The imagined communities of Toxic Puppies: Considering fan community discourse in the 2015 Hugo Awards 'Puppygate' controversy

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Abstract:
In 2015, toxic fan conflicts disrupted the Hugo Awards selection proceedings. The conflict between the awards voters and a movement known as 'Puppygate', led by angry fans, dates back to at least 2012 and comprises thousands of networked conversations enacting toxic frames of contemporary culture wars (heated and often disruptive exchanges characterized by challenges to identity politics, arguments over representation, and conflicting tastes) from all sides. However, these toxic fan discourses emerged within the context of significant cultural changes. Fans exist in communal spaces formed among institutional and cultural forces, yet the drive to create communal culture through shared communication exchanges continually encourage toxic conflicts of social identity and taste. This article considers the toxic exchanges between various actors in the blogs, social media, and formal public statements of the Puppygate controversy to chronicle how structural change is subsumed into frames of 'culture war' rhetoric.

Keywords: science fiction, toxic fan exchanges, fan studies, Hugo Awards

Introduction
In the past few years, toxic fan conflicts have increasingly captured news and social media attention. Such exchanges, which are often cited for their uncivil rhetoric and anti-social tendencies, strategically disrupt spaces of communal cultural appreciation, and represent the growing tensions between fan gatekeeping and conflicts over social values in an increasingly mediated culture.

Scholarly analyses of inter- and intra-fandom Othering 'of fans, by fans' (Hills, 2012, p. 113) have been conducted on such quarrels and conflicts across a variety of contexts, perhaps most prominently when considering #Gamergate or disputes over fan objects, such

as *Twilight* (Hills, 2012; Williams, 2014), or the 2016 female-led *Ghostbusters* remake (Proctor, 2017). Though they appear outwardly homogenous, science fiction communities have been described as internally heterogeneous, with diverse tastes, practices, and different levels of social capital (Tulloch and Jenkins, 1995) that are maintained through internal hierarchies (MacDonald, 1998; Baym, 2000). Toxic fan disputes most often appear to occur between these internal fan groups and revolve around the intensification of fan entitlement and the expression of possessiveness over popular media reproductions. These disputes often use gendered frames to police the boundaries of fan communities (Busse, 2013). The use of anti-feminist and anti-social frames by at least some participants is one visible way media outlets consider disagreements 'toxic' (Williams, 2017), but it should be noted that toxic disputes usually include rhetorical strategies utilized by individuals or groups to disrupt the expressed value systems or flows of communication within a community. Toxic exchanges involve groups that rudely disagree about the values of the fandom, but it is the manner in which the disagreements occur that truly constitutes the toxicity. Toxic disagreements tend to disrupt dialogue, undermining the community's ability to productively discuss differences. Rather, exchanges revolve around some discussants' use of aggressive rhetoric to challenge social values that they perceive to be embodied within a media text, in order to reassert acceptance of pre-existing hegemonic cultural norms.

Clashes between publics and counterpublics, as defined by Nancy Fraser, typically position the counterpublic as the less privileged group attempting to mount resistance to a hegemonic public around how conversations or media messages are framed or discussed (1990, p. 81). However, in these toxic fan conflicts, the clash typically involves a counterpublic comprised of ethnically and socially privileged fans attempting to reassert their recently challenged privilege upon an existing public. Such counterpublics still appear to operate as Fraser describes: 'On the one hand, they function as spaces of withdrawal and regroupment; on the other hand, they function as a basis and training ground for agitational activities directed toward wider publics' (1988, p. 82). When spread across digital media platforms, such expressions assemble like-minded individuals into 'issue-fied' counterpublics (Marres, 2015) or what Brooker (2002) describes as 'strongholds' where values are reinforced, resulting in social conflicts between groups that challenge identity politics and cultural status (Massanari, 2015; 2017).

In 2014, a toxic fan dispute around the Hugo Awards began to receive publicity, and, during the following year, these toxic conflicts continued to disrupt the awards selection proceedings. The Hugos, widely considered since 1953 the highest honour in science fiction and fantasy publication, became the focus of what soon became known as 'Puppygate', an attempt to disrupt the electoral proceedings of Worldcon led by authors who organized fan networks previously outside the established voting community. *Wired Magazine* described Puppygate as

> a campaign, organized by three white, male authors, that resulted in a final
> Hugo ballot dominated by mostly white, mostly male nominees. While the

leaders of this two-pronged movement – one faction calls itself the Sad Puppies and the other the Rabid Puppies – broke no rules, many sci-fi writers and fans felt they had played dirty, taking advantage of a loophole in an arcane voting process that enables a relatively few number of voters to dominate (Wallace 2015).[1]

The networks of 'Puppies' self-segmented into 'Sad Puppies', who sought to leverage critique of the Hugo voting system into consideration of their favoured works, and 'Rabid Puppies', who sought outright disruption of the deliberative processes of the community itself. Each group developed their own slate of texts, which their members attempted to nominate as Hugo selections. Due largely to the machinations of the Sad and Rabid Puppies, 2015 awards voting participation increased more than 65% over previous contests, and five categories emerged with Puppy-endorsed candidates exclusively nominated (Waldman 2015). Those five categories were ultimately voided by the voters, since the majority voted for 'no award' to be given. Ultimately, both sides of the dispute claimed victory, renewing the site of toxic intra-fan conflict for subsequent years.

Though the Hugo controversy superficially resembles other toxic fan disputes, closer analysis reveals some distinct differences. Puppygate involves a culture clash between multiple communities, but it primarily revolves around the challenging of the existing norms of an in-person convention community (the voting and attending members of Worldcon) by an issue-driven counterpublic formed through blogs and social media. On the surface, the rhetoric used by the Puppies strongly resembles the 'culture war' rhetoric commonly noted in political clashes over media since the early 1990s (Hunter 1991). Closer inspection of the argumentation used in the blog and social media posts in question suggests that the 'culture wars' rhetoric served as a proxy for underlying uncertainty around changes to science fiction (SF), SF publishing, and the ways SF audiences are assembled. These uncertainties are founded in three key areas of change that appear to fuel Puppy arguments: first, an expansion in SF book audiences due to the increasing popularity of ebooks and niche publishers; second, an increasing mistrust of the publishing house structure (itself partially disrupted by electronic formats); and, third, resentment of the awards criteria as they relate to a constantly evolving genre. The redirection of these anxieties makes some sense. While fans exist in communal spaces formed among institutional and cultural forces, their sense of entitlement can mask their own positioning as consumers in the cultural production process. Thus, the drive to create communal culture through shared communication exchanges continually encourage toxic conflicts of social identity and taste, even as production factors (such as changes in technology, the publishing industry, or audiences) shape the topics under discussion. However, it is the anti-feminist and anti-social justice rhetoric that understandably commands the attention of their opponents (both within the fan community and in media coverage), making productive communicative exchange difficult.

This article begins by analysing the Puppygate controversy from a historical and theoretical perspective, considering how shifts within the SF genre create diverging fan cultures, how changes within the publishing industry create new fan discourses about SF, and how economies of prestige affect the boundaries of imagined communities of SF authors and fans.[2] After tracking and analysing these major evolutionary changes, the authors used a snowball sampling method to archive and examine blog and social media posts related to the 2014 Puppygate controversy, as well as numerous second-hand commentaries and discussions. Following linked threads between blog posts, articles, and social media expressions, the authors gathered hundreds of textual passages that engaged the Puppygate controversy. This article focuses on representative posts from 2012–2014 that comprise the build-up to and early stages of Puppygate in order to better understand the concerns and rhetoric that produced this cultural moment. While the event superficially resembles other toxic events such as Gamergate, this article seeks to highlight, through historical analysis and observation of fan behaviour, the unique attributes of Puppygate to articulate why the explicit rhetoric used in toxic conflicts at times masks implicit commentary about changes to institutional and social structures.

The Formation of Puppygate

The Puppy/Hugo conflict dates back to at least 2012 and comprises hundreds of networked conversations engaging a number of different perspectives. These conversations contain various toxic frames reminiscent of contemporary culture war rhetoric, heated and often disruptive exchanges characterized by challenges to identity politics, arguments over representation, and conflicting tastes. However, these toxic fan discourses emerged within the context of significant cultural changes. In terms of political economy, the digital transitions of the publishing industry enabled an exponential increase in the number of self-published and small-press titles introduced each year and disrupted the established methods of organizing exemplars of genre. As more and more prose SF works became available on the market, readership diversified and expanded, bringing new readers (and new values) to bear on the question of what works were to be considered 'awards for excellence in the field of science fiction and fantasy' ('What Are the Hugo Awards?' 2017).

Within the science fiction and fantasy community two key awards exist: the Nebulas and the Hugos. The Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America Association[3] organize the Nebula Awards, and only their membership of certified authors can nominate works for consideration and vote. In contrast, the Hugo Awards purport to belong to the fans of SF and fantasy. Any fan can participate in the nomination and voting process so long as they register and pay to attend the annual Worldcon convention or register as a non-attending member. As such, the Hugos are supposed to be a better representation of the reading public – the fan awards. However, in recent years, one branch of the fan community has begun to vocally critique this presumption. As early as 2012, voices began to argue that the Hugo Awards had become a popularity contest controlled by the 'liberal elite', a group

interested more in disseminating so-called 'message fiction' than in promoting popular and enjoyable science fiction.

Awards and prizes are important in several regards but mostly serve to separate economies of prestige (works validated as art) from economies of commerce (English, 2008, p. 52-53). Institutionally, they function 'as a claim to authority and an assertion of that authority [and] control over the cultural economy' (English, 2008, p. 51). For the individual, awards also denote acceptance and value within a given community. For the Hugo Awards, this means the members of Worldcon, serving as a proxy for science fiction fandom writ large, determine which works conform to the collective's values of 'excellence'.

In January of 2013, Larry Correia, a bestselling fantasy and SF author, initiated a movement that would become known as the Sad Puppies by organizing a voting bloc to help his novel *Monster Hunter Legion* receive a Hugo Award nomination. On his blog, he argued that this was a way 'to poke the establishment in the eye' (Correia, 2013a). Later in that same month, he coined the phrase 'sad puppies', a reference to an American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) commercial featuring Sarah McLachlan. Correia argued that, like the abandoned and mistreated puppies in the ASPCA commercial, pulp novelists had been 'abused by the literati elite' (2013b), and he urged his fans to take action by 'donating' to Worldcon and nominating his book (The Puppies realized they could register for voting rights without needing to attend the convention, using these privileges to shape the nominations, a tactic the group used in subsequent years to add additional titles to the process).

Over the course of the year, Correia gradually expanded his call to action, first promoting other texts from his publisher Baen (a publisher that emphasizes space opera, hard science fiction, and military science fiction), and then a full list of the texts and authors he intended to place on his own ballot – what he described as a 'Sad Puppies Hugo stacking campaign' (2013c). The following year he launched a new slate for the 2014 Hugo nominations entitled 'Sad Puppies 2: Rainbow Puppy Lighthouse, The Huggening'. Correia's blog *Monster Hunter Nation* created a platform from which the larger Sad Puppies movement and community has grown. Since 2014, other writers have taken over running the slate, including authors Brad Torgerson and Kate Paulk.

However, the Sad Puppies are more than simply a slate of preferred books. In pursuit of their nomination goals, the Puppies have also engaged in large amounts of critical discourse, raising complaints about particular nominated and award-winning texts. For example, in Amy Wallace's (2015) interview with Larry Correia for *Wired,* she notes that:

> He felt that the Hugos had become overly dominated by what he and others call 'Social Justice Warriors', who value politics over plot development. Particular targets of Puppy derision include two 2014 Hugo winners: John Chu's short story, 'The Water That Falls on You From Nowhere', in which a gay man decides to come out to his traditional Chinese family after the world is beset by a new phenomenon: whenever a person lies, water inexplicably falls on them;

and Ann Leckie's debut novel *Ancillary Justice*, whose protagonists do not see gender. Leckie conveys this by using female pronouns throughout.

In the previous year's Hugo Awards, Correia indirectly referenced Kim Stanley Robinson's novel *2312* as a 'dying polar bear story of global warming sadness and evil capitalism', which he remarked would 'surely lose to Scalzi, who is liberal blogger who happens to write books too' [sic] (Correia, 2013c). The group has also rallied together to criticize significant events within the larger SF&F community, such as the expulsion of writer Vox Day[4] from the Science Fiction & Fantasy Writers of America and the SFWA Bulletin controversy.[5] As these topics were raised and discussed, patterns of oppositional resistance began to dominate, consistent with the tenor and tone of toxic fan exchanges, with those who expressed privileged hegemonic values positioned themselves as the victims of persecution by a small group of conspiring liberal elites.

As communities formed and produced this discourse, consistent themes invoked claims of class. For instance, Torgerson claims his books are blue-collar speculative fiction in the title of his website (Torgersen, n.d.). The Hugos, Puppies claim, have become snobby and exclusionary, often ignoring books that are widely popular, as well as books by conservative writers. Such commentary invited responses with opposing views, and clashes occurred with great frequency in blog posts, comment threads, and social media posts. Over time, the Sad Puppies developed a selection of names for their opponents: CHORFS, for 'Cliquish, Holier-than-thou, Obnoxious, Reactionary Fanatics'; SMOFs for 'Secret Masters of Fandom'; the FGHH for 'Feminist Glittery Hoo Haas'; 'Puppy kickers'; and the ever-present pejorative 'social justice warrior' (SJWs) label often found in toxic fan exchanges.

An Evolving Genre

Many of the rhetorical clashes between the Puppies and their opponents appear to revolve around the differing definitions and boundaries of the science fiction genre. For example, a common Puppy argument is to claim that the purpose of science fiction is escapism and enjoyment and that introducing political or issues-driven frames interferes with the core purpose of science fiction itself. This is illustrated in Larry Correia's post titled 'An explanation about the Hugo awards controversy', in which he writes:

> We always hear about how fandom is supposed to be inclusive. Only apparently my fans are the wrong kind of fans. They don't care about the liberal cause of the day. They don't care about Social Justice. They like their books entertaining rather than preachy. They probably vote incorrectly. That sort of thing. (2014a)

In a similar fashion, Brad Torgersen, on his website's About page, states:

> I write fiction and sell it, believing that the primary purpose of fiction is to *entertain the reader* — and to make me a little money. I'm *not* in it to

'educate' you, nor to 'confront' you, nor to (God help us!) 'raise awareness'. I simply want to let you have some worthwhile fun in the world(s) of my imagination, just as the authors I love and adore have always done (2009; emphasis added).

This runs counter to long-standing opposing views that claim the importance of 'Othering' as a core element of the genre itself, an element that lends itself to political and social commentary. Adam Roberts writes, '[SF] is predicated upon a fundamental *hospitality to otherness*, to the alien' (2006b, 148), and Foz Meadows, in a blog post, argues that, 'fantasy is all about foregrounding outliers' (Meadows, 2013). Indeed, the most frequently cited definition of science fiction in SF theory is Darko Suvin's (1979) proposition that science fiction is 'cognitive estrangement', which builds the idea of otherness or difference into the definition itself.

Part of the discord underlying the rhetorical exchanges is the fact that despite many attempts, SF authors, readers, and critics have never been able to entirely agree on the definition of science fiction, and the values expressed by the Puppies and their opponents can be located in earlier explorations of the genre's boundaries. Debates about the definition of science fiction date back to the genre's popularization in the US in the early 20th century, but early consensus seemed to suggest that science fiction had three purposes: entertainment, education, and inspiration for future advances (Westfahl, 1999, p. 189-190). This consensus would evolve as science fiction began to receive scholarly attention.

Though science fiction has historically been considered low culture (Freedman, 1987), much energy would eventually be devoted to its formal study, criticism, and discussion. Science fiction criticism emerged from three distinct traditions: 1920s fanzine letter columns, 1940s professional published commentaries, and 1960s and 1970s academic attention (Wolfe, 1995, p. 483-485). Early science fiction scholarship focused almost exclusively on textual studies undergirded by mass communication theories, largely ignoring considerations of audience or popular reception. As culture studies began to shift analyses from textual interpretation to audience reception, an emphasis on fan studies approaches emerged (see Jenkins, 1992; Tulloch and Jenkins, 1995; Hills, 2002; and Gray, Sandvoss, and Harrington, 2007).

Scholarly attention perhaps imprinted a changing emphasis on popular conceptions of science fiction. Suvin's (1972) initial argument for a precise definition positioned science fiction as the greatest genre for launching social change in the world. Central to Suvin's theorizing of science fiction was the presence of 'cognitive estrangement', the ability to allow the audience to disconnect from societal assumptions and consider rationally developed alternatives to social issues; or as Frederic Jameson (1982) described it, 'to defamiliarize and restructure our experience of our own present' (p. 151), a technique Suvin (1988) described as science fiction's most defining characteristic. In 1975, Robert Scholes described a similar core element as defamiliarization, or 'structural fabulation', any 'fiction that offers us a world clearly and radically discontinuous from the one we know, yet returns

to confront that known world in some cognitive way' (Roberts, 2006a, p. 10). This understanding of science fiction extends to modern scholarship, as seen in statements like the following: 'Scifi's most important, attractive, and unique quality is its handling of sociopolitical ideas, rather than battle scenes, romances, or other sensationalist narrative elements' (Osur, 2014, p. 68).

This emphasis on social learning was not a new introduction by the academic waves of scholarship. One of the earliest figures in science fiction pulp criticism was Hugo Gernsback, publisher of the pulp magazine *Amazing Stories* from 1929. Considered the father of science fiction criticism (Westfahl, 1999, p. 187), it is Gernsback for whom the Hugo Awards are named. From even that earliest moment, the publisher of pulp science fiction considered science fiction to have a social education role:

> Not only is science fiction an idea of tremendous import but it is to be an important factor in making the world a better place to live in, through educating the public to the possibilities of science and the influence of science on life . . . If every man, woman, boy and girl could be induced to read science fiction right along, there would certainly be a great resulting benefit to the community. Science fiction would make people happier, give them a broader understanding of the world, make them more tolerant (Gernsback quoted in James, 1994, p. 8).

This is not to suggest that such statements are universally accepted. Writer Samuel Delany has challenged the validity of defining science fiction in terms of its subject matter, suggesting instead that science fiction is 'a vast play of codic conventions'. As Roberts (2006a) explains, for Delany, science fiction is 'a shared game of signification that readers can apply to texts at the level of the sentence as much as the level of the text, to social performance and semiotic engagement' and is 'as much a reading strategy as it is anything else' (p. 2).

Science fiction film and television were initially ignored in science fiction scholarship (Osur, 2014). Though non-literary media have more recently been included within science fiction studies literature, the majority of work continues to privilege the 'aestheticism of the mind' associated with prose over the visual aesthetics associated with other forms (Jameson, 1991; Russ, 1975). And yet, even as scholarly attention privileges literary expressions of the genre, fan attention has grown more rapidly around other media forms. Roberts (2006a) documents that:

> SF has largely shifted from a verbal to a visual cultural mode. *Star Wars* was the Rubicon. Before 1977, and speaking very broadly, SF had been a literature of ideas, of extrapolation and transcendence rooted primarily in verbal texts, popular only with a relatively small group of aficionados who called themselves fans. After that, through the 1980s and 1990s, SF shifted about on its axis to

become a mass-culture phenomenon, much more widely consumed, and more likely to be consumed as a visual mode (p. 508-509).

The expansion of audiences through an increasingly broad content offering across an increasingly broad number of media formats and outlets strains the coherence of science fiction as a genre, leading Farah Mendlesohn to claim that 'science fiction is less a genre ... than an ongoing discussion' (James & Mendlesohn, 2003, p. 1). In many ways, Puppygate is also a discussion about the definition and boundaries of science fiction, in which visual media serve as primary influences for some. Given the primacy ascribed to prose science fiction over the visual aesthetics of video presentation, the communal norms created around increasingly varied audience experiences present an even greater challenge to the definition of the science fiction genre (or to the resulting subcultures represented within a potentially collapsing genre). As Adam Roberts (2006a) points out, 'The Gamergate/Puppies fury is one reflection – a reaction, an intemperate kickback – against a broader logic' (p. 510). Roberts was writing about the rising importance of the worlds created within literature and the resulting passions of involvement, but that observation could also be extended to the differing opinions about the locations of those constructed worlds and their purpose. Shifts in the genre of science fiction reflect the expansion of that broader logic but do so as if the publishing industry has not significantly changed. Meanwhile, the publishing industry itself continues to expand to serve new audiences that are less likely to participate in the on-going discourses engaged by the Worldcon voting community.

An Evolving Industry

Despite the inclusion of science fiction television and films in the Hugo Awards categories, and the rising scholarly interest in such content, the bulk of the Puppygate conflict still revolved around the evaluation of prose novels and short stories. However, the changing nature of print itself also presents implications to the Puppygate discourse.

The emergence of tablet devices in American culture provides new avenues for book reading (Clark et. al., 2008, p. 119) and has unleashed a surge of interest by publishers who see them as potential distribution mechanisms for their products (Aghbali, 2011). But the introduction of electronic book formats alongside printed books has altered the landscape of science fiction literature in several important ways.

In the UK and the US, publishers influenced the formation of the science fiction genre, privileging novels over pulp (James, 1994, p. 36). Genres originate as organizing principles to help publishers market and sell products to mass markets, but the introduction of digital technologies has expanded the publication of science fiction beyond the 20th century assumptions of mass-market readership. Digital technologies reduce the cost of production even as they help publishers identify more concentrated reading markets, resulting in increased numbers of small presses, niche presses, and even self-published authorship. As a result, science fiction readership is an increasingly fragmented collective of

subcultures with increasingly diverse content experiences, values, and norms. Science fiction is

> no longer one genre but a set of sub-genres each with its own protocols and its own loyal readers ... The fragmentation of sf and sf fandom could be related to the fragmentation of culture at large, the replacement of widespread values and loyalties by smaller, more specialized subcultures, which some see as the most typical feature of postmodern or postmodernist culture (James, 1994, p. 166).

Even more importantly, given that the publishers originally played such a significant role in organizing and policing the boundaries of the genre, their dislocation from the centre of science fiction publishing (or at least, their loss of monopoly status as its gatekeeper) by the expansion of niche publishing houses and even self-publication platforms creates potential parallel modes of organizing and categorizing the 'awards for excellence in the field of science fiction and fantasy'. For the purposes of this article, it is worth noting that as these networks of audience expand around different publishers and diverging types of science fiction, new subgenres of texts essentially create counterpublics in resistance to the more established science fiction environment, including large publishers and the fans involved in Worldcon.

Except for a brief hiatus during World War II, Worldcon has served as the annual convention of the World Science Fiction Society since 1939. Its attendees, a literary society formed from a mixture of authors and fans, serve as members of the society and participate in the selection process for the Hugo Awards. As Guest of Honor Doc Smith exclaimed at the second gathering in 1940:

> What brings us together and underlies this convention is a fundamental unity of mind. We are imaginative, with a tempered analytical imaginativeness which fairy tales will not satisfy. We are critical. We are fastidious. We have a mental grasp and scope which do not find sufficient substance in stereotypes, in the cut and dried. Science fiction fans form a group unparalleled in history, in our likes, in our partisanships and our loyalties (as quoted in James, 1994, p. 133).

Though Worldcon is considered a fan event, writers and publishers pay close attention to its proceedings. Australian science fiction and popular science writer Damien Broderick explained that this seemingly unusual status makes sense, given how central fandom activities are to the communal norms:

> The life of the SF writer is a life of continual socializing and communication with a rather large audience of loyal and vocal readers together with the majority of other writers working in the field. The response of these people to a writer's

work is always in the forefront of his consciousness and may even be the controlling factor in his writing ... Fandom, then, is at the center of a discussion of SF, without which all else falls apart (Broderick, 1995, p. 18).

Even to the degree that fan voices themselves do not drive conversation, the creators of science fiction texts have long held that fans serve as a useful proxy for consumers of the texts:

> Publishers pay attention to the Hugo Awards because they understand through experience a fact that critics of fan culture dismiss: fandom does accurately represent the reading taste of the vast majority of readers who do not themselves participate or have never heard of fandom (Bacon-Smith, 2000, p. 61).

The close intersection of fans, authors, and publishers makes Worldcon and the Hugo Awards a peculiar communal experience that influences and produces culture. Given the tight intersections between the industry, authors, and readers, it is no wonder that the communal norms of Worldcon developed around the reinforcement of publication traditions and conventions, literary analysis, and the biases of mass-market publication. The concentration of social capital and power makes the Hugo Awards one of the premiere sites of cultural authority in the world of science fiction. Because of the changing forces documented above, the community of voters who select the Hugos presents itself as an ultimate insider group positioned among a rapidly expanding network of diffuse tastes, values, and norms. As new groups become orientated and form new dialogues with the Worldcon collective and the Hugo Awards processes, communicative aggression over issues of taste and the selection criteria seems a likely occurrence.

Evolving Communities

Digital technologies not only disrupt the science fiction publishing industry; they also affect the way fandom operates. The history of science fiction is as much about fan culture as industry production. The same letter columns that birthed the earliest science fiction criticism also allowed for fan connections and exchanges. As regional meetings and fanzines increased in frequency and scale, conventions soon began to serve as a community centre for thousands of people at a time (Bacon-Smith, 2000, p. 12-24). Each of those types of exchanges produces texts, which, in turn, serve as fandom experiences for those in the broad tent of science fiction fandom. The use of media and communication binds consumers into communities, even when they are dispersed over large distances (McMillan and George, 1986).

Social identity in large dispersed communities is constructed differently than those formed in close proximity, as individuals connect to 'imagined communities'. Benedict Anderson (2006) explained how nationalism functions as an imagined horizontal comradeship (p. 224), and Gruzd, Wellman, and Takhteyev (2011) found imagined

communities form online cultures across large distances using tools like Twitter. The tone and framing of communications messages across digital media have been shown to be strongly affected by those to whom commenters imagined they were talking (Perrin and Vaisey, 2008; Sindorf, 2013).

Though popular culture consumption is often a solitary experience, fandom requires social elements: 'Without ever interacting with other fans who are within fandom, [one] can never become a part of that fandom' (Kleefeld, 2011, p. 24). As a result, a key attribute of a 'fandom' is the intersection of individual passion and social identity (Jenkins, 1992; Harris and Alexander, 1998). When negotiating social identities, individual fans tend to define themselves either 'in terms of what makes [them] unique compared to other individuals' or 'in terms of [their] membership in social groups' (Reicher, 2004, p. 928). These negotiations can in turn lend themselves to the use of communicative aggression by some parties to impugn the preferred social identities of others and to increase one's own self-identity (Daily, Lee, and Spitzberg, 2007). Communicative aggression can enhance one's self-image (Tajfel and Turner, 1979) but also foster in-group cohesion (Adler and Adler, 1995). Given how strongly fan connections and group identification can affect a person's social identity (Reysend and Branscombe, 2010), it is not surprising that communicative aggression tends to coalesce around gender and class (Kendal, 2000).

Disagreements and arguments are nothing new to science fiction fandom or fan communities more generally, but the use of online media for fan activity brings with it certain conditions that potentially amplify the rancour of toxic exchanges. The use of online media has been shown to contribute to group polarization (Yardi and boyd, 2010; Stroud, 2010), and disrespectful online comments particularly contribute to group polarization effects (Anderson et al., 2014). Considerable research points to the proliferation of disrespectful comments (Coffey and Woolworth, 2004; Carlin, Schill, Levasseur, and King, 2005; Hlavach and Frievogel, 2011; Herring, Job-Sluder, Scheckler, and Barab, 2012), including hostile behaviour and personal attacks. As Benson (1996) noted:

> These debates are often characterized by aggressiveness, certainty, angry assertion, insult, ideological abstraction, and the attempt to humiliate opponents. On the other hand, the debates might, even admitting these faults, be characterized as displaying a high degree of formal regularity, as robust exercises in free speech, as closely attentive (if unsympathetic) to opposing arguments, as performing virtuosity in argument and language, and as a rare opportunity for free participation in a political forum where one may meet widely divergent views (p. 375).

The sheer number of postings and discussion suggests there must be core arguments beneath the inflammatory rhetoric of the Puppies. For that reason, we decided to perform a textual analysis on some of the key posts and comments in the Puppy discourse, analysing

them for common frames and raised issues in an attempt to separate underlying concerns from the toxic discourse.

Textual Methodology

Though there are many online discussions that have occurred within the SF community prior to and since the beginning of Puppygate, the authors chose to focus on particular sets of blog and social media posts for the scope of this project. The Puppygate controversy began in 2014 and continued to evolve in subsequent years, under ever-changing leadership, but for the purpose of this article, the authors are primarily interested in the initial formation of the controversy. The authors conducted a textual analysis of 191 blog and social media posts related to the 2014 Puppygate controversy, as well as numerous interlinked second-hand commentaries and discussions. This article focuses on a subset of 30 posts from 2014, when the controversy first drew mainstream attention, and 41 posts from 2013, during the months leading up to the commencement of Puppygate. The posts selected were chosen utilizing a snowball method, and represent the most heavily engaged, cited, and quoted examples of Puppy rhetoric. The authors began by reading blog posts from that time period published by a spectrum of voices in the SF community. Some of those individuals included George R.R. Martin, John Scalzi, and Larry Correia. These blog posts, along with news articles covering Puppygate, referenced and responded to other posts, so using these connections the authors gradually built a network of the main posts the SF community at large was engaging and circulating at the time.

In order to ascertain a general sense of how often certain trends arose in these circulating posts, each blog post was coded in the software Dedoose according to recurring themes referenced by the author, such as 'critique of social justice warriors' or 'appeal to popularity' or 'the changing publishing industry'. Each blog post was also categorized based on the author's affiliation with a particular SF sub-community, i.e. the Rabid Puppies, the Sad Puppies, and those described by the Puppies as 'SJWs' or Social Justice Warriors.[6]

Considering the Puppies

The 71 posts and messages coded for the 2013-2014 period under examination contained thousands of statements, frames, and arguments across many different topics. Many posts contained multiple topics and multiple frames of argumentation. The blogs and messages encapsulated intense sites of confrontation and exchange between parties in disagreement. As expected, the vast majority of Puppy postings invoked criticism of 'message fiction' or the actions of progressive politics seen to be embedded within science fiction texts. An example from Larry Correia appears below:

> The hoighty-toighty literati snobs prefer heavy handed, ham fisted, message fiction. *(show picture of sci-fi readers giving up in frustration as they read yet another award winning book where evil corporations, right wing religious fanatics, and a*

> *thinly veiled Dick Cheney have raped the Earth until all the polar bears have died and the plot consists entirely of academic hipster douchebags sitting around and talking about their feelings) …* (Correia, January 16, 2013).

Accusations of poor quality of writing made frequent appearances (38), as did allusions to dichotomies between pulp science fiction and literary science fiction (37), mostly to suggest pulp was a misunderstood and maligned form of science fiction. The Puppies (primarily authors) touted popularity and book sales over critical acclaim as a metric of success (37 instances) and also used this to self-promote individual works. (Self-promotion became a controversial topic itself, as the Puppies argued self-promotion was essential in self-publishing and niche publishing markets, often framing the practice as a response to publishing houses who widely promote member authors. Many authors on both sides appeared to agree on this particular point, but the topic continued to be voiced by some participants throughout the controversy.)

Though almost all posts in some way indirectly considered questions of the definitions of science fiction itself, or the boundaries of science fiction fandom, relatively few exchanges produced explicit questions or statements about these subjects. In this way, it often seems as though Puppy rhetoric performs 'culture war' rhetoric that connects to deeper questions of boundaries of genre or how consumers differ from fans, while simultaneously obscuring those deeper concerns and disrupting any opportunity for deliberation upon them.

Another general attribute considered stereotypes of ignorance in toxic exchanges (the presumption that Puppies might be mistaken on central facts related to their critiques), but the researchers found relatively few (8) instances of claims that contradicted verifiable events or facts. Despite strongly stated differences of opinion, ideological approaches to cultural production, and differing views of the value of symbolic capital, core facts, and events appeared to be held more in common than expected.

The generalizable narrative from the Puppies perspective can be well exemplified in this statement from Kate Paulk:

> Just think of it – for so many years they've had the security and prestige of knowing that their books would be in actual bookstores, making it really easy to tell that they're real authors, not like the self-published and independent riff-raff hanging out at that horrible, horrible Amazon place. They could sneer at us pleb indie rabble because we didn't have real publishers who got our books to real bookstores (never mind the speed with which the real bookstores are vanishing), and look through their lorgnettes at us because they were Worthy! Their publishers told them so, and it's hard to get into the field, so it must be true, right? … Those ever-diminishing sales must be because the genius of their Feminist Glittery Hoo Haas is just too erudite for those redneck yokels out in flyover country (Paulk, October 31, 2013).

In the above post, Paulk invokes class, challenges perceived attitudes towards ebook distribution, reconnects the primary value of culture to commercial sales, and wraps narrative Othering into a culture war frame. It is difficult to imagine a way for someone not predisposed to the Puppies' positions to respond to such rhetoric in a productive way.

Discussion

We have approached toxic fan exchanges as clashes between a public and counterpublics in which different groups assert their value systems through argumentation, and we have examined those arguments for signs of differences in the imagined communities of the two groups. Analysing the 2013 and 2014 posts, it does indeed appear that the root of the on-going Hugo dissent presents support for the idea that Puppies imagine the Worldcon community significantly different than the longstanding Worldcon members seem to imagine it. This growing difference in notions of identity and belonging appears rooted in the expanded offering of available science fiction itself. Unlike in the context of mid-20th century publishing, any notion of a unified canon or universal trajectory of texts appears unlikely, given the sheer impossibility for a consumer of science fiction to read through the volume of texts released every year (James, 1994, p. 160). This results in a fracturing of the fandom and the possible collapse of the genre into smaller subsets of interests and literary forms, and those realities in turn lead to conflict over values for communities and economies of prestige. The Puppies seem to argue for awards consideration for SF narratives built more explicitly for entertainment (such as military science fiction), rather than the more literary-minded or experimental forms of science fiction preferred by the pre-2014 Worldcon voting community.

      A consistent and key critique offered by the Puppies argues for altering the definition of fandom. Because the Nebula Awards winners are selected by certified authors and the Hugo Awards are fan-driven, many Puppy posts point to sales figures as evidence of fan popularity. For example, Larry Correia (2014b) insists that, 'Storytellers win where it counts, BOOK SALES. The SJW contingent wins awards. If the barbarians start taking awards from them they'll have nothing left. No wonder they are so angry'. Interpreting such comments, the Puppies appear to imagine the Worldcon community as an open and generalist fandom. Because Puppy-authored books sell the most copies, those books should win the fan awards. However, that interpretation misconstrues both what the Worldcon community has historically been and what role the Hugo Awards perform in terms of bestowing cultural capital. In her book on *Science Fiction Culture*, Camille Bacon-Smith (2000) references Pierre Bourdieu's description of this tension as

> a struggle for position in the hierarchy of power that includes both economic and symbolic power. The ultimate prize in the struggle is the authority, the power, to define what a writer is. At one end of the struggle he describes the symbolic capital of the *autonomous artist* who produces for a culture defined

as his peers who are trained through the same processes to read the same symbols and to likewise create art using them (i.e. rich in symbolic capital) ... *The heteronomous artist*, by contrast, finds that his field of cultural production meets the field of consumer taste in such a way that he may experience little symbolic capital attached to his work, but may conversely enjoy greater economic capital (p. 243).

In the film industry, the Hollywood blockbuster model strategizes some projects (lower risk formulaic films) for economic capital gain while others (smaller niche projects) are earmarked for symbolic or cultural capital. The Hugo Awards conflict does not involve those strategies, but as can be observed in the implementation of those strategies, different sectors of the science fiction publishing world seem to command different forms of capital:

> The science fiction industry seems to have split into two strongly marked divisions: Lowest Common Denominator fiction, which provides the financial fuel but has become increasingly limited by formula, and a more sophisticated but inward turning literary fiction that does not pass beyond the small market for more thought-provoking fiction in the genre readership (Bacon-Smith, 2000, p. 266).

Ultimately, the Puppies seem to desire recognition as a part of the community they imagine Worldcon to be (the Puppies' rhetoric seems to suggest Worldcon should be a populist (populist or popular?) community), but the Puppies do not feel valued within the Worldcon community because they do not win Hugo Awards. However, in some of the Puppy arguments, it seems the values of the Puppies (popular and commercial success) are not in line with the expressed communal values of the majority of pre-existing Worldcon members, suggesting that their attempted forcible entry into the Worldcon community (in following years, the Puppy presence continued to grow around additional campaigns) could be changing the community to which they purport to belong.

As noted above, indeed several historical and longstanding arguments over the definition of science fiction include threads that would resonate with the values expressed by the Puppies. In one sense, the Puppies are rehashing one of the oldest arguments in science fiction criticism, an argument that longstanding Worldcon members seem to consider settled decades ago. However, it also makes sense that these arguments are resurfacing at this moment in history. Part of the reason why science fiction became a more consistently celebrated literary endeavour at Worldcon was because of the publishing industry's role as a gatekeeper in terms of distribution. Self-publishing, small press, and niche publishers are metaphorically like a return of the prominence of the pulp magazine format, except that the prevalence of digital publishing and the rapid expansion in the amount of content offerings offers a volume of content unprecedented in a historical sense. Thus, some of the questions underneath the Puppy rhetoric could potentially be important

and interesting, should the two communities connect in dialogue. However, the toxic rhetoric in their exchanges makes such connection unlikely.

Many of the Puppy posts perform the general tendencies observed in toxic exchanges found in online communication. The affordances of new media tools appear to bend such exchanges into aggressive frames, like the following excerpt:

> For the Interchangeable Feminist author, the Feminist Glittery Hoo Haa magically transforms her grocery lists (should she ever deign to commit such a patriarchally derived act as create one) into high art (those of you speculating on precisely what one has to be high on to consider it art may stop now). Editors, agents and publishers recognize the brilliance of her FGHH and – judging by the samples I've read – don't bother to read the piece before publishing it and pushing it harder than a heterosexual male backstage at a pole dancer's convention. Obviously their brilliance is lost on the rest of us who lack this magical piece of anatomy and possess the usual combination of a pair of functioning eyes and some brain cells that don't faint in shock when they're called on to do any thinking.
>
> The rest of us also failed to fall for the notion that math and logic are tools of the patriarchy. Possibly because we're capable of performing both. The FGHH is even worse than the romance variety when it comes to rotting brains, you see. The poor things that have one spend all their mental energy trying to hold on to such utterly conflicting and ridiculous notions (simultaneously all-powerful and a fragile flower that wilts at anything resembling a harsh word? Yep. Got it in one) and they've got nothing left to actually use whatever brain function they possessed before the FGHH poisoned their lives. (Paulk, 2013)

Kate Paulk is a prolific blogger who contributed large amounts of argumentation to the controversy over a few years. Speaking as a female voice among the Puppies, Paulk often used her gender status to advance aggressive attacks on the perceived political stances of WorldCon nominators and voters, and she became the organizer of the fourth Sad Puppies campaign in 2015. Another example from her blog continues the rhetoric and satirical tone:

> In the light of this, perhaps the successful applicant should consider stocking up on glitter for their hoo haa, since possession of a glittery hoo haa in SFWA demonstrably confers immunity for any and all sins – but you do have to get the glitter from the approved suppliers. It wouldn't do to have insufficiently diverse glitter. Or default bi-gender glitter. Oh, no, that would be just tacky (actually, no, it would be bloody prickly and uncomfortable. And no I do NOT speak from experience. It's just… small pieces of metallic stuff in an area of the anatomy that's rather… sensitive. Ow). It must be properly multi-gendered

glitter with diverse racial and sexual heritage (but heaven forbid your glitter leans conservative. What? Stranger things have happened) (Paulk, 2014).

Embedded in the second Paulk posting above is a perhaps fair critique about locations of cultural authority, but it is unlikely that someone with a different perspective will be able to engage in meaningful discourse because of the inflammatory rhetoric used in both posts (and the recognizable patterns of such throughout her posts).

Unfortunately, such toxic expressions are likely to continue. Science fiction publishing continues to increase in volume and expand in a variety of forms, in ways that stretch the coherence of organizing principles. These expansions challenge boundaries, norms, and values between different groups that do not hold them in common, though they imagine themselves to be part of the same community.

The 2013-2014 version of the Puppygate dispute is but one of many moments of cultural transition for science fiction. At this moment, as newer kinds of authors take advantage of new platforms and new access to audiences, it remains fascinating that so many seek validation tied to establishments like Worldcon while some elements within their rhetoric seem incompatible with the values of the communities from which they seek validation. Perhaps an explanation for this seeming paradox concerns the tendencies of issue-driven counterpublics to unconsciously conceptualize combative larger publics in contrast to the more (agreeable) civil spaces closer to the smaller imagined community (Perrin and Vaisey, 2008, p. 804).

Future studies
'Geeks' possess interpersonal communication skills that are not distinguishable from the general public (Carrol and Carolin, 1989; Carter and Lester, 1988). As this toxic fan debate continues, it will be invaluable for the scholarly community to explore and evaluate the underlying dynamics of rising fan tensions and what the expressions and actions of each side infer for broader society, outside the science fiction community. Future studies can and should include a consideration of the voting mechanisms in the Hugos and related awards, as well as the cultural significance of particular arguments for particular voting methods; the recent formation of new awards and award communities, such as the 2016 Dragon Awards launched by the organizers of Dragon Con, to purportedly 'fix' the Hugo problem; the relationship between the Rabid and Sad Puppies and the influence of Vox Day upon the Sad Puppies; if and how the Sad Puppies can be made happy (whether a toxic counterpublic can have an end-goal without a prosocial agenda); and, perhaps most importantly, where Puppygate fits alongside the many other socio-political crises over white heterosexual masculinity and US nationalism today.

Worldcon, like most long-standing popular culture conventions, possesses a specific culture that reproduces certain communal values for those that attend. The event itself–and likely each annual event, given its rotating global location, which no doubt privileges certain individuals and groups in a given year over others–exists as a site of interest, worthy of

ethnographic exploration. The relationship of the in-person interactions compared to the online exchanges could bear some interesting insights into dynamics affecting various fan communities' discourse about the meaning of science fiction.

As technology transforms access to publishing and the availability of texts, the relationships between fan groups, as well as between fans and the texts themselves, appear to be continually reorganizing. Communal change can be difficult, particularly for impassioned fans. The expansion of fandom – not to mention the expanded offerings of science fiction literature – combined with increasing prominence of online communication tools in fan discussions appear to encourage toxic exchanges, when some within the community are coping with profound questions of values and community norms. Toxic fan exchanges are typically thought to attack the standing of female or minority community members, but in the case of the Sad Puppies, the toxicity of their rhetoric also disrupts the effectiveness of traditional fan discourse to help communities adapt to changing cultural circumstances.

Though the Puppygate exchanges possess similar traits to the texts in other disputes considered 'toxic', this article noted several key differences. With so many fan disputes receiving public attention in recent years, it is understandable that studies have sought to frame disputes in the way that they are similar to each other (the anti-feminist frames used, the appeals to reclamations of hegemony within fan spaces that have developed alternative cultural values, and even some of the disruptive rhetorical techniques). This article attempted to dig past the categorical presumptions needed to consider such cultural events as merely attempts to rebel 'against a broader logic' (Roberts, 2006a, p. 510), in order to look deeper into the expressed concerns underlying toxic rhetoric. Fan cultures have always struggled against the industries that produce the texts they value (Johnson, 2007, p. 287), but changes to those industries, as well as the production and consumption of technologies for the text, realign audiences, create new experiences, privilege particular fan practices over others, and otherwise disrupt the communal construction process. Fan cultures are not always quick to adapt to such changes, particularly in light of the antagonistic relationships they often possess with the producers of content.

The pre-2014 Worldcon collective represented a specific alignment of authors, publishers, fans, and scholars that operated within a structured community, and the voting mechanism for the Hugo Awards represented those aligned relationships. In seeking to subvert the electoral process, the Puppies sought to disrupt existing dynamics of authority to expand the culture of prestige to consider their own works. These were works previously excluded from consideration for awards, based on their nonconformity to the evolving genre of science fiction, the evolving industry norms, and the growing prosocial logics within narrative storytelling. Those same forces created new markets of readers, new classes of product offerings, and the technology to self-promote through online media (to say nothing of self-publishing), which in turn presented some valid concerns for negotiation between the newer fan communities and the older Worldcon community. Unfortunately, the

aggressive tactics and toxic tones of Puppy engagement mask these concerns from intra-communal dialogue and largely from media coverage of the disputes.

It is not known to what degree other toxic controversies may mask similar structural concerns, or whether such controversies bear similarities beyond the acerbic rancour noted by outsiders. The drive to categorize similarities creates stereotypes of fan narratives for outside observers. Only by delving into a larger collection of 'stronghold' discussions and intra-group discussions alike can scholars hope to develop a more comprehensive understanding of what drives fans to make toxic statements and perform toxic actions.

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Notes:

[1] Most media coverage points to the male authors in question as prime movers in the movement, but it was clear in the collected archive that female voices were quite prominent from the earliest days of the Puppies discourse, and in fact, women took over the leadership responsibilities of the Sad Puppies in later years (Paulk 2015).

[2] It is a well-known convention within science fiction that fans often become authors and authors consider themselves fans, heavily blurring the lines between producer and consumer (Bacon-Smith, 1999, p. 192-193).

[3] The professional organization for authors of science fiction, fantasy and related genres.

[4] Vox Day is the profession name of Theodore Robert Beale, an author, game designer, alt-Right activist and leader of the Rabid Puppies, an extremist offshoot of the Sad Puppies.

[5] The SFWA released several issues of their Bulletin, which contained cover images and magazine content that many subscribers found offensive and misogynistic. The controversy eventually led to the resignation of SFWA Bulletin editor Jean Rabe.

[6] A note on framing and terminology: Those described as SJWs would not generally describe themselves as SJWs, nor would they consider themselves as belonging to a specific SF sub-community. Rather, these individuals constitute what the Puppies consider the hegemonic and elite Hugo Award-controlling community.