionnaire respondents discussed their antipathy towards critics who dismiss the show as lowbrow, such issues failed to emerge in the postings that I analysed. Only a few questionnaire respondents offered the opinion that *BB* was distinctive, commenting that “there is no other programme like it” (Paige) or suggesting that “*BB* is by far the best [reality TV] there is” (Rae). This is in clear opposition to fans of *The West Wing* who routinely expressed in both questionnaires and postings that the show was unique and exemplary (see page 227). However, *BB* fans did dismiss those who criticised the show as having never watched it (Aaron, Jackie, Harry). Fans are angered by the suggestion that “only people with low intelligence watch *BB*” (Nadia) and they suggest that many critics are missing the point of the show (Felix). The issue of cultural value is clearly addressed in these responses, with one fan opining that

There is nothing worse than TV snobbery from the Daily Mail readers of the world who would rather watch *Gardeners World*. It’s like – not liking pop music because bands like Arctic Monkeys etc are *serious artistes*. Whatever. We are all free to like what we like (Gareth).

Fans are aware that reality television is a disparaged genre; “There is quite a lot of snobbery concerning reality TV [...] critics fail to see the show for what it really is – an entertainment show” (Gabby). Another fan refers to football, as a more culturally acceptable form of entertainment in order to elevate the show’s status;

Its the same with the vast number of people who like me cannot see the point in football and cannot stand it yet its a national sport and millions of people world wide enjoy playing it and viewing it. Its all down to personal taste and everybodys is different (Imelda).

In one highly reflexive response a fan notes that,

People who dismiss things for being "trashy" or "low-brow" are usually too insecure to enjoy them. If you're worried about how people will view you, you might labor to only enjoy things that are "sophisticated." If you're secure in who you are, though, you can have fun with guilty pleasures and not worry (Ed).

Such comments demonstrate familiarity with cultural value and the latter remarks are reminiscent of Bourdieu’s theories of capital, taste, and *habitus*. However, this respondent also links cultural value to a secure narrative of self (Hills 2005c) suggesting that fans who gain ontological security and the reflection of their self-narrative from their fan/object relationships are better equipped to withstand potential disapproval of culturally devalued fan objects.

The issue of genre is also crucial in discussions about the cultural value of *BB* as “nearly every genre [is] located on the highbrow/lowbrow axis” (Mittell 2004:15). As outlined in chapter two, producers, critics, and audiences often mobilise discourses around quality television to make bids for cultural status. The same practices can be seen in the ‘intertextual relay’ (Neale 1990) of genre dependent upon “industrial, journalistic and marketing discourses in defining any corpus of texts” (Holmes and Jermyn 2004:8). The instability of the reality TV (Bignell 2005c:7) means that *BB* has been characterised as a generic hybrid and aligned with the game show, drama, talk show, and documentary (Bignell 2005c; Corner 2002), or perceived as a ‘gamedoc’ (Corner 2000:687; Hill 2002:251), which depicts ‘real life’ contestants who are competing for a prize. However,



*BB* is also associated with soap opera as both “secure a high degree of audience involvement by drawing viewers into a series of highly contrived ‘real-life’ scenarios” (Kilborn 2003:59). Linking *BB* to soap opera enables critics to consider “actions and circumstances as planned or scripted instead of spontaneous” (Mathijs 2002:319-320) and also allows fans to treat *BB* as fictional and the housemates as characters who, “When they're evicted [...] cease to exist” (Maria, August 4 2006, 01:40:02) or are “expunged from [fans’] mind[s]” (Matthew, August 8 2006, 23:24:07).

However, fan alignment of *BB* with soap opera may also perform different discursive functions, particularly considering that both have been aligned with low culture (Hill 2005:32). One fan suggests that “BB is not a format that suits casual observation. It’s quite close to a soap opera really in that respect” (Daniel). This inverts cultural expectation, warding off accusations of fan attachment to disposable (i.e. ‘lowbrow’) shows by positioning *BB* as one which requires close viewing. Such attempts echo my discussion in chapter two, as producers and critics make similar attempts to elevate *BB* to ‘quality television’ by linking it to a desirable demographic of viewers (Mathijs and Hessels 2004:67) or, as discussed above, to the concept of ‘event television’. Another fan notes that, when the show “first started, and there wasn’t the tabloid hype surrounding it, then I think it had an almost cult following, and so you’d imagine the fans to have been geeky TV obsessed characters. However, nowadays, it appeals to so many” (Gabby). This suggests that, as the show has become more ‘mainstream’, it has become less specialist and appeals to a wider audience (Jancovich 2000). By stereotyping those original fans as ‘geeky TV obsessed characters’, this respondent positions herself in opposition to these figures, aligning herself with the mass audience and avoiding any suggestion of being ‘geeky’ or ‘sad’ herself, drawing on generic discourses to display a desirable self-identity. However, this statement also relates to the notion of the ‘mainstream cult’, as introduced in chapters one and two (see pages 23 and 51). As has been argued, “*Big Brother* also challenges ideas around television genres and categories. Spread across the schedule, both ‘prime timed’ and ‘niched’, its genre has become so variable that it defies classic genre theory” (Mathijs and Jones 2004:4). Here Mathijs and Jones argue that *BB* functions as both a mainstream (prime time) and cult (niche) text, straddling a boundary

between the two due to its variant scheduling. Furthermore given the huge levels of tabloid press interest, which constructs the show as 'event television' and transforms the housemates into 'celebrities', *Big Brother* is clearly positioned within the mainstream mass media. Given this, we can suggest that *BB* occupies a position of 'mainstream cult' due to the broadcasting imperatives of networks and its scheduling position. However, it is more contentious as to whether *BB* fulfils the other characteristics which Matt Hills (2004) suggests are traits of the mainstream cult text. Clearly, for example, *BB* has no singular auteur figure for fans to use as a signifier of quality. Although they may, as outlined below, clash with the producers of the show regarding unwelcome developments and twists, they are unable to draw upon a discourse of authorship to elevate the show and make bids for its 'quality'. However, *BB* fans do splinter off into different fan groups, depending on their favourite housemates and/or couples and this appears to fulfill Hills' argument that such texts allow the formation of fan "sub-subcultures or microcommunities" (Hills 2004:62). Similarly, his argument that mainstream cult texts exist beyond the borders of the shows themselves and become dispersed across other media is also relevant to *BB* which, as noted above, cannot be defined as a textual entity given its existence on TV, the Internet, and through books, news reporting and sister shows such as *BBLB*. However, whilst *BB* appears to share some traits with the mainstream cult text (through its fandom, and its dispersal through other media), the show's status as a lowbrow text (see above) renders this more complex. Hills argues that the mainstream cult text "carries textual and intertextual markers of quality TV without necessarily being inserted into the 'intertextual' network of texts that are described by fans – and in secondary texts (fanzines, publicity) – as 'cult'" (Hills 2004:55) but it is hard to correlate this with the discourses surrounding *BB*. *Big Brother* does not carry any markers of quality associated with traditional definitions of the concept and, as I have outlined, fans are less concerned with these issues or with trying to make a case for the show as traditionally 'quality' TV. In fact, more relevant here to *BB*'s status as potential mainstream cult is the impact of scheduling and networks, and, as I shall continue to argue through my empirical case studies, the broadcast status of programmes may be a way to extend the notion of the mainstream cult and how we can begin to define it.

Ultimately, then, whilst *BBUK7* fans were less concerned with genre and quality television than those in my other case studies, some respondents made distinctions regarding the show or other fans in order to perform identity work. In the next section I will continue my discussion of fan distinctions considering *BBUK7* fandom in relation to theories of the active audience which may be complicated by its status as non-fiction (Mathijs and Hessels 2004:65). Relating my analysis to a specific incident in the show (the return of previously evicted housemates to a House Next Door) I illustrate how fans' interpretation of, and resistance to, the intentions of producers are manifested in a fandom based around a non-fictional show.

### **“It’s only a game show”: Active audiences, rules, and game-playing**

Fan/producer interactions in fictional television shows have been widely examined although, as argued in chapter two, claims regarding the increased reciprocity of these relationships are usually discursive bids for power by producers and fans themselves (see page 37). Following such debates, the increased interactivity of reality television would seem to have destabilised the boundaries between fans and producers, finally enabling viewers to influence what happens in their favoured shows. Indeed, interactivity in reality television has been explored (Griffen-Foley 2004; Holmes 2004; Ross 2008) and *BB* offers multiple sites of participation (Brenton and Cohen 2003:72; Cover 2004:181; Tincknell and Raghuram 2004:263) which exemplify media convergence. It is the opportunity to evict housemates which grants the audience some control over the show and such participation is alleged to attract more 18-24 year olds to vote than political elections (Coleman 2003). However, the non-fictional nature of *BBUK7* complicates debates surrounding the active audience for how can fans ever ‘poach’ the actions of real people to suit their own needs? As discussed above, *BB* has often been aligned with soap opera enabling fans to treat events as akin to those within fictional genres (Mathijs 2002:319-320). Thus, the highlights show on C4 can be edited to offer an apparently authoritative version of events and create a desirable ‘narrative’ even as audience access to live feeds may contradict producerly intention.

As discussed above, the disjunction between the live streaming and the highlights shows means that fans often have different interpretations and can draw upon this knowledge to argue for the accuracy of their opinions and increase their subcultural capital. However, in *BBUK7* fans felt that the live feed was subject to greater censorship than in previous years;

in past years we've been able to "see through" the edits, having watched, and live-updated the action 24/7 ... this is the first time we've been lead largely by the highlight show because of the soundcuts and still scenes (Charlotte May 31 2006, 23:29:01).

The editors have this series more than any previous ones had control from minute 1 on Day 1. I realise that I watch more than most anoraks but the difference between what is being shown and what people are thinking is happening is wider than I have ever noticed (Edgar, June 6 2006, 23:32:28).

Despite this increased control some fans feel that the live feeds remain essential in being able to get a more complete view of events in the house; "even with all the [sound cuts] and bad camera angles we still get to see stuff that doesn't make the highlight show" (Horatio, August 5 2006, 22:04:32). Linked to this is the knowledge that particular events are edited out of the C4 highlights show and that the wider *BB* audience remain ignorant of certain situations such as the bullying of contestant Shahbaz; "I dare say C4 has lifted all the bullying bits that happened in the last 24 hours" (Ruby, May 24 2006, 21:43:22). There is, thus, a tacit understanding that producers can influence public opinion of housemates via their editing of the highlights show. After nominations one poster notes that "We'll see where those odds go after one or two highlights shows. Those will give a clear indication of who *BB* want to stay in there" (Malcolm, June 12 2006, 14:11:51). Many fans negotiate with the producers' dominant editing of situations and use the highlights shows, live feeds, and official stories on the C4 website to try to ascertain the 'truth' about events in the house. Such struggles for meaning illustrate that fans of non-fictional shows wrestle with interpreting their fan objects and may still resist the intentions of the producers. Thus, it appears that reality TV may be as polysemic as fictional genres, as the "'preferred' meanings being offered [...] [can be] challenged, subverted and destabilised" (Tincknell and Raghuram 2004:261).

For example, in week eleven of the show viewers were given the opportunity to vote four previously evicted housemates into the House Next Door (HND), one of whom would be selected by the 'proper' housemates to return fully to the *BB* house and be eligible to win the £100,000 prize. This twist was greeted with anger by many online fans who felt that this was a money-making ruse that betrayed the fundamental rules of *BB*. Many resisted the producer's intentions and also, apparently, the will of the general *BBUK7* audience, over 875,000 of whom voted for housemates to return to the house (Teeman 2006: online). Such resistance suggests that participation in *BB* is not limited to the binary offered by Pamela Wilson (2004) who argues that interactivity is restricted to either sanctioned viewer participation via voting, referred to as "narrative involvement" (2004:337), or subversive "narrative activism" which "contradict[s] the plans or desires of the corporate producers" (2004:337), such as shouting messages over the wall of the house. The fan resistance to the HND twist demonstrates that fan involvement in *BB* can be oppositional, subverting the official narratives of the producers. In their discussions about the HND one of the key debates surrounded the refrain that *BB* is 'only a game show'. The 'game' element of the program was emphasised in official discourses surrounding the twist with series producer Paul Osborne arguing that "It's been amazing to hear this kind of stuff discussed as if it's a Home Affairs Select Committee. Remember the season one song? '*It's only a gameshow*'. Well it is" (Teeman 2006: online). Here, Osborne positions himself as similar to fans, demonstrating his own subcultural capital via reference to the first series of *BBUK*. By aligning himself with fans Osborne attempts to legitimate a preferred reading of the show, that is, it should be viewed as a game show and that this latest twist should be accepted. Some fans did endorse this official view of the show, even using the same reference to the song from the first series; "sings \* its only a game show its only a game show\*" (Hermione, August 4 2006, 23:11:50). Others agreed;

at the end of the day its only a game show, i only vote once on every eviction with the exception of the final. If the powers of BB decide to change everything and do lots of twists and turns i dont see how i can make a difference (Jenny, August 5 2006, 11:55:31)

i thought the whole point of BB was that it was a game show, light entertainment, and that they reserve the rights to change the rules when they like (Vicky, August 5 2006, 12:06:13).

can only apologise if ppl are offended or belittled by ppl calling it ONLY a game show.. It doesn't alter the fact that it IS only a game show (Emma, August 5 2006, 23:35:46).

However, many fans compared the HND incident to sports, attempting to elevate their fandom to those that are accorded higher cultural status within society. As Harrington and Bielby note, “national sports teams seem okay [as fan objects], as evidenced by the socially legitimized and unapologetic national fervor over the Super Bowl and the NBA playoffs” (1995:135) or, in the UK, the World Cup or Wimbledon. However, this invocation also emphasises the rule-based nature of sports and, in this instance, may be utilised by fans to reinforce their beliefs that the rules of *BB* should be upheld. Posters note that,

Chess, football, cricket, golf baseball are only games. They would lose their audience and die if Endemol's attitude managed their affairs (Dennis, August 5 2006, 15:51:07)

Imagine this was the world cup and France were knocked out during the first round and then, all of a sudden, they were allowed back in the contest for the semi-final (Ruby, August 4 2006, 21:33:12)

Football is 'only' a game. But, Birmingham got relegated. There would be rioting in the streets if the Premier League chairman invited them back because they get good crowds (Matthew, August 5 2006, 14:39:43).

As well as comparing the twist to sporting events, one fan referred to another gameshow, *Who Wants To Be A Millionaire* to reinforce the unfairness of a late re-entrant winning *BB*; “It is a game show but imagine if someone gets to the million pound question on *Millionaire* and Chris Tarrant tells them that there are now another 5 questions to go. You can't just change the rules mid-game” (Horatio, August 4 2006, 23:19:01). These references to sports and quiz shows and the awareness of *BB* as a game juxtaposes with the fan dislike of overt game-players who desperately want to win (see below). However, many fans resisted the ‘game show’ discourse enforced by producers and by other fans;

There is no equivalence between seriously being angry over the new twist in *BB* this year and, say, the anger that some of us feel over the role of the UK and the USA in the Middle East. To be told that we need a sense of proportion is insulting to our intelligence (Dennis, August 5 2006, 15:51:07).

As the above discussion has shown, the fact that *BBUK* is a non-fictional show which features 'real' people does not prevent fans from resisting producer's intentions or disputing the 'narrative' direction of the show. As fans' resistance to the HND situation demonstrates, *BBUK7* fans wrestled with the meanings imposed by the text in the same way as *Neighbours* and *West Wing* fans (see pages 174 and 232). The apparent interactivity of reality television cannot be assumed to have levelled the playing field between producers and audiences, allowing viewers complete control over the outcomes of the show. For, as this chapter has illustrated, fans argue that producers maintain control over who is evicted via selective editing and by interventions in the voting process (see above). Despite this, *BB* does offer more points for engagement with the fan object via its wide range of subsidiary programmes and texts and its interactivity via voting, attending evictions, and so on. Thus, one might expect a higher amount of fans with impure fan/object relationships than in my other case studies. Indeed, five questionnaire respondents could be categorised into my sector C (see appendix two), having impure fan/fan and fan/object relationships which are most impacted upon by outside factors (see page 85). Each of these fans had accrued high levels of capital via their involvement with the show or from interactions with other fans. Some had met production personnel and auditioned for the show, attended evictions, met housemates at events, appeared on satellite shows such as *BBBM* and *BBLB*, or attended wrap parties and awards ceremonies. One of these fans also had high levels of involvement in fan community, moderating at a *BB* fan site whilst the others were heavy participants in online forums. However, most fans appear to have maintained pure fan/object relationships whilst their active involvement with other fans renders their fan/fan interactions more impure. It is possible that this is due to the widespread fan disappointment with *BBUK7* and an associated lack of interest in involvement with it (see above).

Given my examination of fan distinctions regarding fellow fans and what constitutes ‘proper’ *Big Brother*, in my final section I continue to explore such fan value judgements. I consider the distinctions that fans make regarding the authenticity of housemates and the ensuing debates around issues of celebrity and ‘reward’. Linking this discussion to the work of Giddens and Bourdieu, I highlight the importance of housemates appearing to ‘be themselves’ and avoiding overt game-playing, suggesting that it is fans’ own reflexive knowledge and possible insecurity about their positions within the broadcasting field (see chapter two) which leads them to place such an emphasis upon the concept of authenticity.

#### **“Endemol approved clones”: authenticity, *illusio* and celebrity**

As I have outlined, fans often discuss favourite housemates and previous research has found that viewers value very highly the perception that contestants are ‘being themselves’, are ‘ordinary’, ‘real’, or similar to the viewers.<sup>64</sup> However, fans also acknowledge that the show is mediated as it “freely and knowingly performs its own processes of production” (West 2005:90) by incorporating cameras into the show’s title sequences and publicity materials. Thus, whilst fans do not believe that the show unproblematically reveals ‘real-life’, it remains crucial that the winner be ‘true to themselves’ and avoid appearing duplicitous or manipulative (Andrejevic 2004:125) or not revealing their ‘true selves’ to the viewers (Jones 2003:413). Contestants must also not appear too eager to win and this emphasis upon ‘being real’ means that any game-playing must be hidden (Couldry 2002:90). In this section I consider why this is so important for fans of the show, how this impacts upon fans’ sense of self-identity and ontological security, and how it links to Bourdieu’s theories of capital, field, and *illusio*.

Many fans expressed disapproval of those with game-plans, claiming that it is “not right” (Calum) and that such contestants “are not genuine” (Jackie). In contrast, some openly endorsed game-playing as “It is a game” (Rae, Kacy) which makes the show “more

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<sup>64</sup> See Collins (2008:104); Holmes (2004, 2004:124); Kilborn (2003:52); Roscoe (2001:479); Tincknell and Raghuram (2004:258).



interesting” (Lana). The fact that *Big Brother* had been screened for seven series inevitably meant that housemates were more sophisticated in their participations in the game; “I think that there was probably very little game playing in the 1<sup>st</sup> & 2<sup>nd</sup> series, but as the years go on it gets more competitive & the game playing is more evident” (Nadia). For others the inevitability of game-play is accepted but often justified by conceding that the fan would prefer to see non-manipulative participation in the show. They note “I’m not bothered (much) about them playing a game, after all it is a game-show. Though I do prefer people to be themselves” (Macy) or “Good For Them, it’s a game show after all, I don’t like the bitching though” (Faith). Such responses indicate an awareness of the ‘game’ of *BB* but also enable fans to assert moral superiority via their disapproval of duplicity. The act of ‘being oneself’ is of crucial importance to many fans, who comment that “If I was a housemate, I think the best “gameplan” you can have, is just to be yourself, and enjoy yourself for a few weeks” (Gabby). However, this respondent goes on to note that “the majority of the housemates say they don’t do it for the money, or because it’s a gameshow – they mainly do it for the experience (and the fame!), and I believe them.... which might be quite naïve of me!”. This response indicates discomfort with the possibility of contestants falsely playing a game or failing to ‘be themselves’, as the fan chooses to believe the importance of the ‘experience’ over the winning of the game to the contestants, even if this makes her appear ‘naïve’. For others gameplaying is accepted specifically if it *is* explicitly declared; “I did like though how *BB6*’s Makosi was vocal about her game plan: she used to talk though her plan in the Diary Room” (Nadia). However, obvious game-players are rarely liked by the public even though “playing to win is what people do on every other gameshow” (Edie). This emphasis upon ‘being oneself’ may result from an audience anxiety that “if real people convincingly ‘put on an act’ where can sincerity, authenticity and real emotion be located with any conviction?” (Lury 1996:126). Indeed, one respondent notes, “it makes you question whether this is what your life is also like – ie do you really know people. Does this back-stabbing happen behind you[r] back also?” (Nadia). This need for genuine housemates may again result from a desire for ontological security but this time from a need for trust in the authenticity of others.

“it appears that it doesn't matter what Endemol decide to do as it is only a game show and we should chill out...apparently” (Ruby, August 5 2006, 22:43:36). Such discussions suggest that, if the established rules of *BB* are changed, fans may feel a threat to their ontological security which they gain from the routine of the show. Although they may tolerate some twists, those that appear to violate the core rules of *BB* cannot be accepted as they threaten to destabilise the security gained from fandom of the show.

However, fans are keen to demonstrate a sense of perspective, acknowledging that in comparison with the ‘real-life’ situation in the Middle East,<sup>63</sup> worrying about *BB* is trivial; “The world is going crazy. The Middle East is in turmoil. And I am getting angry about some silly gameshow. Stupid boy, get a grip” (Matthew, August 4 2006, 10:18:19). Another fan admits that, even though they know that *BB* is not as important as real-life, they cannot avoid being emotionally involved in it: “I can't believe this game show is annoying me so much,with what is happening in the Middle East,but it just is” (Linda, August 4 2006, 21:34:48). Many fans use the discussion to work through their feelings about real-life events, invoking a discourse of escapism; “To be honest it feels kind of good getting worked up about something, which in the grand scheme of things, is trivial crap...it's making me forget all the real life stuff that's getting me worked up at the moment” (Ruby, August 5 2006, 01:11:10). For others, despite the knowledge that *BB* is a gameshow, their level of involvement contributes to their impassioned reactions although they remain acutely aware that the show is, in comparison to real-life events, unimportant. As one poster comments, “you're right, it's only a gameshow, and in the grand scheme of things it's not important [...] but it's something that people have spent real money on, phoning the eviction lines and texting the housemates out” (Cordelia, August 4 2006, 10:21:50). For some fans though, the constant refrain of ‘it’s only a gameshow’ is insulting, suggesting an inability to distinguish between mediated events and real-life;

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<sup>63</sup> The situation in the Middle East during the time-frame discussed by these on-line posters refers to Israeli conflict with, and incursion into, Lebanon after Hezbollah militants in Lebanon captured two Israeli soldiers (BBC News 2006:online).

However, I suggest that the importance of contestants being ‘themselves’ can also be related to the notion of fandom as a form of pure relationship. Whilst fans’ use of fictional characters can usually, excepting any major narrative rewriting of the character be considered stable the fact that *BBUK* contestants are real people means that any identity building is more precarious. If fans draw on the show to perform identity work then for such identities to remain stable one must not have aligned oneself too closely with someone who is later revealed to not ‘really’ be as they seemed. However, this is only important if it completely undermines those traits that were initially identified with. For example, if a fan identifies with Pete for his anti-establishment attitude, even if he is later revealed to be duplicitous within the game of *BB*, this fan’s identification is unlikely to be severely undermined as those elements which were originally identified with remain. However, if Pete was later found to have lied about his background or to have pretended to be ‘rebellious’, fan identification with these traits could be threatened. In cases where housemates that fans have identified with are found to be merely two-faced, their distancing from such contestants is more likely to result from the cultural view of duplicity as morally wrong and thus identity work will not be destabilised in the same way.

However, the emphasis upon being ‘real’ and not openly demonstrating a desire to win *BB* can also be related to Bourdieu’s concept of *illusio* (Bourdieu 1984:250) (see page 19). As argued in chapter two, fans often act as ‘consecrating agents’, able to define cultural objects as worthy of attention and scrutiny (Bourdieu 1993:11) and are an integral part of the broadcasting field (see page 34). Thus, *illusio* is necessary to ensure their ‘belief in the game’ as “culture is a stake which, like all social stakes, simultaneously presupposes and demands that one take part in the game and be taken in by it” (Bourdieu 1984: 250). Thus, all *BB* fans are already caught up within the *illusio* of the broadcasting field given their positions as potential consecrating agents within that field. However, this *illusio* can only be seen by those who are outside of the game and those who are inside it must continue to believe in the importance of that which is invested in (Swartz 1997:125). It is possible to argue that viewers watching *BB* feel unfavorably towards those contestants who overtly play a game as this highlights the

*illusio* of their investments within the cultural field and also in the act of engaging with *BB* itself. For Bourdieu, one's learning of the appropriate rules of the game must be discreet and effortless and one of his main objections to fans is their acquisition of knowledge which is "too 'self-interested', too marked, in their style, by the haste of their acquisition" (1984:330, see chapter one). It is possible to suggest an analogous fan *illusio* which perpetuates equivalent ideas about knowledge and fan learning as whilst fan knowledge and its resultant subcultural capital is highly privileged (Egan 2003; Hunt 2003), the acquisition of that knowledge must be concealed from view of other fans (Crawford 2003:229). To be ignorant, a "know-nothing dilettante" (Kermode 1997:58) is bad, but to be seen to be actively learning and attempting to accrue fan knowledge is much worse. Therefore, whilst fans who possess such knowledge are happy to display this, often assuming the pedagogic mantle of a "sage advisor" (Hoxter 2000: 175), the recipients of such knowledge are devalued within fan cultures for their overt displays of learning as "nothing depletes capital more than the sight of someone trying too hard" (Thornton 1995:12). Indeed, it is only via participation in the relevant fields that levels of capital can be accrued although capital is not actively sought out:

the '*illusio*', generates a 'sense' or 'feel for the game', a 'practical' or implicit sense of which actions are likely to reap rewards, not a conscious search for prestige but a series of 'strategies' objectively orchestrated towards preserving or accumulating capital within the field (Lane 2000:73).

One must conceal one's desire for acquisition of capital and it is possible to argue that *BB* fans do not react well to those contestants who overtly express a desire to win and, therefore, accrue capital. Given the discreet learning that is enforced in fan cultures, any contestants who explicitly display their attempts to 'play the game' tend to be rejected by *BB* fans.

As well as concealing their desire to win *BB*, housemates are also expected to eschew the desire for celebrity whilst inside the *BB* house. As Andrejevic notes, there is a "paradoxical reality expressed in the chatrooms. Once [contestants] decide to sacrifice [their] privacy in order to become a 'reality' celebrity, [they] should behave as if [they

aren't] at all interested in celebrity" (2004:128). One questionnaire respondent notes that, despite the presence of people eager for fame, these contestants rarely win due to their overt desire for rewards; "There will always be some people on the show who are doing it to get work as a Glamour Model, or a TV career of some sort, but they tend to not get very far" (Hailey). However, for other fans, the presence of these types of housemates substantially detracts from their enjoyment of the show. When new housemates are sent into *BBUK7* one poster wryly questions whether the new housemates will be "A boob-job chinawhites model type [...] A young boring thingy who has done four dry runs [participated in trial runs of the show to enable producers to check camera angles and so on]" (Orlando, June 23 2006, 22:55:05). This draws attention to another fan complaint, that too many housemates are known to the producers due to repeated auditions, connection to the media industry, or taking part in 'trial runs' of the shows. As one poster comments, "there's a whole sub-culture of Endemol approved clones waiting to quaff free champagne" (Robin, July 4 2006, 23:05:23).

Why, then, are fans so concerned about the presence of 'professional' housemates or those who wish to further their professions of singing or glamour modelling? It appears that such interests counter the assumption that *BB* housemates are normal and are 'just like' the viewers, thus restricting its use as a tool for identity work. Whilst *BB* may continue to provide ontological security via its routines and repetitions, the ways in which fans can "look at the cast [...] as people with whom to identify" (Andrejevic 2004:109) are limited as contestants fail to echo the value placed upon authenticity by fans. Furthermore, contestants who openly display an interest in celebrity are disliked by fans as this suggests an overt intent to accumulate high levels of capital as the famous have high levels of social, economic, and symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1991:230). Indeed, it is surely relevant here, for example, that a sense of 'being famous for being famous' where people are known for their "well-known-ness", not for any specific "greatness, worthy endeavors or talent" (Boorstin 1963:11) is most common in reality television (Holmes 2004: 111). However, as previously discussed, accumulation of capital should be discreet, particularly within fan cultures where 'trying too hard' is frowned upon (Thornton 1995:12). If fandoms are reluctant to acknowledge their own power hierarchies

(MacDonald 1998:136) (see page 106), the sight of housemates openly declaring their ambitions for fame, celebrity and the associated rewards may, by association, damage the *illusio* of fandom and fan activity.

Ultimately, however, in *illusio* there is never any ‘outside of the game’ and even those contestants who conceal this are still participating in the game. Thus, it may be that those perceived to be ‘authentic’ within *BB* may be those who align their playing of the game with the game itself and that, even when they appear to be authentic and not displaying any overt desire to win, contestants are still performing. However, even those who perform authenticity may find their game-playing becomes too obvious at certain points within *BB* and the façade of authenticity must be recuperated. It may well be, given that authenticity itself is performed and that *illusio* cannot be stepped out of, that it is the overt pursuit of benefit which renders contestants as inauthentic. Indeed, the Bourdieuan idea of the importance of knowing one’s place within the show has been commented on (Biressi and Nunn 2005:149) and, in addition to Holmes’ assertion that reality TV privileges “highly conservative ideologies of selfhood and individualism” (2004b: online), the importance of not playing the game too overtly may prove to be one of *BB*’s key ideologies.

## **Conclusion**

In this first empirical chapter, I considered how a specific fan community of *BBUK7* fans used the show to perform identity work, gain ontological security, and make a variety of distinctions regarding fellow fans, the show itself, and the participating housemates. As I have discussed, drawing on the concept of ‘fan pure relationships’, fans engage with the fan object and the surrounding community to differing degrees.

The ways in which *BB*’s temporal structures encourages intimacy between viewers and the house-mates make it an ideal site for identity negotiation. As I have demonstrated fans often make links between themselves and their real-life experiences or relationships and those of the house-mates, or construct their identities via explicit opposition to those

they perceive to have negative traits. In addition to identifying, or refusing identification with, specific housemates, I have also examined how fans might form attachments to onscreen relationships between the housemates and might engage in the fan practice of shipping, which is usually an aspect of more cultish fandoms. This chapter has thus posited that work on reality TV has failed to consider fan responses to relationships within *BB* and how their discussions might impact upon their identities and ontological security, and also upon the distinctions they make regarding the show, the contestants, and fellow fans. Furthermore, the regularity of nominations and evictions contributes to a sense of ontological security which is derived from expectations of an on-going text. However, ontological security is negotiated in different ways depending on fans' responses to the twists introduced in the show and their expectation of difference which I have termed 'predictable unpredictability'. Similarly, fans' engagement with spoilers and their desire (or otherwise) to know what will happen next also illustrates that the ways in which ontological security is negotiated is not standardised across all fans. This chapter has also considered what happens when fans become dissatisfied with the fan object but continue interactions within a fan community. Thus, for some, ontological security and self-identity can be attained from such fan/fan relationships even when faith in the fan object itself has been shaken. However, given my dual use of both Giddens and Bourdieu, issues of distinction and value have been entwined with those of identity and ontological security throughout this chapter. As I have illustrated, when fans make distinctions regarding other 'types' of fan (e.g. the 'pink Nokia voters') or what constitutes the 'proper' show, they are also performing their own fan identities and displaying their discursive power and capital within the fandom. Furthermore, the predominant fan discourse surrounding the 'authenticity' of contestants and fan antagonism towards overt game players or those who explicitly seek rewards from participation in the show (e.g. potential glamour models) also reflects fans' own identities. In this case, this suggests anxieties around the trustworthiness of people in the fan's real life or the prospect of fan hierarchy, which is often denied by fans and was refuted in *BBGossipper's* responses to the online article about them. Furthermore, the concept of *illusio* means that fans' dislike of those who are blatant game-players may result from their own unease about fan power

hierarchies, thus destabilising the *illusio* of fandom's position within the broadcasting field and the wider field of cultural production.

In the next empirical chapter I focus upon fans of the Australian soap opera *Neighbours*. In contrast to *Big Brother*, *Neighbours* is an imported show which has aired for over twenty years in constant twice-daily weekday slots in the BBC schedule. Thus, as in my *BB* case study, I am interested in how this regularity and the resultant sense of closeness to characters contributes to fans' use of the show for identity work and ontological security. However, during my research it was announced that the show was moving in the UK from the BBC, its home for twenty-two years, to Channel Five. Given my argument that it is the expectation of regular scheduling which contributes to fans' ontological security this change, and fan responses to it, presented a chance to examine this empirically. As in my work on *BB* fans, *Neighbours* fans also vented their anger and frustration with the direction of the show, although their interactive contact with producers was more limited and, ultimately, more antagonistic (see page 186-189). Once again, issues of cultural value cohere within my work to enable critical examination of fans' discussions the 'golden ages' (Tulloch 1995) of the show. However, whilst for *BB* fans the 'true' show was one which adhered to the underlying rules of the programme, for *Neighbours* fans such judgements were made according to what was deemed to be 'emotionally realistic' for the soap genre and the characters (see page 183). Thus, the next chapter deals with these issues before I move on, in my final empirical chapter, to present the results of my examination of fans of the US 'quality' drama *The West Wing* and to consider how fan engagement with this show demonstrated similarities or differences with the experiences of fans of *Big Brother* and *Neighbours*.



## Chapter Six

### 'Good' Neighbours? Identity, scheduling and intra-generic distinction

The previous chapter examined fans of *Big Brother UK 7* which has been accorded low levels of cultural value due to its generic status as reality television. In this case study, I examine fans of *Neighbours*, the long-running Australian soap opera which began in the UK on BBC1 in October 1986 and which occupies a similarly low position on “the highbrow/lowbrow axis” of genres (Mittell 2004:15). Soap opera has long been associated with the feminine and the trivial and its audiences culturally maligned, leading some fans to apologise for their interest in such shows (Alasuutari 1992). However, the genre also engenders high levels of audience attachment via its regular scheduling (Crofts 1995:103; Dunleavy 2005:376), providing an obvious avenue for the formation of self-identity and ontological security. Indeed, Giddens (1991:199) views soap as one of the most likely genres to offer such rewards because their “sense of narrative coherence and continuity over time can be made use of by regular viewers, enabling them to gain some ‘reflexive control’ over their own ‘life circumstances’ through the personal stories they tell themselves” (Moore 2005:144). This chapter emphasises how *Neighbours*’ scheduling patterns and longevity impact upon fans’ negotiation of self-identity and ontological security. I also examine how fans make intra-generic distinctions regarding the soap genre relating this to discussions of ‘quality television’, cultural value, and self-identity. Finally, I consider the threats posed to fan/object relationships when fandom is undermined by unwelcome narrative developments but also when those who control the programme appear to denigrate fandom.

As introduced in chapter four, the basis of this case study is the unofficial online forum *Neighboursfans.com*, from which I analysed online postings and solicited questionnaire respondents (see pages 93-94). The main structure of the site and my methods have been outlined previously and I wish to outline the results of my empirical data to consider *Neighbours* fans’ pure relationships with the show, emphasising how they identify with or resist identification with characters. I then outline how the unique scheduling of *Neighbours* (i.e. across five nights of the week) contributes to its importance within the

history of soap operas and broadcasting more generally and how this contributes to fans' ontological security. Given *Neighbours'* culturally devalued status I also examine how fans make intra-generic distinctions regarding their expectations of the soap genre. Finally, I detail clashes with producers over the show's narrative direction and how the apparent dismissal of certain types of fans by these figures threatens self-identity or ontological security. However, I firstly wish to contextualise my research by offering a critical over-view of previous work on soap opera audiences.

### **Examining soap audiences and soap studies**

Work on soap operas has been common and this often emphasised the oppositional nature of women's viewing of such programmes, characterising their interest in these shows as a means of resisting patriarchal ideologies surrounding family, friendship, and femininity.<sup>65</sup> Early work detailed how female viewers formed supportive communities, reflecting soap's emphasis upon the private sphere. Soap opera is often culturally coded as 'female' due to its open-ended storytelling (Brown 1994:58; Fiske 1987:179) and its "serial narrative form, its presumed lack of closure, its focus on the feminine subject, and its multiple, concurrent plots have been [...] linked to a feminine sensibility" (Scodari 2004:xviii). More recent work concentrated upon specific Internet forums rather than utilising methods such as offline ethnography (Brown 1994; Seiter 1989) or analysis of letters written to the researcher (Ang 1982). Such work continues from a broadly feminist perspective but further emphasises community and interpersonal relationships (Baym 2000; Scodari 2004). Soap fans were also often perceived to have reciprocal relationships with production personnel in off-line venues such as fan club gatherings and luncheons (Harrington and Bielby 1995:36). However, although cult media fans' online relationships with producers have been examined little work has been done on the ways in which soap fans and producers engage in cyberspace. Thus, in this chapter I examine

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<sup>65</sup> Such work examined British shows such as *Eastenders* (Buckingham 1987; Madill and Goldmeier 2003; McNicholas 2004), *Coronation Street*, (Dunleavy 2005) and *Crossroads* (Brunsdon 1981; Hobson 1982), American 'prime-time soaps' including *Dallas* (Ang 1982; Liebes and Katz 1993, van Zoonen 2003), *Dynasty* (Press 1990), teen soap/dramas like *Beverly Hills 90210* (McKinley 1997) and daytime serials like *Once & Again* (Menon 2007) and *All My Children* (Baym 2000). There is also some work on the New Zealand soap *Shortland Street* (Dunleavy 2003, 2005) and Australian soaps *A Country Practice* (Tulloch 1986) and *Home and Away* (Wober and Fazal 1994).

the interactions between *Neighbours* fans and the writers/producers, proposing that we may better understand these relationships through Bourdieuan field theory (see chapter two). There are also a number of early academic analyses of *Neighbours*, most commonly discussing its cross-cultural context (Cunningham and Jacka 1994), emphasising its ‘Australian-ness’ (Gillespie 1995; Howard 1994), or discussing how production conditions impact upon the show (Sergi and Dodds 2003). However, much of this work makes assumptions about the reasons for the popularity of *Neighbours*, suggesting that the serial format, emphasis upon the everyday, positive portrayals of women, its ‘feel-good’ factor, and its appeal to teenagers have contributed to the show’s status within the UK without drawing on any empirical research (Crofts 1993, 1995; Cunningham 1994). Indeed, only Wober and Fazal (1994) and Gillespie (1995) actively engage with viewers of *Neighbours*, with the former finding that people liked *Neighbours* if “they believed the acting was good, if they thought there was plenty of plot content [...] and if they felt there was something to laugh at” (Wober and Fazal 1994:85) and the latter examining the ways in which young Punjabi viewers of the show drew on its discourses of love, romance, and kinship to negotiate their self-identities (Gillespie 1995).

However, none of this previous work considers the show’s online fandom, an omission which my own research seeks to rectify. Furthermore, these discussions are now at least a decade out of date and the cultural impact of *Neighbours* is arguably less than it was in the late 1980s and early 1990s. As UK viewing figures fell from around 16 million in the eighties (Oram 1988:50) to an average of 3 million viewers for the lunchtime slot and 2.6 million for the 5.35pm episode in 2007 (Maloney 2007: online), *Neighbours*’ cultural relevance has decreased and its fans are now often perceived to consist primarily of housewives and students (Ferguson 2007: online). The show initially attracted a high level of press interest and “publicity [...] continually stoked the boilers of *Neighbours*’s success in the media” (Crofts 1995:104), contributing to “the ‘social text’” surrounding the show (Cunningham 1994: 134). In contrast, whilst some of the current long-standing characters such as Harold (Ian Smith) and Paul (Stefan Dennis) may be recognised by a wider audience, many are “treated as famous only by and for their fan audiences” (Hills

2004b:61) and might occupy the position of ‘subcultural celebrity’ (Hills 2004b:61). As noted in chapter two (see page 51), Hills also proposes the concept of the ‘mainstream cult’ which allows the surrounding fandom to fragment into a number of fan groups, tends to have a central auteur figure and be discussed through discourse of authorship and is dispersed across other media through tie-in merchandise and fans’ textual productivity such as creating fanfiction, videos and so on (2004:62). Given this, is it relevant to consider *Neighbours* as a form of mainstream cult? If we consider the surrounding fandom of the show then Hills’ suggestion that mainstream cult programmes allows their “online fans to split into sub-cultures or micro-communities that support different characters or couples” (2004:62) we can certainly argue that this is characteristic of *Neighbours*. Indeed, the fan community under investigation does allow fans to split into factions who support specific characters or ships and has “its own communal identities and languages” (Hills 2004:63). Furthermore, the show is dispersed through other media via fans’ textual practices which, whilst not as common as in cult media fandom, do exist via the creation of *Neighbours* fanfiction, artwork and music videos. However, as I argue below, soaps such as *Neighbours* are rarely constructed by a single authorial figure and are often treated by fans as being created by a committee of writers and producers. This might appear to limit this aspect of *Neighbours*’ status as a mainstream cult text but, as I will suggest below, despite the fans’ awareness of this collective creation, they are still highly aware of who these writers, producers, directors and so on are. Thus, whilst they cannot draw on a discourse of authorship which is commonly associated with quality television (Brower 1992; Thomas 2002:129), they are still conscious of those who are in charge of the show.

Having outlined prior work on soap opera and its relevance to my own research I now turn to discussion of my empirical data. In the next section, I explore the ways in which fans use the show to perform their self-identities, often via distancing themselves from those characters who they perceive to be unrealistic or acting ‘out of character’.

### **“Where is the character I can identify with?”: Characters, identification and ‘betrayal’**

As outlined in chapter three, one of the key rewards from fan/object and fan/fan pure relationships is the reflection of a desirable self-identity and reflexive narrative of the self (Giddens 1991:36). Soaps emphasise “personal relationships and emotional dilemmas” (Geraghty 1991:122-123) and audience discussions move easily from narrative events to ‘real-life’ situations (Ang 1982:34; Hobson 1982:129). Soaps allow viewers “to evaluate their own experiences as well as the norms and values they live by” (Seiter 1989:233) and viewers often feel ‘close’ to soap characters, “referr[ing] to them as friends with whom they talked, laughed, cried and suffered” (1989:235). As Baym notes;

viewers make the shows personally meaningful. They do this by putting themselves in the drama and identifying with its situations and characters. They also bring the drama into their own lives, making sense of the story in terms of the norms by which they make sense of their own experiences (2000:71).

More specifically, Marie Gillespie’s study of *Neighbours* audiences within a Punjabi community in Southall similarly found that young viewers of the show drew “on the soap as a cultural resource [...] as they endeavour[ed] to construct new modes of identity for themselves” (1995:143). The young viewers she studied “compare and contrast, judge and evaluate the events and characters in the soap and those in ‘real’ life” (1995:145), drawing on the show to make sense of issues of community, kinship, love, and romance. Such connection with the show is engendered by its aesthetics as “identification is encouraged by the everyday tempo and rhythm, the invariable use of eye-level camera and a thoroughly utilitarian visual style which draws no attention to itself” (Crofts 1995:99). Furthermore, the pleasures of soap opera have often been linked to fantasy (Ang 1996) which can lead to the “taking up of subjectivities to share the feelings and experiences of fictional characters even if those feelings and experiences might not be sought in real life” (Scodari 2004:2). Scodari argues that we most commonly identify with characters we perceive to be like as “if given the option, real social actors are more inclined to be interpellated by and adopt the positions of protagonists with identities similar to their own” (2004:3). However, this is not always the case and people may

identify with multiple characters or those they are not like in real life. Identification “may involve the desire to be like/unlike [characters]” (Liebes and Katz 1993:98), causing us to “present the self as juggling different, often competing, attitudes or identities” (Liebes and Katz 1993:99). Furthermore, viewers do not always blindly identify with characters no matter what narrative twists and turns befall them. Although some fans do remain loyal, preferring to blame producers and writers for ‘betraying’ characters (Symonds 2003a), others actively re-negotiate their feelings towards favoured characters. As Brown, drawing on Davies (1984) suggests, in an ‘implicatory reading’ the viewer “will involve her- or himself with a character but will draw back if what happens to that character becomes uncomfortable” (1994:52). This is “audience controlled [...] active pleasure” (Brown 1994:52) rather than passive, unconditional identification with characters. For example, one fan on the *Neighboursfans* board expresses a lack of identification with characters, asking

where is the character I can identify with? Where is the 30-yr-old, married with no kids, stable job chick who still has good and bad things happen without having her world turned upside down every second week and having her life (or her marriage) threatened every other week? (Sally, post #52 ‘Giving *Neighbours* one last chance’).

This inability to identify with onscreen individuals is linked to the common fan criticism that unwelcome narrative events result in ‘out of character’ behaviour to serve sensationalist plots (Jenkins 1992:118). Fans often suggest that the occupants of Ramsay Street are acting in an unrealistic fashion with no consistency;

Storylines should embrace the characters, not assassinate them (Ian, post #58 ‘Giving *Neighbours* one last chance’).

characters are so locked in their own little bubbles and being prepared for the next dramatic explosion/fight/affair/near death experience that emotion has taken a back seat. The characters don't really have characters anymore (Jack, post #115 ‘All New Winter 2006/Spring 2007 Spoilers’).

I could cope with all this drama as long as character development was happening, character histories were apparent and consistent, and the drama had a purpose. Instead we get no character development, the drama has absolutely no purpose whatsoever, new characters I feel we know nothing about and older ones...well we

know nothing about them either because they aren't the same old characters.  
(Tabitha, post #116 'All New Winter 2006/Spring 2007 Spoilers').

Although the importance of characters acting consistently has been previously examined (Amesley 1989), my concern here is with how this intersects with self-identity and ontological security. If fandom can be viewed as a form of pure relationship, then fans expect that the fan object (e.g. characters) will resonate with their own experiences and that they will be able to draw on these to develop their reflexive self-narratives. However, when characters act 'out of character', their use as a point of identification, and the show's status as a provider of ontological security, is threatened. As one fan notes, "fans are now scared to become too close to a character or begin to like them and enjoy them because TPTB [The Powers That Be]<sup>66</sup> are so harsh that they could take them away without batting an eyelid" (Karl, post #53 'Giving *Neighbours* one last chance').

This is also the case for those fans who identify as shippers of certain relationships. As previously outlined, shippers are fans who support particular on-screen romantic relationships or potential pairings, often discussing signs of an impending romance or recollecting their favourite moments in a couple's relationships. Although, as I have argued, such practices have yet to be fully explored within the reality TV genre, some consideration of these attachments has been undertaken on soap fans. Fans' attachments to on-screen soap relationships are perhaps to be expected given the closeness which the dailiness and routine of the genre engenders. However, those studies which have considered soap fans' interest in on-screen relationships have so far avoided explicit use of the term 'shipper' (Baym 2000; Harrington and Bielby 1995; Scodari 2004). This may result from the fact that the term shipper originated in science-fiction fandom and that soap scholars are either unaware of the term or seek to distance their work from this genre. However, given the similarities in fan practice and attachment across disparate genres (e.g. the reality TV fans of *BB*, and the shippers in *The West Wing* fandom); I suggest that the activities that soap fans engage in clearly position them as shippers. Conversely, however, my interest here is not in how *Neighbours* fans discuss their chosen

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<sup>66</sup> This is the fan nickname for the collective of writers, producers and, sometimes, network executives who control the fate of the show.

ships and draw on them to work through issues in their own lives or to make bids for discursive power. Rather, I want to draw attention to the fact that shippers may feel threatened by unwelcome narrative developments within a show and might be reluctant to engage in this fan practice. Indeed, despite the identification and closeness which the longevity and routine of soap opera often fosters, the *Neighbours* fans I examined were often reluctant to engage in shipping. For example, shippers or Stax (Steph/Max) or Pizzy (Paul/Izzy) comment;

there really is no point in investing in couples anymore, TPTB clearly find "coupledom" boring, Steph and Max had enough angst to fill several lifetimes, and only then to split anyway, Paul lasted all of five minutes with Lyn until he developed an unhealthy interest in young girls (Post #736 'The Robinson Family (spoilers), Part XXII: The Bus Stops Here').

I'm not investing in any more couples. I invested in Stax, look where that got me!! [...] In order to avoid huge disappointment, it is best not to overly invest in any character and certainly not any couple (Post #735 'The Robinson Family (spoilers), Part XXII: The Bus Stops Here').

Couples rotate every month. Couples are 'in love' and the love of eachothers lives after one date. No story line is ever built up the same anymore. It's all quick release. Draw your comparisons if you will, but the anticipation is often the best part (Ashley, post #22, 'Giving Neighbours one last chance').

This suggests that fans are reluctant to form the close emotional attachments so essential in fan/object relationships as this relationship could be ended abruptly without the fan's consent if TPTB choose to write characters out or split characters up. Although fans' understanding of production conditions (Turnbull 2004) means they realise that such occurrences often result from factors such as actors deciding not to sign new contracts, this does not stop them from being upset when their favourite characters leave the show. This can be displeasing for fans of individual characters or of relationships, and the responses of these fans indicates that fans might, in addition to continuing to discursively manifest their "frustration and antagonism" (Jenkins 1992:23), experience a sense of loss or disappointment at these happenings. Thus, much like *The West Wing* fans in the next chapter, *Neighbours* fans may react intensely to such events, feeling a sense of grief which they then need to work through (see page 198). The close emotional ties to



characters and relationships engendered by soap opera means that the loss of these elements of the show may be particularly difficult to accept (Hobson 1982:143). Thus, fans are forced to renegotiate their fan/object relationships, with some even making a 'romance' analogy explicitly in their postings;

you had us fall in love (for 20 years) and then you broke our hearts, and not in the good way drama should (Lance, post #170 'All New Winter 2006/Spring 2007 Spoilers').

We post on this board because we love the show. As with people in love, we experience highs and lows in relationships, and for me at the moment I am experiencing a low. Whether the relationship is beyond saving is another thing (Uma, post #161 'All New Winter 2006/Spring 2007 Spoilers').

Another fan notes that "It hurts to see a show that I loved become something I no longer recognise. What was the "House" equivalent of soaps is now the "[Desperate] Housewives""(Sally, post #52 'Giving *Neighbours* one last chance'). As well as making value judgments about the types of show that are deemed to be 'quality' television, this poster also alludes to her fan/object attachment via the notion of hurt or disappointment at witnessing the show's decline.

Given these fans' emphasis upon long-standing fandom, detailed knowledge of the show, and emotional attachments, it is often the re-writing of the show's history and key characters that fans most resent. For example, one of the fiercest debates on the forum concerned the return of the character Paul Robinson who was originally in the show between 1985 and 1993 and was reintroduced in the 2004 season finale. The character's subsequent involvement in murder, blackmail, and arson were criticised by those fans who felt that this had tainted the 'legacy' of the Robinson family, who were one of the soap's original sets of characters;

The [Robinson] name has been mutilated beyond recognition. I cannot fathom the conception behind it. If the show wants a family like that, by all means introduce one. It wouldn't suit the show. It *doesn't* suit the show, but the back-story could be developed to account for it, something one cannot say for the Robinsons (Valerie, post #274 'All New Winter 2006/Spring 2007 Spoilers').

If Paul were actually Paul, rather than this comedy clown, I'd still be watching [...] Why would I want to watch this current garbage and panto villain Paul, where I can shove in a VHS and watch the real one? (Magnus, post #43, '*Neighbours* future').

Such comments about the betrayal of previous events and characters indicates that “soap depends on viewers’ knowledge of its history. When that back-ground is continually shifting, it becomes difficult and potentially impossible to bring that history to bear on making sense of the show’s present” (Baym 2000:100). Thus, for example, the rewriting of Paul’s character prevents fans from drawing on their knowledge of his previous tenure on the show to inform their discussions of his current actions. TPTB, like fans, have the “power to gloss” (Tulloch 1995:147) the show’s history, offering their own interpretations and rewriting the show’s history if it suits current storylines (see Hills and Williams 2005). However, if previous narrative events which fans have drawn on to perform identity work are re-written then the fan’s self-narrative can be undermined. Furthermore, a fan’s sense of ontological security depends upon the consistent scheduling of the show, knowledge of past events, and an intimacy engendered by this regular screening. If fans feel that programme history can be re-written to serve plotlines or characters could be written out at any time, their confidence in the text is threatened, leaving them less able use the show as a source of ontological security and causing their fan/object relationships to be jeopardised. Despite this, fans who disliked *Neighbours*’ direction continued to post about their disapproval at the forum (Andrejevic 2008:44). To return here to the multi-dimensional continuum I established in chapter three (see appendix two), such fans would fall into sector D of this model (see page 86), having pure fan/object relationships but more impure fan/fan relationships. By expressing their “frustration and antagonism” (Jenkins 1992:23) these fans continued to accrue social and symbolic capital by attempting to discursively enforce their view that the show had decreased in quality, even as their interest in *Neighbours* itself declined. Such fans maintained their fan/fan relationships over their interest in the fan object, indicating that the fan community remains an integral aspect of their ontological security and reflexive self-narratives.

As this section has illustrated, a stable sense of the show's history is crucial in allowing fans to form successful fan/object pure relationships with *Neighbours*. In the next section I examine how the regular scheduling of *Neighbours* and its unique position within broadcasting history also impacts upon the fandom that surrounds the show, particularly with relation to fan's sense of ontological security.

### **"I've watched *Neighbours* my whole life!": Scheduling, routine and ontological security**

As I have argued, ontological security is one of the most important aspects of modern society (Giddens 1991:36) and this can be gained, in part, from the routines and repetitions of television scheduling (Moore 2005; Scannell 1988; Silverstone 1999). Thus, the temporality of *Neighbours* is crucial as, whilst *The West Wing* was aired for a finite number of episodes per season and *Big Brother* is scheduled almost continuously over a specific but bounded time period, *Neighbours* is screened twice daily on five days of the week, almost year-round.<sup>67</sup> *Neighbours* thus occupies a unique place in the history of British broadcasting as it was the first show to be stripped across the schedules over five days (Cunningham and Jacka 1996:140; Dunleavy 2005:376). At the time of *Neighbours*' debut in the UK soaps usually aired only twice a week, although this had increased to three shows per week by the early 1990s and omnibus editions to allow viewers to catch up on missed episodes were also introduced (Hobson 2003:5). *Neighbours* was also the first soap to be screened twice a day (Grade 1999:239), although its original schedule pattern consisted of a first screening at lunchtime and a repeat at 9:05am the next morning. However, this was eventually altered in January 1988 so that a new episode aired at lunchtime and the repeat was scheduled at 5:35pm after the end of children's programming (Oram 1988:48-50).<sup>68</sup> The initial time slots attracted "a typical

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<sup>67</sup> When the show aired on the BBC it was usually off-air over some holiday periods such as Christmas or bank holidays and during the two weeks that the BBC screened the Wimbledon tennis tournament and other major sporting events. These 'rests' were intended to ensure that the UK did not catch up with Australian episodes which tend to be around four-to-eight weeks ahead of those screened in Britain. It remains to be seen how these 'rests' will be managed now the show has moved to Channel Five.

<sup>68</sup> The apocryphal story behind this is that BBC Chairman Michael Grade observed the viewing habits of his teenage daughter and her friends and realised that such scheduling would secure youngsters' viewing outside of the school holidays (Crofts 1995:103; Hobson 2003:14).

audience of housewives, shift workers, the unemployed, people home sick” (Oram 1988:48) whilst the new slots catered for working mothers and schoolchildren (Crofts 1995:103). Such assumptions relate to Mittell’s argument that scheduling “can articulate genres to particular target audiences and cultural hierarchies” such as “daytime soap operas [which] are linked to female audiences and lowbrow cultural tastes through their scheduling” (2004:59).

The impact of the show’s scheduling is easy to under-estimate, given the fact that numerous screenings of shows are now commonplace in a world of 24-hour rolling news coverage, multi-channel, digital and satellite television (Moore 2005:25), which John Ellis has referred to as the “era of plenty”<sup>69</sup> (Ellis 2002:39). For example, the BBC repeats *Eastenders* on its digital BBC3 channel later in the evening, and was reportedly due to begin similar screenings of *Neighbours* before they lost the rights to Five (Holmwood 2006:online). After the show’s move to Five, a 7pm repeat was screened on its digital channel Five Life and an omnibus showing was aired on Saturday afternoons. However, in the mid-eighties, the BBC’s stripping of *Neighbours* was unique and its success in the UK can be attributed to its “constant schedule presence” (Dunleavy 2005:376) and the “opening up of daytime television on BBC1 and the expansion of tabloid coverage of television” (Crofts 1995:107). The show’s success was also due to its early-evening repeat which attracted younger viewers (Hobson 2003:14). Such scheduling patterns meant that, for many viewers, the show became “a fixed marker-point in their daily routine. It could be an inescapable accompaniment to lunch, or the juncture at which afternoon slipped into early evening” (Gauntlett and Hill 1999:30). *Neighbours*’ distinctive scheduling means that my data may begin to substantiate the vague claims regarding routine, repetition, and ontological security made by critics such as Scannell (1988), Silverstone (1994), and Moore (2005). My research considers how these theories may be complicated by empirical study of the discourses of fans themselves. Along with my exploration of the neglected concept of fan/producer relationships within soap

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<sup>69</sup> Ellis suggests that the era of plenty is a period when “television programmes (or, as they will be known, ‘content’ or ‘product’) will be accessible through a variety of technologies, the sum of which will give consumers the new phenomenon of ‘television on demand’ as well as ‘interactive television” (2002:39).

fandom (see below), this is another way in which I build upon prior work within television and fan studies.

Another key element of the temporality of *Neighbours* is the fact that the open-ended storytelling in soap opera often engenders a unique closeness between the viewer and characters (Hobson 1982:87; Feuer 1991; Geraghty 1991:14; Livingstone 1994; Seiter 1989:229). As Brown suggests,

the illusion one gets in watching soap operas is that each group of characters continues to interact with each other even after the cameras and microphones are off. This is one of the reasons that it is so easy to pretend that the characters are actual people (1994:58).

Although viewers' relationships with characters (or celebrities) can never be reciprocated (Giles 2000:61; Thompson 1995:219) soap is widely perceived as the genre most likely to engender 'parasocial interaction' (Horton and Wahl 1956) due to its frequent broadcast and the intimacy it engenders. As one *Neighbours* fan posts,

*Neighbours*, has such a unique opportunity, where you can follow the residents on a daily basis. That's the strength of the whole soap genre. You live, you cry, you love with the characters. And you care what happens to these people, because *you know them*, you know *about* them. Once that goes.....when you can't care, because things don't make sense, the show fails (Willow, post #136 'All New Winter 2006/Spring 2007 Spoilers').

The fact that *Neighbours* is screened twice daily and has been on air for over twenty years means that its potential as a source of ontological security is high. Indeed, the longevity of the show is referred to by many posters;

I've watched *Neighbours* on and off my whole life, ever since I was a baby, but only since 2004 have I made sure I catch it everyday. So it's not like I'm an 1980's viewer who hates modern day *Neighbours* (Kane, post #164 'All New Winter 2006/Spring 2007 Spoilers').

Do you think we actually want the show to fail? Would some of us have sat through this show for upward of 15 years just to want it to fail? The answer is no. Most, if not everyone loves this show. No one wants to see it go but if it keeps

going on this course, it will (Amy, post #212 'All New Winter 2006/Spring 2007 Spoilers').

I'm angry at the amount of *Neighbours* criticising that goes on here. I'm 20 years old and have watched *Neighbours* my whole life, and will probably continue to do so, despite people telling me it isn't as good as it once was (Becky, post #35 'Giving *Neighbours* one last chance').

However, as well as ensuring continuity and routine *Neighbours*' endurance also intersects with capital, power, and hierarchy. For many fans, their long-term viewing means that they can call on their knowledge of the show's detailed history to display their subcultural capital and make bids for fan 'discursive power' (Tulloch 1995). Thus, although subcultural capital excludes non-fans who do not watch the show (Hobson 1982:125) such knowledge also operates within the fan culture to maintain levels of discursive power. However, whereas subcultural capital is often correlated in fan studies with high levels of power and prestige (Brown 1997; Jancovich 2000; Thornton 1995), some fans felt that the show's writers were actively attempting to devalue their readings of the show by distancing the programme from its heritage. Such disavowal was often textual; for example, whilst one character was watching an apparently melodramatic film the movie's soundtrack featured music often used on *Neighbours* during the 1980s in genuinely emotional moments. This, for some fans, gave the impression of belittling many of the soap's key narrative events, including the deaths of beloved characters. However, the apparent devaluing of enduring fans also occurred extra-textually, in an interview with Luke Devenish, one of the show's writers. He stated;

would I be right in saying that the ones who hate present stories/characters the most are also the ones who revere the past the most passionately? [...] I do understand the dismay of some of the long time fans. My advice: get over it and jump on the fun bus with the rest of us. Failing that, watch something else. The show's a different beast than 1986, big bold villains are desirable and required by our network (2006: online).

Online posters interpreted these comments as trivialising the investments of long-standing fans and suggesting that those who had an enduring interest in the show were out of touch. One poster sarcastically notes to another "Yeah, but you just don't get it

[...]. You're still living in the eighties!!!! Only enlightened people get today's show” (Willow, post #182 ‘All New Winter 2006/Spring 2007 Spoilers’). Similarly, when fans discuss the perceived decline of the show they refer to the negative discourses surrounding long-term fans:

[it’s not] just the nostalgists, so they can't claim it's all sad geeks living in the past (Darcy, post #30 ‘All New Winter 2006/Spring 2007 Spoilers’)

it's not just sad old gits like me who wish it was 1987 (or, preferably, 1990) again, it's everyone, even people who don't know what the good old days WERE like (Magnus, post #77 ‘All New Winter 2006/Spring 2007 Spoilers’).

it can no longer be defined by nostalgic people. It can't be dismissed anymore (Jack, post #78 ‘All New Winter 2006/Spring 2007 Spoilers’).

The intense debates over the value of long-term fans within this community highlight the importance of *Neighbours*’ status as a long-running soap opera which fans had come to trust over a lengthy period of time. In light of this I now wish to examine fan responses to the announcement in May, 2007 that *Neighbours* was moving from the BBC to Channel Five in the UK.

The decision to move the show from its long-term home was primarily due to the BBC feeling that the Australian distributors Fremantle Media’s £300m price tag was unrealistic and could not be justified, given the BBC’s status as a public service broadcaster funded by a licence fee (Fincham 2007: online). Some fans expressed dismay at the move, especially as many viewers were outside the UK or could not view Channel Five due to problems with reception or an inability to get digital or satellite television (all posts in this section are from the ‘Neighbours is moving to Five from the BBC’ thread unless otherwise stated):

I'm also from Belgium and can't believe it... We won't get the new episodes anymore! I'm so sad. [...] This is just terrible news. No words for it. Please help all the fans outside Britain (Claude, post #54).

I'm very dissatisfied it is going to move to Channel 5. I am not looking forward to suffering through adverts. And I just hope it stays at the same time. It's been my routine for half my life now!! (Annie, post # 18).

The stability of the show, moving to Five from the BBC, means a period of instability, as such, the show wants to really get its act in gear in Oz! (become stable again!!), as they won't have the same commitment the BBC has shown them! (Sandra, post #34).

Given my concern in this research with ontological security and identity it is perhaps unsurprising that fans responded to this potentially destabilising move by expressing disappointment. Much like *The West Wing* fans discussed in the next chapter, this potential threat to ontological security was expressed in a supportive fan environment to enable fans to deal with the rupture. For many fans this negotiation of the temporary “pulling[ing] apart [of] the protective cocoon [of ontological security]” (Giddens 1991: 40) was articulated in debates over the ‘merits’ of the show’s move to Five and how this related to issues of cultural value. For example, those who debated the ‘quality’ of Channel Five made the following points:

The channel seems to have more credibility now than it did a few years back. Getting shows like CSI and Prison Break has helped (Darren, post #23).

It has totally changed from when it first aired. Yes they've got CSI, House etc but the porn stuff is long gone. I actually watch more programmes on 5 than I do on ITV (Shannon, post #26).

I think the main problem is that many people view Five as just a rubbish (or stronger word) channel where but that isn't true any more. The imported shows they have in prime time are pretty good, the shows that Five make (or commission others to make) are often bilge but the whole channel is tarnished with the same brush (Liam, post #78).

However, for other fans, the move was characterised as positive because it was felt by some that the new channel would treat the show with a ‘respect’ that they felt the BBC had lacked. They note,

Five do know how to treat Aussie Soaps well- they've done a good job with [Home & Away] and I'm sure they will do with Neighbours (Jimmy, post #12).



I see this as a positive move. BBC have treated neighbours badly for the last few years, not giving it any promos when big stories are coming up, talking through the credits, etc, not showing full length Australian credits. Home and away is much better on 5, and so will Neighbours be when the initial "shock" is over (Rose, post #123).

What such comments indicate is that whilst, for some, the change of channels threatened to undermine fans' sense of ontological security attained from the familiar scheduling of the show, for others the main issue was quality and distinction. For those who debated the merits (or otherwise) of Channel Five, the concern was related to whether the channel was 'worthy' of screening *Neighbours* or if its alleged content of 'porn' and 'gore' would denigrate the show. However, when fans argued for the merits of the channel they invoked contemporary quality American series' such as *House*, *Prison Break* and *CSI* to position the channel as 'good' and as supporting 'quality' television (see Goode 2007 and Knox 2007). This was furthered by arguments that the channel's enthusiastic promotion of such shows would benefit *Neighbours*, attracting new audiences and elevating the programme to a higher level of public awareness and, potentially, cultural acceptance. Their discursive positioning of *Neighbours* as 'worthy' suggests that the show, and the fans themselves, are 'good' via the association with American quality television. Thus, much like *The West Wing* fans examined in chapter seven, association with high status texts enables fans to articulate self-identities which are desirable or culturally acceptable.

As the above discussion indicates, *Neighbours*' longevity and scheduling contribute to fans' relationships with the show but also enables long-term viewers to display their increased fan knowledge. However, paradoxically, this leaves them open to attack from producers when their views of the show do not mesh with official positions. These attacks threaten fan identity and ontological security and need to be negotiated in order to protect each (see below). However, the show's move from the BBC to Channel Five also prompted fans to reevaluate their sense of ontological security, given the resultant disturbance to routines that many had followed for numerous years. For these fans, such threats were circumvented through discussions of quality television and cultural value and an accentuation of the positive aspects of the change. In the next section I more

specifically examine how fans form intra- and inter-generic distinctions to make their own value judgements within soap opera.

### **“No-one’s expecting Shakespeare”: Genre, distinction, and emotional realism**

The above discussion about disavowals of fans of 1980s-era *Neighbours* have touched upon debates about quality and ‘golden ages’ within the soap. In this section I examine the intra-generic distinctions made within this *Neighbours* fan community, particularly the ways in which fans compare across the genre to accord value to some soaps whilst dismissing others. I demonstrate that fans do not readily subscribe to established cultural hierarchies which esteem or denigrate certain genres but, rather, that they operate their own mechanisms of generic value. Although fans may be aware of the cultural derision towards their favoured shows I aim to illustrate the ways in which they reject such views, instead negotiating distinction, cultural value, and ‘quality’ through their own specific criteria.

As I have outlined, soap opera is possibly the most culturally devalued genre with its fans perceived as being “as low as one can sink on cultural taste hierarchies” (Harrington and Bielby 1995:5). Soap fans are aware of this cultural contempt, often drawing on discourses of ‘guilty pleasures’ (Radway 1984; Schroder *et al* 2003:249) or alluding to notions of addiction when discussing their fandom (Brunsdon 1997:23; Gauntlett and Hill 1999:31; Press 1990:169). *Neighbours* is particularly derided, often even by those attempting to study it (Thomson 2000: online) and,

when it comes to *Neighbours*, it's more socially acceptable to admit an addiction to, say, Pot Noodles, or Lambrusco. [...] *Neighbours* is a lonely pleasure. It's the Cinderella of soap operas - never seen at glitzy TV awards shows, unaccountably snubbed by every magazine's soap round-up, as if watching *Neighbours* might be somehow grubby, embarrassing, even suspect (Ferguson 2007: online).

Soap opera’s status as a disparaged genre partly results from its association with the feminine but is also “grounded in the division between high-taste and low-taste culture that creates a value-laden distinction between aficionados (e.g. of opera) and fans (e.g. of

soap operas)” (Baym 2000:37, see also Jenson 1992). Thus, those who have an interest in high culture are legitimated whilst those who engage in fandom of popular objects are deemed socially unacceptable. However, the considerable academic interest in soap audiences has gone some way towards rehabilitating this genre and “the term soap opera has been refined in a conformation between such historical examples as the afternoon serial drama, prime-time serials, and British soap operas” (Feuer 1992:140). Furthermore, many of the elements of soap opera are now utilised in genres such as news programming and sports (Wittebols 2004) whilst, as discussed in chapter two, soap also informs some ‘quality television’ such as *Sex and the City* (Negra 2004) and *Desperate Housewives* (Lancioni 2006). However, most common is the alignment of soap opera with reality television (see page 145). It is worth noting, however, that both reality television and soap opera are devalued genres and that this correlation is rarely undertaken by critics to argue for the value of either genre (although the *BB* fans examined in chapter five drew on the notion of soap opera to elevate the reality genre).

However, the *Neighbours* fans I examined developed their own criteria for quality and demanded certain levels of competence within the soap genre as audiences do possess a “popular aesthetic” (Frith 1998) and make their own value judgements (Bird 2003:123; McKee 2001: online). However, acknowledgment of fan aesthetic interpretations has been associated with canonicity and accused of being elitist (see chapter two). Despite this, “an understanding of the aesthetic evaluation process for any genre does not mean that we then have to make a judgement about whether that genre is truly ‘art’” (Gracyk 1999 cited in Bird 2003:124) and we can discuss issues of ‘quality’ without needing to argue for the ‘value’ of the soap opera genre or justifying *Neighbours* as a ‘worthwhile’ object of study. For many fans, there is a clear demarcation between ‘good’ soaps (e.g. *Neighbours*) and ‘bad’ soaps such the American *Sunset Beach*. This is the show most commonly used to exemplify ludicrous, trashy, and over-the-top soaps and it is often referenced to demonstrate fan displeasure with *Neighbours*’ current storylines;

I haven’t posted on here since the BBC stopped showing *Neighbours* and replaced it with *Sunset Beach* Australia (Elaine, post #155 ‘All New Winter 2006/Spring 2007 Spoilers’)

[the audience members who took part in market research and applauded the show's new direction must have been] picked up from [...] *Sunset Beach* forums or similar (Tabitha, post #187 'All New Winter 2006/Spring 2007 Spoilers').

What I'm reading now isn't *Neighbours*. It doesn't bear any resemblance to *Neighbours*. It reads like *Sunset Beach* with an Aussie accent. It's just... what is it? (Darcy, post # 32 'All New Winter 2006/Spring 2007 Spoilers').

These quality judgements are clearly related to debates over what constitutes the 'real' show for fans and their opinion that the programme is no longer 'proper' *Neighbours* and does not conform to fan expectations. These ideas are discussed in numerous threads, with comments such as "I just can't be doing with the show no more. It's not the same at all." (Faye, post #16 'Giving *Neighbours* one last chance'), "It's not really *Neighbours* anymore is it?" (Post #171 'The Robinson Family: Spoilers Part XXII: The Bus Stops Here') and "I fail to see what establishes it as being in the same paradigm as "*Neighbours*" (Post #173 'The Robinson Family: Spoilers Part XXII: The Bus Stops Here').

Furthermore, *Neighbours*' early success was often attributed to the writing skills of those involved (Crofts 1995:102) and, as discussed in chapter two, a high standard of writing is often linked to quality television (Brower 1992:171-172). However, many fans feel that the standard of writing on *Neighbours* has fallen and, as well as making distinctions between 'good' and 'bad' soaps, fans also maintain intra-fandom standards of quality. One poster notes that "[*Neighbours*] is supposed to be soap opera. When I want Dickens, Austen or Shakespeare I won't be switching on at 5:30pm!!!" (Nate, post #117 'All New Winter 2006/Spring 2007 Spoilers'). This fan clearly distinguishes between high cultural objects such as Dickens and perceived lowbrow media such as soap operas. However, for other fans such dichotomies do the soap genre a disservice and fail to acknowledge the need for specific standards of competence within *Neighbours*. Again, 'bad' American soaps are referenced in a post which questions what it is that

means [soap is] supposed to be stupid? If your set standard of soap is *Days of Our Lives*, *The Bold and the Beautiful* or *Sunset Beach* then I see what direction you're coming from. But it doesn't mean all soaps have to be like that [...] No-

one's expecting Shakespeare [...] just a decent standard of television writing. The show managed it for quite a while before now (Darcy, post #118 'All New Winter 2006/Spring 2007 Spoilers').

Clearly, whilst fans don't 'expect the show to be Shakespeare', they do insist that a standard of writing is maintained;

Most fans don't expect *The West Wing* (pre S5). Most fans also don't expect *The Bold & The Beautiful*. There's a middle ground, and that middle ground was achieved (IMO) very well in the late 80s, the late 90s, and 2003-4, perhaps also the first half of 2005 (Michaela, post #132 'All New Winter 2006/Spring 2007 Spoilers').

Fans' main argument is that the soap should be as good as it had been during the 'golden ages' mentioned in the post above. As another poster suggests, nobody is "asking *Neighbours* to meet the best of literature's standards. We're just asking it to meet its own standards" (Lance, post #121 'All New Winter 2006/Spring 2007 Spoilers'). These debates indicate generic differences in judgements of quality television and aesthetics, suggesting that soap fans employ their own specific criteria. As argued in chapter two, in order to avoid the association of quality only with certain types of show (e.g. costume drama) genre-specific approaches to quality television must be encouraged (see page 44) for "the terms of judgement will vary according to what is under consideration: we will not consider a gameshow or a news programme in the same way as a serial drama" (Jacobs 2001:430). Furthermore, Jason Mittell argues that genres are not 'natural' but are "discursive practices" and are "contingent and transitory, shifting over time and taking on new definitions, meanings, and values within differing contexts" (2004:17). Such work indicates a move away from formalist definitions of genre which rely upon traditional ideas about 'good' and 'bad' texts. Instead, much as I argued in relation to the ways in which 'quality television' is constructed by industry personnel, academics, and audiences (see chapter two), genres are also constructed and "employed by critics, industries and audiences" (Mittell 2004:10). Thus, it must be acknowledged that such distinctions are not only genre-specific but may also be fandom-specific or exclusive to particular fan communities, meaning little to those without highly specified knowledge of the shows in question. We must not assume that audiences operate dominant mechanisms of cultural

distinction but should investigate each case on its own merits, to uncover the variations of generic difference that fans draw on. As Bird notes, soap fans

understand the constraints of limited sets and daily taping, and especially value achievements that transcend those constraints. Acting is also evaluated differently; for instance, soap fans happily acknowledge that 'good' soap acting may be very different from that in prime time TV or films (2003:139).

Thus we cannot expect soap fans and fans of 'quality' drama to be responding to the same criteria as, for soap fans, a 'good' example of the genre may well be an example of 'trashy' television for fans of drama or documentary or other 'high-brow genres' (Mittell 2004).

Work on shows such as *Doctor Who* (McKee 2001:online) and *Doctor Quinn: Medicine Woman* (Bird 2003) has emphasised the ways in which intra-generic judgements are made and how fans hold the shows to varying standards. Such debates also occur within *Neighbours* fandom with fans discussing the shows' 'golden ages', with perhaps the most widely ridiculed being the 1995 season which was characterised by "weird dream sequences and Mark being a mad priest" (Gail, post #31 'Giving *Neighbours* one last chance'). As one pro-1995 fan attests, "My season has been trashed so much by people with 'differing tastes', its reputation is worse than Satan's" (Patrick, post #30 'Giving *Neighbours* one last chance'). In comparison, the years 2003-2005 are widely lauded as being amongst the show's best;

it really needs to go back to the early 2000's (Hannah, post #2 'Giving *Neighbours* one last chance').

there was just the right balance in [2003-2004] seasons. [In my opinion] drama overtook character and pacing etc from the beginning on the 2005 onwards (and I've enjoyed the show less and less since then) (Scarlet, post #33 'Giving *Neighbours* one last chance').

I believe the ratings reflected that golden 03-05 period, did they not? I hope TPTB take note of all this valid criticism - we love the show and don't want to see it self-destruct (Nicky, post #50 'Giving *Neighbours* one last chance').

For many fans, the key to ‘good’ *Neighbours* is a balance between character and action;

the benchmark (of recent years) most people are using is 2003 and 2004 which saw plenty of action and drama. I personally think Steph's cancer arc, Karl & Susan's marital breakdown, Lana's coming out are all some of the absolute highlights of the show... ever. But they were real, they resonated, they were well paced and brilliantly scripted and they were packed with emotion and handed to terrific actors (Lance, post #195 ‘All New Winter 2006/Spring 2007 Spoilers’).

The above quote illustrates fans’ insistence upon ‘emotional realism’ (Jenkins 1992) and the importance of an ‘emotional aesthetic’ (Bird 2003) in their fan objects. Indeed, as Jenkins notes,

the fannish ideal of ‘emotional realism’ also insures that transgressions of ‘common sense’ assumptions about social reality will be harshly criticized not simply as ideologically motivated but as violating the integrity of the represented world (1992:116, see also Bird 2003:136-138).

Indeed, the importance of respecting the established ideology of a show is of crucial importance to the *Neighbours* fans I examined and it is to this issue that I now turn.

Although the fans I examined make intra-generic distinctions between ‘good’ (e.g. *Neighbours*) and ‘bad’ (e.g. *Sunset Beach*) soaps and form the show’s history into golden ages, they also have clear generic expectations regarding what constitutes the ‘real’ show. Thus, many fans argue that sensationalist storylines featuring murder, scandal, and intrigue occur at the expense of remaining true to the characters (see above), but also mock the show itself, belittling those fans who invested in the original, neighbourly premise of the programme. Many viewers enjoyed *Neighbours* because it was not ‘depressing’, in marked contrast to the British soap *EastEnders* (Gauntlett and Hill 1999:32, see also Cunningham and Jacka 1996: 139) and is “set in suburban Australian milieu” which contrast with “British-styled pubs and corner shops” (Dunleavy 2005:379). This ‘feel-good’ factor (Crofts 1995) was said to contribute to *Neighbours*’ appeal, but its community atmosphere and strict sense of morality were also perceived to be important (Frensham 1990; Reynolds 1988). Indeed, the show’s popularity was partly attributed to the “generally moral universe where no good comes of bad deeds, and

threats to happy living are normally minor and quickly resolved” (Gauntlett and Hill 1999:32). This is echoed by fans as one poster recalls when “*Neighbours* had the ‘feel good’ factor where good always won through and very little bad things happen [...] [they should go] back to basics, happy, feel good factor in sunshine” (Chris, post #21 ‘Giving *Neighbours* one last chance’). However, such strict divisions between ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ have been challenged by some viewers who feel that the show now appears to reward evil-doers and allow misdeeds to go unpunished. Characters may prove unpopular if they embody “attitudes [fans] find socially undesirable and inconsistent with the values they find within the series” (Jenkins 1992:116) and this may explain the ire fans feel toward Paul Robinson (see above) and his involvement in plots involving murder, arson and general evil-doing which fans felt were anathema to the character and the soap. For example, one poster sarcastically notes that,

*Neighbours* should be renamed ‘Dark Lane’. It needs a new black logo, a scary new theme tune and dark, spine-tingling opening titles [...] I want a never-ending storyline which involves the great Ned trying to bring down the evil Paul Robinson who lives in West Waratah Castle – a dark place over-looking Ramsay Street (Patrick, post #9 ‘Giving *Neighbours* one last chance’).

Although such comments are sarcastic and comedic the use of horror genre conventions suggests that current plotlines in the show violate the expectations of the soap genre. More specifically, for these fans the show violates its own boundaries and fails to live up to its previous ideology, which is discussed in an online debate in the ‘The Robinson Family (spoilers), Part XXIV: Come Together’ thread;

The show is amoral now. It has no standards. Anything goes and it usually does and it's not a good thing (Post #176).

The show now is more of a role model of how not to behave (Post #177).

Totally agreed, It's sad that it lost the moral centre as well as the mind of the show (Post #179).

The *Neighbours* fans’ concerns about the show’s lack of morality have parallels in other soap fandoms as, whilst fans anticipate “lying and deception [which are] often key to



moving storylines along” (Bird 2003:138), they also operate moral standards regarding what forms of on-screen behaviour are acceptable and refuse to tolerate storylines which are “repugnant and degrading, deriving from out-of-character behaviour and manipulative, plot-driven writing” (Bird 2003:138). For example, many online *Neighbours* fans were disgusted by a scene in which Paul Robinson seduced the character Pepper in a euphemistic sequence of toy trains entering tunnels, intercut with a scene of clothes flying across the room. Fans made clear moral judgements about this storyline commenting that “Just reading it made me cringe, can't imagine how it was actually viewing it” and “Poor taste but then the whole scene was poor taste really and they show it at a time when young children could be watching ugggh” (Willow, post #173 and Harry #175 ‘The Robinson Family (Spoilers) Part XXII: The Bus Stops Here’). Such debates suggest that if fans fear they are identifying with a show (or characters) which is immoral then their fan/object pure relationships may be undermined. If our objects of fandom should reflect a desirable identity or self-narrative, what does it mean for *Neighbours* fans to favour a show that appears to reward deception and permit wrong-doers to escape unpunished? When fans perceive a drastic shift in the show’s ideology its ability to provide ontological security is also destabilised, causing fans to renegotiate and potentially abandon their fandom or struggle to continue to use it to perform identity work. For example, once the on-screen Steph/Max marriage broke down and Max departed the show, some ‘Stax’ shippers gave up watching until his temporary return and the subsequent cessation of the relationship; “historic moment ladies and gentlemen, I am going to watch *Neighbours* for the first time in months” (Donna, post #66 ‘The Wondrous Mr & Mrs Hoyland - Spoilers, Take 47’). Similarly, for other fans giving up the show was preferable to enduring the betrayal of the characters;

*Neighbours* is being run into the ground, slowly but surely. If it was axed tomorrow, I think I would breathe a sigh of relief that this once popular show had been laid to rest and stop these people butchering it, playing with the characters like they are toys and not real people (Karl, post #53 ‘Giving *Neighbours* one last chance’).

However, whilst these fans have apparently given up watching the show their continued online presence indicates that their fan/fan relationships remain strong and that they still

desire discussion of their frustrations with the show. This suggests that, whilst fan/object relationships cease to be important, their fan/fan relationships may endure and the object may continue to hold specific meaning for the fan's self-identity (see page 86).

Such discussions suggest that issues of quality television are relevant to fans even within culturally devalued genres and imply that debates over quality TV need to be more generically specific. Although *Neighbours* is often ridiculed in the wider press (Ferguson 2007:online), for fans of the show it can be a benchmark of 'quality' in comparison to those soaps perceived to be ridiculous or implausible such as *Sunset Beach*. This can again be linked to fans' use of their *Neighbours* fandom to negotiate self-identity and ontological security. As argued above, long-term fans may feel the show's apparent decrease in quality means that it can no longer be relied upon to provide familiar pleasures as the unpredictable and unrealistic plotlines destabilise their trust in the programme. However, perhaps even more threatening to fans' sense of self-identity and ontological security is the denigration of their fan investments by those who create the show. It is, therefore, to this issue that I turn in my final section of this case study.

### **'Meeting in a dark alley!': Fan/producer relationships in the broadcasting field**

Although fan/producer relationships have been examined in prior work (see page 36), these interactions have not been linked to self-identity or ontological security. In this section I examine these issues, drawing upon Bourdieu's work on hierarchy, field, and capital. Although Giddens' notion of pure relationships remains pertinent, I begin to engage more closely with issues of active audiences and examine how fans of *Neighbours* interacted with producers regarding the narrative direction of the soap.

The issue of fan/producer relationships is not new and has been examined in the work of many theorists. However, Robert C. Allen notes that soaps are "marked by their authorial anonymity [...] soap opera is seen as having no identifiable artist who embodies it with a personal vision" (1985:15). Thus, whilst fans of shows such as *Twin Peaks* (Jenkins 1995), *Buffy* (Pearson 2005), or *The West Wing* fans I examine in the next chapter can

draw on discourses of authorship in their fan discussions, soap fans appear less able to construct themselves in relation or opposition to a single auteur figure. However, whilst this may have been true in the pre-Internet age, the increase in online fandom means that fans are now acutely aware of who controls soap narratives, from the networks and producers down to specific writers, often collectively referred to as TPTB (the powers that be). Fans are also highly mindful of “shifts in the power hierarchy [of soap producers]” (Scodari 2004:143). However, despite such awareness of who controls the show, these *Neighbours* fans rarely use the names of individual writers or producers (with the exception outlined below), preferring the more anonymous term TPTB. This replicates the non-authorial discourse so common in off-line soap opera fandom, highlighting the fact that the show is part of an industry created by a collective rather than being ‘art’ or ‘quality drama’ which is the product of a individual. Thus, although fans could use their knowledge of those involved in the creation of the show to construct an auteurist discourse around *Neighbours*, they fail to do so. This, I suggest, is due to their continued awareness of the show within the soap opera industry but also results from a discursive move to construct those in charge as a nameless, homogenous, imagined ‘Other’ who oppose the fans’ interpretations.

Despite this, fans are “conscious of the implied relationship between fan and performer [or writers, producers etc] that suggests an obligation owed to fans” (Bird 2003:78). Thus, heated debates ensue when their interpretations diverge as “the possibilities proposed and championed by audiences often prove to be either actively avoided or specifically debunked by industrial producers, as a way of reinforcing their agency and power over the textual realm” (D. Johnson 2007:77). For example, Derek Johnson (2007) offers the example of *Lost* in which producers continually sought to debunk various theories about the show, including devoting an episode to the fan suggestion that the show was all a figment of a character’s deluded imagination. A further example would be that of *Buffy* fandom in which the producers, keen to assert that those viewers reading a Buffy/Spike romance as plausible were wrong, sought to foreclose this interpretation by writing the characters into a controversial attempted rape scene (Symonds 2003). One of the most notorious divisions between fans and *Neighbours*

TPTB occurred after a batch of spoilers were posted which fans decried to outline ludicrous and unwelcome storylines. One of the show's writers who, in keeping with the ethical constraints of my work I will not directly name here, responded on the forum to these fan critiques;

thank you so much to all of you for your many kind comments and words of encouragement. I can't tell you how heartwarming it is to feel the love that literally radiates for the show - and for me personally! - on this thread. I would be so pleased to meet any one of you in a dark alley. I'll be the one wearing a t-shirt with "arrongant!" [sic] printed on it with a frowning emoticon (Earl, post #147 'All New Winter 2006/Spring 2007 Spoilers').

Of course, given the confrontational nature of this posting, one might question the validity of the poster – is the poster really the member of the writing team as they claim? Given my long-standing lurking at the *Neighboursfans.com* site I am aware that the webmaster had a previously positive relationship with several of the writers from the show and that these writers often posted on the message board and responded to fans' questions and comments. Although, as with all online posters, one's identity can be faked, an earlier thread offers some substantiation that the poster is who they say they are. After the writer posts a more positive message, another poster questions their identity and is reassured by fellow fans (all posts from the 'New New New Spoilers' thread).

I hope I don't offend here, but how can we be sure that [Earl] is [Earl]? Perhaps the spoilers *are* true and [Earl] is someone pretending to be [Earl]. What's to stop anyone from signing up with a famous name (like [another writer] for example) and proving/disproving other spoilers? I respect [Earl] and I would hate to think that someone is falsely using his name. Could someone please confirm his identity? (Patrick, post #57)

I know what you are saying but that **IS** the right man (Shannon, post #59).

Yup, that's definitely the real [Earl] posting (Hayley, post #61).

Although given the ethical constraints of my research I cannot offer any identifying details regarding these posters, they include staff members at the forum and one poster who had contact with the production company and attended focus groups on potential *Neighbours* storylines in 'real-life'. Despite the writer's strong links to the site and his

proven record of posting suggest that he was who he claimed, some doubt may remain. However, given the assurances of high-ranking board members we can reasonably assume that the poster was who he claimed to be. Either way, online fans took the poster's identity to be authentic and, as one might expect, were outraged by this posting which, as well as making overt threats of physical violence, appeared to sarcastically mock online fans' practices and intelligence. Posters comment;

Instead of taking on board what is being said by intelligent people with an understanding of what makes for a good, enjoyable, family show, you offer threats of violence... "Meet any one of you in a dark alley", indeed. You're an idiot, mate (Eric, post #167 'All New Winter 2006/Spring 2007 Spoilers').

So wait, we're moving to threats now are we?! That's really mature and all you've done is backed up the negative views about you. How are we meant to "feel the love" for you when you are completely irrational and just lash out (as you did last time) at anyone who has the sheer **nerve** to call you out when the writing on the show isn't good enough? Your attitude and behaviour is disgraceful (Jack, post #198 All New Winter 2006/Spring 2007 Spoilers').

Other fans, however, were less concerned with divergent interpretations and opinions and more interested in how this post violated their fan community. The first two rules of the site instructed posters to express opinions "in a respectful manner" and to avoid "offensive comments about anyone - character, actor or member" (Shelley, post #1 'The rules') and many fans felt that the writer's post contravened these guidelines. As one respondent notes, "Maybe the reason people call you arrogant is because you act as such? If this gets deleted, I will want to know why because your insults and comments about **us** are low. You need to grow up. Really" (Jack, post #198 'All New Winter 2006/Spring 2007 Spoilers'). Clearly, fans expect TPTB to abide by the same community rules as them and to avoid making threats or personal attacks on posters. Thus, whilst these figures were respected and applauded when the fans enjoyed the direction of the show, once fans perceived a detrimental change in the narrative, these figures were no longer lauded and were expected to behave like regular members of the forum.

However, some fans supported TPTB, suggesting that it must be difficult for them to face critique and often personal attacks on their writing talents.

Thanks so much for posting a reply [poster name removed]. Its good to hear the opinions of someone from the inside, I can fully understand you're frustrations. I know heaps of people who are not members of this forum who are saying how much they love the show at the moment. I for one am also enjoying most of the show at the moment and always will (Peter, post #158 'All New Winter 2006/Spring 2007 Spoilers').

Somehow it seems that we're not allowed to member or character "bash" (except for Ned) but it's okay for some to personally attack the writer. Yes the show may not be great, but I don't really know why [poster name removed] should be expected to give a toss about our opinion when there are people here who are willing to jump down his throat at the first opportunity, regardless of what he actually posts. (Gareth, post #233 'All New Winter 2006/Spring 2007 Spoilers').

Whilst these clashes are in no way restricted to this *Neighbours* forum, my interest here is in how fan/producer interactions intersect with fan/object and fan/fan relationships. It may certainly be argued that fans that come to the attention of producers attain cultural, social, and symbolic capital via their high placement in hierarchies of access (MacDonald 1998:136). Thus, given my argument throughout this research, such fans would have more impure fan/object relationships given their online contact with those in charge of the show. However, I am also concerned here with how fans who clash so vehemently with TPTB might find their sense of fan identity or ontological security threatened. Many fans defended their critiques of the show, drawing upon the longevity of their fandom as 'evidence';

It really, really annoys me that people think we enjoy complaining. We don't sit around every day looking at what to nitpick about. We are discussing the show and at the moment it is mostly fueling negative comments. Nobody mentions all the praise that we gave in the lead up to the 5000th episode. If we were all so bitter and twisted then we would just moan about everything (Nina, post #176 'All New Winter 2006/Spring 2007 Spoilers').

most fans on this board don't criticise because we hate the show; we criticise because we love it, and we want it to be its best. If you're a relatively new fan (which some people are) you might not have the previous seasons to compare it to (Michaela, post #132 'All New Winter 2006/Spring 2007 Spoilers').

I guess what is apparent is that whether we love it or hate it at the moment, we all still love our *Neighbours* regardless. Whether we love the characters that are in it now or simply crave for days gone by, if you didn't love it then you wouldn't be posting here (Klein, post #224 'All New Winter 2006/Spring 2007 Spoilers').

Such comments suggest that, for many fans, the dismissal of their fandom by those who create the show may, much like *The West Wing* fans in the next chapter (see page 219), result in a reiteration of their fan identity to protect themselves from potential ruptures to their ontological security. By rearticulating their love for the show and their long-term devotion, these fans defend themselves against the attacks by producers and writers to attempt to maintain the sense of ontological security and self-identity engendered by their fandom of the show.

However, some fans reiterated the fact that they had foreseen problems with the show long before others, drawing on a sense of 'being right' and positioning themselves in a situation of discursive authority. These posters were mostly fans of the Robinson family who, as I have outlined above, many posters felt had been betrayed by current storylines. In response to the writer's critique, these fans queried whether they had been proven right by the widespread fan dissent on the board;

Do you think the Robinson [fans] have been vindicated in a way, for having foreseen the trend months before it drastically affected others favourites? (Darcy, post # 92).

I think for a while we were the only ones who noticed a decline because it was the people we cared about who were being destroyed; Paul. Little by little more and more characters have been affected and now the show as a whole is affected so of course, gradually other people start to realise something's not right (Nina, post #100).

Vindication yes. For over a year the faults were becoming increasingly obvious and being mocked and [...] we were told were disloyal and didn't get that the show was just as good as ever. And sadly it seems we were right. I hope I speak for everyone when I say that it is in no way a victory. There's no competition of who was right/wrong (Andy, post #103, all posts from 'All New Winter 2006/Spring 2007 Spoilers').

However, the final quote performatively functions to suggest that this fan's emotional attachment to the show supersedes any explicit attempts to accrue capital or discursive power from the vindication of their criticisms of the programme. However, despite such proclamations, such fans may still display implicit capital via the longevity of their fandom and the fact that their opinions of the show appear to have proliferated into the

wider community. Thus, in order to protect their fan/object relationships (and their ontological security and sense of self-identity), they refute any potential threat caused by the dismissal of their fandom by TPTB by reiterating that they foresaw that the fan object was decreasing in quality. This echoes the 'rejection discourse' employed by *The West Wing* fans examined in the next chapter (see page 231), suggesting that such discursive manoeuvres may be a common way for fans to protect themselves against threats to their fan identities across different types of fan cultures.

However, other fans more reflexively discussed their fan/fan relationships and fan community, describing how the forum had initially been welcoming and friendly, like "getting into a warm bath" (Willow, post #235 'All New Winter 2006/Spring 2007 Spoilers') whilst another notes that "I've always felt that this forum has been a different kettle of fish. I've participated in various Buffy/Star Trek forums where there was universal vitriol, even for good episodes...and I never felt this here" (Gail, post #234). Conversely, fans also acknowledge that the Internet can breed discontent, allowing people to vent frustrations that they might otherwise just accept within the show. They suggest,

I think this is becoming a trend throughout the Internet. Nearly every board I go on now, whether it's TV shows or my other hobbies and interests seems to be getting more and more negative. [...] I think it's something to do with the Internet medium for discussion, people can type what they want without recrimination, which more often than not gets other peoples backs up, which more often than not leads to arguments (Simon, post #231 'All New Winter 2006/Spring 2007 Spoilers')

Maybe they (we) are actually *underestimating* the power of the Internet. More and more people have access. And aren't we all "regular" people? Why would my view be any different from a viewer who is not on NF? Unless you think NF influences my opinion. And then subsequently the negativity feeds on itself? (Willow, post #232 'All New Winter 2006/Spring 2007 Spoilers')

Other fans argue against the idea that negativity is merely feeding on itself; "It's not just "jump on the bandwagon negativity". People here have their own minds and say when they like and dislike things. Unfortunately there isn't much to like at the moment" (Gail,



post #234). Fans suggest that the desire to see the show improve results from long-standing love for the show as people “want the show to be as good as it can be. There is *genuine* affection for the show. But some of the criticism that started last year, I guess. And is now persisting, there is a good reason for it” (Willow, post #235). The fact that fans debate the community itself suggests that fan/fan relationships are as crucial as fan/object relationships to their enjoyment of the show. If the cohesive community is compromised by vitriolic clashes over the direction of the show, then this fansite is no longer able to act as a routinised provider of ontological security and may also threaten fan identity (see page 62-63).

As outlined above, posters employed a number of strategies to protect themselves against potential threats to their fan identities caused by the explicit challenge of TPTB. They positioned themselves as ‘right’ in their assertions that the show had decreased in quality, reiterated their long-standing and intense love for *Neighbours*, and self-reflexively queried the impact of their fan/fan relationships upon their feelings toward the show. However, I now wish to consider this fan/producer clash via Bourdieu’s field theory to argue that such conflicts are related to capital and position-takings within the broadcasting field. As discussed in chapter two, fans are consecrating agents (Bourdieu 1993:11) who “not only contribute to the formation of collective belief surrounding the value of symbolic goods, but also to the evaluation of a cultural producer’s symbolic capital” (Shefrin 2004: 270). Bourdieu argues that this relies upon the ‘sincerity’ of the producer which occurs when “there is a perfect and immediate harmony between the expectations inscribed in the position occupied [...] and the dispositions of the occupant” (Bourdieu 1993:95). Producers who support fan practices are viewed as in harmony with the expectations of their position, whilst those who inhibit fan practices are perceived as ‘insincere’ and are often accorded less symbolic capital by fans (Shefrin 2004:270). Shefrin discusses this in a comparison of *Star Wars* director George Lucas and *Lord of The Rings* director Peter Jackson and their different attitudes towards fandom, with Jackson apparently sanctioning and actively encouraging it and Lucas attempting to control and discourage it. Such ideas may, thus, prove relevant to my consideration of the producers’ responses to the fans of *Neighbours*. If fans expect producers to tolerate and

even actively encourage their fandom, then the fact that some of the *Neighbours* writers have chosen to explicitly antagonise fans obviously contrasts with the “expectations inscribed in the position occupied” (Bourdieu 1993:95). Thus, fans re-evaluate the writers’ symbolic capital and, as consecrating agents who are crucial contributors to the “circle of belief” (Bourdieu 1993:77), have the power to not only devalue the show (via their accusations that it has decreased in quality) but the producers and writers who create the cultural product (Shefrin 2004:276). Field theory justifies the writer’s derogatory comments as an attempt to protect his/her position within the broadcasting field and also suggests that fans can reduce the symbolic capital of those who produce cultural objects via their status as consecrating agents. However, fans are also located within the broadcasting field and are expected to behave in a fashion in keeping with their positions. Thus, if producers presume fans are loyal, deferent and enthusiastic, when they begin to criticise or complain, they cease to act as consecrating agents of the fan object or those who produce them, threatening producer’s levels of capital and power within the field. This can result in instances when producers attack fans, dismissing their intense involvement with the fan object or suggesting that they are not ‘proper’ fans. Thus, we can view fan/producer relationships, and the associated claims or denials of, vindication as symptomatic of the fact that all fields are “arenas of struggle in which individuals and organizations compete, unconsciously and consciously, to valorize those forms of capital which they possess” (Benson and Neveu 2005:4) and in which agents must “hold their positions against those who struggle to establish the dominance of their own positions” (Williamson 2005:107).

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has examined how fans of the long-running soap opera *Neighbours* draw upon the show to negotiate identity and self-narratives, often by refusing identification with those characters they perceive to be acting ‘out of character’ or opposing narratives which violate the established ideologies of the show. I also considered how fans of the show who engaged in the practice of shipping particular on-screen relationships felt that they could no longer invest in this due to their dissatisfaction with the narrative direction

of the show and the apparently casual attitude with which TPTB split up onscreen romances or wrote characters out from the narrative. This, I argue, suggests that identification with onscreen relationships also enables fans to perform identity work and to attain a sense of ontological security which may be threatened in the wake of undesirable storylines or production decisions. This case study has also outlined *Neighbours*' unique position within UK broadcasting history as the first show to be 'stripped' across the schedules over five consecutive days and the first programme to be repeated on the same day. I have argued that this, coupled with the intimacy engendered by soap opera's regularity and narrative structures, contributes to ontological security for fans of the show. Thus, whilst links between scheduling, cyclicity, and ontological security have been long posited by theorists such as Scannell (1988), Silverstone (1994), and Moores (2000), this case study provides empirical evidence to substantiate these ideas. My examination of such issues was furthered by the move of the show from the BBC to Channel Five during my research and fan responses to this. Whilst their reactions indicated some threats to ontological security, for many fans this change prompted debate over issues of quality television, particularly centred on the reputation of Channel Five. Furthermore, by examining the intra-generic and intra-fandom distinctions that fans make I have shown how issues of 'quality television' are relevant even for those interested in culturally devalued genres such as soap opera. Finally, given the fact that fans' disappointment with *Neighbours*' current direction has intersected with each of the above discussions, I examined one specific point of fissure between fans and producers of the show. I outlined how fans' sense of ontological security and fan self-identity is threatened when their fandom is belittled by those responsible for creating the fan object. This provides another of this chapter's distinct and unique arguments; firstly by considering fan/producer relationships within soap opera fandom and, secondly, by suggesting that these relationships across all types of fandom may be understood through Pierre Bourdieu's field theory (1993). By drawing on this work we can better comprehend the often fierce clashes between fans and producers for, if we understand them as agents with specific positions and dispositions within the broadcasting field (that is, that producers should be encouraging and tolerant of fan behaviours whilst fans, in their positions as

consecrating agents, should be deferent and respectful), the conflicts between them can be understood as battles over capital, prestige, and authority.

In the next, and final, case study I examine fans of the American drama *The West Wing* which was broadcast in the UK on Channel 4 and its digital sister channel More4. In contrast to the prior two programmes I examined, *The West Wing (TWW)* is widely considered to be ‘quality television’ which is indicative of a recent wave of American contemporary drama. Thus, whilst *Big Brother* was a UK-based version of an international format and *Neighbours* an imported Australian soap opera, *TWW* is an imported quality drama which has travelled transnationally to find an audience in the UK. Furthermore, whilst *BB* runs almost continuously for a finite number of weeks before disappearing from UK screens and *Neighbours* has been ‘stripped’ across schedules and screened five nights a week, the temporality of *TWW* is different. Screened in regular slots and returning with each new ‘season’ of television in the autumn schedules of each year in the US, *TWW* was broadcast in a non-continuous but, nevertheless, routinised manner. However, most significant for my study was the announcement of the show’s cancellation at the end of the 2005/2006 season and fan responses to a text that they knew was coming to an end. Given my interest in the varying temporal structures of television shows, this provided a unique opportunity to examine fans’ discussions about an object whose demise was both guaranteed and imminent. Thus, in the next chapter, I continue to explore my key research areas of cultural value and power, and self-identity and ontological security through the prism of fan awareness of *The West Wing’s* impending cessation.

**Chapter Seven**  
**Loveshock, security, and transition:**  
**Post-object fandom and the demise of *The West Wing***

The prior chapters examined the data generated by my case studies of online fan communities devoted to *Big Brother UK7* and the Australian soap opera *Neighbours*. In this, my final empirical chapter, I consider the American drama series *The West Wing* (2000-2006), continuing my examination of capital and power and how fandom contributes to identity building and ontological security. This case study was undertaken via textual analysis of postings made at the unofficial site *Television Without Pity* <[www.televisionwithoutpity.com](http://www.televisionwithoutpity.com)>, a general site for discussion about various TV shows. My research here was supplemented by online questionnaires from fans from a range of online message boards and, in total, I received twenty-three completed questionnaires and drew on the postings of fifty-four different online fans (see pages 94-97). In contrast to *Big Brother* and *Neighbours* which have both been characterised as ‘lowbrow’ genres *The West Wing* (*TWW*) has been considered a “textbook case” of “television’s mainstream of quality drama” (Feuer 2007:148). This enables me to continue my study of the intra-generic distinctions made within specific fandoms and also to relate these to wider debates surrounding quality TV (see chapter two). Furthermore, during the course of my data collection *TWW* aired its final episodes, enabling me to examine how fans articulated their responses to this event and how the demise of the fan object threatened their fan pure relationships. As this chapter outlines, whilst much has been posited about the process of fans critiquing their fan objects, no prior work has examined fan reactions to the precise moment where a fan object moves from being an ongoing to a ‘dormant’ object. I then examine how the ending of *TWW* impacted upon fan’s self-identities, paying particular attention to the ways in which shippers of romantic relationships negotiated this and how this relates to wider fan debates over ‘proper’ or ‘true’ *West Wing*. I also consider the impact of the cessation of the show on fans’ sense of ontological security, returning to Anthony Giddens’ theories of pure relationships, as introduced in chapter three. After detailing the relevance of this work I outline the three key discourses that fans used when negotiating their responses to the end of *TWW*. These, broadly, consisted of fans rearticulating their reasons for their love of the show and bidding it a

fond farewell, admitting that their fandom would need to be renegotiated in the face of the show's cessation, or stating that they did not care about the ending of the show as it had already begun to lose its appeal for them. It is my suggestion that these responses, which I refer to as the reiteration, renegotiation, and rejection discourses, enable us to examine fan responses to the demise of a range of media texts beyond this specific study of *TWW* fans.

This chapter thus considers my research's key concerns of identity, ontological security, and capital through the prism of fan response to the end of *TWW*. As outlined above, I will return to Giddens' theory of the pure relationship, as introduced in chapter three, and will introduce his notion of 'loveshock' (the period of mourning necessary after the break-up of a relationship). I then outline the three ways fans discussed their reaction to this, which I have termed the reiteration, renegotiation, and rejection discourses.

However, to contextualise my findings I firstly discuss previous theoretical approaches to how mediated objects have been used to deal with periods of transition in individuals' lives and, also, how fans 'fall out of love' with fan objects. However, I suggest that such approaches fail to consider what happens when it is the object, not the fan, which ends the fan/object relationship (in the case of *TWW* through the cancellation of the show). Secondly, theories of use of mediated objects to assist in periods of transition fail to adequately account for what happens if it is the end of a particular fan object which necessitates a period of transition and readjustment in the first place. It is, therefore, to these debates that I now turn.

### **Transitions and endings in fandom**

This section offers an over-view of prior approaches to transitions and endings within fandom, considering this necessitates a period of adjustment and re-narration of the self. I also examine the previous ways in which cultural studies has theorised the end of fandom, arguing that these approaches are limited in various ways. The ending of *TWW* offers a unique chance to examine the precise moment of transition in fan's 'careers' (see page 73), in which they move from being fans of an on-going text which can be

speculated about, to being fans of a text which has ceased production. It is my suggestion that we view shows such as *TWW* (and other fan objects such as bands that have split up) as ‘*dormant fan objects*’ and define fandom that continues after the cessation of the fan object itself as ‘*post-object fandom*’.<sup>70</sup> However, whilst some may continue to self-identify as fans of those objects, persisting in watching DVD’s and talking about their fan objects in online forums, not all fandoms continue once programmes end production or bands split up. For example, in the absence of live gigs to attend or a lack of new material to enjoy, a fan of a rock group may still occasionally listen to CD’s or wear a T-shirt but consider themselves to have a lessened investment in this group. Those who react to the cessation of fan objects in this way devolve their once powerful passions into ‘*peripheral fandoms*’ which have had an impact upon the formation of a fan’s self-identity but which, due to their dormant status, can no longer provide an avenue for ongoing or transformative identity work or ontological security.

A fan object’s movement from active to dormant may necessitate a period of identity transition for the fan as, “the altered self has to be explored and constructed as part of a reflexive process of connecting personal and social change” (Giddens 1991:33). Transitions “have always demanded psychic reorganisation” (Giddens 1991:32) which were commonly seen in *rites of passage* in which events such as birth, marriage and death were marked by special acts or rituals (van Gennep 1960:3; Warner 1959:303). However, such rites of passage may “also concern entry into a new achieved status, [such as] [...] membership of an exclusive club or society” (Turner 1967:95). Such ideas have been taken up to examine the media<sup>71</sup> whilst football (Armstrong & Hognestad 2003) and horror fandom (Egan 2003; Jancovich 2000: 33) have been perceived as offering ‘rites of passage’ where (usually masculine) identity can be negotiated. Similarly, Crawford (2003) draws on van Gennep (1908) and Glaser and Strauss (1971) to use the concept of ‘status passage’, which is defined as “the passage of an individual through various stages

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<sup>70</sup> It is worth noting here that this differs from the similar term ‘post-fandom’ used by Steve Redhead and which refers to the fact that “the fragmentary, self-conscious, reflexive, mediated [...] notion of what it means to be a fan of soccer, music and fashion which has always been present is now more pervasive [...] The post-fan [...] does not have to leave the home of the bar to see the object of the gaze because television and video provide endless opportunity for ‘grazing’ and ‘channel surfing’” (1997:29).

<sup>71</sup> See Aden (1999: 81); Brooker (2007); Couldry (2000, 2002b); Hills (2002:145); King (1993).

in a life course (such as shifting from being unmarried to married)” (2003: 224).

Crawford uses this to argue for a model of fandom that accounts for varying levels of fandom over time and moves away from rigid categorisation of fan ‘types’ (2003:225) (see pages 70-74). However, this model fails to account for what may happen when a fan object ceases to provide any new episodes, albums, or sports matches.

Tania Zittoun has also examined how young people deal with “transitions in the life course – periods that follow ruptures, and during which people define new identities, new skills, and confer meanings to their trajectory and their world” (2006:xviii). She argues that they utilise “movies, books, songs and so forth, to help them work through transitions and thus organize psychological development” (2006:xviii), referring to these as ‘symbolic resources’. Young people use these resources to negotiate ruptures in their lives such as leaving home or the death of family members. Zittoun’s work is persuasive and can account for why fans draw on chosen objects to help them through times of personal crisis. Indeed, many *TWW* fans articulated such sentiments;

This show got me through college, got me through my first job, and has been a model for what I want to do with my life. I'm going to miss it (Ritchie, post #43 ‘Tomorrow’).

Right after my first year at college, during an extremely hard time in my life, and I was recovering from a very serious illness [...] I have no doubt in my mind that watching *The West Wing* helped me to recover from the horrible year I had (Esmerelda, post #210 ‘Tomorrow’).

However, Zittoun’s work cannot explain how individuals respond when their fan objects change from being active to dormant. If it is the cessation of an object *itself* which causes a rupture and necessitates a period of transition, this object’s use as a symbolic resource is inevitably reduced. When faced with *TWW*’s cessation, some questionnaire respondents turned to the text for reassurance, seeking refuge in its fictional world via avidly rewatching DVDs (Christine) or continuing the programme’s universe by reading fanfiction (Lene). As one online poster comments, “In a strange, but fitting, coincidence, my Season Six DVDs arrived from Amazon.com this morning. It's comforting” (Nicholas, post #291 ‘Tomorrow’). However, other fans of *TWW* reacted in different



ways in order to negotiate the rupture and change in self-identity caused by the cancellation of the show, which I examine below.

Whilst media objects can be used to deal with transitions, fans sometimes end their fandom if they feel their fan objects have ceased to be as good as they had previously been (often referred to as ‘jumping the shark’ (Hein 2002; Hermes 2005, 2006)), becoming dissatisfied with unwelcome narrative developments (Symonds 2003a), unpopular characters (Hills 2003), or the violation of the object’s established ideologies (Brooker 2002: 79-99; Tulloch 1995:145-163). For example, some *X-Files* fans expected the character of Scully to personify a female role model (Felder 1999:87) whilst fan displeasure with *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* partly derived from the assertion that on-screen misogyny and potential homophobia violated the feminist ideologies of the show (Tabron 2004). This also arose in my own research in chapter six on the importance of emotional realism to fans of *Neighbours* (see pages 180-185) in which fans critiqued characters that embodied “attitudes they find socially undesirable and inconsistent with the values they find within [a] series” (Jenkins 1992:116). Such work has emphasised how fans maintain community based on mutual displeasure (Harrington and Bielby 1995:151; Symonds 2003a), ‘salvaging’ unwelcome plotlines whilst simultaneously expressing their “frustration and antagonism” (Jenkins 1992:23). Thus, disappointment does not necessarily equate with a loss of attachment to the fan object and it may continue to mean something to the fan (Gray 2003:65). Furthermore, although studies have recounted tales of ‘becoming a fan’ (Hills 2002:6), in essence, of ‘falling in love with fan objects’ (Barker and Brooks 1998:67; Cavicchi 1998:59; Jenkins 1992:50; Kermode 1997:57), fan reactions to the end of fan objects have received little academic attention. The main exception is examination of letter writing campaigns instigated by fans to attempt to save cancelled shows (Abbott 2005; Menon 2007; Scardaville 2005; Trimble 1983) or have them picked up by other networks (Sabal 1992). However, focusing upon such activities reinforces the resistive or oppositional nature of fan engagement (see chapter one) and fails to fully account for the fact that fans may welcome the end of the fan object.

This lack of research into the demise of fan objects may result from the ‘dominant discourse of community’ (see page 104) which has pervaded fan studies as the cessation of a fan object is often perceived to equate with the end of the surrounding fan community. Furthermore, the focus on fans who resist unwelcome developments results from the ‘dominant discourse of resistance’ (Sandvoss 2005) which emphasises oppositional activities and the view of fans as “modern-day Robin Hoods, folk heroes busily snatching back ‘our’ popular culture” (Gwenllian-Jones 2003:163). The idea that fans may accept an object’s demise or even openly express relief at its ending contradicts such images of fans, further limiting cultural studies approaches to fandom which rely solely on ideas of resistance (see pages 2-3). To clarify, it is my argument here that *if fans’ investment in a text is so strong that they prefer its cessation rather than a perceived decrease in quality or violation of its ideological framework, this suggests an emotional attachment to that object which transcends a desire for discussion of the meanings of that text.*

Having outlined previous approaches to transitions and ‘endings’ within fandoms I now return to the model of fan/fan and fan/object relationships introduced in chapter three. Drawing on Giddens’ ideas of identity, ‘loveshock’, and ‘ontological security’ I argue that these may help us to theorise reactions to the end of fan objects such as *The West Wing*.

### **“You changed my life for the better”: Identity, self-narrative and transformation**

As argued in chapter three, fan/object relationships can be perceived as Giddensian ‘pure relationships’ which continue for as long as they provide two necessary rewards; the reflection of a desirable self-narrative and ontological security (Giddens 1991:36). In this section I consider how fans of *TWW* used the show to perform identity work, linking themselves with characters and using the programme to make sense of their own experiences or, in some cases, distancing themselves from the characters to position themselves as autonomous agents. I also consider fan responses in relation to issues of quality television and Bourdieuan distinction and capital, before moving on in the next

section to examine the importance of ontological security and Giddens' idea of 'loveshock'.

Many fans used their identifications with specific characters to perform identity work, drawing upon personal knowledge to inform fan discussion and using the fan object to make sense of their own experiences (Thompson 1995:233). Although for many viewers the character of President Bartlet is the primary point of engagement with the show (J. Elizabeth Clark 2005:225), for others the principal interest may be the supporting characters who appear as White House staffers. In questionnaire responses *TWW* fans were often keen to align themselves with certain characters;

[I am like] Josh, with a touch of Toby. I am very driven, too competitive and can sometimes come across as a bit smug or insensitive. Plus, like Josh, I am clumsy at initiating relationships (Walter)

Toby and I have a sarcastic, some might say pessimistic world view, coupled with a passion and sensitivity that we keep hidden (Victoria).

As well as using these identifications to promote positive elements of their own characteristics (e.g. being passionate or ambitious), these fans are also happy to align themselves with less desirable traits such as appearing smug or pessimistic. This may indicate that alignment of their identities with the show's 'quality' supersedes any potential stigma which could be accrued by association with culturally devalued traits. For other respondents, experiences were more general;

I have found myself in questionable situations in an effort to help/protect a loved one (i.e. Sam and Josh trying to protect Leo from investigations into his past substance abuse, or Josh protecting Donna from lying about her diary) (Lene)

The similar situations I've dealt with are basic American work situations. Dealing with an annoying/egotistical boss. Working in a team. Stuff like that (Lucy)

I think, although I have never had to deal with issues on the broad spectrum as those on the show, the moral, ethical, and personal issues are common to all people (Mandy).

These assertions that situations depicted in *TWW* are common and have real-life resonance further demonstrate fans' desire to intertwine their own experiences with the show. By insinuating that the show depicts everyday workplace, moral, and personal concerns, these fans suggest that their identification with characters or issues is 'obvious', natural, and almost inevitable. However, some fans were more cautious about identifying with specific characters, often suggesting that they see no similarities before going on to offer some caveats about traits that they share. One respondent admitted that "I don't identify on that level" (Nancy) whilst another comments that, "There are certain episodes where a certain character reminds me of me, but I think these characters are so well drawn that they definitely have their own personalities" (Caroline). As well as drawing on discourses of individuality (i.e. positing that the fan is 'unique') the 'well drawn' characters align *TWW* with quality television, elevating the fan herself as appreciative of a culturally valued object. Another respondent challenges the conception that sharing similarities with the characters makes fans identify with them or contributes to a sense of 'being like them';

I am intensely loyal to family and dear friends – does that make me like Josh? I am intensely organised at time, like to take care of my loved ones, and am proud of growing and taking on leadership in my own right. Does that make me Donna? [...] But does any of this mean that I am similar to a particular character? I'm not sure. Perhaps I am – perhaps that is why I love the show. But I don't think I've ever thought to myself "oh, I'm just like Josh!" (Lene).

This quote indicates a resistance to attempts to reduce her love of the characters to mere identification. This fan also attempts to assert her individuality by refusing to acknowledge that she is like any of the characters, even if she displays similar traits to each of them. However, this also further links to ideas surrounding quality television which is often associated with complexity of text and characters (Bird 2003:135, see also chapter two). Other fans debated similarities with characters by drawing on subcultural references to demonstrate familiarity with the show and to display their fan capital. One fan notes that "My complete loathing of conservative politics could be likened to Josh Lyman's hatred of the [Republican Party]" (Tad), referencing a textual plot point, whilst another comments that "except that I've dated many gomers, no [I'm not similar]"

(Paula). This fan draws on a comment by Josh to Donna in season one of the show, again deploying fan knowledge of the text and displaying levels of subcultural capital.

For some fans, their fan/object relationships transcended affinity for specific characters, instead impacting upon their political beliefs or prompting them to make changes in their real-lives; “like several of the characters, I left a more high paying career for a more service oriented, low-paying career” (Rhian). As discussed with relation to the impact *Big Brother* had on some fans’ world-views (see page 123), Cornel Sandvoss’ work has resonance here. He acknowledges that fans may adapt to changes in their fan objects even if this contravenes their previously held views (2005:112). However, as I argued, we can draw on this work to examine how fans might use fan objects to actively engage in transformation of the self. It is, thus, my suggestion that use of Sandvoss’ work to consider both changes to fan identities and their responses to post-object fandom can be extended by consideration of how fandom might alter fans’ understandings or world-views and how ontological security is relevant to these changes.<sup>72</sup> Indeed, some *TWW* fans found that their engagement with the text prompted social changes and greatly impacted upon their self-identity commenting that;

Aaron Sorkin’s writing will forever influence my own, especially when I take a screen-writing course in a semester or two. I consider this to be a lasting tribute to my fandom (Beth)

I think I feel safe in saying that this show has changed the direction of my studies and, to an extent, the direction of my life [...] this show helped me find the passion in government (Andreas, post #279 ‘Institutional Memory’).

The show caused me to a). Become interested in politics to the extent I now help out the DCCC on a local level. b). Move to DC for a year, just to see if it's like it was on TV - it is (Redvers, post #212 ‘Tomorrow’).

It is clear that the show is indelibly interwoven with these fans’ lives and histories, carrying deep meaning for them which transcends identification with characters or modes of resistance. However, fans are keen to demonstrate their ‘real-life’ political interest and

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<sup>72</sup> See also Garry Crawford’s work which, drawing on Goffman (1968:119) argues that the concept of the ‘moral’ career of a fan “involves changes in the individual’s own identity as a [fan], and significantly how they categorise and judge their own and others’ behaviour” (Crawford 2004:42).

to rearticulate this as *TWW* draws to a close and, it is my suggestion that this results from the cultural division between being a consumer or a citizen, with the former connoting passivity and indifference whilst the latter suggests socio-political awareness and activism (Lewis *et al* 2005). If fan/object relationships reflect desirable self-identities it is unsurprising that fans seek to align themselves with such culturally lauded characteristics. However, the reassertion of such political activity or beliefs *after* the final episodes of *TWW* may also 'prove' that one's attachment to the show was worthwhile, that it was 'more than' just a television show, and that it actually altered the fan for the better. Despite the 'mainstreaming of fandom' (Pullen 2004), certain types of fan are often still derided and assumed to be unable to differentiate between fiction and reality (Harrington and Bielby 1995:1). Thus, to be able to demonstrate that one's fandom of *TWW* facilitated transformation into a politically active and socially aware citizen legitimates that fandom, suggesting that fans are not passive or delusional but that their fandom may motivate them into valuable real-life action.<sup>73</sup>

However, whilst fans variously identified or resisted alignment with specific characters, for others their main point of engagement were the onscreen romantic pairings between characters (see page 16). Although other *West Wing* couples include canonical relationships such as CJ/Danny, Charlie/Zoe and Will/Kate or the subtextual Josh/Sam pairing (Kustritz, 2003:372) I wish to focus upon the most divisive ship in *TWW* fandom in this discussion; Josh/Donna (J/D) shippers. My interest is in how fans' particular textual allegiances may impact upon their levels of subcultural, social, or symbolic capital or power and the ways in which fans used the J/D ship to develop self-identity and reflexive narratives of the self. However, in keeping with my emphasis upon the impact of the cancellation of *TWW* on the surrounding fandom, I will view these fan practices within the context of wider fan debates regarding the show itself.

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<sup>73</sup> It is worth noting here that *TWW* is a very specific example of a fan object with liberal political ideologies and discourses which might impact upon fans and spur them into political action. Whether fans adopt the values of other fan objects and are impacted upon in this way in other fandoms remains to be seen, and would need to be investigated through further empirical case study.

**“Wandering off into soap land?”: Shipping, gendered readings and ‘proper’ *West Wing***

Examinations of shipping have focused upon cult media fandoms (Chin 2001; Felder 1999; Scodari 2003; Scodari and Felder 2000) whilst soap opera studies have discussed the concept without explicitly referring to it as shipping (Harrington and Bielby 1995), and this fan practice has not been explored in any depth within fans of ‘quality’ drama. This may be for several reasons. Firstly, as shipping is typically perceived as a resistive or oppositional activity it seems logical that this practice be most commonly associated with those genres deemed to be most subversive or challenging, in this case, cult media. Secondly, as shipping is a largely feminised fan practice it is possible that any insinuation that ‘quality’ drama programmes are connected to these activities may tarnish those genres, correlating them with culturally feminised notions of love and romance. Finally, this may be a side effect of fan studies itself and its emphasis upon cult media and the concept of fan fiction, particularly slash (Brooker 2002:131). It is possible that the discursive alignment of slash fiction with shipping (particularly via the practice of connecting shipped character names with a forward slash) has led some critics to avoid considering this practice within other genres. This can again be linked to the apparent ‘quality’ of the drama genre, in contrast to the feminised genres of soap or the subversive and resistive nature of cult shows, suggesting that considering shipping in such genres privileges either feminised or trivial fan practices or uncomfortably sexualised practices such as slash. Furthermore, although Harrington and Bielby concede that fans may be disappointed when favoured onscreen relationships break up (1995:148), prior work on shippers has not looked at the reactions of these emotionally involved fans when their chosen text ceases production. This is an omission which my work in this thesis seeks to rectify.

Briefly, the J/D relationship consists, for the first five seasons of the show, of an employer (Josh)/employee (Donna) interaction, although the two characters were routinely depicted as having a closeness that superseded that of other senior White House staffers and their assistants. After suffering life-threatening injuries in a terrorist attack at

the end of the fifth season, Donna leaves the White House in season six to work on a Presidential campaign, in direct opposition to Josh who also departs to work on a rival campaign. Donna is absent for the first few episodes of the show's seventh season before the two characters are reunited, working on the same Democratic 'Santos for President' campaign, although it casts Donna's character in a much more responsible role than she played at the White House and significantly alters the dynamics of her relationship with Josh. This was a hugely popular ship in *TWW* fandom and, when news of the show's cancellation broke in January 2006, many shippers experienced a sense of optimism at the news, primarily as they felt that the only hope of a J/D romance was at the point when the shows' demise was assured. Indeed, it was widely reported that "after Sorkin left, the series' new behind-the-scenes commander in chief, John Wells, told [Janel] Moloney [who played Donna] that whenever Josh and Donna got together, the show would be over" (Avins 2006:1). Executive Producer John Wells confirmed this in tertiary materials, stating that "one of the great things when you know the show is ending [is that] you can actually do stuff that you probably wouldn't do if you thought the show was continuing" (Ausiello 2006:online). Eventually, the show ended with the couple united and working at the White House as Chief of Staff and Chief of Staff to the First Lady. Thus, whilst J/D shippers had often been opposed to the producers' and actors' intentions (Porter 2004), their position appeared to be vindicated with the consummation of the relationship in the final episodes of the show. This recalls ships in other fandoms when producers often simultaneously encourage and restrict fan activities via the employment of what I am terming '*authorial duality*', which both encourages loyalty to the show whilst paradoxically cautioning against fan expectation that their desires be sated. For example, producers of shows may continue to simultaneously encourage *and* deny the impact of fan protests and campaigns (Noxon 2002; Whedon 2002) whilst actors may endorse fan readings of shows whilst also deferring to producers' comments (Hills and Williams 2005:356-358). Such encouragement/restriction of fan activities ensures fan loyalty *and* enables producerly control over shows in the televisual medium in which authorship is often precarious (Lavery 2002; Pearson 2005). This can also be the case when fans claim to have influenced the narratives of their favoured shows and is clearly related to the concept of the broadcasting field (see chapter two). Within this "field of struggles"



(Bourdieu 1993:30) such claims can be attempts by fans to assert power over fellow fans by privileging their own textual readings, enabling them to establish “the ‘informed’ exegesis for their subculture of fans [and] establish and control an important reading formation” (Tulloch 1995:150). If fans can argue that their interpretations of the text were ‘correct’ and have been incorporated (and, thus, legitimated) by producers, this increases their ‘discursive power’ (Tulloch 1995). Fans also seek to attain power over producers, making bids for positions within the broadcasting field and “bring[ing] with them dispositions and position-takings which clash with the prevailing norms of production and the expectations of the field” (Bourdieu 1993: 58). However, the authorial duality of producers/actors within the broadcasting field and the bids for capital made by producers or fans is impossible to confirm due to difficulty in gaining access to production decisions. As discussed in chapter two, the media is granted the power of consecration (Benson 1998:469) and is able to confer legitimacy to various texts or behaviours as it is “presumed [...] to represent the social whole” (Couldry 2003:13) and to construct social reality (Benson 1998). By elevating the media to a culturally powerful position it is able, much like governments and large corporations, to maintain the invisibility of its mechanisms and keep its production decisions hidden from view. Thus, cultural economy and a desire to ensure the success of heavily marketed brands mean that texts must be protected by levels of secrecy surrounding their production (Harrington and Bielby 2005b:906). It is also worth noting that alleged reciprocity in fan/object relationships is restricted to text-based ‘fictional’ fandoms,<sup>74</sup> particularly television fandom due to its intimacy and seriality which may enable fan feedback to be incorporated into an ongoing text which has an “endlessly deferred narrative” (Hills 2002:134). Perceived reciprocity is less common in ‘factual’ fandoms such as sports or music and, for example, whilst fans of musicians or bands may read or reply to online messages from their fan objects they rarely claim influence over the fan object’s future career, recordings and so on, unless such input is specifically requested.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> I use the term ‘fictional’ fandom to refer to fictional cultural objects such as television shows, films, books, comics and so on. I refer to fandoms involving sports, music and celebrities as ‘factual’ fandoms in this research. See page 78 for further clarification on these distinctions.

<sup>75</sup> For example, the singer Bjork asked fans to vote on her website for the songs to be included on her greatest hits album (<http://unit.bjork.com/specials/gh/>).

Endorsement of fan's textual readings (e.g. implying that their assertions that Josh and Donna' relationship was 'more' than just that of a boss and an employee are warranted) through the narrative whilst making extra-textual declarations against this relationship enables producers to ensure viewer's continued watching of the programme whilst endlessly deferring the satisfactory resolutions that they require (Scodari and Felder 2000). For instance, before he left the show after season four, creator Aaron Sorkin encouraged fans to hope for a romantic resolution to the J/D storyline, urging them "I want you to hold your breath. Please *do* hold your breath!" (No author 2001), whilst the actors themselves suggested in tertiary materials that "I've always been ready to move further with our relationship, and I'm just waiting for the pages to come down [from the writers]" (Porter 2004:online). However, this is also commonplace in other fan cultures. For example, *The X-Files*' creator, Chris Carter, both encouraged shipping via subtext whilst simultaneously enforcing a preferred reading of the text through tertiary material. Although "textual analysis of *The X-Files* examining narrative structure, generic conventions, character versus plot orientation(s), and their relation to gender demonstrates how Shippers' readings are invited, if not embraced, by the series' authors" (Scodari and Felder 2000:239), Carter continually maintained extra-textually "that Mulder and Scully would never become romantically involved. For years, the series teased shippers and other fans with near-kisses, undercover marriages, and intimate gestures" (Silbergleid 2003: online).

Despite these potential clashes with producers, many fans attained ontological security or used the ship to perform identity. Harrington and Bielby argue that limerance may explain why fans appear to 'fall in love' with on-screen relationships and that fan's failure to explain attachment to onscreen couples replicates a real-life inability to articulate why they love another person;

It is not that fans are infatuated with or in love with fictional characters. Rather, their emotional recognition of the pleasures of infatuation allows them to embed themselves in the love stories they see unfolding on television. Fans fall in love with a couple's state of love for each other (1995:137).

These fans are not deluded, nor do they believe that the on-screen romance is ‘real’, but rather they identify with the emotions and developments they see on the screen. However, although Harrington and Bielby’s work is useful, it cannot fully account for fan attachment to onscreen relationships as it fails to allow for the impact that the act of ‘shipping’ has on the fan. In their argument, this is a one-way street with the fan in love with the ‘couple’s state of love for each other’ but with no room for consideration of the ‘rewards’ fans may get from this investment. Furthermore, although acknowledging that the pleasure fans gain from embedding themselves in the onscreen romances may replicate a real-life inability to explain one’s romantic attachments or inclinations, the potential entwining of narrative and ‘real life’ events remains unexplored here. In fact, as I have argued throughout this research, fan objects routinely contribute toward a persons’ sense of self-identity and may become inextricably intertwined with their reflexive narratives of the self. Indeed, identifying as a *J/D* shipper gives one a very specific subcultural identity within *TWW* fan cultures, labelling one’s investments in the show and signposting to other fans the importance of interpretation of those canonical events which support a pro-*J/D* reading of the programme. Fans who identify as long-term shippers (e.g. those who may declare that they ‘spotted the signs’ of a potential *J/D* relationship from the early seasons) may also begin to construct a self-narrative to relate the story of their engagement with the onscreen journey of the characters, and may intertwine elements of their own life experiences with narrative events (e.g. drawing on one’s own encounters with office romances to inform readings of the text). For example, one female poster comments that watching the *J/D* romance develop made her “really happy and yet at the same time it made me really miss my husband (he's deployed at the moment) so...that was nice and sad all at the same time” (Pat, Post #267 ‘Transition’). Similarly, another respondent admitted to using the ship to work through issues in her own life;

I know that I once imagined writing a *JD* story in which I could exorcise a few demons from a past romantic relationship. I guess that might have had something to do with seeing myself in the characters – but I suspect it more had to do with my own desire to say things that I hadn’t had the opportunity to say (Lene).

Furthermore, for many shippers the character of Donna is central to their support of the *J/D* relationship. *TWW* has been accused of privileging a “charmed male circle” (Smith

2004:online) of characters, portraying “the ongoing delineation of male virtue” (Smith 2001:online), and of marginalising Donna by casting her as “a contrast for Josh and a source for witty banter when he mulls over political problems” (Garrett 2005:189). However, another interpretation is that Donna becomes increasingly central within the narrative of the show and that she is “intuitive and confident: she provides a voice of reason in the midst of chaos” (Lane 2003:34) and it is this reading which many J/D fans supported. Those who applauded the more assertive, pro-active and politically motivated Donna of later seasons articulated this as a pleasure in watching the character grow, noting;

[I’m like] Donna, [I’ve] watch[ed] her grow and change over the years and gain self-confidence and lost some naivete (Christine).

I’m more educated than Donna and haven’t had the career issues she had, but I can relate to her questioning of herself. It might be endemic to a lot of working American women (Wilma).

I’ve always thought that I was kinda like Donna. A girl thrown into a place of work and trying to soak in as much as possible. She did as much as she could (sorta... really just after she left the White House) to improve her status and worked really hard (Shona).

However, the predominantly female shippers also declared their attraction to Josh; “I fell head over heels for Josh (the character, not the actor, although I think Bradley Whitford is immensely talented). Josh was everything I’d ever wanted in a friend and or potential partner” (Wilma). It is thus possible that shipping occurs within a liminal space between admiration and desire, in which identification with female characters must be counterpoised with an affirmation of (assumed) heterosexuality, displayed by resolute support of romantic relationships with male characters. However, paradoxically, attractions to male characters must also be justified, often via a sublimation of libidinal attraction into a desire for a romantic narrative with female characters. The cultural dismissal of female fans who express attraction to male characters or actors is well documented (Bury 2005; Clerc 1996; Hills and Williams 2005; MacDonald 1998; Nash and Lahti 1999) and shipping may provide a way for fans to avoid the potential derision or dismissal this may result in. Thus, shipping appears to be an act predicated on the

mutual reinforcement of two discourses which must be either articulated or warded off. Identification with female characters and possible accusations of inappropriate (queer) desire for these *and* any association with culturally feminised ‘drooling’ over male characters can be subsumed into the supporting of a ship featuring both characters. As Busse and Hellekson point out, Constance Penley’s (1992) work on slash suggests that “for heterosexual readers, slash allows females to have and be either and both of the characters” (2006:19). In shipping, however, the acceptance that one may desire and want to be both of the characters cannot be embraced in the same way that sexually ambiguous slash fiction allows. Given its emphasis on romance, shipping instead allows fans to distance themselves from culturally unacceptable sexual ‘deviance’. It also counteracts the possibility of fan attachments simultaneously being too heterosexual/too queer by neatly converging attractions to both male and female characters into one fan object which is culturally accepted via its validation of normative heterosexual relationships.

However, given my interest in fan reactions to the end of *TWW*, it is crucial to examine how J/D shippers, who were intensely emotionally attached to characters and their fictional relationship, responded at the end of the show. Although for fans who are in love with an on-screen couple’s state of love for one another, “infatuation is almost inevitably accompanied by heartbreak from a breakup” (Harrington and Bielby 1995:148) this usually occurs when ships break-up onscreen and there has been no examination of the responses of fans whose ship endures but who can no longer witness its unfolding due to the cessation of the text. Although J/D shippers did not face constant battles with opposing shipper groups (Driscoll 2006:85), they did clash with those who vehemently opposed the romantic development of this relationship and this intensified as the show neared its final episodes. Indeed, such hostility echoes that within *X-Files* fandom between those who supported the Mulder/Scully ship and those ‘Noromos’ who did not (Scodari and Felder 2000). For some fans, emphasis on the J/D ship was not ‘proper’ *West Wing*, referring to it as the “Josh/Donna “The Young and the Horny” daytime drama” (Amelia, Post #47 ‘The Last Hurrah) or a potential “*West Wing*: Tahiti Edition” (Chad, Post #130 ‘The Last Hurrah’) following the couple on their holiday. For these fans, such emphasis upon romance violates generic expectation that the show centres on

political issues rather than personal ones. One poster argues that pro-J/D writer Deborah Cahn “has a real tendency sometimes to wander off into soap land” (SB, Post #156 ‘Institutional Memory’), whilst another pleads that the J/D relationship not be “drag[ged] this out so that it resembles some kind of third rate soap opera” (Lewis, Post #67 ‘The Cold’). Another fan comments that

I am looking forward to more politics not an additional “Legally Blond” episode [...] the show is about politics first, people second [...] The remaining time left for this series is so precious, and I sincerely don’t want *Days of our Lives* (SB, Post #180 ‘The Cold’).

Although these fans devalue the soap genre the possibility of *TWW* as a ‘prime-time soap opera’ has been considered by van Zoonen, who argues that the show displays soap narrative hallmarks such as “a core location, the focus on a community of people trying to get by, the emphasis on the human side of public affairs, the multiple storylines, and [...] the core tension between two ‘families’, Republican and Democrat” (2005:118). However, for non-shippers, comparison with soap opera is to be discursively avoided, and alignment of personal, character-based stories with the feminised and culturally devalued continues. Indeed, soap opera has long been seen as a ‘woman’s genre’ given its emphasis upon personal relationships and interactions, verbal interaction and its open-ended storytelling techniques (Brown 1987). This anti-soap opera discourse can thus be seen as indicative of a wider battle within this *TWW* fan community between the personal and the political, with specific strategies employed to denigrate feminised readings of the text. Indeed, there is “a common association of the feminine with vulgarity and excessive emotion” (Bird 2003:141) and thus many fans devalue such readings of the show. Indeed, the personal versus political discourse can be clearly aligned with feminised and masculinised readings of the text, which is not uncommon within fan cultures. For example, as Susan Clerc notes, fans of *The X-Files* clearly engaged in such divisions as “men used the character interactions to illuminate the plot and referred to outside information to solve narrative problems; women used the plot to illuminate aspects of the characters’ internal lives and worked within the universe established by the series (1996:41). Furthermore, as Scodari and Felder (2000) note, many fans opposed the

possibility of a Mulder/Scully romance as they “worr[ied] about the show drifting into the realm of soap opera” (2000:241). Such gendered divisions can also be seen in Jenkins’ discussions of *Twin Peaks* (1995) and *Star Trek* (1992) fans, and are alluded to in MacDonald’s work on *Quantum Leap* fans and the fact that male posters disliked discussion of attraction to characters, onscreen relationships or the posting of real-life events and stories (1998:148).

In addition to the genre-based anti-soap opera sentiment, other discourses were deployed to argue against the validity of the J/D ship as the show neared its end. Fans comment, variously,

I don't buy into [Donna's] new role, and I'm totally offended that Josh would have a relationship with her which is unprofessional and possibly unethical (Gideon, Post #266 ‘Institutional Memory’).

I'll skip commenting on the Josh/Donna crap because I find it to be exactly that, modified by "boring" (CC, Post #101 ‘Election Day Part One’).

I personally would rather not see Josh and Donna on the beach canoodling. I almost get a little squeamish seeing them "together", almost like a brother and sister (Sam, Post #75 ‘The Last Hurrah’).

Whilst these fans offer different reasons for their dislike of J/D, each works to discursively position the ship as ‘wrong’ and to attempt to enforce the dominance of their fan interpretation. By variously suggesting that the ship violates moral and ethical boundaries, is tedious, or is nauseating (even discursively aligned with incestuous behaviour) such fans seek to impose their textual readings and to imply that those who support J/D are misguided. Given that the text of *TWW* itself officially sanctioned the relationship, non-shippers could no longer rely upon the ambiguity of producer’s statements as ‘evidence’ to verify that the ship existed only in the minds of shippers.

However, given that these fans were aware that their fan object was coming to an end, why did it remain so important for them to compete over textual interpretations and to struggle to enforce certain reading practices? One reason for this is that, if fan objects are instrumental in identity formation and the creation of self-narratives, potential instability

caused by the move from an active to a dormant object needs to be warded off. One way to limit the possible rupture of identity caused by the object's cessation is by reassuring oneself that the fandom of that object was legitimate, and that the time and emotion invested in it was worthwhile. Thus, it may be that, whilst fans routinely clash over interpretations (Tulloch 1995), engaging in continual battles for textual authority, this may become intensified as the end of a fan object approaches. Alignment of one's interpretation of a text with the officially sanctioned canonical events enables fans to ward off anxiety about the move from active to dormant fan object, reasserting the validity of their reading of the text and avoiding any potential disjunction between their own understandings and the object itself. Thus, for example, J/D shippers had continually asserted that their reading of subtextual hints to suggest a romantic relationship would be vindicated. As the show approached its finale, these fans were eager that the show depict romantic developments and lamented the possibility that this would not take place;

I thought it was a good episode, but y'all, I am so sad. We've got a finite number of episodes left and I'm not seeing any development in the Josh/Donna relationship. I'm doubting at all we're going to get it. They haven't had a conversation that wasn't about work in months (CK, Post #42 'Duck and Cover').

If they don't get together now, I think I will have to hunt down Wells and annihilate him (Rosemary, Post #24 'The Cold').

Even when narrative events such as the first J/D kiss ('The Cold') or their first night together ('Election Day Part 1') endorsed the interpretations of J/D shippers, other fans continued to argue against these developments. The reappearance in the last few episodes of the character of Amy Gardner who had dated Josh in seasons three-five prompted debate, with one fan opining that "I know I'm in the minority here and am prepared for the snark and flogging to come... but I rejoiced in the previews when they showed Ms. Amy Gardner. I can only hope Josh comes to his senses in time" (Lauren, Post #259 'The Cold'). A questionnaire respondent reiterated the view that it was the end of the series that led to the canonisation of the J/D ship, noting that "really the producers decided to cater to the fans as the show concluded, Donna and Josh could never really be together, besides Josh belongs with Amy" (Victoria). However, such interpretations were quickly dismissed by J/D shippers who suggested that "Amy's return may push Josh towards



Donna even more” (Charlie, Post #262 ‘The Cold’) and “I have a feeling Amy comes back like Joey came back; she's moved on. I just don't see Amy being an issue for Josh and Donna anymore” (Marla, Post #262 ‘The Cold’). If *TWW* had ended without explicit canonical depiction of the J/D relationship, these fans face greater threat to their ontological security and cohesive self-identity than those whose interpretations of the text proved correct. Thus, whilst the reignited fan debates regarding the validity of the J/D relationship or arguments over Donna versus Amy may seem superfluous, given the impending end of the series, it may be that such deliberations actually become even more pertinent as there remains only a finite time frame in which fans can be vindicated.

This emphasis upon resolution for many of the characters can also be seen as a textual strategy on the part of producers to reward fans for their investment in and support of the show. Elements such as the return of the character of Sam Seaborn, a cameo appearance by original series creator Aaron Sorkin in the series finale and the textual resolution of the relationships of Josh/Donna and CJ/Danny are interpreted by many fans as gifts from the production team. Thus, the end of the show can be seen as a textual strategy to reward fan loyalty and devotion and many fans viewed many elements of the series finale in this way, emphasising that their favourite aspects of the series finale ‘Tomorrow’ were the inclusion of a gift from Leo to President Bartlet in an early episode and a meta-textual reference in a conversation between Bartlet and his secretary Nancy, played by his real-life daughter Renee Estevez. They comment;

I also loved and (I lost it) when the gift (which we all knew what it was) was revealed as the one Jed gave Leo in season 3 "Bartlet For America" (KG, Post #38 ‘Tomorrow’).

Anyone that is a true Wingnut knew what the package was (Sue, Post #31 ‘Tomorrow’).

It ended exactly as I always thought the series would end. [...] We all knew it was the napkin. That doesn't matter. It was the perfect way to close shop (NT, Post #34 ‘Tomorrow’).

In these comments, fans suggest that ‘real fans’ would have been the most well rewarded by the finale, as they would have guessed the contents of the gift for Bartlet. Other fans

more explicitly likened the events in the episode to a ‘thank you’ from producers, noting that they “gave us the episode that any real fan has already seen multiple times. But it was truly a gift” (Mary, Post #82 ‘Tomorrow’) and that “This episode was just a kiss on the lips to the loyal viewer, beginning to end” (DA, Post #95 ‘Tomorrow’).

As this discussion of J/D shippers has demonstrated, many fans opposed the development of romances in *TWW* as this was perceived to threaten those aspects of the show that they were initially attracted to, potentially pushing the show into the realm of soap opera. The devaluing of the soap opera genre is clearly culturally loaded, and such distinctions were not unusual in fan debates as *TWW* neared its end (see below). As I have argued throughout this research, the formation of identity and a reflexive self-narrative is only one of the rewards gained from engagement in Giddensian pure relationships. The second of these is a sense of trust which is often provided by the secure knowledge that a relationship (in this case, a fan object) is constant and ongoing. Thus, given my interest in this chapter is in fan responses to the end of *TWW* the next section relates ontological security to Giddens’ notion of ‘loveshock’, the feeling one experiences when a pure relationship ends. After outlining this theory’s relevance to understanding how fans cope with the end of a fan object, I examine the ways in which fans responded to the end of *TWW*, identifying their three key discourses and suggesting that these enable us to begin to theorise fan responses to the demise of a range of fan objects beyond this specific case study.

### **Ontological security and ‘loveshock’ : Coping with the end of a fan object**

As outlined in chapter three, the development of ontological security is crucial in the advancement of self-identity, offering an,

emotional inoculation against existential anxieties – a protection against future threats and dangers which allows the individual to sustain hope and courage in the face of whatever debilitating circumstances she or he might later confront (Giddens 1991:40).

As I have argued, ontological security is a key reward gained from pure relationships (Jamieson 1999:479) and, once a sense of trust in a beloved fan object is undermined,

ontological security may be threatened and a fan's self-narrative must be reworked in order to cope with this disruption (see page 63). Thus, pure relationships often end, resulting in 'loveshock' which refers to the emotional trauma of falling out of love. This leads to a period of mourning and "of letting go of habits which otherwise translate themselves into affective habits in the present" (Giddens 1992:103). Thus for both the rejector and the rejected party, the feelings of loss and mourning need to be negotiated as "loveshock has a 'psychological traveling time', which may take a period of many months to work through" (Giddens 1992:103). However, by emphasising the fact that one only remains in a pure relationship as long as one is getting adequate rewards from it, Giddens fails to properly account for the emotional impact upon the person who is rejected (Liljestrom and Ozdalga 2002:57, see also Bauman 1993). Although this enables Giddens to continue his model of social beings as autonomous, active agents it does not account for the feelings of love and attachment that may exist between the individuals in a relationship. Although loveshock affects both partners, it seems likely that the rejected party will wrestle with stronger feelings of loveshock and may need a longer 'psychological traveling time' to deal with these emotions. Accordingly, when one is engaged in a fan pure relationship with an object which ends (e.g. the cancellation of a show or the break-up of a band), the fan is always cast in the role of the rejected party. Although the fan object clearly does not make the explicit choice to reject the fan (as it is an inanimate text or a distant figure), the fan *does* fall into the position of the person who is abandoned by the object and must necessarily cope with any associated feelings. Indeed, when fans' relationships with objects end they may suffer loveshock and need to cope with this period of mourning before refashioning their self-identity to deal with this rupture. If a fan pure relationship offers ontological security as one of its rewards, how do fans cope with the loss of a fan object which may provide such a sense of security? For, although fans may gain comfort from the routine of their fandom (in this case, anticipating the scheduling of *TWW* in a regular timeslot and knowing that it will return in each new television season), ontological security is not solely dependent upon such repetitions and expectations. Rather than providing the "emotional inoculation" which Giddens imagines (1990:94), ontological security can never fully protect against the possibility of disruption to one's sense of self (Giddens 1991:40; 1992:40). However, it

does enable individuals to cope with change (Craib 1997:357) and the basic ontological security gained in early childhood should allow fans' emotional pain at the end of *TWW* to be "re-internalised as bearable, manageable feelings" (Craib 1997:357, see also Willmott 1986).

Threats to ontological security, as I have argued throughout this thesis, are often deeply felt by fans of television texts due to the apparent intimacy with the text and scheduling patterns. Much like the on-going nature of *Neighbours*, *TWW* attracted a dedicated viewership as "American series are often well suited for developing a long running presence in the schedule, which may translate into viewer loyalty as they tune in each week" (Rixon 2007:106).<sup>76</sup> Thus, fan responses to the sudden end of the text may be highly intense. For example, Matt Hills argues that the increase in viewing TV programmes on DVD enables viewers to experience "a more 'trustable' or 'ontologically secure' re-versioning of broadcast TV" (2007:58). Hills suggests here that fans' sense of trust in a programme is undermined when that show is cancelled, whereas DVDs enable fans to "begin watching a series knowing that they will be able to follow it through to its conclusion (or perhaps knowing in advance that it will end at a particular point)" (2007:57). This equips them for the cessation of the show and increases the level of 'trust' they have in the text. Hills' work on DVDs as a 'trustable' or 'ontologically secure' alternative to watching broadcast television indicates the threat that fans may feel to their ontological security when beloved fan objects are cancelled.

However, despite ontological security enabling fans to cope with the end of *TWW*, loveshock takes time to experience and an individual's self-narrative needs "continually to be reworked, and life-style practices brought in line with it, if the individual is to combine personal autonomy with a sense of ontological security" (Giddens 1992:75). Maintenance of ontological security depends upon constant renegotiation of identity and

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<sup>76</sup> It should be noted here that any usage of the term 'American quality television' or allusions to American drama in this chapter is not intended to reinscribe nationally specific definitions of quality television (see chapter two). When such terms are used they are either quotes from other writers or used in scare quotes to illustrate my distance from such nationalised notions of quality TV.

self-narrative and fans must undertake this when their fan objects become 'dormant'. Indeed, self-identity is found

in the capacity to keep a particular narrative going [...] The individual's biography [...] must continually integrate events which occur in the external world, and sort them into the ongoing 'story' about the self (Giddens 1992:54).

Furthermore, when one suffers loveshock as a result of the ending of a pure relationship, there must be a "cognitive and emotional coming to terms with the psychological past, and a rewriting of the narrative of the self" (Giddens 1992: 103). It is essential for individuals to deal with the loss of the beloved object (whether a person, a text etc.) and to incorporate this demise into their self-narratives in order to avoid damaging "repetition[s] of similar patterns of behaviour" (Giddens 1992:103).

However, few critics have provided empirical data to substantiate claims about fan reactions to the end of fan objects. Thus, this thesis offers empirical data on this fan phenomenon and my theorisation of three main ways in which fans respond to this aspect of their fandom. In the remainder of this chapter I outline the various types of response fans articulated to the demise of *TWW*. These were,

1. Reiteration of self identity by reasserting their identity as a fan or reiterating self-narratives detailing how they became a fan and how the show had been important to them throughout key events in their lives;
2. Renegotiating of self-identity, acknowledging that, whilst it had previously been important to them, eventually *TWW* would no longer have such meaning for them;
3. Rejection via distancing themselves from the show, discursively positioning themselves as critical and non-emotionally involved and suggesting that the programme was past its best period and deserved to end.

It is, thus, to more detailed discussion of these three key discourses of reiteration, renegotiation, and rejection that I now turn.

### “The constant in my life”: The ‘reiteration discourse’

In what I have termed the ‘reiteration discourse’ fans were keen to reassert their fan identities, offering coherent stories of how the show had impacted upon their lives and often revealing large amounts of personal detail. These often took the form of lengthy postings of ‘goodbyes’ to the show;

I have grown up a lot over the run of this show. It's so great to have constants in your life, even if they are just fictional TV characters, and I will miss them all dearly. Not to be too sentimental about it, but the show started when I was at a very low ebb, and for a while it was really the best thing about my week (sad I know)...but since then things have changed in so many ways and in so many directions (Pat, post #277 ‘Institutional Memory’).

It was so long ago when I first saw *The West Wing*. Through adversity, exams, marriage, residency, divorce, rediscovery, recovery, and now some sort of sanity, *The West Wing* and you people here on this forum have been my friends. The constant in my life (Hilary, post #130 ‘Tomorrow’).

Mid-way during the second season, my college friends and I started gathering to watch it. We’d cook dinners and sit silently, talking loudly and quickly during commercials, hanging out until the evening news...at least. This show was so much more than just a show: it was OUR show, you know? And now two of these friends are getting married this week, everyone is so different now... This show ending is more than just another series end: something in my life has closed (Rosemary, post #35 ‘Tomorrow’).

Such postings intertwine fan’s identity with the show but also ward off potential anxiety about the end of the fan object. By relaying their self-narratives these fans rearticulate their identities and form their experiences with the show into a coherent story. When our sense of self is threatened we reinforce “a sense of trust, predictability, and control in reaction to disruptive change by reestablishing a previous identity or formulating a new one” (Kinnvall 2004: 746). Thus, fans’ reiteration of self-narratives may be a way to strengthen their self-identity, increasing their ability to deal with the end of *TWW*.

Furthermore, it can be argued that the text itself encourages continued attachment as, although it has been argued that *TWW*’s “political storylines have been constructed as repetitive mini-quests of the staff, without the guarantee of a happy ending” (van Zoonen

2004:119), the final episode of the show did attempt to offer closure for each character, suggesting what the next stage of their fictional life would involve. Thus, in contrast to series' that end ambiguously such as *Blake's 7* or *Angel*, *TWW* leaves relatively few storylines in a state of uncertainty. Furthermore, by ending the show with the incoming Democratic Santos presidency which involved characters that fans 'knew', they were presented with the impression of an ongoing narrative and a world which continues beyond the final frame. This continuation of the programme universe is dependent upon *The West Wing's* established 'hyperdiegesis' (Hagedorn 1995:39), consisting of a "vast and detailed narrative space, only a fraction of which is ever directly seen or encountered within the text" (Hills 2002:137). Although this is most commonly seen in cult texts, *TWW* clearly displays, via its textual mentions of Senators, House Members, political chairs and chiefs, committees and subcommittees, a vast narrative space which involves characters and places the audience never sees. This hyperdiegesis

displays such a coherence and continuity that it can be trusted by the viewer, presenting the grounds for 'ontological security' [...] The fan-viewer treats the hyperdiegetic world as a space through which the management of identity can be undertaken (Hills 2002:138).

Indeed, it is this hyperdiegesis that makes series' "cohere as ontologically secure worlds that can support discussion, speculation and cultural production" (D. Johnson 2007:66). Thus, even after the show's demise, its hyperdiegesis enables fans to draw ontological security from rewatching DVDs or re-runs, enabling continuation of their fan pure relationship with the text. This is alluded to by one respondent;

Sometimes I'm left wondering what characters "would be doing now." I think if a character has an intricate backstory – as do most of the *TWW* characters – then fans are implicitly encouraged to imagine their futurestory just as intricately (Lene).

Similarly, an online poster links the concept of open-endedness to quality television, commenting that,

there are a lot of unanswered questions that each of us want fulfilled, but I believe that in the 'television for smart people' context, we know and love these characters

and to an extent we each can decide and imagine where each will go in the future. I think that's what it's creator intended, for each of us to be content with whatever future each of envision. (Freddie, post #192 'Tomorrow').

However, given my dual interest in fan/object *and* fan/fan relationships, it is pertinent that many posters also bid farewell to the online fan community at *TWoP*, acknowledging that their involvement in the *TWW* forum would inevitably lessen. Even fans who had not been regular contributors took the opportunity to 'de-lurk' and declare their fandom and to thank those who had contributed to discussions;

I've been reading recaps here since halfway through S3, but I never posted before. Just had to say my own good-byes to the West Wing with a group of people who share my sadness at the end of this amazing show (Pippa, post #47 'Tomorrow').

I have never posted here, but I have always read this board...from the very beginning...read every post, silently joined every argument and taken sides...and loved every minute of it. I felt compelled to post my first and final message now. [...] Thanks for the great years, guys (Mary, post #82 'Tomorrow').

I have rarely posted but I have been an extremely loyal lurker. Thank you from the bottom of my heart to each and every one of you who's posts have helped me better understand and appreciate every episode of this wonderful show (Fox, post #178 'Tomorrow').

By reiterating their membership of the *TWoP* forums, fans reassert their sense of 'belonging' to the community, also acknowledging the impact of their fan/fan relationships upon their fandom. Such reiterations echo the goodbye messages posted regarding fan/object relationships, suggesting again that fans seek to rearticulate their fan identities by describing the importance of the text itself as well as the fan community that surrounded it. As one poster notes,

I love that we have a place to express our joy, sadness, shock and at times anger. We are all a family, and are all certifiably nuts for our show. I'm a WingNut for life! So I thank you all for your thoughts, opinions, lessons and at times arguments (Helena, post #50 'Institutional Memory').



In stressing that she is a ‘WingNut for life’, this fan responds within the ‘reiteration discourse’ to re-narrate her fan self-identity. Such postings allow fans to cope with the “emotional void and forced detachment from the program narrative [...] [through] mutual consolation of other’s mourning the death of a series, or more positively, reviving the memory of a past program to keep it alive” (Costello and Moore 2007:135).

Another aspect of the ‘reiteration discourse’ is fan’s insistence upon aligning *TWW* with ‘quality television’ in their discussions. The show meets many of the academic criteria for ‘quality television’ such as auteurship via the hyphenate figure of Aaron Sorkin (Crawley 2006), a workplace setting (The White House), serialised narratives (Feuer 2005:31; Feuer 2007:149), ensemble cast (Lane 2003:32), a filmic-style musical score (Kaye 2007:223), and cinematic association via actors such as Martin Sheen and Rob Lowe. It also received widespread critical acclaim<sup>77</sup> and is literary and writer-based, winning acclaim for its dialogue (Lawson 2005:xviii). The show also realistically portrays government and national security (J. Elizabeth Clark 2005), uses aesthetically innovative flashbacks and multi-angled storytelling, and attracts a largely upscale demographic (Crawley 2006:63-70). *TWW* has also been compared with “a number of circa-2000 series which marked a new darkening of tone, deepening of subject matter or complexity of structure in American television” (Lawson 2005:xviii). As argued in chapter two, the television industry often draws upon the concept of quality television to promote shows, accord them value, and attract affluent, literate audiences who can be targeted via niche advertising (see page 44).<sup>78</sup> In the UK, American shows are often characterised as ‘quality television’ as they “help enliven the schedule, and sometimes even attract up-market viewers” (Rixon 2007:101) and they have high production values although, conversely the opposite is often true in the US which tends to view British programmes as possessing higher production values and being well-made (e.g. *Masterpiece Theatre*). Thus, *TWW* was utilised by its UK broadcaster Channel 4 to position itself as an alternative, quality channel (C. Johnson 2007:12-13; McCabe 2000),

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<sup>77</sup> For example, the show received thirteen Emmy nominations in its first year (J. Elizabeth Clark 2005:226) and won a total of 24 Emmy awards (BBC 2006: online).

<sup>78</sup> See also Gray (2008:45) on the ‘hype’ which surrounded Sorkin’s follow-up show *Studio 60* and the way in which this was positioned as ‘quality’ in various ways.

to appeal to a specific demographic (Born 2003), and to “build a distinct corporate brand identity for itself” (McCabe 2005:212). This was furthered when the show moved onto the Channel 4 digital channel More4 which positioned itself as “a lively, outspoken and above all entertaining channel for discerning viewers who want more from digital TV than repeats, football and back-to-back acquisitions” (Wilkes 2005:online). More4 thus used *The West Wing* to “brand itself as serious, challenging and intellectual” (Rixon 2007:106).<sup>79</sup> It is, given the scheduling of *TWW* in the UK, possible to consider it as a form of ‘mainstream cult’ (Hills 2004a:62) for, as Hills notes, “cult TV status may thus itself be aided by the transnational circulation of texts, with certain shows taking on an anti-mainstream foreignness in national contexts other than their point of origin” (Hills 2006b:67). As I have sought to argue throughout this thesis, the concept of the mainstream cult text may offer a way to move beyond typical definitions of quality television and to consider the impact of audience and fan responses. Mainstream cult texts are those which, as Hills argues, possess markers of quality but which are not referred to as cult texts in secondary materials (2004: 55). As I have argued above, *TWW* carries many such markers and signifiers of quality (e.g. authorship, high production values, and high standard of writing) but it is not perceived as a cult text. However, it is my argument that *TWW* does qualify as a form of mainstream cult programme as it clearly attracts a dedicated fan following which splits fans into ‘sub-subcultures’ (Hills 2004:62) depending upon their favourite characters or ships (see above), and is marked by an auteur figure which offers endorsement of the show as ‘quality television’. Finally, although the show does not carry over into other media, fans do produce their own texts such as fanfiction and so on. This appears to indicate a clear case for *TWW* as an example of the mainstream cult text. Furthermore, as I have argued in relation to *Big Brother* (see page 145) we can add the impact of scheduling and networks to these traits of the mainstream cult and, I suggest, we can make a clear case for this in relation to the broadcast status of *TWW* in the UK (see above).<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> See also Simone Knox (2007) and Ian Goode (2007) on how the Five channel in the UK used the import of the *CSI* franchise to rebrand itself and Rixon (2007:107-108) for discussion of the importance of ‘American quality television’ in constructing brand identities for Channel 4 and Five.

<sup>80</sup> It should be pointed out here that, despite my discussion of *TWW* within the UK broadcasting context, there is no way to know the location of many of the fans whose threads I draw on in this research. Given the prevalence of anonymity on the Internet, the only way to identify location is by hints within the posts

Given this potential relationship between quality and cult status, many fans clearly shared the view of academics, critics, and broadcasters that *TWW* was ‘quality television’ and, despite their debates as the series ended (see below), many bemoaned the show’s loss. Posters suggest that the show was unique and incomparable;<sup>81</sup> “Television will never be the same again” (Owen, post #147) whilst others suggest “Tonight is the night TV died” (Toby, post #75), and “This was the crown jewel of tv drama” (George, post #22). Comparisons with reality television and gameshows are also made and these genres are aligned with lowest common denominator programming and passive, unintelligent audiences;

In a world that includes shows like *Deal or No Deal*, the *West Wing* made me believe network television could actually be worth tuning in for. Not that I'm a snob or anything, but there's no reason a show has to fall to the lowest common denominator (Jon, post #283).

In a world of reality television and increasing cynicism all around us, thanks for the optimism and idealism. For the way with words, the emotion, and for the intelligence (Craig, post #159).

As seen in this distancing from reality television and gameshows, fans position *TWW* as intelligent ‘quality television’ which challenged viewers. Such pronouncements indicate the fans’ position as Bourdieuan ‘consecrating agents’ who “contribute to the formation of collective belief surrounding the value of symbolic goods” (Shefrin 2004:270) (see page 34). By discussing *TWW* as ‘quality television’ which surpassed other shows, fans consolidate the view of the show as ‘good’, reinforcing the discourses perpetuated by the show’s producers and academics who seek to elevate the programme to render it worthy of their critical scrutiny. However, why did fans continue to so vehemently draw on discourses of quality television, originality, and intelligence even after the final episode of *TWW* had aired? Given that I have argued throughout this chapter that fans use *TWW* to perform identity work and provide ontological security, it is perhaps unsurprising that they seek to align themselves with cultural objects perceived as ‘good’ or as worthwhile.

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themselves. Therefore, whilst some references to American political parties, employment and so on can be seen to demonstrate that posters are located in the US, such identification is not possible for the majority of online fans.

<sup>81</sup> All posts on this page are from the thread devoted to the series finale, ‘Tomorrow’.

By insinuating that *TWW* appeals to intelligent audiences and is diametrically opposed to the ‘lowest common denominator’ programming of reality television and gameshows, these fans clearly associate themselves with such traits. By positioning themselves in opposition to the passive audience who happily consume lower quality shows they can employ *TWW* to reflect back a satisfactory self-identity. However, given the cessation of the show, such positioning also takes on the crucial role of validating their continued attachment to the show over a number of years. Systems of cultural value place all genres into categories of ‘highbrow’ and ‘lowbrow’ (Mittell 2004:15) and if *TWW* is perceived as ‘quality television’, and those who are fans of it construed as intelligent, politically aware and so on, then the use of this object to perform identity work is legitimated.

#### **“My interest will probably wane”: The ‘renegotiation discourse’**

However, in the ‘renegotiation discourse’ fans acknowledged that, whilst *TWW* had been of huge importance to them the show would cease to be so influential in their lives. Many fans noted that they would transfer their interest to alternative shows, commenting;

It had a good run. It was fun to watch, and I’ll have to find something new to do on Sundays at 8:00 pm [...] I’ll inevitably lose interest when a new show catches my eye. I’ll probably stay involved for a year or so before moving on to a new fandom (Lucy)

I’m sure it will fade away after a while. There is talk of a fan fic virtual season. I might try to read that. I’ll still beta for my friend until her story is completed (it’s a long one.) After that, I’ll probably start finding other interests/shows to follow (Rhian).

Fans concede that their interest will fade, commenting “I doubt there will be much point in reading the sites, my interest will probably wane” (Kate) and “I’ll continue to visit messageboards because I’ve met some really great people, but I don’t think it’ll be as much as it used to be” (Caroline). Such fans have already begun renegotiate their identities accordingly, acknowledging that eventually *TWW* would no longer have such meaning for them and, we can extrapolate from this, would no longer provide such high levels of ontological security. Equally, fans renegotiate their fan/fan relationships,

suggesting that whilst the fan community was important to their fandom this will necessarily become less crucial to their sense of self-identity and self-narrative. One poster comments,

also a thank you, but hopefully not goodbye, to the people in this forum who also entertained me and made me smarter. On top of everything else, *TWW* was my first TWOP show, and although I've been a-wandering through other shows/forums, this one will always hold that nostalgia for me (Jasmine, post #117 'Tomorrow').

Many fans also articulated their intention to watch *TWW* creator Aaron Sorkin's new series *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip (S60)* (2006-2007) which premiered on the NBC network on September 19<sup>th</sup>, 2006. They note;

I'm already part of a few communities on LJ for *Studio 60*. [...] I watch SN on DVD as much as I do *TWW* and *Studio 60* will be the #1 priority on my Tivo come fall (Nancy).

Before I got involved with *West Wing* fandom, I didn't know much about Aaron Sorkin. Since then, I have become a fan of his writing, and plan to watch *Studio 60* from the very beginning (Rhian).

Great show, great ending. On to *Studio 60* (Kelso Post #78 'Tomorrow').

Such fans accept that they will move onto other forums and shows but still privilege *TWW* as being crucial in formation of fan self identity. Indeed, this can be seen as indicative of the fans' struggle to maintain their positions within the fandom and their accrued subcultural, social, or symbolic capital. As argued in chapter two, capital can be converted when agents move between fields (or between fandoms) and they may have accrued capital related to *TWW* which they can carry into the fandoms that follow. Indeed, fans often form links of similar fan objects, either devoting themselves to various objects simultaneously (what I am terming '*promiscuous fans*') or wholeheartedly to one object before moving onto another ('*serially monogamous fans*'). There may be structural links and overlaps between these fandoms (Hills 2002:81) allowing fans to carry capital between them. For example, in discussions of *TWW* creator Aaron Sorkin fans often cited his other work as favoured fan objects or suggested that this would help them to get

through the end of *TWW*; “I definitely plan to watch *S60* this fall. In fact, I expect it to live up to the Sorkin/ Schalmme legacy and therefore plan to record-to-keep it” (Lene). It is thus possible that the capital accrued in *TWW* fandom can be displayed if the fan moves onto *S60* fandom. To be clear here, it is not that fans enter new fandoms and cause others to consciously think that, given that fan’s knowledge about *TWW*, their interpretations of *S60* must be correct. Rather, the implicit acquisition of capital which, as Bourdieu (1984:330) and Thornton (1995:12) caution, must not be overt but rather unspoken and inherent, enables fans to draw on their pool of knowledge to position themselves as ‘discursively powerful’ (Tulloch 1995). Furthermore, any social capital accrued may also be exchangeable within new fandoms if posters recognise so-called executive or ‘Big Name Fans’ (Coppa 2006:43). Thus, fans who have accrued high levels of subcultural, social or symbolic capital within *TWW* fandom will have more impure relationships with both the show and other fans. As discussed in chapter three, as fans attain rewards outside of fan/object and fan/fan relationships themselves (such as prestige, capital, or monetary reward), these relationships become more tainted as they offer the fan more than the rewards of ontological security and reflection of desirable self-identities. Fans who transfer capital between fandoms (that is, moving from *TWW* into *S60* fandom) may find their fan/fan and fan/object relationships are even more tainted as their engagement allows them to continue accruing capital in other fandoms.

Furthermore, the fact that ontological security can never truly be eradicated by the demise of one singular TV show may also be reflected in fans’ movement onto new shows such as *Studio 60*. As well as enabling them to transfer subcultural capital between fandoms the enthusiasm of many fans for *Studio 60* is perhaps indicative of the fact that television as a whole provides ontological security due to its routine via “schedules, genres and narratives” (Silverstone 1994:15). If the end of one show forces fans to renegotiate their self-identities and narratives, it is undoubtedly the ‘basic trust’ or ‘primary ontological security’ (Laing 1960: 39) established in early childhood that equips them to cope with this. Thus, it can also be argued that ontological security means that, despite the loss of one fan object, a replacement can usually be found which, over time, may develop into a

new fan/object relationship and may come to offer the same rewards as the previous object.

However, other fans suggested that they would not so readily transfer their interest or affection onto other programmes. They note;

I am done with episodic television: I am not getting roped into another one of these but I don't regret jumping in with both feet seven years ago and not looking back (Jake, post #108 'Tomorrow')

In an effort to return to a normal life, I hope I don't get sucked into another episodic show any time soon (Stewart, post #121 'Tomorrow').

Although these comments may refer to a desire not to invest due to time constraints, they also suggest that the trauma of the ending of the fan object is so great that fans cannot comprehend being able to form such close attachments to another object. As well as appearing to seek to protect themselves against the trauma of the cessation of this source of ontological security and self-identity, these fans also demonstrate the depth of their attachment, displaying their emotional ties for fellow fans.

### **“Putting the show out of its misery” – The ‘rejection discourse’**

Finally, in the ‘rejection discourse’ fans adopted a critically distanced or defensive posture, articulating that the show was past its best period or ‘golden age’ (Tulloch 1995) and that they were glad to see its’ demise. Although such reactions are briefly alluded to via Jenkins’s comments on the “relief” felt by some fans when *Beauty and The Beast* ended (1992:151), they have yet to be comprehensively examined in fan studies.

Furthermore, whilst internet fandom enables fans to “quickly mobilise grassroots efforts to save programs” (Jenkins 2002:161), the possibility that fans may in fact, campaign *against* their own fan objects has not yet been studied. However, in the case of *TWW*, some had actively called for the show to be cancelled via the *Don’t Save Our Show* campaign (Tucker 2004: online) and many “would rather have no *TWW* than bad *TWW*” (Justin, post #241 ‘The Last Hurrah’). Other posters reacted using discourses of

euthanasia, alluding to “putting the show out of its misery” (Melissa, post #124 ‘The Last Hurrah’) or lamenting that “It’s sad watching my favorite show die. I know the patient is on life support and not expected to live much longer, but I can’t help watching it wither away” (Eleni, post #298 ‘Two Weeks Out’). Such self-protective posturing allows fans to attempt to ward off any emotional upset when the show ends as they rationalise their affective ties away via the suggestion that the show had ceased to be worthy of their attention.

These discussions over the perceived demise in quality relate to *TWW* fans’ debates over what constituted the ‘true’ show. Such discussions were also commonplace within the *TWoP* community before the cancellation of the show was announced, with posters debating what constituted ‘real’ *West Wing* (see the above discussion of J/D shippers and those who felt that an emphasis upon relationships was not ‘proper’ *West Wing*). For example, many fans felt that episodes focusing upon the Presidential campaign between the Democrat and Republican candidates to replace Bartlet were not ‘proper’ episodes of the show;

Well, that was pretty good. It was interesting. But what show was it? It certainly wasn't The West Wing (Candy, post #2 ‘Message Of The Week’)

Wow...the only thing missing from The West Wing tonight was....THE WEST WING (Alan, post #6 ‘Message Of The Week’)

It just isn't the same show without all of our original characters. It might not be a bad spin off but, it simply isn't *TWW* (May, post #57 ‘Message Of The Week’).

In contrast others felt that the new direction was still ‘true’ *West Wing*, asking

Seriously, can we stop with all the "This isn't The West Wing" stuff? I get that there are a lot of people dissatisfied with the direction of the show right now and would prefer that it had never shifted away from Jed and the gang. [...] But this is the show. It's still called The West Wing (Mark, post #227 ‘Message Of The Week’).

However, such debates intensified and occurred with increasing regularity as the final episode approached. When the antepenultimate episode ‘The Last Hurrah’ was screened



fans were outraged that it focused upon the incoming administration and barely featured long-term characters;

OMG what an amazing waste of one of three final episodes of this show. Appalling. John Wells is just incapable of getting it, isn't he? Of course there will be storylines left hanging, but these all rank among the top of the Who Gives a Fuck list? (Joan, post #11 'The Last Hurrah').

With three episodes left the focus of characters created by the new writers is egotistical and selfish. Nobody cares, get over it (Jeremy, post #67 'The Last Hurrah').

it certainly felt like a love letter to those people who tuned in to see one of the final episodes of their program and its beloved long-running characters. And the individual letters are f, u, c k, y, o and another u (Ellen, post #146 'The Last Hurrah').

Such vitriolic statements indicate the level of fans' attachment to the original characters and premise of the show and the sense of disappointment and betrayal that they feel regarding such episodes. However, the emphasis upon the fact that there are only a few episodes of the show left also demonstrates an anxiety that the narrative can never fully sate their need for resolution of events. These statements further indicate a level of blame toward the writers and producers, suggesting that they are not only incapable of writing satisfactory conclusions to the story but are deliberately antagonising fans in their insistence that storylines involving new characters are what the audience wants to see. This is not to say that Wells or the other writers were actually behaving in this fashion but that these discursive fan strategies must be read as symptomatic of their debates and struggles over what constitutes *The West Wing* and what types of episode are 'good' or 'bad'.

However, such distinctions do not merely result from the impending demise of the show. One poster notes "Yay, we've gone back to a year ago this time. Because those episodes were so great" (Violet, post #27 'The Last Hurrah'), indicating that episodes in prior seasons that focused upon the Santos campaign were equally unpopular and perceived as 'inauthentic' *West Wing*. Some fans claim that such flaws lead them to be relieved that the show is ending; "Just when I thought that it was a travesty this show was going off

the air” (Neville, post #92 ‘The Last Hurrah’). However, as discussed above, such debates allow fans to make defensive statements which enable them to deal with the loss of a previously valued fan object. If episodes such as ‘The Last Hurrah’ can be dismissed as violating what was enjoyable about the show in the first place, the show’s demise can be rearticulated as a welcome relief, enabling fans to cope with potential disruption to their identities or self-narratives.

Discourses of good/bad episodes and the ‘proper’ show are often related to issues of authorship, a cinematic concept which endures within television studies (Jenkins 1995; Pearson 2005). The fans in my earlier case studies were, given the non-authorial nature of the genres they were fans of, largely unable to place blame for unsatisfactory aspects of the shows on specific figures, tending instead to hold accountable the homogenous producers of *BB* (see page 148) or TPTB in charge of *Neighbours* (see pages 187-189). In contrast *TWW* fans commonly distinguish between the show’s earlier seasons, helmed by show creator Aaron Sorkin and seasons four-to-seven, led by John Wells;

That was a truly outstanding episode. It reminded me of the best days of the show (cough, Sorkin, cough) (Denny, post #28 ‘The Cold’)

Aaron Sorkin would have done better with this because Aaron Sorkin is a better writer/conceptualist and hears nuance a hell of a lot better than John Wells (Courtney, post #148 ‘Requiem’).

Such dividing of shows into golden ages is not uncommon but *TWW* fans routinely project their disappointment onto Wells whilst seeking to privilege and elevate the figure of Sorkin as auteur or ‘hyphenate’ (Thompson 1990 cited in Hills 2002: 132). The associations of auteurship with an ideology of quality have long been noted (Brower 1992: 171; Hills 2002:133; 2007:52) and fans thus associate *TWW* with ‘good television’ via their alignment of the ‘best’ episodes or seasons with Sorkin. Indeed, such a distinction between art (‘high’ culture) and commerce (‘low’ culture) is common within fandom (Frith 1998; Hills 2005: Shuker 1994:16). Such distinctions became more pronounced as the series neared its end, with fans frequently bemoaning the opportunities

wasted by both John Wells (sometimes referred to as “Wellsatan” (Neville, post #92 ‘The Last Hurrah’)) and another widely derided writer Lawrence O'Donnell;

Dear Lawrence O'Donnell - It's about the characters, stupid (Bradley, post #78 ‘The Last Hurrah’).

firing Lawrence O'Donnell woulda been a good budget cut (Chandler, post #91 ‘The Last Hurrah’).

Lawrence O'Donnell should never write anything ever again. Not even a take-out menu (Owen, post #22 ‘The Last Hurrah’).

These distinctions between good and bad writers relate to discourses of quality television but also suggest an anxiety that the show may never fully resolve all of its narratives, leaving the fan unfulfilled once the final episode airs. Although the hyperdiegesis of *TWW* enables fans to imagine a narrative world beyond the final frame, events which are not rendered canonical in the final few episodes will never be realised, potentially undermining fans' sense of ontological security. Furthermore, berating the writers for unpopular episodes also shifts the causes of loveshock onto outside sources, allowing fans to deal with their potential feelings of loss by apportioning blame.

The above discussion has outlined the three main discourses which fans use to discuss their responses to the end of *TWW* although these discourses of reiteration, renegotiation, and rejection may be used to consider fan responses to the cessation of fan objects beyond this specific case study. However, before concluding this chapter I wish to interrogate possible reasons as to why fans responded to the ending of *TWW* in these different ways. In keeping with my theoretical framework I relate my discussion to Giddens' concept of ontological security and my extrapolation of his work to develop the idea of fan pure relationships. However, I also wish to introduce some broader theories, including Hochschild's (1979, 1983) concept of ‘emotion work’ and suggest how this, along with the cultural gendering of emotion, may begin to explain varieties in fan reaction to the end of *TWW*.

### **Fluidity, emotional management, and ontological security**

Having established the discourses of reiteration, renegotiation, and rejection which fans use to negotiate their reaction to the end of *The West Wing* I wish, in the final section of this chapter, to relate these responses to the multi-dimensional continuum I established in chapter three (see appendix two) and to offer some exploratory reasons for these various responses. My main concern is why some fans sought to minimise the impact of the cessation of the fan object through the ‘rejection discourse’ of critical distance whilst others were content to espouse their more affective reactions to the show’s demise within the ‘reiteration’ or ‘renegotiation discourse’. This section considers the relevance of the cultural gendering of emotion, the concept of emotion work and emotional management, and the unacceptability of ‘inappropriate’ emotion towards lowbrow cultural objects. I then conclude by suggesting that the difference in responses may relate to fans’ varying needs for levels of ontological security from their fan objects. Without wishing to pathologise fans or suggest that their fandom results from some ‘lack’ in their non-fan lives, I propose that the varying degrees of ontological security that individuals negotiate may explain why fans responded to the end of *TWW* in this variety of ways.

As argued above, fans must readjust to the ending of a fan object and, I argue, it is this which may necessitate movement between the types of fan ‘sectors’ I proposed (see pages 84-86 and appendix two). Indeed, “interest, involvement and levels of knowledge of a [fan object] will often change over time. This may recede in significance in their [fans’] lives” (Crawford 2004:46). Thus, fans who drew upon the reiteration discourse are likely to remain within the same sector, provided that their post-object interest in the fan object and their fan interaction remains at the same level. However, those who responded within the renegotiation discourse will necessarily move between sectors as their fan/object and fan/fan relationships change (see appendix two). Indeed, these fans are more likely to belong to Sector A, having pure fan/fan relationships (as they have less to discuss with other fans) but a more impure fan/object relationship as the text continues to have some importance to them, although this may have diminished. Furthermore, those who drew upon the rejection discourse are also likely to have moved sectors although,

given their assertions that *TWW*'s 'quality' had been declining for some time, this may have occurred before the actual cessation of the show. Such fans are likely to move from sectors with highly impure fan/object and fan/fan relationships towards those with purer relationships, given these fans' dissatisfaction with the show. Thus, fans whose interest had waned but who continued to discuss their displeasure within fan communities would fall into Sector D, privileging fan/fan relationships over the fan/object relationship. Alternatively, fans whose unhappiness with the show meant they withdrew from fan interaction would belong to sector B, and have very pure fan relationships as they had reduced interest in the fan object itself and no contact with fellow fans (see pages 84-86).

Thus, after the series finale of *TWW*, fans negotiated their self-identity and ontological security and may have moved between fan sectors accordingly. It must be reiterated here that this is not a conscious decision by fans but that, given my argument that fandom is both a power hierarchy and an arena for the negotiation of self-identity and security, changes in fandom will need to be navigated by fans. Thus, consideration of post-object fandom of *TWW* provides some empirical data to substantiate my argument in chapter three that my multi-dimensional fan continuum, and the use of continuums as a theoretical model in general, remain useful, provided that they allow for a "fluid and dynamic understanding of the structure of a 'community' and an individual's (or collective's) progression (Crawford, 2003:225).

Having related the findings from this case study to the theoretical model I introduced in chapter three, I now propose potential reasons why fans may have reacted in varying ways and why some move between sectors (see appendix two) whilst others remain static. Such differences in fan response may be explained by the fact that rational control of emotion is culturally masculinised whilst emotional reactions are feminised (Jaggar 1989:145). Indeed, "'emotionality' tends to have certain meanings that link it to female rather than male interests and behaviours" (Lupton 1998:131) and there is "a common association of the feminine with vulgarity and excessive emotion" (Bird 2003:141). Thus, fans (especially males) may seek to portray socially acceptable responses to the end of the fan object to avoid accusation of inappropriate behaviour. Control of emotions has

been examined in Hochschild's (1979, 1983) study of the concept of 'emotion work' which suggests that we must work on providing appropriate emotional responses in situations such as weddings and funerals. This is dependent upon social guidelines and "a set of shared, albeit often latent rules" (Hochschild 1983:268). Indeed, 'emotion work' is "the emotion management we do in private life [whilst] 'emotional labor [...] refer[s] to the emotion management we do for a wage" (Hochschild 1990:118).<sup>82</sup> Such work draws on Goffman's (1967) suggestion that we are capable of displaying 'multiple selves' and can match appropriate feelings to various situations. Such ideas suggest that specific forms of emotion work are undertaken within fandoms, enabling fans to manage and display their feelings in specific ways.

As well as seeking to disavow any linkage with culturally devalued (i.e. feminised) emotional reactions, this type of emotion work may also be undertaken to avoid displaying an excess of emotion which society may deem an inappropriate reaction to the end of a fan object. Although it is socially acceptable to feel sad at funerals, fan emotional reactions are only permitted within certain arenas; for example, sports fandom (even when it is primarily male fans who respond in this way). In contrast, other fans are often pathologised, assumed to be unable to distinguish between fantasy and reality (see page 7) and perceived to be 'obsessed' with trivial mass media products. Thus, to avoid stigmatisation as 'fanatical' or 'sad', emotional reactions to the end of fan objects must be carefully negotiated and emotional labour performed in order to ensure that cultural norms surrounding appropriate responses are adhered to.

Whilst those who responded within 'renegotiation' or 'rejection' discourses may have been cautious of displaying culturally unacceptable emotional responses to the end of the show, they also appear to be those fans that no longer need the text to perform identity work or to provide ontological security. This is linked to a critique of Giddens' use of ontological security, namely that he too neatly demarcates between possessing it and not

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<sup>82</sup> For example, such theories have been examined in workplaces such as call centres (Mulholland 2002) and accountancies (Bolton 2000).

possessing it. Instead, we oscillate throughout our lives and have more security at some times than at others;

ontological security is not something that is simply there or not there, it is always a matter of feeling more or less secure so that everyone [...] may be affected by some feelings of insecurity in this sense (Layder 1997:68, see also Craib 1992).

Ontological security varies within social and cultural context (for example, elderly people may not trust in systems such as the Internet or online banking, whereas younger people would be more inclined to trust such systems) and some people may place more trust in fan objects thus gaining greater ontological security from these than from other people. For example, those fans who responded within the 'reiteration discourse' may require a greater level of ontological security from their fan objects than those who critically distanced themselves although I must caution here that such a view is not intended to pathologise fans or suggest that they are caught up in a 'fantasy' world (Jenson 1992). Rather, in relation to my own work on fan cultures, Giddens' insistence on a binary in which one either does or does not possess ontological security fails to allow for the varying levels of trust that fans place in their chosen fan objects. As discussed above, fans may dislike some aspects of their fan objects, loathing unwelcome narrative plotlines in a television show or a disappointing album by a band. However, these fans do not suddenly lose all trust in the object. Rather they negotiate their feelings (Jenkins 1992: 23) and rework their self-narratives to account for disappointing elements of their fan objects. Furthermore, 'promiscuous fans' often declare themselves fans of more than one object at a time and may find that their trust in various fan objects changes over time and according to the situation. For example, a fan of several bands may feel disappointed by a poor live show and find their trust in one band is threatened whereas their trust in the others remains strong. It is not, then, the case that fans possess ontological security as a result of the routine and familiarity of their fan object which then vanishes when the object challenges their trust in it. Rather, ontological security, as Craib (1992), Layder (1997), and Moores (2005) argue, is itself experienced along a continuum, and one's sense of trust can fluctuate over time and in various contexts;

our internal worlds also contain fear, self-questioning, doubt and agonies which at times enhance the banality of our commonsense world. We are regularly thrown by external processes over which we have no control, processes that result in wars, unemployment, poverty (Craib 1998:72).

This final section has related the varying fan responses to my multi-dimensional conceptualisation of fandom and has offered some rationale for why fans responded to the end of *TWW* in a variety of ways. I have argued that those who avoided overly emotional responses may have wished (explicitly or implicitly) to avoid alignment with culturally feminised responses or the appearance of ‘over-reaction’ to the demise of a fan object. Drawing on Hochschild’s work on emotional management, I used the variety of responses deployed by the fans in this case study to suggest that Giddens’ own conceptualisation of ontological security is too rigid and fails to account for the fact that our levels of such trust oscillate over time. It may be that those who responded within renegotiation or rejection discourses found that their sense of trust in *TWW* had changed and that they no longer had such strong emotional ties to it. As argued above, this discussion has been tentative but it is my hope that such ideas can be expanded and that the reasons for varying fan responses to the end of fan objects can be better understood in future fan studies.

## **Conclusion**

This, my final case study, has examined the main concerns of this thesis – distinction, capital, self-identity, and ontological security – through the lens of fan responses to the end of the television show *The West Wing*. This provided a unique chance to examine the moment when a fan object became ‘dormant’ and my theorisation of this fan phenomenon is intended to supplement previous work on fan responses to dissatisfaction with their fan objects. Through analysis of empirical data I provided some conceptualisations of the ways in which fans react to the cessation of fan objects. Using Giddens’ notion of ‘loveshock’ I suggested that, if fan/object and fan/fan pure relationships provide ontological security and an avenue for identity work, when the focus of these relationships ends there must be a period of ‘mourning’ and of working



through this disruption. This was evidenced by the fierce debates between fans over what constituted ‘proper’ *West Wing* – whether this meant a show that avoided excessive emphasis on romantic ‘ships’ or a show which focused on the original cast of characters – and the fan discussions regarding quality television and genre. Drawing on the idea that the basic trust established in early childhood enables individuals to deal with threats to ontological security, I suggested that fans deal with the ending of a fan object in a number of ways.

According to the data I collected, fans appeared to respond in three broad ways. As argued above, many fans reiterated their attachment to their fandom, offering lengthy rationales for their interest in the show and vowing to continue their involvement. Others conceded that whilst *TWW* had once had an important place in their lives, this would necessarily change as new episodes of the show ceased to be produced. Finally, many fans rejected the show, expressing relief at its demise and critically evaluating its final episodes. These discourses enabled fans to re-establish their identity as a fan (in the reiteration discourse), rework this identity (the renegotiation discourse), or distance themselves from a show which they perceived to no longer be ‘worthwhile’ (in the rejection discourse). Furthermore, all three responses related to issues of capital and distinction in fan discussions of the ‘quality’ and perceived uniqueness of the show, in their proclamations that they would move onto fandom of Aaron Sorkin’s new show *S60*, or their battles over whether the narrative would satisfy their interpretations of the show before the series finale. Having identified these responses this chapter correlated them with the model of fan sectors which I introduced in chapter three (see appendix two), suggesting that the data generated in this case study offers empirical evidence to back up my argument that my fan continuum is fluid and enables movement between each sector. Finally, this chapter offered tentative reasons for why fans may have responded in various ways; relating this to the gendering of emotion, cultural disapproval of over-emotional attachment to objects of fandom, and critiques of Giddens’ underestimating of the varying levels of ontological security which individuals negotiate throughout their lives. As prior fan studies have failed to address the phenomenon of ‘post-object fandom’ it is my hope that this thesis goes some way towards beginning investigation of this issue,

offering some starting points for future research. Whilst this case study of specific online fans cannot be considered comprehensive, it is my suggestion that the responses of these fans may, via empirical research, be identifiable in other fandoms and it is recommendation that future work on fandom should begin further investigation into this area.

Having offered my extended case study of online fans devoted to three different television shows, the final chapter provides an over-view of these examples, tracing the commonalities and disparities in the distinctions discussed by fans and in the ways in which they negotiate self-identity and ontological security. I also offer some observations on the limitations of this thesis and conclude by proposing some theoretical and methodological suggestions for future work on fandom, suggesting that fan studies should undertake comparative multi-site case studies to more fully comprehend the complexities of fan practices in modern mediated society.

## Chapter Eight

### Conclusion

#### The story so far...

The preceding chapters presented the findings of my three case studies of fans of the television programmes *Big Brother*, *Neighbours* and *The West Wing*, using this data to theoretically and empirically address the main research aims of this thesis. I have suggested an approach to fan cultures which, in contrast to prior work on fandom:

- considers fandom as both a community and a hierarchical site of struggles over power and capital,
- accounts for the internal impact of an individual's fandom on their sense of self,
- allows for differences in the levels of engagement fans have in their fan/object and fan/fan relationships and attempts to account for different types of fans and fan practices,
- treats fan/object and fan/fan relationships equally (even if fans themselves may have varying levels of engagement with each).

However, despite the differences in genre, cultural value, temporality, and trans-national status of each of the shows I have examined I wish, in this final chapter, to draw together the key themes and ideas which intersect and cohere across these multiple sites. Moving away from the specificities of the fan practices towards more general conclusions, I aim here to outline the wider implications of this thesis for work on fans and audiences, critically assessing this research's contribution to media and cultural studies.

Having suggested in the introduction that previous fan studies which utilised theories of resistance, affect, and psychoanalysis were inadequate when considering the dualisms of fandom, I introduced a conceptualisation of fan cultures which drew on sociological theory (see chapter three). Indeed, whilst Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of capital and *habitus* have been widely drawn on in fan studies, his ideas of field and *illusio* have been

relatively under-employed. Similarly, whilst Anthony Giddens' work on modernity, identity, and ontological security has been applied in media studies (Moore 2000; 2005; Scannell 1988; Silverstone 1994), there has been no real attempt to employ such work in fan studies and his notion of 'pure relationships' has yet to be developed. Thus, this thesis distinctively argues that fans' connections to their fan objects and other fans can be conceived as forms of 'fan/object' and 'fan/fan' pure relationships. However, these are not always "entirely decontextualised from outside criteria" (Giddens 1991:6) and must be imagined in terms of 'degrees of purity', depending on how they are impacted on by outside factors such as power and capital. I thus introduced Bourdieu's theories of capital and field to account for the fact that fans often consciously and unconsciously make bids for positions and the associated capital within the broadcasting field, contributing to the power hierarchies which often bisect fandom. Drawing on Giddens and Bourdieu I outlined a multi-dimensional continuum to enable consideration of various types of fans who have different levels of engagement with fan objects and other fans (see appendix two). Indeed, the ability to theorise various levels of fan attachment and engagement remains crucial and we must "continue to explore differences between different fans on the level of media usage, social connectivity and textual productivity" (Sandvoss 2005:164). In the remainder of this conclusion I offer an over-view of the empirical findings of my research, tracing the themes of self-identity, ontological security, and capital and power across the three online fan communities which formed my cross-comparative multi-site case study.

### **Self-identity, ontological security and fan pure relationships**

One of the key points of coherence across the case studies was fans' negotiation of their identities and reflexive narratives of the self (Giddens 1991, 1992). Fans from each online community explicitly correlated themselves with, or refused identification with, characters or housemates or implicitly identified with traits they find desirable. For instance, *Big Brother* fans were the group who most often displayed congruence between how they perceived themselves and their favourite *BB* contestants (see page 122). Similarly, fans of *The West Wing* aligned themselves with the characters of Josh (who

was 'driven' and 'ambitious') and Toby (who had a hidden 'passion and sensitivity') (see page 203). However, *TWW* was the only fandom in which fans also identified with the more negative traits of characters such as Josh's smugness or insensitivity and Toby's sarcasm (see pages 203-204). Whilst this was unique to *TWW* fans those in the other case studies did recognise negative traits of characters of housemates. However, in these examples, they explicitly distanced themselves from these and avoided comparison or identification with them. This can be seen in their refusal to identify with 'mad' *BB* housemates and those perceived to be ambitious for celebrity, rather than being 'normal' people (see page 124) or in *Neighbours*' fans disavowal of characters who were duplicitous or criminal (see page 166). However, returning to Cornel Sandvoss' (2005) work on mirroring of identity within fandom, I suggest that these examples of distancing or refusing identification with those perceived to be 'not-like' fans still constitute a form of mirroring (see page 123). Even though this may be what we can call 'negative mirroring', fans who disavow similarities to characters/housemates are still clearly performing identity work and engaging in the production of Giddensian narratives of the self.

There were also similarities across the case studies regarding the ways in which fans used the shows themselves to perform identity work and to construct themselves in meaningful ways. This clearly links to the 'golden ages' (Tulloch 1995) of the various shows and is reflected in the distinctions and value judgements that fans made regarding the best eras of the programmes and this also reflects the types of appropriate self-identity fans wish themselves to have. For example, by arguing that current episodes of *Neighbours* are amoral and lack a 'heart' fans implicitly align themselves with the desired ideology of the series and situate themselves as friendly, positive, and decent (see page 183). Similarly, arguments over *The West Wing*'s perceived decrease in quality position fans as demanding texts which challenge and stimulate their intellect. Despite this, it was in the *West Wing* case study that fans were the keenest to align themselves with the show itself, rather than specific characters, to associate themselves with a culturally valued text and to position themselves as intelligent, politically aware citizens (see page 205). Thus, one further contribution to the literature on fan identity and identification that this thesis

makes is this consideration of the ways in which fans might engage with the cultural value and status of their chosen fan objects and how this might intersect with their self-identity and self-narratives.

Similarly, evidence of the fan practice of shipping was present in each of my three case studies. Although this practice has been widely considered in fan studies, such work has been limited to specific genres (e.g. cult media) and has tended to be discussed in limited ways (e.g. discussing practices which are clearly identifiable as shipping but not referring to it as such). However, this thesis seeks to contribute to this aspect of fan studies in a number of important ways. Firstly, it attempts to move our understanding of shippers and their activities beyond those genres typically associated with such practices by examining shippers within the reality television, soap opera and drama genres. More crucially, I offer one of the first analyses of shipping in reality TV which attempts to move the discussion beyond merely enquiring as to whether viewers find the relationships convincing or not. Whilst Andacht (2004)'s analysis of fans' negative responses to *BB* relationships is relevant here, I seek to relate *BBUK7* fans' shipping to wider issues of identity and ontological security. For example, *BB* fans' characterisation of relationships between housemates as fake or inappropriate indicates that they were using this 'anti-fandom' (Gray 2003) to indicate that they privileged honesty, being genuine, and that they respected the boundaries of what behaviour was appropriate to engage in on television (see page 126). Furthermore, this thesis also uniquely considers fans who support romantic relationships on soap operas as shippers; something which prior work has failed to do. Whilst identifying that fans may engage in practices we might recognise as characteristic of shipping, previous soap studies have avoided use of the term shipper (see page 167), something which this thesis has sought to rectify. Furthermore, my examination of shippers within *Neighbours* fandom has moved away from discussions over competing interpretations and readings of the text towards considering how fans' loss of trust in a text might threaten their ability to emotionally invest in an on-screen relationship. The fact that the *Neighbours* fans felt that the producers were so 'cruel' and 'harsh' that they could suddenly write characters out of the narrative threatened their sense of ontological security in the show, and reduced the possibilities of fan

identification with ships. In examining these fans responses to the apparent decline of the show and its inability to offer avenues for identification, this case study thus links the fan practice of shipping to the issues of identity and ontological security so central to this thesis. Finally, my case study of *The West Wing* examined shippers who, initially, appeared to most clearly demonstrate traits typically associated with this fan practice such as mobilising specific interpretations of the text and clashing with fans with competing readings. However, again, I sought to move beyond merely examining shippers' interpretive practices towards understanding their emotional attachments; this time through fan reactions to romantic relationships on *TWW* as the show drew to a close. Thus, although prior work might have considered fan reactions when ships end on-screen, this thesis offers the first example of how shippers respond when their beloved fan text ceases in its entirety. The cessation of *TWW* thus offered a unique chance to relate fan discussions over identification with characters and ships to their ideas about genre, quality, and what constitutes 'proper' *West Wing*.

However, it could be argued that use of Giddensian theories of self-identity over-emphasises the 'presence' of the self, failing to account for "the texture of fan experience [...] – in favour of citable, quotable bits of fans' linguistic self-accounts" (Hills 2007b:152). To assume that fans can coherently trace links between their fan objects and their own lived experiences and sense of identity presumes a stable, fixed 'self' and may be accused of ignoring fans' more "dimly sensed half-graspings of their self-identities" (Hills 2007b:152). This emphasis upon the coherence and security of fan identity may result from my avoidance of pathologising fans as self-absent or as unable to rationally articulate the reasons for their fandom (Hills 2002:7). However, there is also a theoretical rebuttal to the potential argument that this thesis over-emphasises the presence of the self at the expense of the fluidity and fragmentation of fans' self-identities. Although brevity demands that my discussion of theories of the self is limited, I wish to argue that this thesis *has* allowed for the instability of fan identity.<sup>83</sup> Giddens himself notes that

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<sup>83</sup> See Adams (2003); Brown (1998); Burkitt (2008); Craib (1998); Elliott (2005); Grodin and Lindlof (1996); Levin (1992); Perry (2002); Shoemaker (1963) for more on various theories of the 'self' and 'self-identity'.

poststructuralist accounts of culture have led to the view of “the self in modern society [as] frail, brittle, fractured, fragmented” (Giddens 1991:169) and the very notion of reflexive self-narratives accounts for the readjustment and renarration of the self (see page 66). Furthermore, the self may “evolve over a lifetime; and [is] subject to injury” (Levin 1992:209) and contemporary theorists have argued that the self is now ‘diffused’ though a “multiplicity of [mediated] experiences and forms” (Longhurst 2007:118). Thus, although not directly engaging with poststructuralist or postmodernist definition of the self as flexible and decentred (Elliott 2005:2) or with queer theory’s account of the self as performative and fluid (Butler 1990), my conceptualisation of the self is clearly influenced by these ideas. In my suggestion that we view fans’ declarations about their self-identities and experiences as performative displays of their fandom which cannot be treated as transparent or ‘true’ (see page 114), I acknowledge that any sense of the fan self can only ever be partial or nominal. What is key here are the choices that fans make when they select which aspects of their identities to present to fellow fans (in online postings) and a researcher (in their questionnaires). Fans’ intertwining of their real-life experiences with fan objects to form self-narratives or their use of these to work through issues and emotions in their lives is performative (see Hills 2005:ix-xiii). Therefore, it is futile trying to access some ‘true’ fan self which never be fully known by fans themselves nor, therefore, by a researcher. What I have instead done in this thesis is treated fans’ comments as ‘texts’, which must be read “symptomatically [...] for what is behind the explicitly written” (Ang 1982:11). Furthermore, this thesis has frequently highlighted moments of instability and rupture in fans’ self-identities and ontological security, demonstrating an acknowledgement that any understanding of fans’ ‘selves’ must account for the constant processes of renegotiation of identity and self-narrative which fans engage in.

Indeed, the presence of such moments of insecurity and renegotiation highlights that potential threats to fans’ ontological security were navigated by fans in each of the case studies. Although these, variously, result from violation of the perceived rules or ideologies of a show (*Big Brother* and *Neighbours*) or from the permanent cessation of a programme (*The West Wing*), fan attempts to cope with these threats and to assimilate



them into their coherent self-narrative or identity are homologous across each fan community. It can be suggested, then, that the demonstration of fans' negotiation of self-identity and ontological security substantiates my theoretical proposition that fandom be viewed as forms of 'pure relationship' which engender such rewards. Furthermore, my work on the end of *The West Wing* and my suggestion that we view such fandom as 'post-object fandom' and non-continuing objects as 'dormant' fan objects is the first attempt to examine this period of transition in a fan's career (Crawford 2004). By identifying three broad discourses of reiteration, renegotiation, and rejection which fans might respond within, it is my hope that these can be developed beyond this specific case study and thesis, and will prove useful in examination of other fandoms such as music, sports, film, or celebrities.

However, perhaps surprisingly, given my emphasis upon fans' self-identities, a constraint of this research is that it does not account for the importance of gender, sexuality, age, ethnicity, and so on in relation to individual fan identities. This is not to imply that the Internet has levelled the playing field of identity (see pages 107-108) or that such factors have no impact upon fandom. Indeed, work by Baym (2000), Bury (2005), Clerc (1996), Herring *et al* (1995) and MacDonald (1998) on gender, Hamming (2001) and Hamner (2003) on sexuality, and Scodari (1998) on the impact of age in online communities clearly demonstrate that this is not the case. However, my lack of engagement with these issues is partly due to the specificities of online research in which the gender, age, sexuality and so on of online posters is near-impossible to substantiate. On a more theoretical level, it is perhaps Bourdieu and Giddens' own neglect of these issues that results in my usage of their work perpetuating the same omissions. Given his emphasis upon class as the main axis of distinction within society, Bourdieu remains relatively unconcerned with such factors and Giddens also fails to account for "fundamental lines of inequality, such as those connected with gender or ethnicity" (Giddens 1991:6, see also Anthias 1999). Thus, it can be argued that Giddens overlooks the varying levels of ontological security or anxiety experienced by "people in different social positions [...] [this] must surely be related, in complex ways, to divisions of class, gender, generation and ethnicity" (Moore 2005:142). This thesis' emphasis upon the key research questions

surrounding quality, cultural value, and fan community/hierarchy has meant that consideration of such divisions falls beyond the scope of this research. However, future work in this area may begin to interrogate how various cultural contexts influence the ways in which people deal with threats to their ontological security, consistently re-narrating their reflexive narratives of the self to maintain the delicate balance between anxiety and security (Craib 1997:357). For example, there may be some value in beginning to understand how male and female fans use their fan/object and fan/fan relationships differently and whether there are disparities or commonalities in the ways in which they use these to perform identity work or, indeed, whether they respond differently to threats to their sense of fan ontological security.

### **Quality, mainstream cults and power**

Whilst fans' negotiations of their self-identity and ontological security shared similarities across the case studies, the ways in which fans negotiated issues of distinction and cultural value were more divergent. Fans of *BB* were the least concerned with typical issues of quality and value, and their discussions were less centred around cultural opinions of the show or in making comparisons with other reality television programmes or genres. For these fans distinctions tend to be intra-textual, that is confined to the show itself, with fans making judgments within the programme regarding what constituted 'proper' *BB* and what made contestants 'worthy' of winning the show (see pages 153-157). In contrast, although the *Neighbours* fans were concerned with such fan-specific issues (e.g. the 'golden ages' of the show or the proper ideology of *Neighbours*) they also widened their discussions to make intra-generic distinctions regarding their expectations of the soap genre and to demarcate 'good' and 'bad' soaps. These fans acknowledged that to compare soap with genres such as drama was futile, given the disparities in production conditions and generic conventions, but they expected *Neighbours* to live up to their anticipations of the soap genre and the show's own prior standards (see page 181). In contrast, fans of *The West Wing* were the most concerned with making quality judgments which are akin to those made by networks, producers, and academics (see chapter two) and to notions of the "traditionally aesthetic" (McKee 2001: online). Fans frequently

aligned the show with ‘good’ television, situating it as unique and intelligent, and bemoaning the show’s apparent decline. Whilst these fans also made fan-specific distinctions (e.g. distinguishing between ‘good’ episodes written by Aaron Sorkin and ‘bad’ episodes by John Wells or Lawrence O’Donnell) it is in this case study that we can most clearly see coherence with the established definitions of quality television (see pages 225-228). Whilst, then, debates surrounding quality and cultural value necessarily vary between each case study, the presence of such distinctions across fan cultures suggests that such issues remain pertinent for fans of a range of genres. As I have argued in each empirical chapter, these discussions often reflect fans’ identity work, demonstrating their discursive strategies to position themselves as having investments in culturally valued (and, therefore, acceptable) media. It is, thus, crucial in further work on quality television to examine fans’ own distinctions and to relate their concerns with such issues to both issues of field and power and fan self-identity and ontological security.

However, another point of cohesion across all three case studies was the possibility of each of the texts I examined being considered as ‘mainstream cult’ television texts. As outlined in chapters one and two, the concept of mainstream cult has the potential to move debates over quality television away from rigid lists of textual traits or from nationally specific binaries and definitions (see page 42). Drawing on Matt Hills’ (2004) work on mainstream cult and on Catherine Johnson’s (2005) notion of ‘quality/cult’ texts, I sought to consider whether *Big Brother*, *Neighbours* and *The West Wing* might be imagined as shows which blurred the boundaries between mainstream and cult texts, and how this might have impacted upon fans’ responses to the shows. As Hills has argued, the “emphasis on cult = anti-mainstream neglects to consider how cult and mainstream status can intersect” (2006b:161) and, I would argue, how this might relate to issues of quality and cultural value. However, to begin to examine how certain programmes might be both mainstream and cult/niched allows an understanding of the ways in which fan practices, textual attributes, and subsidiary materials and para-texts might be working to construct shows as mainstream cult texts. Indeed, following Hills’ definition of mainstream cult texts as having a single auteur figure, a diffused and divided fan culture, and being dispersed across multiple media forums, it appears that each of my studied texts possess

some of these traits. All three of them have fandoms which have divided along the lines of favoured characters, contestants or onscreen couples and whose online fan communities engaged in debates over each of these. However, only *TWW* has an authorial figure (Aaron Sorkin) who fans focused their discussions on, given the non-authored status of both *BB* (which is not scripted in the same fashion as fictional television and is run by producers) and *Neighbours* (which fans acknowledged was created by a collective which they referred to as The Powers That Be). Given this, it cannot be argued that fans of *BB* or *Neighbours* draw on the discourse of autism to attempt to elevate these shows to the status of 'quality television' in the way in which Hills argues fans of mainstream cult shows might do. Indeed, as illustrated in these two case studies, fans were blatantly aware of the apparently lowbrow status of the shows and, instead of attempting to make a case for the shows as quality television, they made intra-generic or inter-generic distinctions about the shows in comparison to other examples of the genre or to previous eras of the shows themselves. Similarly, not all of the programmes were dispersed across other media forms through tie-ins such as books and so on. The most clear example of this occurred in the *Big Brother* fandom I examined for, as I have suggested (see page 92), to speak of a singular *BB* text is futile given its existence on multiple channels, the Internet, its accompanying sister shows, and its dissemination in other media forms. However, although *TWW* and *Neighbours* have some tie-in products (for example, *Neighbours* DVDs, CD's and books exist and *TWW* has some official companion books) they do not appear to be dispersed in quite the same way. Therefore, not all of my studied texts fulfill each of the criteria that Hills (2004) establishes as characteristic of mainstream cult texts.

However, there is one relevant point of coherence across each of the case studies which, I argue, can be used to extend Hills' definition of what constitutes the mainstream cult text. As I have suggested, the scheduling of each of the shows I examined has an impact upon how the programme is constructed and on how broadcasters are using the shows to position themselves in certain ways. For example, *Big Brother* – with its almost constant schedule presence – functions as both a mainstream text via the airing of the daily highlights show and eviction programmes on Channel Four, but also acts as niche

programming via the live feed and subsidiary shows which air on digital channels such as E4. Thus, *BB* straddles both the mainstream and the cult, given its dual status as something which many a mass audience might watch on the main channel but which might attract a more dedicated and hard-core following who watch the live streaming on the smaller digital channels. Similarly, *TWW* has been used by Channel 4 and, latterly, More4 to suggest that the show is for intelligent audiences who are determined to seek out and find this 'quality' programme (see page 225). As I have argued in chapter seven, *TWW* was screened by Channel 4 in late-night slots before it was moved to its digital channel More4. Thus, whilst in America the show was clearly a mainstream text which was screened in prime-time on the prominent NBC channel, once the programme was imported into the UK, its scheduling position rendered it more obscure and as more of a 'cult' text. Hills (2006b) and Harrington and Bielby (2005c) have argued that the mainstream or cult status of programmes can alter depending upon various cultural contexts and it appears that, whilst the text of *TWW* still possesses typical textual traits of quality TV, once it is screened in a different context, it can be considered as a potential mainstream cult text. Finally, *Neighbours* can also be considered to function as a mainstream cult text in certain ways. However, this is primarily due to its audience reception and the ways in which it might be treated as a cult text due to the presence of potential 'subcultural celebrities' (Hills 2004b) and its precarious cultural status. However, its scheduling also has an impact here as, given its broadcast times of lunchtime and early evening, it has been widely assumed to appeal to housewives and students (Ferguson 2007: online). Thus, *Neighbours* acts as a mainstream text which is broadcast on popular channels (firstly BBC1 and now Channel Five) but, given its appeal to specific types of imagined audience and its subcultural appeal, it might also function as a mainstream cult text in these ways.

Indeed, all three of the texts I examined can be thought of as mainstream cult texts due to their broadcasting status and the ways in which their position as both mainstream and niche programmes impacts upon the surrounding fandom. It is my suggestion that, in addition to Hills' (2004) proposed definition of mainstream cult, we can add the impact of scheduling to our concept of what constitutes a mainstream cult text. This argues that,

in addition to mainstream cult status being dependent upon fan practices (e.g. sub-subcultures or splitting of fandoms), markers of quality (e.g. authorship), and para-texts, it is also contingent on the ways in which shows are positioned within the television landscape. For example, shows can be both mainstream and niched or cult depending on their dual positioning (e.g. *Big Brother*), may be considered mainstream in one cultural or national context but a more cultish text in another (e.g. *The West Wing*) or may be considered cultish due to the potential subcultural distinctions within the fandom which surrounds them (e.g. *Neighbours*).

### **Distinctions: 'Proper' fans and fan/producer interactions**

However, in addition to issues of quality and the intersections between mainstream and cult texts, questions of power and capital also emerged in each case study although these were, again, subject to the nuances of each fan community. As argued above, this research has emphasised the moments of tension and fissure which emerge in each of the seemingly incongruent case studies. This therefore enables a logical theorisation of fans' negotiation of their relationships with fellow fans and the producers or creators of their favoured shows.

Firstly, there were clear distinctions made in each online fandom regarding fellow fans, particularly over who was a 'proper' fan and over the forms of fan behaviour which were deemed appropriate. For example, within the *Big Brother* community, fans who were imagined to support relationships between the housemates were devalued, assumed to want to watch on-screen sex and to 'fancy' the male housemates (see page 142). Similarly, there was a discomfort with apparently childish fans who were often associated with the housemate Nikki and these fans were referred to as 'Pink Nokia voters' and the "'silly little girl" Nikki fanbase"' (see page 142). Such fans are characterised as being immature and are devalued as they are discursively constructed as both feminised and as childish. These discourses of devaluation are not unique to *BB* fandom and fan discomfort with immature or childish fans can be seen, for example, in *Star Wars* fans' discussions of the character of Jar Jar Binks (Brooker 2002; Hills 2003) whilst (typically

male) fan dismissal of those who display libidinal attraction to characters can be seen in fandoms surrounding *Quantum Leap* (MacDonald 1998), Leonardo diCaprio (Nash and Lahti 1999) and *Buffy* actor James Marsters (Hills and Williams 2005). *TWW* fans also made similar judgements, devaluing the ‘feminised’ shippers of the onscreen Josh/Donna romance and suggesting that those who supported it were wrongly emphasising personal storylines over political ones (see page 214). In addition to these generic distinctions (e.g. fans who like the J/D romance are associated with soap opera), fans also devalued shippers by implying, variously, that the ship violated ethical and moral boundaries, was boring, or was disgusting (see page 215). These discourses clearly attempt to enforce specific or devalue certain textual readings and also contain value judgements about those who support the J/D romance (i.e., they too are ethically confused or tedious).

Distinctions over ‘proper’ fan behaviour are also made by *Neighbours* fans, although these discussions are far less vitriolic in tone than those of the *BB* or *TWW* fans. This is partially due to the collective fan disputes with the producers/writers of the show which these fans were engaged in, resulting in their distinctions being made regarding the show itself, rather than one another. That said, there were a few instances which suggested distinctions regarding proper fans, particularly when fans were discussing their long-standing fandom of the show. Whilst implicit, the suggestion here is that long-term fans are privileged over newer viewers given the increased subcultural knowledge and capital which they can draw upon in their interpretations of the show. What each of these examples indicates is that fans’ devaluing of one another and the discourses they employ in order to circulate and enforce notions of proper or appropriate fan behaviour are linked to issues of self-identity. In dismissing other fans as, for example, immature, feminised or boring, fans not only work to enforce their specific textual interpretations as dominant, but also construct themselves in opposition to these traits. Thus, these fans can continue to position themselves in certain ways and to police the boundaries of the interpretations that ‘proper’ fans make and the practices they engage in. They are, therefore, able to make bids for ‘discursive power’ (Tulloch 1995) and to “establish and control an important reading formation” for fellow fans (Tulloch 1995:150). Given my argument that such power equates with Bourdieuan forms of subcultural, social and symbolic power, it can be suggested here that fan attempts to devalue the interpretations and

behaviours of other fans relate to the battles over capital, power, and prestige and the hierarchies which often characterise fan cultures (see pages 9-10).

It is also worth noting that, despite arguing for a consideration of the importance of both community and hierarchy in fan studies, the thesis does appear to have highlighted fan clashes and issues of hierarchy at the expense of community. Indeed, this call for recognition of the dualism of community and hierarchy has been complicated by my own empirical data which appears to demonstrate that the issue of power and hierarchy remains of importance to fans. In this sense, the study functions in some ways as an example of the Bourdieuan approaches to fandom which were critiqued in the introduction although, I would argue, that my use of his concepts of capital and distinction in tandem with his ideas of field and *illusio* actually go further than previous studies which draw on ideas of capital in isolation from Bourdieu's wider theories. Furthermore, whilst hierarchical fandom may be foregrounded each empirical chapter also discusses fan community in different ways, whether this is the ways in which community is held as an ideal for the fandom (e.g. *Big Brother*), how fans bond together even as their fan object holds less appeal to them (e.g. *Neighbours*), or the ways in which community is negotiated when fan objects come to an end (e.g. *TWW*). Thus whilst Bourdieuan theory informs the thesis and issues of hierarchy and power emerge in each case study, I have also aimed to consider fan community and how it is constructed and negotiated across the various fan sites I examined.

However, fans across each case study also engaged in battles over their fan objects with the producers/writers of the shows. Although such clashes have been examined within fan studies, prior work has largely failed to move beyond asserting that these relationships are discursive battles over 'ownership' of the text (see pages 37-38). Indeed, as argued in chapter two, fans often refuse to accept unwelcome on-screen events or production decisions (Jenkins 1992:24), venting their anger and frustration to producers. However, despite their emotional attachments and the argument that the Internet has led to genuinely reciprocal fan/producer relationships, fans have little power over their fan objects (Gwenllian-Jones 2003). Their only power is discursive; the ability to control the interpretations and reading formations of the fan community (Tulloch 1995). Producers



also simultaneously encourage *and* deny the impact of fan protests and campaigns. Such actions, which I termed ‘authorial duality’ (see page 208), mean that previous examinations of fan/producer relationships have rarely moved beyond consideration of such discursive battles and have failed to locate these struggles (and any associated capital) within the specific broadcasting field. Thus, discursive conflicts over interpretation with other fans are present in all of my empirical studies but so are fans’ divisions with the producers of the shows they love. For *BB* fans, the point of contention is the apparent breaking of the show’s fundamental rules; *Neighbours* fans object to the apparent violation of the shows’ ideology and the denigration of long-term fans; whilst *The West Wing* fans object that new episodes tarnished the show by emphasising newer characters at the expense of the original cast. However, whilst such debates are widespread in fan cultures, this thesis uniquely suggests that such battles over interpretation, intention, or violation of the ideologies of a show can be elucidated via Bourdieu’s field theory. I argue that such clashes are indicative of agents (i.e. fans and producers) occupying positions within the broadcasting field which they seek to change or defend. It could be suggested that such an emphasis on fan disagreement and disappointment with texts ignores the views of those who remain satisfied with their fan objects. However, it is the fact that fans are so emotionally invested in their fandoms which leads them to question those aspects with which they are unhappy. Furthermore, given my interest in fan distinctions regarding the ‘true’ or ‘proper’ show, “the tension between the producer’s conception and the fan’s conception of the series are most visible at moments of friction or dispute” (Jenkins 1992:132). Threats to fans’ ontological security can, by definition, be most clearly seen when trust in their fan objects or in those who create them are threatened by displeasing narrative developments or interactions. It is, thus, my suggestion that, in order to move away from restrictive theories of fan/producer relationships which emphasise discursive power and models which rely upon fan resistance, the use of field theory enables us to better understand these conflicts as battles over capital, prestige, and position (see pages 37-38).

One final comment here; there may be an element of familiarity to my discussions of fan/producer relationships; perhaps a sense that fan studies has not moved beyond these

issues which were being discussed almost twenty years ago in Jenkins' *Textual Poachers* (1992). Despite this, as my empirical data makes clear, these discussions remain important to the fan communities I examined and to ignore these pressing fan debates as a result of an academic impetus to move beyond such issues seems, to me, to be ethically contentious. To do so is reflective of what Nancy Baym cautions against; the selection of online cases "that confirm researcher beliefs, creating a reflection of researcher assumptions rather than a valid (if necessarily incomplete) story of a community" (Baym 2000:25). As long as clashes with producers and writers continue to be relevant for fans themselves it is my argument that fan studies must address them and persist in finding new ways to understand why these conflicts continue to occur. It is also pertinent to maintain an interest in why such matters remain crucial for fans and it is my contention that theorising fan/producer relationships through Bourdieu's field theory (as this thesis uniquely does) allows for new understandings of the fierce clashes between agents within the field of broadcasting which both producers and fans belong to.

### **What's next?**

Having offered a critical over-view of the key findings of this thesis I wish, finally, to conclude by suggesting some possibilities for future research into fan cultures. Firstly, despite the sector model of fandom set up in my literature review (see appendix two), this thesis focuses solely on ready-made groups of Internet fans, who can be assumed to already possess certain levels of fan social and subcultural capital as they are interested enough in their fan objects to seek out information and fellow fans online. A combination of on-line and off-line methods was unworkable in this research due to temporal and economic constraints, as well as my specific research interest in online fan communities. However, whilst access to lone fans remains problematic given their isolated nature<sup>84</sup> and contact with high-level or executive fans (who have 'impure' fan/object relationships) is unlikely given their high institutional position, it is my hope that future research can employ a wider range of methods to access fans in each of the sectors established in this

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<sup>84</sup> This lack of access is similar to that experienced by online researchers who try to recruit 'lurkers' for research (Hine 2000:155, although see Nonnecke and Preece 2001).

thesis (see pages 84-86). Alongside such future academic investigations into lone or isolated fans I also recommend further work on the notion of 'potential fan capital' (see pages 76-78). As argued in chapter three, fans who do not share their knowledge with fellow fans are presumed to possess 'potential subcultural capital' which does not function as 'proper' capital until it is "activated strategically in the present" (Robbins 1991:35). It is my contention that development of this concept and empirical investigation of its function in future research may provide fan studies with an approach that facilitates ongoing examination of those whose fan experiences and practices fall outside the realm of 'typical' fandom. The development of such a concept enables continuation of the dual emphases upon fan attachments and capital and power advanced in this thesis and also contributes to understandings of fandom as existing within the broadcasting sub-field within the field of cultural production (see appendix one).

The concept of field also intersects with my own position in relation to this research and, given my negotiation of my identity as a scholar-fan who has an interest in each of the programmes examined, I have been forced to question my own investments in this research. I cannot proclaim to have conducted this research in an objective vacuum, disconnected from my own biography (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995:16) or the power structures of the very 'fields' that I am analysing. Indeed, this research is, like the discourses deployed by the fans under examination, a way for me to articulate a desirable identity and self-narrative and to participate within the fields of academia and cultural production (within the subfield of the broadcasting field);

[The] process of interpretation is for both [fans and academics] an avenue for making statements about their own identity and positioning within their respective communities, for both it is a site of pleasure (and a certain amount of power) (Merrick 1997:55).

I was also conscious of the ways in which my fandom impacted upon my theoretical and empirical interpretations (see pages 24-26). My lack of active involvement in any cohesive fan community despite my often intense personal attachments to certain texts inspired my interest in the ways in which fan objects come to have significant personal

meaning for fans. However, I have been prompted to consider the possibility that my academic work itself renders extraneous any desire to discuss my fan objects with other fans as I am able to think through issues or questions regarding these texts via my research, rather than engaging more informally with fellow fans. Despite the increased discussion of fan-scholars and scholar-fans (Hills 2002) the possibility of academic work actually supplanting fan discussion has yet to be considered. However, I suggest that this may be another fruitful avenue for future research on fandom, given its consistent interest in the ways in which academic/fan identities intersect and connect in intriguing ways.

I also remain mindful of the accusation that such attempts to theorise fans, particularly through a conceptual tool such as the 'pure relationship', appear to place me, as a researcher, in a position of power outside of those being studied, able to identify and articulate behaviours which fans themselves remain unaware of. Returning to Bourdieu's concepts of field and *illusio* (see pages 30-32), it may appear that I am implying that, as a researcher, I can step outside of the field; "apprehend[ing] [it] from the outside, from the point of view of the impartial spectator, who invests nothing in the game or its stakes" (Bourdieu cited in Dreyfus and Rabinow 1999:90). However, it remains possible to be aware of the rules of the 'game' or field whilst continuing to be inside it; "cultural distinctions can be accrued by analysing one's own game while still remaining *sufficiently* within its terms" (Hills 2002:55). Thus, the fact that I remain mindful of my own position within the academic field (as a potential consecrating agent within the broadcasting field) does not preclude me from continuing to accumulate distinction and capital within it. Thus, it should not be supposed that my attempts here to understand and theorise fans result from any imagined 'objective' position outside of the fields under examination. Nor should the discussions of *illusio* and field in this thesis be seen as threatening to characterise fans as foolish or fallacious. Indeed "to identify the *illusio* belonging to a particular field is not to criticize that field or the players in it. It is not to say that agents are deluded" (Crossley 2004:159). Rather the 'metaphor' of fan pure relationships, like Bourdieu's economic metaphor of 'games' (Gershuny 2000:84), is intended to allow theoretical conceptualisation of fan practices in a way which accounts for the accounts for the dualism of intense emotional attachments and issues of power and

hierarchy which are very real within fan cultures. Furthermore, it has not been my intention in this work to pathologise fans “as obsessive, freakish, hysterical, infantile and regressive” (Hills 2007c:459) or to suggest that fandom is a deviant behaviour which fans engage in to compensate for their lack of real relationships or ontological security in their everyday lives. Instead, as I hope I have made clear throughout, it is the very basic trust or ontological security developed in early childhood and maintained throughout their lives that ensures that fans are able to deal with changes to their fan objects or fan/fan relationships and to rework their identities and self-narratives accordingly. Thus, rather than suggesting that it is solely fandom which offers such security, it is my argument that fandom may contribute to it much as other routine aspects of the media, such as the news, do in everyday life (Moore 2005; Silverstone 1994) (see page 62).

It is also relevant at this juncture to reiterate that this thesis makes no comprehensive generalisations about fan practices and the ways in which fans draw upon their fandom to fashion their self-identities. Nor is it my intention to present a complete theory or ‘grand narrative’ of fandom – clearly there is much more work to be done. Rather, I have tried to demonstrate, via an approach that takes seriously the various contradictions of fandom, that the importance of fan/object and fan/fan relationships to individuals’ self-identity and ontological security should be examined alongside issues of community, hierarchy, and power within fan studies. It is only via further empirical research into a range of fan cultures (e.g. sports, music, or celebrity fandom) that we may be able to draw broader conclusions regarding the theoretical framework I have proposed in this thesis. This work is intended to supplement and advance previous and ongoing research into fan communities and hierarchies, self-identity, and fan/object and fan/fan attachments. Furthermore, in the wider general context of media studies, ongoing research into fan cultures continues to be relevant as it,

allows us to explore some of the key mechanisms through which we interact with the mediated world at the heart of our social, political, and cultural realities and identities [...] [and enables] understanding of how we form emotional bonds with ourselves and others in a modern, mediated world (Gray *et al* 2007:10).

I wish to conclude, finally, by positing that future work on fans should take care to acknowledge that fan groups are not entirely disparate, separate entities and that they do share common discourses, practices, and attitudes. The confluence of fan discourses across all three of my case studies demonstrates that “quite different subcultures can share deep similarities in their subject-forming dynamics” (Drew 2006:377). If this thesis makes a methodological recommendation, let it be that fan studies heeds the call for increased cross-comparative multi-site research in order to enable investigation of points of comparison or divergence across seemingly disparate fan cultures. Only then can we more fully understand the complex and often conflicting ways in which fan identity is articulated and performed within a contemporary society which has, for the most part, begun to accept fan practices as part of everyday life for many people. That is not to say that fandom is a cohesive, utopian site or that fan identity is stable and fixed. Fandom continues to be, as this thesis has demonstrated, demarcated by the tensions between community and hierarchy, and internal individual identity and external factors, along with discursive struggles regarding who is a fan and what the ‘real’ or ‘proper’ fan object ‘should’ be. Thus, whilst as I asserted in the introduction to this thesis, the struggle to place fan studies on the cultural studies agenda has certainly been won, battles over what constitutes ‘fandom’ continue to rage, both within fan cultures and the academy itself.

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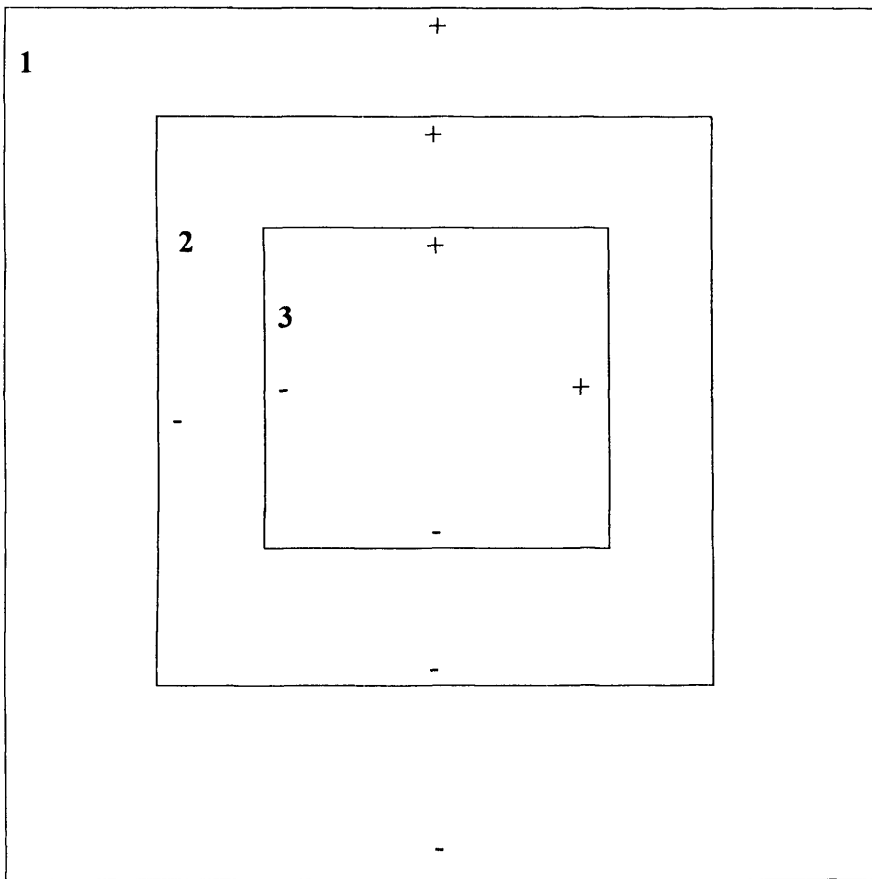
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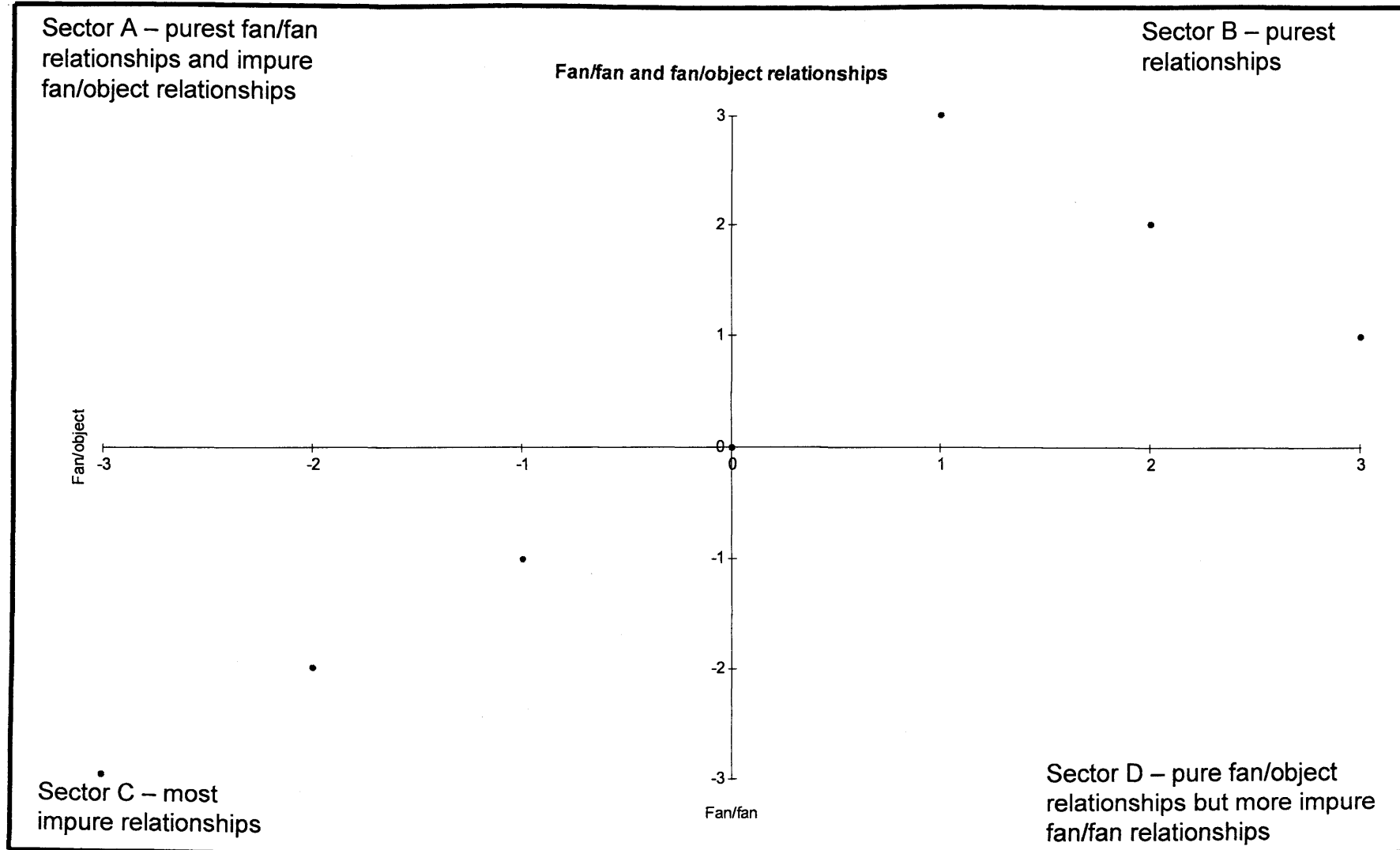
## **Appendices**

**Appendix 1 –**  
**Diagram of the broadcasting field within the field of cultural production**

Diagram of the broadcasting field (3) contained within the field of cultural production (2), within the field of power (1). (This figure is based on Bourdieu's own conceptualisation of the literary and artistic field, as detailed in Bourdieu 1993:38).



**Appendix 2 – Multi-dimensional continuum of fan sectors**



**Appendix 2**  
**Multi-dimensional continuum of fan sectors**

**Fan sector key**

Fan/fan (Y axis)	<u>Fan/object (X axis)</u>
3 Non-fan	3 Non-fan
2 Isolated	2 Isolated
1 Interested	1 Interested
-1 Invested	-1 Invested
-2 Dedicated	-2 Dedicated
-3 Official	-3 Intimate/Official

**Appendix 3**  
**Table of types of fan according to sector**

	<b>A – Fan based</b>	<b>B - Pure</b>	<b>C – Impure</b>	<b>D – Object based</b>
<b>Level of fan/fan purity</b>	Pure	Pure	Impure	Impure
<b>Level of fan/object purity</b>	Impure	Pure	Impure	Pure
<b>Social capital</b>	Low	Low	High	High
<b>Subcultural capital</b>	High	Low	High	Low
<b>Symbolic capital (e.g. prestige, reputation)</b>	Low	Low	High	High
<b>Economic reward</b>	Low	Low	High	High
<b>Examples</b>	Children, Those who work on fan objects	General audience, Children	Creators of objects, Executive/big name fans	Post-object fans, Those who work on or for fan objects

## **Appendix 4**

### **Statement for Participants in Research**

I am interested in the ways in which people interact within on-line fan communities, and am researching the ways in which people form relationships with other fans, and how they discuss their chosen fan objects.

Your input into this research is greatly appreciated, and confidentiality and anonymity is assured.

By participating in this research you are indicating that you understand and accept the following --

- This research is undertaken as part of a PhD research project but versions of this work may be published in journals, books or any other media, or may be presented orally at conferences and thus your responses may enter the public domain.
- Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary.
- You may withdraw participation without explanation at any point in the carrying out and writing up of the research.
- If so, you may request that any previous responses from yourself be removed from the research and not referred to in any context.
- Any information given will be treated as strictly confidential.
- Your identity will be kept anonymous in the printed research and all identifying information will be changed to protect you.
- You will be assigned a pseudonym which will remain constant throughout the research.
- You are under no obligation to answer any questions you do not wish to, and may omit answering without explanation.
- Further information about the research is available at your request.
- Versions of completed research are available at your request.



**Appendix 5**  
**Copies of requests to moderators and online postings**

**Copy of request to moderators of online boards and forums**

Hi,

You probably get emails like this all the time but I am a researcher based at Cardiff University in the UK, and I'm investigating various online fandoms as part of my PhD thesis. I am particularly interested in considering fans of [insert show title]. I am thus requesting your permission to post in the Drama forum asking interested posters to follow a link and complete a short email questionnaire. If it is convenient, I was also wondering if it is possible for you to make my request a 'pinned' thread to ensure that it doesn't get lost in the high volume of postings or even to post my request yourself. Anyone who responds will be kept anonymous and anyone who participates will be able to view versions of my work and offer feedback.

Further information about me and my research can be found online at [http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/jomec/en/degrees/154/87.html?staff\\_id=89&n=Rebecca+Williams](http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/jomec/en/degrees/154/87.html?staff_id=89&n=Rebecca+Williams)

I hope you will be able to co-operate with my project, and I look forward to a response from you regarding this matter.

Best wishes,

Rebecca Williams  
Cardiff University, UK.

## Copy of online postings

Hi all,

The head admin of the board has very kindly given me permission to post here, asking for some of you to help me out with some research I'm doing into online fandom as part of my PhD thesis. I'm a researcher based at Cardiff University and I'm particularly interested in considering fans of *Neighbours/ The West Wing/ Big Brother*. Further information about me and my research can be found online at [http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/jomec/en/degrees/154/87.html?staff\\_id=89&n=Rebecca+Williams](http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/jomec/en/degrees/154/87.html?staff_id=89&n=Rebecca+Williams)

Anyone who responds will be kept anonymous and anyone who participates will be able to view versions of my work and offer feedback, to ensure that the fandom is not misrepresented in any way.

If you're interested in helping me out on this project please visit email me at [email address removed] for more information. I'd be enormously grateful for any help you guys could give me!

Rebecca.

**Copy of email sent to questionnaire respondents**

Hi

Thanks very much for agreeing to help me out - it is much appreciated. There are quite a lot of questions but I hope you will enjoy answering them!

Please also read the attached Statement for Participants in Research document which explains a little more about how the information you give me will be used. I look forward to receiving your replies very soon.

Thanks again :-)

Rebecca.

PS- Please feel free to pass this onto anyone else who you think may be interested.

**Copy of follow-up email sent to questionnaire respondents**

Hi again

Thanks so much to everyone who has volunteered to help me out so far. I'm very grateful. A lot of people have been in touch wanting to know specifically what the research entails. Basically, I will email you a list of 30 questions which you can either email back to me or PM to me via the site. They take between 10-15 minutes to complete, depending on how much detail you want to go into. So, if anyone is reading this who wasn't sure if they had the time to help out, maybe this will prompt you to get in touch.

Thanks again,

Rebecca.

**Appendix 6**  
**Copies of online questionnaires**

**Online questionnaire for Big Brother**

Thank you very much for agreeing to help me in my research on *Big Brother*. Please complete this questionnaire at your earliest convenience and email it back to me. Please also take the time to read the attached Statement For Participants in Research as by participating in this research you are indicating that you understand and accept what your replies will be used for. Please be aware that the focus of this research is on the current series of *BBUK* but feel free to discuss experiences in previous series if you feel they help you to answer the questions.

I'm interested in anything you may write so please feel free to answer as much, or as little, of the questionnaire as you want. Once again, all replies will be treated in the strictest confidence and no identifiable names or pseudonyms will be used in the writing up of the research.

I look forward to reading your replies very soon!

1. Can you tell me a little about how you first came to be a fan of *Big Brother* (for example, have you watched any previous series)?
2. How do you watch the show (for example, do you watch the daily highlights show on C4, live streaming on E4, BBLB, BBBB or BBBM on E4?)
3. Have you made any purchases related to the show (e.g. DVD's, books or other merchandise (t-shirts, mugs etc.)?)
4. Have you ever attended any events related to *Big Brother* such as eviction nights, personal appearances by housemates, book signings or other events?
5. Have you ever auditioned for the show? If so, please tell me a little about this.
6. Can you describe for me if you have met any of the stars or production personnel involved in the show or worked for the show in any official capacity?
7. What do you most enjoy about *BB* (for example, particular contestants, the 'reality' element, the 'liveness' of the show, the regularity of nominations and evictions, etc.)?
8. How do you feel about housemates who appear to be playing a game on the show?

9. How do you feel about the 'romantic' relationships that often develop on the show (e.g. Grace/Mikey, Michelle/ Stewart, Helen/Paul etc.)?
10. How does your support or dislike for these couples affect your viewing of the show?
11. Do you try to find out what twists the producers have planned in advance (e.g. new contestants, surprise evictions etc) Why/why not?
12. Do you feel that knowing or not knowing about these twists affects your viewing in any ways? If so, please give examples.
13. Can you describe for me how you interact with other fans, either online (e.g. lurking or posting at message boards, moderating or running sites or forums) and/or off-line (e.g. talking to friends about the show, attending evictions or other *BB* related events such as book signings or nightclub appearances).
14. If you lurk or post online, please describe a little about the forums you visit and how you came to be involved with these sites.
15. If you are a lurker, can you describe for me the reasons why you do not post.
16. Do you feel that the term 'community' fits these particular online groups and why/why not?
17. How important are these online spaces to your fandom of *BB*??
18. Have you formed relationships with any other posters, either friendships or romantic attachments?
19. If you could know more about the show or know more people who liked the show, which would you choose and why?
20. Has your involvement with online community kept you watching the show even if it became less enjoyable (e.g. with contestants you disliked or series that were dull)? If so please give examples.
21. Who are your favourite contestants from the current series and why?
22. Do you feel that you are similar to particular contestants/relationships in the current series? If so, who, and why?
23. Have you ever felt you have been in a similar situation to any *Big Brother* contestants or 'storylines'? If so, please describe this.

24. Do you feel that there are any divisions within *BB* fandom you are a part of? (E.g. divisions between those who favour certain contestants?)
25. Can you describe what you imagine the typical *BB* fan to be like?
26. How would you respond to critics who cannot see the appeal of *Big Brother* (e.g. those who describe it as cheap, trashy etc.)?
27. As *BB* is only on for a certain number of weeks, how do you feel when the show finishes?
28. Do you continue with your fandom of the show and if so, how do you continue to participate in this fandom (e.g. visiting forums, watching and discussing Celebrity *BB* etc.)?
29. Do you have any major involvement with fandoms other than *BB* and, if so, please give examples.
30. Can you see any similarities between these fandoms?
31. What is your age?
32. Where are you located (e.g. county/country)?
33. Are you male or female?
34. What is your occupation?
35. Where did you find the link to this survey?

Once again, **MANY THANKS** for your help!

### Online questionnaire for *Neighbours*

Thank you very much for agreeing to help me in my research on *Neighbours*. Please complete this questionnaire at your earliest convenience and email it back to me. Please also take the time to read the attached Statement For Participants in Research. By participating in this research you are indicating that you understand what your replies will be used for.

I'm interested in anything you may write so please feel free to answer as much, or as little, of the questionnaire as you want. Once again, all replies will be treated in the strictest confidence and no identifiable names or pseudonyms will be used in the writing up of the research.

I look forward to reading your replies very soon!

36. Can you tell me a little about how you first came to be a fan of *Neighbours*?
37. Which aspects of *Neighbours* are you most attracted to?
38. How do you participate in your fandom of the show (for example, do you tape the show for repeated viewing, purchase DVD's or other merchandise?)
39. Have you ever visited, or would you like to visit Ramsay Street, taken a *Neighbours* Tour, or attended a *Neighbours* Night in Australia? If so, can you tell me a little about this?
40. Can you describe for me if you have attended any events featuring actors from the show, such as seeing them perform in pantomimes or plays, playing gigs or attending any other events?
41. How important are the characters to your enjoyment of the show?
42. How do you feel about the romantic relationships on the show (e.g. Karl/Susan, Max/Steph etc)?
43. Have you ever actively participated in fandom related to 'shipping' of this/these couples? If so, how?
44. Do you read spoilers for the show and why/why not?
45. Do you feel that your status as spoiled/unspoiled affects your fandom in any ways? If so, please give examples.

46. Can you describe for me whether you interact with other fans, either online (e.g. lurking or posting at message boards) and/or off-line (e.g. talking to family or friends who also watch the show).
47. If you read online message boards but do not contribute, can you describe for me the reasons why you choose not to post.
48. If you lurk or post online, please describe a little about the forums you visit and how you came to be involved with these sites.
49. Do you feel that the term 'community' fits the online groups that you visit and why/why not?
50. Have you formed relationships with any other posters, either friendships or romantic attachments?
51. If you could know more about *Neighbours* or know more people who liked the show, which would you choose and why?
52. Has your involvement with online community kept you watching the show even if it became less enjoyable (e.g. after seasons you disliked or when characters you liked left the show)? If so please give examples.
53. Have you ever felt that you are similar to a particular character/relationship in the show? If so, please describe this.
54. Have you ever felt you have been in a similar situation to any *Neighbours* characters or storylines? If so, please describe this.
55. Do you feel that there are any divisions within *Neighbours* fandom you are a part of? (E.g. are there any divisions between those who like or dislike particular characters or 'ships', or those who prefer the older episodes to the newer ones?)
56. Can you describe what you imagine the typical *Neighbours* fan to be like?
57. Have you ever felt the need to defend your fandom of *Neighbours* to those who may dismiss it as 'rubbish' or who may question your viewing of it?
58. What shows, if any, do you think *Neighbours* is similar to?
59. Have you had any involvement in fandoms before *Neighbours*? If so, please give examples.
60. Can you see any similarities between your *Neighbours* fandom and any other fandoms you may have been involved in?



61. What is your age?
62. Where are you located (e.g. state/county, country)?
63. Are you male or female?
64. What is your occupation?
65. Where did you find the link to this survey?

Once again, **MANY THANKS** for your help!

## Online questionnaire for TWW

Thank you very much for agreeing to help me in my research on *The West Wing*. Please complete this questionnaire at your earliest convenience and email it back to me. Please also take the time to read the attached Statement For Participants in Research. By participating in this research you are indicating that you understand what your replies will be used for. I'm interested in anything you may write so please feel free to answer as much, or as little, of the questionnaire as you want. Once again, all replies will be treated in the strictest confidence and no identifiable names or pseudonyms will be used in the writing up of the research. I look forward to reading your replies very soon!

66. Can you tell me a little about how you first got involved with the show?
67. Which aspects of *The West Wing* are you most attracted to?
68. How do you participate in your fandom of the show (for example, do you tape the show for repeated viewing, purchase DVD's or other merchandise, attend *West Wing* related events such as conventions or signings, run a website etc.)?
69. What are your main point(s) of engagement with the show (for example, specific characters/relationships/political interest)?
70. How do you feel about the romantic relationships on the show (e.g. Josh/Donna, Charlie/Zoe, CJ/Danny)?
71. Have you ever actively participated in fandom related to 'shipping' of this/these couples? If so, how?
72. Do you read spoilers for the show? Why/why not?
73. Do you feel that your status as spoiled/unspoiled affects your fandom in any ways? If so, please give examples.
74. Can you describe for me how you interact with other fans, either online (e.g. lurking or posting at message boards) and/or off-line (e.g. at conventions or other *West Wing* related events).
75. If you are a lurker, can you describe for me the reasons why you do not post.
76. Are you involved in the *West Wing* forums at the Television Without Pity site?
77. Do you feel that the term 'community' fits the online groups that you visit and why/why not?
78. How important is this online space to your fandom of *The West Wing*?

79. Have you formed relationships with any other posters, either friendships or romantic attachments?
80. If you could know more about the show or know more people who liked the show, which would you choose and why?
81. Has your involvement with online community kept you watching the show even if it became less enjoyable (e.g. in seasons you disliked)? If so please give examples.
82. Have you ever felt that you are similar to a particular character/relationship in the show? If so, please describe this.
83. Have you ever felt you have been in a similar situation to any *West Wing* characters or storylines? If so, please describe this.
84. Do you feel that there are any divisions within *The West Wing* fandom you are a part of? (E.g. are there any divisions between those who favor pre or post-Sorkin era episodes or any between J/D and non-J/D shippers?)
85. Can you describe what you imagine the typical *West Wing* fan to be like?
86. What is your reaction to the end of the show?
87. What events or issues were you most keen to see resolved before the end of the show and why?
88. Do you imagine you will continue with your fandom of the show after its finale?
89. If so, how will you continue to participate in this fandom (e.g. will you continue to visit *West Wing* forums, continue to re-watch DVDs, etc.)?
90. Would you describe yourself as a fan of Aaron Sorkin's work in general and if so, how do you express this fandom (e.g. watching or discussing *Sports Night*, the forthcoming *Studio 60* etc.)?
91. What shows, if any, do you think *West Wing* is similar to?
92. Have you had any major involvement in fandoms before *The West Wing*? If so, please give examples.
93. Can you see any similarities between your *West Wing* fandom and any other fandoms you may have been involved in?
94. What is your age?
95. Where are you located (e.g. state/county, country)?

96. Are you male or female?
97. What is your occupation?
98. Where did you find the link to this survey?

**Appendix seven**  
**Online links to threads and message boards**

**Big Brother**

May 24 2006

<http://www.bbgossip.com/comments.asp?art=15044>

May 31 2006

<http://www.bbgossip.com/comments.asp?art=15327>

June 2 2006

<http://www.bbgossip.com/comments.asp?art=15426>

June 6 2006

<http://www.bbgossip.com/comments.asp?art=15601>

June 9 2006

<http://www.bbgossip.com/comments.asp?art=15732>

June 12 2006

<http://www.bbgossip.com/comments.asp?art=15863>

June 16 2006

<http://www.bbgossip.com/comments.asp?art=16030>

June 20 2006

<http://www.bbgossip.com/comments.asp?art=16178>

June 23 2006

<http://www.bbgossip.com/comments.asp?art=16319>

June 27 2006

<http://www.bbgossip.com/comments.asp?art=16465>

June 30 2006

<http://www.bbgossip.com/comments.asp?art=16598>

July 4 2006

<http://www.bbgossip.com/comments.asp?art=16802>

July 10 2006

<http://www.bbgossip.com/comments.asp?art=17038>

July 21 2006

<http://www.bbgossip.com/comments.asp?art=17417>

August 4 2006

<http://www.bbgossip.com/comments.asp?art=17818>

August 5 2006

<http://www.bbgossip.com/comments.asp?art=17854>

August 8 2006

<http://www.bbgossip.com/comments.asp?art=17925>

## **Neighbours**

All New Winter 2006/Spring 2007 Spoilers

<http://www.neighboursfans.com/forum/index.php?act=Print&client=printer&f=12&t=13405>

Best and Worst of 2006

<http://www.neighboursfans.com/forum/index.php?act=Print&client=printer&f=47&t=14417>

Giving Neighbours One Last Chance

<http://www.neighboursfans.com/forum/index.php?act=Print&client=printer&f=12&t=15440>

Neighbours Future

<http://www.neighboursfans.com/forum/index.php?act=Print&client=printer&f=12&t=15801>

Neighbours is moving to Five from the BBC

<http://www.neighboursfans.com/forum/index.php?act=Print&client=printer&f=8&t=16934>

Neighbours Ratings

<http://www.neighboursfans.com/forum/index.php?act=Print&client=printer&f=8&t=14455>

New New New Spoilers

<http://www.neighboursfans.com/forum/index.php?act=Print&client=printer&f=12&t=10987>

The Robinson Family: Spoilers Part XXII: The Bus Stops Here

<http://www.neighboursfans.com/forum/index.php?act=Print&client=printer&f=11&t=15294>

The Robinson Family (spoilers), Part XXIV: Come Together.  
<http://www.neighboursfans.com/forum/index.php?showtopic=15802>

The rules  
<http://www.neighboursfans.com/forum/index.php?showtopic=84>

The Wondrous Mr and Mrs Hoyland – Spoilers  
<http://www.neighboursfans.com/forum/index.php?act=Print&client=printer&f=11&t=15161>

What Would You Like in 2007?  
<http://www.neighboursfans.com/forum/index.php?act=Print&client=printer&f=8&t=14343>

### **The West Wing**

J/D Talk  
<http://tv.groups.yahoo.com/group/JDtalk/>

A Full Lid  
[http://community.livejournal.com/TWW\\_full\\_lid/](http://community.livejournal.com/TWW_full_lid/)

Bartlet 4 America  
[www.bartlet4america.org](http://www.bartlet4america.org)

TWoP West Wing Permanent Hiatus forum  
<http://forums.televisionwithoutpity.com/index.php?showtopic=3143108>

TWoP West Wing Read-Only archives  
<http://forums.televisionwithoutpity.com/index.php?showforum=598>

The Ticket 7.1  
<http://forums.televisionwithoutpity.com/index.php?showtopic=3130907>

The Mommy Problem 7.2  
<http://forums.televisionwithoutpity.com/index.php?showtopic=3131255>

Message of the Week 7.3  
<http://forums.televisionwithoutpity.com/index.php?showtopic=3131516>

Mr. Frost 7.4  
<http://forums.televisionwithoutpity.com/index.php?showtopic=3131776>

Here Today 7.5

<http://forums.televisionwithoutpity.com/index.php?showtopic=3132015>

[The Al Smith Dinner 7.6](#)

<http://forums.televisionwithoutpity.com/index.php?showtopic=3132203>

[The Debate 7.7](#)

<http://forums.televisionwithoutpity.com/index.php?showtopic=3132541&st=0>

[Undecideds 7.8](#)

<http://forums.televisionwithoutpity.com/index.php?showtopic=3133548>

[The Wedding 7.9](#)

<http://forums.televisionwithoutpity.com/index.php?showtopic=3133740>

[Running Mates 7.10](#)

<http://forums.televisionwithoutpity.com/index.php?showtopic=3134449>

[Internal Displacement 7.11](#)

<http://forums.televisionwithoutpity.com/index.php?showtopic=3134686>

[Duck and Cover](#)

<http://forums.televisionwithoutpity.com/index.php?showtopic=3134916>

[The Cold](#)

<http://forums.televisionwithoutpity.com/index.php?showtopic=3137115>

[Two Weeks Out](#)

<http://forums.televisionwithoutpity.com/index.php?showtopic=3137517>

[Welcome to Wherever You Are](#)

<http://forums.televisionwithoutpity.com/index.php?showtopic=3137872>

[Election Day Part 1](#)

<http://forums.televisionwithoutpity.com/index.php?showtopic=3138307>

[Election Day Part 2](#)

<http://forums.televisionwithoutpity.com/index.php?showtopic=3138745>

[Requiem](#)

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[Transition](#)

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[The Last Hurrah](#)

<http://forums.televisionwithoutpity.com/index.php?showtopic=3139799>



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Tomorrow

<http://forums.televisionwithoutpity.com/index.php?showtopic=3140613>

