

**From Textual Poachers to Textual Gifters:  
Exploring Fan Community and Celebrity in the Field  
of Fan Cultural Production**

by

Bertha Catherine LP Chin

School of Journalism, Media & Cultural Studies

Cardiff University

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## SUMMARY

Early fan studies positioned fans as ‘textual poachers’ (Jenkins, 1992), suggesting that fans poach characters and materials from texts as an act of resistance towards commercial culture to form their own readings through fan cultural production such as fan fiction. As such, fans are often presented as a unified, communal group interacting within the context of fan communities that are considered alternative social communities with ‘no established hierarchy’ (Bacon-Smith, 1992, p. 41). However, Milly Williamson argued that fans do not all operate from a position of cultural marginality. Fans not only go on to collaborate with the media producers they allegedly poach from, they also “engage in elitist distinctions between themselves and other...fans” (Williamson, 2005, p. 103).

In this dissertation, I look at fan cultural production (specifically fan fiction) by appropriating Bourdieu’s (1993) theory on the field of cultural production. I also suggest that the field of fan cultural production manifests the principles of a gift economy (Mauss, 1954). In circulating fan cultural production as gifts, fans are entering into a social relationship of reciprocity, where fan reputation, or fan symbolic capital, becomes tied to the gifts presented to the fan community and the social network of the fan author. The accumulation of fan social, fan cultural and fan symbolic capitals creates a subgroup of fans who are often treated like celebrities by their peers, and these fan subcultural celebrities often go on to determine the social and cultural norms of a fan community. This often results in conflict within fandom as fan status is frequently contested and challenged.

By employing an ethnographic study on the fandoms of *The X-Files*, *Angel* and the re-imagined *Battlestar Galactica*, I argue that fan culture is not as homogenous as early fan studies proposed as the boundaries of community and fan celebrity status are frequently challenged.

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## Chapter 1:

### Introduction: Setting the scene

Fan cultural production (in the form of fan fiction, meta, fan art and fan videos) is often observed within the context of the fan community, but is normally theorised around the notion that fans poach the original material to insert their own meanings into the text as a form of resistance towards commercial culture (Jenkins, 1992; Bacon-Smith, 1992). These early fan studies also portray fan communities as alternative, social communities that are considerably more democratic than real life communities, suggesting that fandom is homogenous. However, despite its frequent depiction as homogenous, fan communities are often fraught with conflict, with fans who have contributed to fandom and accumulated a certain level of reputation being treated like (subcultural) celebrities by their peers. These fans often go on to become community leaders and respected fan fiction authors, determining the accepted fan social and cultural norms within fandom, suggesting the existence of a social hierarchy that fan scholars have previously denied the existence of (Bacon-Smith, 1992, p. 41). Milly Williamson argues that, “fan scholars have either posited a homogenous ‘mainstream’ culture, or have concentrated their analysis on one set of cultural values: either on the economic influences in fandom, or on the non-commercial but elitist influences in fandom...[Early fan studies] pose a one-dimensional notion of dominant culture in order to stand in for a thorough discussion of that which fans are said to resist” (2005, pp. 110-111).

In this dissertation, I want to propose that fans are textual gifters, their cultural production circulated and exchanged like gifts; where fandom and the field of fan cultural production represent the principles of the gift economy rather than the

socially subordinated position of fans as textual poachers, which places fandom as an act of resistance: that fans collaborate with the commercial culture they allegedly poach from as much as they resist commercial culture's attempts at controlling them. In an article for the e-journal *Transformative Works and Cultures*, Scott (2009) suggests that recent academic works (Hellekson, 2009; Jenkins et al., 2009) that have drawn parallels between fandom and the gift economy have "acknowledged the inability to engage with gift economies and commodity culture as disparate systems, as commodity culture begins selectively appropriating the gift economy's ethos for its own economic gain". These accounts explore the ways in which the media industry has courted fans. Fans are not merely considered "the most valued customer...most passionate, dedicated, and actively engaged" (Jenkins, 2006, p. 73), they are also providing free labour for media producers who harness fans' attachment and dedication to the text for "word of mouth marketing" (Cochran, 2008, p. 246), a move that has proved financially favourable to the media industry (although often at the expense of fan cultural production, as Cochran highlighted in her study).

But more than that, fan fiction, or more appropriately, fan cultural production is also considered a gift culture. De Kosnik argues that, "many scholars of fan studies claim that fan fiction is, and must remain, free — that is, 'free of charge', but also 'free of the social controls that monetisation would likely impose on it' — because it is inherently a gift culture" (2009, p. 122). Situating fans within the context of the gift culture ensures a more complex view of fandom away from the rigid framework of fans as textual poachers. In this way, fans are not merely resisting readings imposed on them by commercial culture by poaching characters from TV shows and placing them in situations and with characters that producers never intended to, but fan cultural production can also be seen as a labour of love: "fans taking the characters



and the storylines into their own hands and creating something anew” (Dasha K, 2008, questionnaire interview), stressing on Brooker’s declaration that, “fandom is built around love” (1999, p. 52).

The notion of fan fiction as a gift suggests a reciprocal relationship, and this offers scholars a chance to look at the relationship between fans and their readers, other authors and their beta readers, rather than merely looking at fan fiction authors as producers. It also suggests that the field of fan cultural production is a contested one, where the value of the gifts (fan fiction, art, videos, meta) gifted to the community determines the reputation of the gifter. This reputation (fan symbolic capital) is not only dependent on the quality of the gifts (fan subcultural capital) but also on the communities the gifters are members of (fan social capital), their fan social circle. Fans who earn their reputation for providing quality gifts are rewarded with fan celebrity status, and these fans mostly go on to determine the social and cultural norms of a fan community or the fandom.

My research is not merely concerned with how fan collaborations with media producers have impacted fandom. Nor is it merely concerned with how situating fandom as a gift economy protects it from unwanted TV network attention when fans are making use of copyrighted materials. What I am interested in, is how fans’ possession of social, cultural and symbolic capitals, having elevated their status to that of fan subcultural celebrity, change or influence their relationship with other fans in the context of a fan community that is traditionally assumed to be democratic and free from hierarchy. This begets the question of fan relationships driven by conflict because of the possession of these capitals.

### *Fan studies so far*

Fandom-as-resistance is ingrained in many early accounts of fan studies (Jenkins, 1992; Fiske, 1992; Bacon-Smith, 1992) where fans are depicted as rebels who often pose a threat to official/corporate power by the way they adopt the text (films, TV shows, literature) and derive their own meanings out of these texts. Fans create and gather in social, interpretive communities – which, before the Internet, consisted of a “weekend-only world” (Jenkins, 1992, p. 277) of fan club meetings and fan conventions – where these textual meanings are explored through cultural production (talk, fan fiction, fanart, etc.). As Fiske (1989, p. 47) indicates, “everyday life is constituted by the practices of popular culture, and is characterised by the creativity of the weak in using the resources provided by a disempowering system while refusing...to submit to that power”. It is the notion of ‘poaching’ (de Certeau, 1984; Jenkins, 1992), where fans utilise the materials borrowed from official culture, that creates the fan/producer binary, where fans are viewed as inherently powerless, but creative in the ways that they adopt and play with the official texts while the producer officially holds the power over these texts (Hills, 2010).

The fan is always observed within the context of a group (a concert crowd, a sporting event, a fan club gathering, a fan convention, as part of a fan interpretive community) or part of the mass audience (pre-audiences), and is rarely considered via singular, individual identity. When they are, fans are usually pathologised as “the obsessed loner...cut off from family, friends and community. His or her life becomes increasingly dominated by an irrational fixation on a celebrity figure, a perverse attachment that dominates his or her otherwise unrewarding experience” (Jenson, 1992, p. 15). However, that figure of the fan as obsessive loner has now been replaced by the fan as consumer, as observations on the fan shift to the fan as part of a

community or a fan group. In a sense, the fan becomes socialised. Abercrombie and Longhurst propose that fans can be categorised into three groups: “fan, cultist (or subcultist) and enthusiast, who are members of fandoms, and cults (or subcultures) and enthusiasms” (1998, p. 138). These categories are framed by the consumer on one end of the continuum, and petty producer on the other – a concept I will explore further in Chapter 2.

However, Abercrombie and Longhurst’s continuum is a linear progression with no scope for more complex movement between those roles or for that matter, any interchangeability. Crawford (2004) contends that many fan typologies are restrictive and models such as Abercrombie and Longhurst’s are overly static. The consumer-fan-cultist-enthusiast-petty producer continuum assumes that fans move in a linear path from being a consumer to a petty producer. It assumes that everyone consumes, reacts to and engages in media texts in the same way. However, this assumption disregards the journey of the fan individuals, who in their various contributions as fan fiction authors and fan community leaders, earn and accumulate cultural and symbolic capitals that further cement their roles as Big Name Fans or subcultural celebrities in their respective fandoms.

Pierre Bourdieu defined ‘capital’ as a “set of actually usable resources and powers – economic capital, cultural capital and also social capital” (1984, p. 114). According to Bourdieu, “capital acts as a social relation within a system of exchange, and the term is extended ‘to all goods, material and symbolic, without distinction, that present themselves as rare and worthy of being sought after in a particular social formation’ (Harker et al. 1990: 1)” (Webb et al., 2002, p. 22). These capitals are usually exchanged within the field of fan cultural production, where the accumulation of fan social capital, (sub)cultural capital and symbolic capital build on the status of

the fan. Correspondingly, Sarah Thornton (1995) has also developed the concept of subcultural capital based on Bourdieu's theorisation of cultural capital, using it to describe the cultural knowledge that members of a subculture acquire to distinguish themselves from other members of the group. In her observations of clubbers, Thornton identifies hipness as a form of subcultural capital in the context of clubs, where clubs are seen as "refuges for the young where their rules hold sway and that, inside and to some extent outside these spaces, subcultural distinctions have significant consequences" (1995, p. 11). This can also be considered as the *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1977), where Richard Jenkins (1992, pp. 74-75), in discussing Bourdieu, explained that:

[H]abitus only exists inasmuch as it is 'inside the heads' of of actors...through and because of the practices of actors and their interaction with each other and with the rest of their environment: ways of talking, ways of moving, ways of making things...Habitus is emphatically *not* an abstract or idealist concept. It is not just *manifest* in behaviour, it is an integral *part* of it (and vice versa).

Claessens and Dhoest defined habitus as "the product of (formal or informal) education, which provides people with the means to understand the codes of cultural products" (2010, p. 50). Within the habitus of the club in Thornton's case, the clubbers are able to ascertain the authenticity of fellow clubbers via the possession of subcultural capital (hipness), where certain value judgements have been imposed by those in possession of the subcultural capital. Citing Kuipers, Claessens and Dhoest (2010, p. 52) argue that taste culture is:

[A]n 'interpretive community with shared preferences, dislikes and criteria for good and bad taste'. In line with Bourdieu, she defines taste not only as a pattern of preferences and aversions, but also as a form of cultural knowledge, linked to social status.

Taste is both a preference for certain cultural objects, and a framework – or habitus – for the interpretation and evaluation of cultural products. According to Kuipers, taste cultures are relational, as they are mostly defined in contrast with other taste cultures. These relations are often entangled with differences in status and power.

Different fan communities, especially ones catered to different ‘shipper’<sup>1</sup> groups in this case, or different genres of fan fiction, can be considered as a habitus. Each of these fan communities subscribe to a specific interpretation and judgement of value (of a cultural product, for instance, the ‘quality’ of a fan fiction) based on the taste determined by fans who have accumulated certain levels of social status.

Fandom is also frequently applauded for its supposed “communal spirit, what [it] often refers to as its collective ‘hive mind’” (Busse and Hellekson, 2006, p. 8). Although Busse and Hellekson do go on to acknowledge that fandom is “fragmented and fragmentary” (ibid.), I want to challenge this celebratory stance on fandom’s communal spirit that often results in the presentation of fandom as homogenous and without complexities and hierarchies. The existence of multiple, niche communities that cater to very specific (if not very rigid) interpretations of the text in some fandoms – which I will go on to call ‘micro-communities’ in Chapter 4 – suggests that the communal fan spirit may not always be as accommodating as Busse and Hellekson make it out to be. While fans may call on their ‘hive mind’ nature to build on a meta-text, it does not mean that every perspective, every reading of a characterisation will be accepted by the community or fan factions. Even among

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Shipper’ is short for ‘relationship-per’, and is a fan term used to describe fans who support the pairing of specific characters on a show. The origin of the term is believed to be *The X-Files* fandom, according to Fanlore (<http://fanlore.org/wiki/Shipper>).

fandoms with supposed canon-endorsed ‘one true pairing’ (OTP)<sup>2</sup> like *The X-Files*, fans are constantly contesting such readings. Some interpretations will undoubtedly be challenged and the ‘communal spirit’ can become vicious (such as the experience of sections of *Angel* fandom and the existence of communities like fanfic\_hate on LiveJournal, as I will go on to argue in Chapters 4 and 5).

The tendency to applaud fandom for its hive mind and its community spirit tends not to take into account sections of fandom that may not necessarily be the most vocal, or may not possess an opinion that is widely accepted by the majority of fandom collective; the section of fandom that may actually be prevented from voicing their opinions. Fan scholars are often fascinated by the production of slash fiction, declaring it to be an act of resistance against mainstream commercial culture and positioning slash fans as if they are the only ones involved in fan cultural production. Green et al. argue that, “academic accounts of slash seem preoccupied with the question of why straight women write stories about gay male characters, seeing slash as a heterosexual appropriation of queerness” (1998, p. 11). But what these fan scholars do not highlight, is that slash is often considered as a subculture of fan fiction, as I shall briefly explore in Chapter 4.

Fan studies are generally too rigid with their interpretation of fan cultural production, limiting it to the production of slash and often disregarding other forms of cultural production such as general fan fiction, shipper-centred fan fiction, meta, and even the production of fan videos and fan films. Brooker argues that, “slash fiction plays exactly the same game with the primary texts, on a formal level, as does genfic,

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<sup>2</sup> ‘One True Pairing’, often abbreviated to OTP, is the primary character pairing (slash or heterosexual) that a fan is interested in. For a show like *The X-Files* that only featured the characters of Mulder and Scully for the first seven years, for instance, fans mostly assume the characters to be the OTP. In contrast, a show like *Battlestar Galactica* that featured an ensemble of characters, fans may support (or ‘ship’, short for relationship) the relationship of different characters, where the chosen pairing is the fan’s OTP. So, for example, some fans might view Kara(Starbuck)/Sam(Anders) as their OTP, others might consider it to be Kara(Starbuck)/Lee(Apollo).

its heterosexual counterpart. [Genfic are] stories that do nothing more than fill in the gaps...[and] are no less radical than slash in terms of their relationship with the primary texts. Slash relies on the [texts] as much as genfic does; genfic departs from the [texts] as much as slash does” (2002, p. 133). Presenting a homogenous view of fandom as well as fan cultural production cancels out the inner hierarchies that exist in a (fan) community, where the position and role the fan plays is dependent on the possession of fan social, cultural and symbolic capitals. The failure to acknowledge that fans engage in this power play, or for that matter, the failure to acknowledge fan hierarchies that, at times provoke many struggles in fan communities, suggests a failure on academia’s part to recognise the complexities of fan interactions.

Fandom is often observed within the context of feminist theories as well, from scholars like Bacon-Smith (1992) and Penley (1997) to Bury (2005) and Hellekson (2009), who argue that the community aspect of fan culture that thrives on intimacy and the building of relationships provide female fans a space to explore their creative desires (slash fiction being one). Busse (2009, p. 105) argues that, “the story of media fandom is one steeped in economic and gender concerns, from the beginning, when women began creating the narratives commercial media wouldn’t offer – dominated as it is by male producers – to the recent founding of the non-profit advocacy group for fan works, the Organisation for Transformative Works”.

I have, however, chosen to abstain from looking at fan cultures from the context of feminist theories, chiefly because scholars like Busse (2009) and Hellekson (2009) have thus far provided excellent accounts of the gender debate within fan cultures. While I do not refute their claims that, “women overwhelmingly make up [the fan] community” (Hellekson, 2009, p. 114), I believe that it is also equally beneficial to observe fandom and fan cultural production beyond the context of

femininity and gender. LiveJournal, for instance, is often conceded as a female space (Boyd, 2005; Busse, 2006; Driscoll, 2008; Senft, 2008). Senft, in the introduction to her book, *Camgirls*, stated that LiveJournal is the “blogging site of choice” (2008, p. 2) for the subcultural community of ‘camgirls’ she was observing. Driscoll presented similar assumptions, declaring: “Since I was working with fandom communities [on LJ] almost all of the people I worked with were women” (2008, p. 199), while Boyd (2005, n.p.) declared that LJ is “heavily female, young and resistant”. These assumptions portray LJ as a safe place for female fans to “perform [their] identity...that brings together the fannish, political, and personal in ways previously separated in fannish discourse” (Busse, 2006, p. 209).

There is also a tendency in feminist accounts of fandom to focus on the collaborative effort of fandom (the feminine attribute in nurturing relationships); but in doing so, other readings of fan interactions, most notably the creation of fan social hierarchies tend to be neglected. Busse has suggested that economic issues are often gendered, as male fans are more likely to turn their fannish endeavours into for-profit projects while women embrace the notion of gift culture (2009, p. 106). There is no conceptual space in this argument to suggest that fans – both male and female – can do both: embrace the gift culture of fandom but at the same time, acknowledge that their gifts to fandom can act as calling cards and networking opportunities for their own careers in the media industry. Feminist accounts rarely factor in the complexity of the fan relationships and the struggle to determine fan social hierarchies, since these accounts tend to emphasize the nurturing, intimacy and collaborative effort of the female fan community.

Hellekson argues that fans’ embrace of the gift culture:

[C]onstruct a new, gendered space that relies on the circulation of gifts for its cohesion with no currency and little



meaning outside the economy, and that deliberately repudiates a monetary model (because it is gendered male). The goal of community-building transactions in online media fandom is the creation of a stable space...to permit performance of gendered, alternative, queered identity (2009, p. 116).

Hellekson's argument is problematic here; in acknowledging fans' embrace of gift culture, she argues that it rejects the masculine-centred monetary model in order for fans to create a stable space that is resistant to commercial culture, disregarding the fan social, cultural and symbolic capitals that are exchanged in place of economic capital. On the one hand, Hellekson appears to move the argument away from fans-as-poachers approach, but on the other, she reinforces the fandom-as-resistance argument, discounting the complicated fan-media producers relationship.

In the next section, I argue that contrary to Hellekson's argument, the gift culture can be considered a field whereby fans negotiate their subcultural celebrity status.

### *Fandom as a gift economy*

One of the most enduring visions of fandom is that fans are textual poachers, as first proposed by Henry Jenkins in his seminal work of the same name. Drawing on Michel de Certeau's work, Jenkins argues that the 'poaching' analogy "characterises the relationship between readers and writers as an ongoing struggle for possession of the text and for control over its meanings" (1992, p. 24). One of the examples Jenkins uses is the fan activity of writing slash fiction to indicate textual poaching. As slash fiction centres on the romantic relationship (sexual or otherwise) between two male characters, fans' engagement with slash can be seen as a way of taking control of the text and its meanings, especially on a show that does not explicitly feature or indicate

this homoerotic subtextual reading (cf. Gwennlian-Jones, 2000 on *Xena* as a text that encourages this reading).

As slashing the text becomes one of the more wildly divergent readings fans perform on their favourite texts, this genre of fan fiction has become synonymous with fan cultural production as most fan scholars from Bacon-Smith (1992) and Penley (1997) to Busse (2006) view slash fiction as – among others things – an act of (fan) rebellion against traditionally masculine and patriarchal (commercial) culture, exercised largely by heterosexual women. “Academic accounts of slash tend to deal with it in isolation from the larger framework of genres within fan fiction” (Green et al., 1998, p. 11). It enables academia to set up an extreme position of fan resistance even though in the act of producing the fan fiction, fans are inserting their own interpretations into the original texts. Either way, whatever the genre, the cultural production of fan fiction is positioned as a form of textual poaching.

However, I want to suggest a different approach to the concept of fan cultural production here. The act of poaching, while useful, is still framed within the tropes of fandom-as-resistance where fans are viewed as social subordinates: “Like the poachers of old, fans operate from a position of cultural marginality and social weakness...Fans lack direct access to the means of commercial cultural production and have only the most limited resources with which to influence entertainment industry’s decisions” (Jenkins, 1992, p. 26). While it remains true that fans still have little influence on the entertainment industry’s decisions, remaining caught up in a discourse that effectively confines fan practices to merely that of poaching seems unhelpful.

Firstly, it appears to suggest that fans remain confined to the realm of fandom (and by extension, social subordination) without an opportunity for upward mobility,

that is, for fans to become official media producers themselves. Many scholars, including Bacon-Smith (1992), Penley (1997) and Jenkins (1992) have commented on fan fiction authors who have turned professional. Hills (2010) has also observed the culture of fans-turned-producers in *Doctor Who* fandom. More importantly, the media industry's current courtship of fans in providing free labour for their marketing strategies of popular texts suggests that fans are not entirely operating from a position of total social subordination. There are, evidently, conditions attached to fans who have accepted their roles as collaborators, but observing fans strictly as poachers seems ineffective.

Rather than confining fans to being poachers, I want to suggest a new term that is not embedded with the concept of cultural marginality: that of fans as 'textual gifters' (cf. Hellekson, 2009 who provides a gendered reading of fandom as a gift culture). Within the context of fandom, many fans see their cultural production of fan fiction not as poaching but more as a form of gifting, contributing to the fan meta-text they build for their fandom: "Fanfic is the equivalent of retelling a myth. No one says campfire storytellers are poaching the Woman in White story when they scare themselves silly with it. It's entertainment, but it's also an opportunity for people to experience archetypal storytelling on a very personal level" (Fan D, 2008, questionnaire interview). More than just a retelling of myths, the collection of fan fiction in a particular fandom can be seen as building that fandom's reputation. For example, as I will go into more detail later in this dissertation, it could then be argued that fans' emphasis on the production of 'quality'<sup>3</sup> fan fiction occurs partly because fan fiction contributes to the repository of reputation-building artefacts that the fandom has produced. In a sense, as Dasha K, considered to be a popular fan fiction

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<sup>3</sup> However, this 'quality' is culturally and even socially constructed as the criteria with which fans judge the 'quality' of fan fiction is dependent on the dominant fan readings of the particular fan community as well as the author's social network within fandom.

author in *XF* fandom suggests, being able to produce quality fan fiction that is well-researched and well-written is “a matter of pride” (2008, questionnaire interview), a matter of reputation (symbolic capital) not only for the author, but also for the entire fandom<sup>4</sup>.

In a fan essay, Rachael Sabotini (1999) equated the fan fiction community to a Northwestern Native Indian *potlatch*, a feast where gifts are exchanged among the hosts and the invited guests. The gifting and reciprocity of the gifts become a marker of status and reputation for the community. Anthropologist Marcel Mauss highlighted the Papua New Guinean exchange system known as the *kula*, a “process marked by a continuous flow in all directions of presents given, accepted, and reciprocated, obligatory and out of self-interest, by reason of greatness and for services rendered, through challenges and pledges” (1954, p. 37). Transposed into the context of fandom, Mauss’s explanation of the *kula* can be used to explain the exchange of fan fiction in fandom.

Within fan fiction fandom, the production of fan fiction (especially for larger and more active fandoms) is, as Mauss said, a continuous flow in all directions. It is not merely the fan fiction that is considered a gift; the accepted norm within fandom is that when a reader chooses to read a fan fiction (acceptance of a gift), feedback is usually expected (reciprocity) – the higher quality the fan fiction and the feedback (or constructive criticism), the higher value the gifts are considered. In some fan fiction communities, this process of gifting is more direct, as fan fiction authors dedicate the stories to their friends on special occasions, fellow community members and beta readers (for services rendered in editing the fan fiction).

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<sup>4</sup> Much like how The Gossamer Project, a fan fiction archive for *The X-Files* fandom is always praised and reputed for being, to this date, one of the few fandoms that attempts to archive and collect as many of its fan fictions under one, central place.

Gifts themselves contain power, as Mauss argues: “the material purposes of the contracts, the things exchanged in them, also possess a special intrinsic power, which causes them to be given and above all to be reciprocated...The obligation to give is the essence of the *potlatch*” (1954, pp. 49 and 50). For fans, the value of a fan fiction is considerably depreciated when a fan fiction author appears imprudent with the story: producing a sub-standard story and perhaps worst of all, threatening to withhold the continuation of a story until satisfactory feedback (in quality and quantity) is received, suggesting that not only can fans be discriminatory, but that different cultural norms dictate different acceptable behaviours in different fan communities.

This discrimination can often be witnessed by the way fan fiction fans<sup>5</sup> of *The X-Files* judge the fan fictions that originate from authors who only exclusively post to FanFiction.net, a multi-fandom fan fiction archive launched in 1998 and often touted as the largest on the Internet that is easily accessible, especially for the mainstream press, curious about fan fiction<sup>6</sup>. Where it may be considered a norm for fans who frequent Fanfiction.net to request that they receive feedback (not necessarily constructive criticism) or an acknowledgement that fans are interested in reading the stories they are posting – often using the number of feedbacks and comments received as a way of gauging fan interest in continuing to write a story – it is unacceptable behaviour in *XF* fan fiction communities outside of FanFiction.net to do so. Dasha K says: “The more a fan contributes to the fandom, the more status and power they have. Almost all of the BNFs (big name fans) in the *XF* fandoms have become big

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<sup>5</sup> I use the term ‘fan fiction fans’ to classify those fans who, instead of merely being fans of the text, go on to become fans of specific fan fiction authors. These fans often go on to support and read the fan fiction by their favourite authors even if they have stopped watching the shows.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Plotz (2000), Buechner (2002), Pauli (2002) and Helmore (2006). The media coverage surrounding FF.net is not exactly flattering either. Multi-fandom archives like FF.net have been accused of providing “an unending supply of smutty fantasies with bizarre misspellings, tortured grammar and no character development” (Truman & Chapman, 2006).

names because they contributed ‘gifts’ to the fans – fiction, reviews, beta reading, etc. The more one contributes, and the better quality of the gifts, the more status” (2008, questionnaire interview).

In appropriating Pierre Bourdieu, Jenkins argues that, “taste distinctions determine not only desirable and undesirable forms of culture but also desirable and undesirable ways of relating to cultural objects, desirable and undesirable strategies of interpretation and styles of consumption” (1992, p. 16). These taste distinctions often lead to conflict in fan communities as fans determine the boundaries of their interpretations, and they are sometimes used to justify the generational split between, for instance, fans who avoid the FanFiction.net system, like the *XF* fans who prefer the standards set up and developed in the early days of the fandom and those who are only familiar with posting to multi-fandom archives like FanFiction.net.

In the next section, I will reflect on why *The X-Files* has been chosen as the main fandom for this research (although I do, in later chapters, refer to other cult TV fandoms such as those of *Angel*, *Lost* and the re-imagined *Battlestar Galactica*) and how the Internet, and specifically Web 2.0 has changed the relationship between fans and media producers.

### *The X-Files and Fandom 2.0*

*The X-Files* fandom has been repeatedly acknowledged (Reeves et al., 1996; Clerc, 1996) for being “one of the first shows to flourish on the Internet” (Lavery et al., 1996, p. 20) since it debuted on television at a time when Internet culture was starting to become more mainstream. Reeves et al. suggest that, “because of [the fans’] high profile on the express lane of the information superhighway, they have generated a great deal of media attention” (1996, p. 22). *XF* fans build their

communities around newsgroups, mailing list communities and forums, developing a centralised system whereby fan fiction can be posted and archived on one website, The Gossamer Project<sup>7</sup>. In essence, their fan cultural production is systematic and self-contained, mirroring the *Star Trek* slash fiction production observed by Bacon-Smith (1992) and Penley (1997) in the pre-Internet days. The rules are also extremely specific, among them: fan fiction needs to have a clear disclaimer, rating and specifications (for example, genre or any warnings the reader should be aware of, especially around more sensitive topics such as character death, rape and even slash); a fan fiction author who is serious about their craft will seek out a beta reader for their stories; and any fan fiction that features the actors are generally not allowed, and therefore not archived on Gossamer.

However, as the fandom developed online over the course of the nine years the show was on the air (from 1993 to 2002), fans also had to deal with the growth of the Internet, perhaps most interestingly, with the advent of blogging in the early noughties. Scholars like Busse and Hellekson have observed how fans appropriated a blogging/journaling space like LiveJournal, proposing that there is now a “constant intrusion of personal information between fannish discussions and [fan] fiction” (2006, p. 14) that changes the interaction of fans. Fans’ appropriation of, and presence on LiveJournal have created a new culture of visibility in, and openness to other fandoms whereas before, our glimpses of fandom were mostly restricted to fandom-specific private mailing lists and forums. Spaces like LiveJournal have enabled fans to combine their fannish identity for multiple, different fandoms and their personal identity through their interaction on LiveJournal, and as Busse and Hellekson claim,

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<sup>7</sup> For storage bandwidth purposes, all novel-length fan fiction is stored on a different archive called The Annex (<http://www.annex-files.com/annex/>)

have “allowed easier entry into fandom at a time when the number of new fans are ever increasing” (ibid.).

Furthermore, Busse and Hellekson also suggest that, “rules that seemed important in the old-model enculturation stage – for instance, the admonition to never, ever write slash [or any stories] based on real people rather than characters (known as *real person slash*, or *RPS*) – have lost their meaning” (2006, p. 13). This assumption is not necessarily true, as ‘real person fan fiction’ (RPF) is still generally unaccepted among most *XF* fan fiction circles<sup>8</sup>. Busse and Hellekson celebrate the movement of fans from one online space to the next, suggesting that the “spaces are continuously inhabited, with fans moving in and out of the spaces as their inclination and technological limitations dictate” (2006, p. 16) but I want to caution the celebratory note of their take, on fandom moving, seemingly without struggle or tension, to new spaces like LiveJournal.

In my observations, particularly in Chapter 5, *XF* fans mark this generational split by drawing very clear boundaries between those who continue to frequent spaces like mailing list communities and forums, and fans who are only familiar with multi-fandom spaces like FanFiction.net and LiveJournal, with neither factions seemingly willing to compromise and acknowledge the other. But while boundaries are clearly being drawn between the different generational fans, the growth of social media has also changed the relationship between fans (some of them newer fans of the show) and media producers in general.

Simone Murray remarks that, “cultural studies work on fandom is notable for its reluctance to investigate rigorously the commercial utility of fan communities to

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<sup>8</sup> Although some authors have ventured to write fan fiction featuring the series’ actors (also known as RPF – real person fiction), this is mostly concentrated on LiveJournal and membership as well as knowledge of the community is privileged to like-minded fans, and is therefore, inaccessible to those outside the immediate circle of the particular fan faction.



corporate marketing and publicity structures, and especially for its disinclination to investigate how recent Internet developments may be shifting the parameters of this relationship” (2004, p. 21). However, recent fan studies have become less preoccupied with the view of fans as resistant to commercial culture and shifted attention to the increasingly complicated and blurred roles, and relationships of fans and media producers (Jenkins, 2006; Scott, 2008; Hills, 2010).

The proliferation of Web 2.0 and digital media into everyday life has “media companies...learning how to accelerate the flow of media content across delivery channels to expand revenue opportunities, broaden markets, and reinforce viewer commitments. [On the other hand,] consumers are learning how to use these different media technologies to bring the flow of media more fully under their control and to interact with other consumers” (Jenkins, 2006, p. 18). Fans are not merely blogging about their fandoms, or finding more creative ways of circulating or presenting their fan fictions, or uploading their fan-made videos to YouTube; they are also engaging with media producers and celebrities on social networking sites like Twitter and Facebook, making their fan identities even more accessible and public.

Scott speaks of how commercial culture is developing a mixed economy to co-opt fans into marketing strategies for their media products: “Media producers, primarily through the lure of ‘gifted’ ancillary content aimed at fans through official websites, are rapidly perfecting a mixed economy that obscures its commercial imperatives through a calculated adoption of fandom’s gift economy, its sense of community and the promise of participation” (2009, n.p.). Scott (2008, 2009) is critical of this development, arguing that the rise of canon material such as podcasts and webisodes produced specifically for the fans, suppress fan creativity (2008, pp. 214-215). However, I argue in Chapter 7 that this development has created a new

group of fans: fan journalists, who maintain their close connection to fandom, but nevertheless, collaborate with media producers in providing content as well as insider news and information for the fans, thereby bypassing third party institutions like the entertainment media.

Rather than considering these fan journalists as merely pandering to commercial culture's seduction and promises of insider content, these fans act as intermediaries between fandom and media producers, often going to the extent of acting as gate-keepers for the media producers and celebrities they have contact with. In exchange, they attain subcultural celebrity status within fandom, as their social and symbolic capitals are strengthened by their connection to the media producers and to the celebrities. These developments are further advocated by the development of Web 2.0 and convergence culture. *The X-Files* fandom is seemingly situated in the trajectory of this development, with fans building a self-sufficient community that is still in use today for the posting and archiving of the show's fan fiction. The fans' presence within convergence culture was felt in 2008 when the media producers harnessed the power of grassroots promotions, making use of several fans (and one website in particular) as mediators for the marketing of the show's second film.

These developments, from fans drawing strict (generational) boundaries in their communities to the creation of fan subcultural celebrities in fan journalists, call for further exploration that needs to be examined in the context of fan cultural production. In the next section, I will turn to look in greater detail at the chapter breakdowns of this dissertation.

## *Chapter breakdowns*

I begin by giving an overview of the theoretical frameworks that have contributed to the formulation of this research. I start by trying to locate the idea of the fan individual, positing through the examination of the work of Crawford (2004) that traditional fan typologies are usually too rigid to present the fan as a multi-faceted individual who will most likely play multiple roles in various fan communities in fandom. Furthermore, I suggest that situating fans as part of a mass audience creates the notion that fandom is homogenous – that fans all interpret the text or assign value to fan cultural production in the same way. This, of course, makes it difficult to see how fans collect and accumulate their social, cultural and symbolic capitals. Recognising that they have not lost their individuality, that they each respond to the text in a different manner is a way of breaking the figure of the fan away from the rigid typologies it appears have to been caught in academically.

I also look at the anthropological theories (Mauss, 1954; Cheal, 1988) surrounding the gift economy which I appropriate into the context of fandom to explore the notion of fan fiction fandom. Fan cultural production has always been defined by Jenkins's term, 'textual poachers', which I argue carries negative connotations. Continuing to define fans as textual poachers acknowledges the notion that fans are operating from a socially subordinate space, and that fandom can only be understood as a form of resistance to commercial culture. However, I suggest that fans themselves may not identify as poachers, but rather as 'textual gifters' as they work towards contributing to the fandom's legacy (in the case of *XF*, for example, an elitist insistence on the production of quality, errorless fan fictions). In the final section of the literature review, I also turn to look at the field of fan cultural production through the application of Bourdieu's field theory (1993), suggesting that

fans who are active participants in this field accumulate fan social, cultural and symbolic capitals which all work towards building their reputation within fandom. So, respected and beloved fan fiction authors, for instance, will have the social power and the status to decide what constitutes quality fan fiction. Correspondingly, fan community leaders can assert their views and positions of the original text and its characters as a way of creating boundaries for, as well as containing difference in the fan community.

In Chapter 3, I explore the methodological complications of employing ethnography as a research method for a study on fandom. Scholars like Hills (2002) have questioned researchers' tendency to rely explicitly on fan ethnographic accounts as representations of the truth about fan cultures without taking into consideration the "processes of auto-legitimation" (p. 66) that fans often rely on. As an alternative, Hills suggests an autoethnography exercise which puts the fans' "tastes, values, attachments and investments" (2002, p. 72) under intense scrutiny and constant cultural analysis. While I question the practicality of implementing such an intensive exercise on fans in general, I take into consideration Monaco's (2010) proposal, which suggests that the researcher performs the autoethnography exercise instead as a way of understanding and reflecting critically on the researcher's knowledge production and how that influences the decisions and positions presented in the study.

From here, I move on to the empirical chapters of the dissertation. The structure of this research can be broken into two main parts. The first part is concerned with the fan fiction fan's community life that is often driven by the level of fan social, cultural and symbolic capitals they have accumulated in their respective fan fiction communities. In Chapter 4, I start where most academic studies into fan culture starts: by looking at the fan community. But rather than replicate the ideas

previously suggested, that fan communities provide an alternative social community for fans that is free from any hierarchical structures, thereby creating a homogenous fan culture, I suggest that fans constantly police the boundaries of their fan communities. This action often produces conflict, as fans are not only determining who the insiders and outsiders are in this case, but they are also containing difference, ensuring that the status quo of the fan community remains (and thus, retaining the social power of those who have accumulated a certain level of fan social and fan symbolic capitals). This conflict often results in the creation of 'micro-communities', smaller communities of fans whose views on the text have been discriminated against among the general (more dominant) fandom. It is here that I start developing the idea that the symbolic capitals that fans accumulate are not transferable.

In Chapter 5, I continue this line of argument by looking at the boundaries that fan fiction fans draw between those who remain steadfastly loyal to fan forums and mailing list communities and those who prefer 'newer' spaces such as LiveJournal and Fanfiction.net. By returning to the notion of the gift economy, I explore the value of fan cultural production and suggest that further to the micro-communities divide which confines the accumulation of fan symbolic capital (and by extension, the fan subcultural celebrity status) to the specific micro-community or fandom (that is, the fan social and symbolic capitals are non-transferable), a generational divide also exists between fans.

In the second part of the research, I shift my focus to look at the development of fan subcultural celebrities. Convergence culture led scholars like Jenkins (2006) to suggest the emergence of a collaborative relationship between media producers and fans, where the commercial media industry has been co-opting fans into the marketing strategies of their media products in exchange for access to insider information.

Chapter 6 looks at how media producers might maintain their symbolic power while co-opting fans into performing free labour to help promote new media products at the same time. In doing so, media producers are also contributing to the creation of fan subcultural celebrity in fandom as they choose which groups of fans to work or engage with, thus generating further social hierarchical structures in fandom.

In Chapter 7, I look into more detail at this producer-fan collaboration, specifically at a group of fans I call the 'fan journalists', whose access to the producers and celebrities have earned them a certain level of subcultural celebrity status among fandom as well. I argue that this collaborative relationship is mutually beneficial rather than merely exploitative as some scholars like Scott (2008) have suggested. The media producers get access to a wealth of fan labour, be it directly addressing fans via their blogs or indirectly through a group of selected fan journalists that act as intermediaries or liaisons between fans and producers, but at the same time, these fans have to exhibit a level of professional behaviour in order to maintain this collaborative relationship with the producers.

This does not mean that all fans have become collaborators, however, as I argue that some fans remain resistant to the presence of media producers in their fannish lives. As with the fan fiction producers I observed in Chapters 4 and 5, fans are continually policing the boundaries of their community, often to the extent of positioning those whom they consider outsiders as 'others'. Fan journalists apply the same strategies, drawing boundaries between themselves and fans who approach them in search of a connection to the media producers or celebrities, rationalising that they have to maintain a professional attitude in order to continue gaining access to these networks. At the same time, the authenticity of their access is constantly being

challenged, often by fans who are sceptical of the fan-media producer collaborative relationship.

These observations are by no means representative of the whole of *The X-Files* fandom or, the entirety of the Cordelia/Angel shippers in the *Angel* fandom, for that matter. My observations merely suggest that fandom, with its intricate web of fan relationships and community boundaries that may be frequently challenged, is non-homogenous. These considerations, and the directions this research can be taken further will be discussed in Chapter 8. In the following chapter, I will first look at the theoretical frameworks that inform this dissertation.

## Chapter 2:

### Literature Review

In this chapter, I will examine the theoretical frameworks that inform and shape my own approach to this research project, focusing mainly on three areas of concern. In the first section, I will argue for a more fluid approach to the notion of the fan individual, who is often observed as part of a fan interpretive community. I suggest that the widely accepted definition and understanding of fandom does not leave any space for the development of a different level of fans in fandom – the fans who become admirers of their fellow fans who have acquired a (subcultural) celebrity status in their roles spanning across the various fields of fan cultural production, as prolific fan fiction authors, popular community leaders or celebrated ‘fan journalists’ who bring exclusive interviews and news to the fandom via their connection to official media producers.

The complexities that arise from the emergence of ‘fan celebrities’, the social and cultural hierarchies that influence fan interactions as well as conflicts, and fans’ endeavours to obtain status within their respective fandoms invite new questions that need to be explored. Furthermore, the constant scholarly positioning of fans within fan interpretive communities has resulted in the loss of the role of the individual fan. Fans are frequently assumed and observed as part of a ‘mass’ – their activities and interactions governed by and executed within a group. Fans are in “sports crowds wearing their teams’ colours or rock audiences dressing and behaving like the bands” (Fiske, 1992, p. 40). Their roles as part of the fan interpretive community overshadow the role of the multifaceted fan, whose producerly and consumerist roles are often blurred and interchangeable.



Jenkins's legacy of positioning fans as 'textual poachers' too resonates with scholarly explorations of fandom where fans are constantly assumed to be poachers who remain resistant towards the commercial culture within which their objects of fandom are located and produced. The idea of fandom-as-resistance still informs many academic studies on fandom today, almost as a default position in the ways in which fandom is approached. However, in recent years, fan scholars like Murray (2004), Jenkins (2006) and Cochran (2008) have suggested that fans have been co-opted into the marketing strategies of film studios and television networks, providing easily accessible free labour, especially for franchised brands that have an established audience. "Media producers and advertisers now speak about 'emotional capital' or 'lovemarks' to refer to the importance of audience investment and participation in media content" (Jenkins, 2006, p. 169). But this is not to say that in an age of convergence, the ideology of fandom-as-resistance is entirely outdated, as fans themselves still embrace this idea of a resistant, anti-corporate identity. Milly Williamson reminds us that "fans who oppose commercial values do not really oppose them, it is not *just* a game of cultural distinction but it is constrained by the process of distinction" (2005, p. 115 – italics in original).

Rather, fan interactions and exchanges reflect that of a gift economy, as scholars like Hellekson (2009, p. 114) are beginning to acknowledge. Scott (2009, n.p.) argues that "this strategic definition of fandom as a gift economy serves as a defensive front to impede encroaching industrial factions". Hellekson has suggested that there is a legal and social imperative to view fandom in this manner. By ensuring that it is a gift economy, fans are protected from any legal complications that would label them as copyright violators – Jenkins (2008, n.p.) terms it as an "unofficial truce between fans and producers" on his weblog. Hellekson also goes on to argue that by

maintaining characteristics of the gift economy, “fan culture preserves its own autonomy while simultaneously solidifying the group and permitting encoding of transactions by imbuing them with community-specific meaning” (2009, p. 117).

I want to propose, however, that situating fandom within the tropes of the gift economy does not exempt it from any social hierarchies. Instead, absent economic capital that fans cannot gain from their cultural production, social capital (the fan’s social circle), subcultural capital (insider knowledge, fan award-winning creative works) and symbolic capital (status and reputation) are exchanged and accumulated where the more outstanding of the fan fiction authors, artists or video producers (vidders) attain celebrity status. The second section of the chapter will explore the anthropological concepts of the gift economy, and how, through the process of de-commodification (where meanings of commodities are assigned new value and worth once they are appropriated by the consumer, or in this case, the fans), the gift economy can be re-contextualised into fan cultural production. Using primarily fan fiction as an example, I will examine how this particular genre of fan cultural production can and have been regarded as gifts that are exchanged in fandom.

The accumulation of social capital, subcultural capital and symbolic capital within fandom also enables me to apply Bourdieu’s theories on the field of cultural production, which I will turn to look at in the third and final section of the chapter. Bourdieu’s theory of the field of cultural production is useful here in allowing for a more comprehensive observation of fan interactions and relationships during the production (as well as consumption) of fan fiction. As I will go on to explore later, previous fan scholarly works have used Pierre Bourdieu’s works on the distinction of taste and capital on a grand scale (fans vs. non-fans, media producers vs. fans); but what of distinction within fandom itself? Bourdieu’s treatise on the social, cultural

and symbolic capitals is conducted in the milieu of French bourgeois society, an observation that Richard Jenkins (1992, p. 148) has suggested may not necessarily be directly transferable to British or American society. Applying Bourdieu's theories to the specificity of fandom requires appropriation of social, cultural and symbolic capitals into the framework of fandom; where fandom would have to exist as a social and cultural field, "a separate social universe having its own laws of functioning independent of those of politics and the economy" (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 162).

Therefore, in locating the fan individual, I am proposing that it will enable us to move away from the assumption that fan identities are inherently tied to fan communities. That is not to say that fans no longer participate in communal activities. After all, as Baym (2000, p. 17), echoing Jenkins (1992) reminds us, "an individual's reading of a show becomes shaped to conform to the collaborative reading". Fans' view and opinion of certain websites and communities are often shaped by the fan community they are members of, as I will go on to explore in greater detail in Chapters 4 and 5 later. However, it is important not to lose sight of the role these fan individuals play, especially when they acquire social power in their communities. Furthermore, acknowledging the fan individual will also present a clearer picture of how social capital, subcultural capital and symbolic capital are exchanged, accumulated and valued within a gift economy of fan cultural production. Employing Bourdieu's theory of cultural production will also facilitate a view where fandom is considered a social universe with its own set of rules, regulations and players.

### *Locating the fan individual*

Fan studies emerged from the tradition of audience research, which at its inception, regarded audiences as inherently passive and "unified in their thoughts,

desires and needs” (Harris, 1998, p. 4). Audiences were powerless dupes within the context of the behavioural paradigm, according to Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998), who in their book *Audiences* examined the changing paradigms in the field of audience research. Abercrombie and Longhurst divide audience research into three major phases – ‘behavioural’, where audiences are regarded as passive and powerless against media conglomerates; ‘incorporation/resistance’, where the audience is considered active in terms of resisting the meanings presented to them but power distribution is still regarded as linear leading from the media corporations to the individual; and finally, the ‘spectacle/performance’ paradigm, where being an audience member is part of everyday life in an increasingly media-saturated society.

Abercrombie and Longhurst suggest that early fan literature emerged from the concerns raised by the second research paradigm, the ‘Incorporation/Resistance Paradigm’ (IRP) that places emphasis on the role of the media as a site of struggle between incorporation of audience members into an assumed dominant ideology, and audience resistance on the other end. However, as Abercrombie and Longhurst argue, it is also possible to situate fan studies within the subsequent model, the ‘Spectacle/Performance Paradigm’ (SPP). The SPP “is a response to changes in the nature of the audience and in the experience of being a member of an audience” (1998, p. 36) through, not least, processes such as those of commoditisation where individuals are simultaneously treated both as consumers and members of an audience.

In the SPP stage, the experience of being a member of an audience becomes normalized into everyday life that is highly, and clearly media-saturated:

In any one evening of television watching...audiences are exposed to a multitude of texts of radically different formats and genres which do not add up to a coherent experience.

Even more diverse, of course, is the audience exposure to the media *as a whole*. An evening's media activity may consist largely of television viewing but at times when there is no suitable programme available, our hypothetical viewer could well listen to Oasis or *La Bohème* and conclude his or her evening by reading the newspaper, a magazine or a book – or all three. Media consumption in the 1990s is essentially a fragmented experience (p. 33).

Media consumption in the noughties becomes even more fragmented as the audience member can consume any of the above media forms via a computer, or surf the Internet, publish a blog post while having the television on or listening to music at the same time. Essentially, being a member of an audience becomes mundane, a form of audience Abercrombie and Longhurst define as the 'diffused audience': a highly mediated audience within a narcissistic and performative society. "So deeply infused into everyday life is performance that we are unaware of it in ourselves or in others. Life is a constant performance; we are audience and performer at the same time; everybody is an audience all the time. Performance is not a discrete event" (p. 73).

The normalization of this experience is reflected in the works on fandom that emerged post-*Textual Poachers* (1992), where being a fan is normalised as part of media consumption (Harrington and Bielby, 1995; Hills, 2002; Sandvoss, 2005; Jenkins, 2006; Hellekson and Busse, 2006). While Abercrombie and Longhurst call for a normalisation in audiences, their hypothesis falls short when they arrive at the definition of fandom. "Our suggestion is that the literature discussed so far can be read as to introduce three categories ranged along a continuum: fan, cultist (or subcultist) and enthusiast, who are members of fandoms, cults (or subcultures) and enthusiasms respectively" (1998, p. 138). This continuum of the triumvirate of

different fan identities is situated within the confining spectrum of consumer on one end and 'petty producer' on the other end.

Fans are likened to children with relatively heavy media use who have, in the process, become attached to certain texts or stars. They lack specific organization and represent people who have little contact with other fans (Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998, p. 138). Cultists, on the other hand, are "closer to what much of the recent literature has called a fan. There are very explicit attachments to stars or to particular programmes and types of programme" (Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998, pp. 138-139). Their media use is more specialized than that of 'fans' and they have an increased immersion in activities through an established network of other 'cultists'.

While the definition of 'cultists' appears to coincide with the general consensus on fans, Abercrombie and Longhurst consider *Star Trek* fans as 'enthusiasts': "Enthusiasms are, in our terms,...based predominantly around activities rather than media or stars. Media use is then likely to be specialized in that it may be based around a specialist literature, produced by enthusiasts for enthusiasts, even though the producing company may be part of a conglomerate" (p. 139). Abercrombie and Longhurst's description of 'enthusiasts' appears to be more fittingly used in describing fans of other fans, where I suggest that fans potentially become fans of their peers – fellow fan fiction authors, artists or essayists, for instance – where even if they have stopped watching the shows, continue to enjoy the creative works produced by these fans. Abercrombie and Longhurst suggest that media consumption among 'enthusiasts' tends to be more specialized, and many fan fiction fans, for instance, consider the production of fan fiction to be the only activity that defines their fan identities. These fans' activities and interactions in fandom are framed by the

production and consumption of fan fiction<sup>1</sup> – the specialist literature in this case. This is obviously not the only form of cultural production fans engage in, as activities like meta discussions, icon-making and text-based role-playing games (a lot of which are based on LiveJournal, which fans have appropriated) are also forms of cultural production.

Sandvoss argues that the various categorisations of fans as proposed by Abercrombie and Longhurst are important, as “such a taxonomy of fandom enables us to read the different conclusions concerning the potential for empowerment and emancipation in fandom in light of the different groups of fans studies” (2005, p. 32). However, there are several problems with this definition other than the obvious, as Hills (2002, p. ix) observed, “it seems faintly unhelpful to produce a taxonomy in which the definition of ‘fan’ is at odds with the use of this term in almost all other literature in the field”.

Abercrombie and Longhurst’s definition also reflects a linear progression of the fan from consumer to petty producer. Furthermore, defining fans of a specific television show like *Star Trek* as merely ‘enthusiasts’ not only limits the scope of the particular group of fans, but fandom in general as well, painting a rigid picture of fans and their activities that appears to be inflexible; when in truth, as scholars like Crawford (2005) have suggested, fans can move across the different categories in a non-linear pattern. It is akin to declaring fan fiction writing to be the *only* activity performed by fans, while other fan activities like costuming, in-depth episode

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<sup>1</sup> The basis of fan fiction can be a singular text, or a group of similarly themed texts of which authors and readers are fans. They can also be based on the stars of the show or film. Known as RPF (Real Person Fiction) or ‘actorfic’, the genre is still considered a taboo in some fan circles (e.g. *The X-Files*, *Buffy*) but in recent years, have become increasingly common (especially in fandoms like *Supernatural*) and expanded out of fan fiction based on music bands generally known as ‘bandfic’. Within the *Lord of the Rings* film fandom, for instance, this group of fans is identified as ‘tin hats’ among fans in jest, in reference to tin hats normally worn by conspiracy theorists who believe that the hats will prevent governments from controlling their minds. The origin of the term within *LOTR* fandom is explained here: [http://www.livejournal.com/community/anth\\_mona/1296.html](http://www.livejournal.com/community/anth_mona/1296.html).

discussions and convention attendance are considered less valid, less noteworthy and less radical.

Furthermore, Abercrombie and Longhurst's observation on the 'enthusiasts', whose specialist literature is produced for other 'enthusiasts' through a production company that may be part of a conglomerate (p. 139) is clearly based on very general viewpoints of [the longer established] *Doctor Who*, *Star Trek* and *Star Wars* fandoms – in particular where fan fiction authors branch out by turning their fan fiction into officially-sanctioned novelizations, and fan films (particularly for *Star Wars*) are marketed. As Brooker observes, "amateur filmmakers increasingly see their projects as calling cards and potential springboards to careers in the movie industry" (2002, p. 175). Other fandoms, with equally rich traditions as well as fan production materials such as the *Lord of the Rings*, *Harry Potter* and even *The X-Files*, are still very much producing fan material on a more grassroots level, distributing them among tight-knit fan circles (Bacon-Smith, 1992; Penley, 1991 and 1997). That is not to say that these fan fiction authors will not nor do not aspire to become professional authors. Some use fan fiction as a platform to improve their writing, or experiment with different writing styles, and to get instant feedback from their readers. These fans' supposed 'grassroots' activity does not mean that fan fiction fandom does not function according to a systematic set of rules and regulations that Penley (1997) suggests mirrors commercial industries.

In addition, the usage of the term 'cultist' may prove even more problematic for the identity of fans, who have been trying to avoid the stigma of pathologisation. Subscribing to Abercrombie and Longhurst's definitions can only stress the already-negative connotations surrounding fans, as the terms 'cult' (specifically when used independently of 'cult media') and 'cultists' draw an immediate parallel and



comparison to the already problematic field of religion and religious cults<sup>2</sup>. At the same time, Abercrombie and Longhurst's proposed 'consumer-fan-cultist-enthusiast-petty producer' continuum is framed in a very linear pattern. Audience members move from being consumers to petty producers, based on the intensity and frequency of their textual and material productions. Fans move from being an unsystematic consumer to achieve the status of petty producer, but Abercrombie and Longhurst's proposal does not allow them to move or interchange roles within this linear continuum, offering a very rigid and limited view of fans and fan identity.

Garry Crawford argues similarly, maintaining that academia's tendency to draw on subcultural frameworks to understand fan culture "tend(s) to present static models, which fail to recognise the fluidity and sometimes temporality of individuals' locations within these [fan] communities, and even the structure and nature of these communities themselves" (2004, p. 38). Furthermore, this particular continuum also assumes that fans – whether as consumers or producers – move as a singular group on the same level and speed of consumption and contextualisation.

The role of the individual fan appears to be lost, or non-existent in Abercrombie and Longhurst's model. While fandom is essentially structured around community practices, the viewing of an episode of the TV show and the fan activity of discussing or writing fan fiction are mostly performed in the privacy of fans' homes, in front of computer screens. And while theorizations of fan cultures urge the move away from viewing fans (and audiences in general) as a mass, fans are still generally and conveniently observed as a type of reduced 'mass': as a community, as a group. Even the activity of writing fan fiction is observed as being conducted in a group setting (Jenkins, 1992). Fans of *The X-Files*, for example, are notorious for

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<sup>2</sup> For a more extensive argument, see Hills (2002), pages 117-130.

emphasizing the culture of watching the show alone and only coming together publicly to discuss their preferred viewing habits (as well as the show) on the show's dedicated newsgroup, *alt.tv.x-files* after an episode has aired.

The tendency is to make general assumptions about fan *communities* that can be summed up to represent the fandom at large, across all genres of texts or objects of fandom. As Janice Radway points out in the introduction to the new edition of *Reading the Romance* (1991, p. 8):

Fish developed the notion of the interpretive community only to account for varying modes of literary criticism within the academy, that is, interpretations produced by Freudian, Jungian, mythic, or Marxist critics, the concept is insufficiently theorized to deal with the complexities of social groups or to explain how, when, and why they are constituted precisely *as* interpretive communities.

In making these general assumptions about fan interpretive communities, the role of the individual fan is presupposed within the context of the fan community as a 'mass'. They are no longer multifaceted, fulfilling and playing different roles and identities in their fandoms but rather, have become a one-dimensional representation: the fan as producer or the fan as consumer of the products of an original text or series.

If we take a group of Matryoshka nesting dolls and consider the first doll as the mass audience, and the subsequent doll nesting inside it the active niche audience and follow it accordingly till we uncover the doll that represents fans in fandom, it is perhaps pertinent to uncover the next, smaller (perhaps more specialized) and intricate doll. We are familiar with the idea of the fan as 'mass' – in a group capacity attending conventions; discussing and socialising among fan communities, both online and off; working together to re-interpret the original text through fan fiction and so forth (Jenkins, 1992; Bacon-Smith, 1992; Penley, 1997). These scholars' astute

observations presented and proved that the mass audience is not necessarily a powerless dupe as assumed during Abercrombie and Longhurst's behavioural paradigm, but at the same time, it is also important that we do not drown out the voice of the individual multifaceted fan where the fan is both producer and consumer, community leader and member, author and reader, critic and fan, collaborator of official media producers and fan, as well as subcultural celebrity and fan.

In fan fiction fandom, for instance, rather than observing fans as a group interacting with one another within the context of the fan interpretive community, we can return to the concept of the individual fan who writes fan fiction, publishes and promotes it, but who also discusses plot ideas with her fellow authors and readers, sends feedback to other authors she admires and takes part in community discussions of the show, or blogs about her identity as a fan. These roles, as fan fiction author, reader and critic, are fulfilled in the context of the community.

As Baym (2000) argues, communities often have a clear focus (for the rec.arts.tv.soaps newsgroup that Baym observed, for example, it is to interpret the soaps), and the "group identity, and social norms...influence every message. All of these factors shape the sense that this group is a community. But it would not feel like a community without the individual personalities" (p. 143). The individual personalities within a group or community, depending on the roles the fans take on, stand to gain status. "While in theory all participants...are equal, in fact group values make some forms of cultural capital more valuable than others and, hence, lend those with such capital greater status" (Baym, 2000, p. 159). Like 'subcultural celebrities' (Hills and Williams, 2004), some fans become celebrities themselves, their version of textual interpretation subscribed to by other fans, their works of fiction revered by readers and other authors; these fans often acquire their own cult of fans.

Thus, fans do not necessarily remain merely as fans of the original texts that introduced them to fandom, but go on to become fans of other high-profile fans (authors, site owners, forum moderators, fan journalists), thereby creating a social hierarchy between them and their fellow community members, sometimes friends whom they have worked alongside and collaborated with; but also other fans who subscribe to a different set of interpretations, or who disagree with the publicity surrounding certain works of fiction and fan fiction authors. This can sometimes create conflict within fan communities, as the authority, not to mention the status of the fan is constantly challenged by ever-changing fan relationships and allegiances.

If attention is to be paid to the role of the individual fan in fan communities and among the wider fandom, a much more fluid framework of understanding fan culture will have to be implemented. Within the context of fan fiction fandom<sup>3</sup>, the concept of what constitutes quality fan production (and in essence, fan consumption) exists in a constant state of struggle. Abercrombie and Longhurst's 'consumer-fan-cultist-enthusiast-petty producer' model assumes that a fan journeys through their fandom in a linear pattern. That is, eventually, the fan community consists of only producers/writers, as that is what they evolve to eventually become from first being merely consumers/readers. They are not seen to be both writers/producers and consumers/readers at the same time, as is the norm among fandom (Jenkins, 1992, p. 280). If they do, the writers must all be moving along the same continuum for the sole purpose of achieving the status of 'petty producer'. Neither does Abercrombie and

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<sup>3</sup> Fandom often denotes all the various sections and factions of fan communities that make up the general fandom of a particular text, or genre of texts. I use the term 'fan fiction fandom' here to signify a considerably large portion of fan activity: fan fiction writing, in particular for fans whose involvement in fandom is within the confines of fiction writing, whereby the original text becomes secondary in importance to the creative works that are being produced. Rather than being a subcultural practice within the larger fandom, I am treating fan fiction fandom as a [standalone] fandom in itself that is as much dependent on the general fandom as general fandom is dependent on fan fiction fandom.

Longhurst's model allow for conflicts within fandom, as fans are assumed to move along the linear continuum without being challenged.

In Abercrombie and Longhurst's continuum, petty producers become full-time professional producers, in that they will "use...even more specialized literature, which may become ever more technical, involving knowledge of...standards, patent law or copyright law, for instance" (1998, p. 140). Abercrombie and Longhurst also add that petty producers' relationships "become organized through the market" (ibid.) and as they move out from being enthusiasts, they return to become more like consumers, and "are as much at the mercy of structural forces as the consumers at the other end of the continuum" (ibid.). Abercrombie and Longhurst are clearly describing fans who have become professionals, but it is not clear why – if these producers are indeed professionals who are expected to play by the rules of the field – they are being identified as 'petty producers' rather than merely 'professional producers'.

Abercrombie and Longhurst's continuum also does not allow any flexibility for fans to remain at the enthusiast level and never proceed on to be a petty producer. Some fans do go on to pursue professional writing, having used fandom as a training ground and continue to use the community as a source of mental and emotional support. Some go on to become official media producers, as many fans of *Doctor Who* find themselves: working for the BBC, producing the new series or writing for the show's official, albeit niche publication, *Doctor Who Magazine* (Hills, 2010). However, most fan fiction writers do not pursue similar paths, while there are some who were already professional writers when they became involved in fandom. Abercrombie and Longhurst's hypothesis on the petty producer also suggests that fans who go on to become full time professionals will only use specialist literatures such

as patent and copyright law, for instance, ruling out the possibility that fans already have such specializations upon entering fandom and that as long as fans remain as ‘enthusiasts’ they are removed from and untouched by this ‘official culture’ (Fiske, 1992, p. 31)<sup>4</sup>. There is no allowing for fans to become semi-professional producers as well, collaborating with official media producers and networks or studios but also maintaining a (restrained) relationship with fandom<sup>5</sup>.

“For the enthusiast, [on the other hand] production has become central. The enthusiasm tends to revolve around the production of things, from railway models to plays to second-hand dresses. There may be textual production as well, but this is subordinated to the material production” (1998, pp. 140 and 150), argue Abercrombie and Longhurst. However, this trait of material production may not be applicable across all fandoms as some fandoms may put more emphasis on textual instead of material productions. Furthermore, as two long-time *X-Files* fans (who are also well-respected authors in the fandom) candidly remark: “Dressing like Mulder and Scully would be futile; they wear off-the-rack business wear. There are no options for costuming in *The X-Files*” (Wylfcynne, 2003, questionnaire interview) and “I don’t imagine costuming for *XF* is a lot of fun. I mean, if a guy shows up at a Scifi convention in a suit and long coat, my first thought is that he’s a vampire who can’t afford a tux and cape. If I see a LOT of people showing up in suits and long coats, I’ll be checking for red ties and Amway fliers” (Shelba, 2003, questionnaire interview). That is not to say that all fans (of *The XF*) subscribe to this costuming policy<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> To keep to Abercrombie and Longhurst’s example of fans using patent and copyright laws as their specialist materials, see for instance Fandom Lawyers ([http://www.livejournal.com/userinfo.bml?user=fandom\\_lawyers](http://www.livejournal.com/userinfo.bml?user=fandom_lawyers)), a community of fans who discuss legal issues that fandom may be faced with, and provide a reference point for other fans who have received ‘cease and desist’ letters from networks or producers, for instance.

<sup>5</sup> More on this in Chapter 7.

<sup>6</sup> As the fans indicated, dressing like Mulder and Scully would prove to be less creative compared to say, dressing like *Star Trek* characters. But that does not mean that fans do not fashion their everyday

Fandom is a constant site of struggle for control between modes of production, fan affiliations or allegiances, or over the definitive representation of fandom to the general public (not just the show's producers), as well as to other fandoms<sup>7</sup>. "As Bourdieu argues, taste 'unites and separates' (1984: 56) and these distinctions share important characteristics with the autonomous aesthetic disposition, namely 'distinguishing oneself from the common people' (1984: 31)" (Williamson, 2005, p. 103). Fan fiction authors (and readers) will insist that their preferred fan activity represents the core practices of fans, a view that might not necessarily be agreed upon by fans who prefer to perform their fan identity in a different manner. Those in forums will insist their fan fictions are better than those available on Fanfiction.Net (FF.net), for instance. In Chapter 7, when I look at the notion of fan subcultural celebrities, the fan journalists I interview hardly make any reference to fan fiction authors, their venue for interaction (the news fan sites) leaving hardly any space for the discussion of fan textual productivity of any kind<sup>8</sup>.

What Abercrombie and Longhurst present is a very general view of fandom without taking into account the complex relationship fans have with one another, with other fan communities within the fandom, or for that matter with other fandoms, and to the media with and through which they communicate. In other words, Abercrombie and Longhurst's view of fans is still bounded somewhat by stereotypes of "the fan as extraterrestrial; the fan as excessive consumer; the fan as cultist; the fan as dangerous fanatic" (Tulloch and Jenkins, 1995, p. 3). To break the hold of this subcultural

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appearance (a popular fashion trait is Scully's hairstyle and particularly the hair colour) after the characters either.

<sup>7</sup> Despite the almost similar storylines, most fans of *Buffy* and *Angel*, for example, will argue that the *Twilight* franchise is inferior in quality (especially in terms of characterisations and plot). This is perhaps exquisitely encapsulated in the fan video *Buffy vs. Edward: Twilight Remixed* (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RZwM3GvaTRM>) which circulated widely among *Buffy* and *Angel* fans when it first appeared.

<sup>8</sup> As the sites I examined are affiliated to media producers (in particular, XFilesNews.com with its affiliation to former *XF* producer Frank Spotnitz's social network, Big Light), fan fiction becomes a complicated legal issue so it is often left out, or discouraged.

framework that had informed fan cultures, Crawford (2004, pp.40-41) proposes the re-conceptualization of fans as ‘neo-tribes’<sup>9</sup>: “loose, fluid, and often temporal communities and groups that individuals move in and out of often several times in their everyday lives”. This particular concept allows for the flexibility needed to understand contemporary fan communities:

[w]here subcultural theories frequently seek to define individuals as types of people within fairly rigid and static cultural formations, the conceptualization of the neo-tribe recognizes that individuals may belong to numerous communities and groups, which will have varying levels of influence on their lives and identities, and they can frequently move in and out of these in their everyday lives (ibid.).

The move away from subcultural theories also somewhat liberates fan cultural theory from subculture’s close association with deviant practices in the early days, and particularly its strong ties to music and youth cultural movements. It seems ill-fitting to use a framework that is based so much on youths’ stylistic appearances and music preferences to consider a range of practices that are largely textual and conducted by a group of extremely diverse people who have come together as a result of their shared interest in a text rather than their age, and who do not particularly share similar lifestyle choices or political affiliations, for instance. Fan communities, if not viewed as neo-tribes, can also be considered as a form of lifestyle (Reimer, 1995 and Miles, 2000 as referenced in Bennett and Kahn-Harris, 2004), which “focuses on the issue of consumer creativity, acknowledging the ways in which commodities function as cultural resources (Fiske, 1989) whose meanings are

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<sup>9</sup> A term, he describes, used by Bauman (1990, 1992a, 1992b) and Maffesoli (1991, 1993, 1996). And it is Maffesoli’s theorization, where neo-tribes “are seen to illustrate the continued importance of collectivity” (Crawford, 2004:41) that Crawford makes use of in his exploration of sport fans. See also Hodkinson (2002) in *Goth: Identity, Style and Subculture* and Sweetman (2004) in Bennett and Kahn-Harris’s (eds.) *After Subculture: Critical Studies in Contemporary Youth Culture*.



generated at the level of the everyday through the inscription of collective meanings” (Bennett and Kahn-Harris, 2004, p.13).

However, viewing fan communities as neo-tribes allows Crawford to introduce the theory of an individual career and process of induction for fans. Although Crawford’s main concern was sports fans, whose career path may be slightly different than that of a television or film fan, his suggestions are useful for several reasons. If anything they offer fluidity to the ways in which fan identities can be viewed as well as a greater emphasis being placed on the fan as individual rather than the fan as ‘mass’.

The usage of the term ‘career’ moves the concept of the fan away from restrictive typologies (fan versus non-fan, consumer versus fan, or in my case, fan fiction reader versus fan fiction author, fan celebrities versus the ‘generic’ fan) carved out by subcultural theories. “The theorization of a career permits a view of the individual as an active social agent within the organization(s) to which they belong. Crucially then, the concept of a career ties in both elements of structure and agency, ascribed and achieved status, and individual and institutional definitions of rank” (Crawford, 2004, p. 39). Secondly, it allows for the understanding of position change and development that will undoubtedly occur to the individual over the course of their career as a fan. Thirdly, it permits the consideration of “how the supporter community (and the nature and career ‘structure’ of this community) can change and develop over time” (p. 41). Finally (and perhaps more importantly for television and film fans), it recognises that individuals will belong to numerous communities “which (following Maffesoli, 1996) they may move in and out of several times in their everyday lives, and hence will follow several (often cross-cutting) career paths” (ibid.). And finally, it

allows for the understanding of how two individuals who may occupy a similar career position may still have differing characteristics and behavioural patterns.

Crawford's career chart for the sports fan, which follows the fan along the continuum of 'general public-interested-engaged-enthusiastic-devoted-professional-apparatus' aims to provide a wider and more flexible view of the roles fans perform without obliterating the identity of the fan as individual. When fans are observed as a mass, it is difficult to discern the status bestowed upon them by other fans (in the case of popular fan fiction authors or subcultural fan celebrities, for instance). The social and cultural capitals that fans gain are normally beneficial to the fan individual, and by extension, only reflect the fan community through the subcultural celebrity's association with it. Crawford stresses that:

[T]his process of socialization is never complete, and the supporters' pattern of interest, involvement and levels of knowledge of a sport or team<sup>10</sup> 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 into this supporter community. Furthermore, progression need not necessarily be linear but far more complex, and individuals may regress, leapfrog certain positions or move in and out of this career structure at any time.

(2004, p. 46).

The above arguments show the complexity of current fan practices highlighted through a highly performative and narcissistic society. We need to move away from the view of the fan as either producer or consumer, and as part of the general fan 'mass', which, while it is useful in determining the social aspects of the fan interpretive community, lessens the role of the multifaceted individual fan and how

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<sup>10</sup> Likewise, television or film or any object of fandom can be applicable.

within these fan interpretive communities, social and cultural hierarchies exist surrounding certain fan celebrities and how they earn their status among the fandom.

Recent media interest (AfterEllen.com staff, 2006; Pickard, 2009; Hartinger, 2010) in the textual productivity of fans has introduced the world of slash fiction to the everyday audience member. Media coverage suggests that slash fiction – and pornographic slash fiction at that – is the only ‘textual poaching’ that fans do, opening up a problematic representation of fans in general. If fans were viewed as a minority group of socially inept audience members having difficulty differentiating between fantasy and reality before, they are now allegedly populating the Internet with pornographic tales of television and literary characters, featuring among other pairings, Samwise Gamgee/Frodo Baggins, Harry Potter/Ron Weasley, Fox Mulder/Alex Krycek, and Sam/Dean Winchester.

However, away from this seemingly adverse world of blatant pornography the media has carved out, general fan fiction is written with as much frequency and fervour as slash fiction within fandom. In the next section, I will explore how the scholarly work that has informed and reflected on this particular practice thus far is under-equipped to tackle the current shift in fan studies, especially pertaining to the specifics of fan fiction fandom.

### *Fan fiction*

Writing fan fiction is a way fans feel they can resolve their disillusionment with the producers’ creative decisions, and restore some form of justice to characters, especially if characters have been ‘prematurely’ killed off in fans’ eyes. With *The X-Files*, for instance, fans started ‘producing’ a virtual season at the end of the 7<sup>th</sup> season on television in 2000, when rumours abounded that the show may be cancelled

by the network<sup>11</sup>. As the introduction page to the Virtual Season 8 website proclaims: “The show did continue, however the storylines did not meet the expectations of many who contributed to our season. We decided to continue writing our virtual season as an alternate universe”<sup>12</sup>. As Lucy Gillam on the Fanfic Symposium – a website that archives fans’ essays on various issues on fan fiction<sup>13</sup> – puts it: “Textual poaching. It’s what we do. In many ways, it’s what separates what we often refer to as ‘fandom’ from the vast majority of people who watch shows, read books and comics, and go to see movies, even the ones who follow such things as faithfully as we do” (2004).

Gillam’s statements represent [social] power as being held by fans, in that the ultimate decision to ‘poach’ resides with the individual fan, regardless of the support they may receive from the collective fandom. The term, ‘textual poaching’ is so ingrained in the consciousness of fandom that it appears to have taken on this symbol of ‘martyrdom’: it separates *us* (fan fiction authors) from the other fans, in other words, *them* (readers and other fans). It defines the authors (and their identities as fans) and the fans “generally accept it is ethically acceptable for [them] to ‘poach’...for [their] own creative endeavours”.

When Jenkins proposed the concept of ‘textual poaching’, he had written: “Like the poachers of old, fans operate from a position of cultural marginality and

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<sup>11</sup> The rumours were also fuelled by the contract negotiations of main actor, David Duchovny, who had wanted to leave, but co-star Gillian Anderson was contractually bound for another year. Duchovny finally signed on to return for half a season the next year, prompting the producers to add a new character to the show, in the hope that it will introduce a ‘new generation’ of *XF* characters – an idea that was not too popular with a lot of the fans, who were very vocal about voicing their displeasure, which led to a huge divide in the fandom; hence the Virtual Season.

<sup>12</sup> Source: <http://vs8.virtualseasonx.com/index.htm>. The Virtual Season is now in its 9<sup>th</sup> year, and looks set to continue on for some time yet, especially now that the show has ended. All of the stories written for the fan project can be found here: <http://www.virtualseasonx.com>

<sup>13</sup> The Fanfic Symposium shares certain similarities to the LiveJournal community, ‘metafandom’, which collects meta (a form of non-fiction essay that fans produce that discusses various fandom issues that interest the author). The main difference being that LiveJournal enables and encourages fans to participate in the discussions.

social weakness...Fans lack the direct access to the means of commercial cultural production and have only the most limited resources with which to influence entertainment industry's decisions" (1992, p. 26). Jenkins' poachers/fans are always in constant struggle with and against the "meanings imposed upon them by borrowed materials" (p. 33) created by the official producers, just as fans are powerless against studio decisions regarding their favourite shows. So they poach in order to gain some control of their favourite characters. They may not have ownership of the texts, but their protectiveness and love of the text is explored through fan fiction – one of the few ways fans feel they can 'own' the characters in an unofficial manner even though they may be challenged by the 'official culture'.

However, current trends in fan cultures reflect a different sort of power struggle. While the struggle between fans and producers continues, fans are also at the same time vying for (social) control among themselves. 'Textual poaching', rather than being something fans do in their powerless positions to stake a claim on the texts, has itself become the very struggle for power and control within fandom. To a certain extent, it becomes less about what fans do with borrowed texts and their relationship with the producers and networks, but what the seemingly powerless elite *can* do to the borrowed texts and their relationship with other fans of the original texts, and with their own fans.

Fiona Carruthers (2004) provides an exemplary illustration of this struggle through her examination of 'hack fiction', where fan fiction itself becomes the primary text poached by 'hacker' fans. These hackers follow the careers of fan fiction authors across cyberspace (and quite possibly across fandoms) and impose their

personal voices on the fan fiction texts, largely through humour and parody<sup>14</sup>. To the hacker, bad fan fiction writing, or ‘suckfic’ as it is normally known, reflects poorly on the fan culture at large for they believe that the authors are not fully exercising their potentials as fans and as authors. “Fan fiction, for the hacker, is concerned with exactly this: with ways of establishing a ‘degree of plurality and creativity’ within an environment which impresses certain rules and regulations upon the writer. For the hacker, the ‘legitimate’ fan writer finds multiple ways of rewriting and re-privileging the text” (Carruthers, 2004, n.p.).

Carruthers argued that the hackers and ‘hackfic’ promote a distinction among fan cultures based on cultural capital the hackers possess (superior knowledge, hip humour, better writing skills) and which the authors they deem unworthy do not possess, thus creating a hierarchy of fan fiction writing based on notions of distinction that very much mirrors Bourdieu’s treatment on cultural tastes. Reputation in fandom is important. A new author, without the support, encouragement *and* endorsement of an ‘older’, more qualified (and thus more popular) author or beta reader (often, this also extends to the communities the new author is a part of, and the community’s reputation in the fandom) will not tend to get their stories recognized or noticed<sup>15</sup>. Likewise, a reader’s recommendation is only beneficial for the author if it comes from a fan who is already part of the ‘in group’ or the clique, of those with authority to influence reading formations in a fan community.

The existence of ‘hackfic’ as a genre brings the notion of a fan fiction hierarchy to the forefront where previously fan communities have been considered

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<sup>14</sup> Often a genre in itself within fan fiction, normally known as ‘MST3K’ or ‘MST’ (based on the science fiction show, Mystery Science Theatre 3000 from the 1980s). It is in the form of commentaries on (usually badly written) fan fiction.

<sup>15</sup> Of course, this could also happen in reverse, where new authors may receive support and endorsement from a popular author but that popularity is only valid within a micro-community of fandom. This could also undoubtedly affect the cultural capital of the new author. I will look more into this very issue in Chapter 6.

(and assumed) to be absent of any such hierarchical structures (Bacon-Smith, 1992, p. 41). The hackers create an elitist environment by attacking the most important signifier of fan status: “their knowledge and interpretation of the object of that fandom” (Carruthers, 2004, n.p.), thereby rendering the gift of fan fiction useless and of inferior quality. This also exhibits the constant struggles that occur in fandom, as fans battle to sustain their own interpretation of the text as the dominant one, in this case, it is the definition of what constitutes a well-written piece of fiction.

As Fiske argues, “such popular cultural capital, unlike official cultural capital, is not typically convertible into economic capital...Acquiring it will not enhance one’s career, nor will it produce upward class mobility as its investments payoffs. Its dividends lie in the pleasures and esteem of one’s peers in a community of taste rather than those of one’s social betters” (1992, p. 34). Further to that, as shown by Carruthers, acquiring and maintaining ‘proper’ and widely-approved cultural capital will allow the fan to gain status and reputation within their fandom, particularly among fans of their work.

Fans work hard at earning these statuses, aiming to be considered a high-status fan or ‘fan leader’ of sorts with their own fans, producing high-quality, well-researched and written fan fiction, and presenting them as gifts to the fandom. However, some fans feel these hard-earned statuses are threatened by the onslaught of general, multi-fandom fan fiction submission sites like the popular FF.net, which does not discriminate the kinds of fictions that are submitted by fans, thereby offering fans easier access into publishing but not necessarily discriminating between stories that are of high-quality, and those that are badly edited according to fandom standards. Much like the hackers’ reaction to ‘suckfic’, although in a less vocal and direct way, fans have complained: “It’s frustrating to have to wade through tons of stories full of

the most OOC (out of character) scenarios and dialogue imaginable” (Piper, 2003, email correspondence). Frohike (2003, email correspondence) concurs: “More and more people, presumably young teens from the sound of their disclaimers, began posting stories [at FF.net] of such poor quality that reading them was painful. You know you're in trouble when the author begins his/her disclaimer by saying ‘I know this sucks, but...’. More often than not, the story lived up to the author's assumption”.

Piper did go on to say that *The X-Files*' own fan fiction archive, The Gossamer Project<sup>16</sup>, does not discriminate on the quality of the show's fan fiction it stores on its database either, but added that unlike FF.net, Gossamer, and in that essence, *XF* fan fiction fandom “has an unusually high amount of good stories” (2003, email correspondence). What this further suggests is the presence of the [implicit] hierarchical structure I have been examining, even without the presence (or for that matter, knowledge on the fans' part) of ‘hackfic’.

Scott (2009, n.p.) commented that fan studies are increasingly embracing the anthropological concept of the gift economy “to reaffirm...[its] central role in the construction and maintenance of online communities”. Scott, along with Hellekson (2009) has stressed on the social and legal imperative in maintaining fandom as a gift economy, but as scholars like Bacon-Smith (1992) and Jenkins (1992) have argued previously, the characters and universes fans make use of in their cultural productions are essentially copyrighted material that they have allegedly poached. These commodities from commercial culture would have to go through a transformation process “where value gets transformed into worth, where what has a price becomes priceless, where economic investment gives way to sentimental investment” (Jenkins, 2009b, n.p.).

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<sup>16</sup> <http://krycek.gossamer.org>



As Sassatelli (2007, p. 102) suggests, “the meaning of things is thereby practically re-elaborated...through a series of ritual activities...[where] rituals are actions saturated by shared symbolic meanings which fix, in turn, other meanings”. In the next section, I will turn to look at how these texts can be ‘de-commoditised’ (Sassatelli, 2007, p. 5) in order for fans to attach symbolic meanings to these texts, as well as their practices.

### *De-commoditisation of the text*

In the introduction to her book, Roberta Sassatelli (2007) posits that we are all born to consume in today’s consumer society. Contemporary Western societies are often framed by consumption: we are addressed as consumers by various disciplines, discourses and institutions that attempt to define and demarcate what consumption means and how we consume. Even the practice of gift-giving is unable to escape the market in contemporary culture. We mark almost every special occasion – from the celebration of birth to the mourning of death – with a profusion of gifts in the form of goods like flowers and cards; gifts that are procured from the market, upon the exchange of currency. In the process of gift-giving, commodities become “catalysers of personal bonds, removing them from commercial circuits and refilling them with sentimental and personal meanings (Miller, 1993)” (2007, p. 145), particularly in temporally and spatially bounded occasions like Christmas. “Ritual transactions, including the hosting of Christmas dinners and exchanges of Christmas presents, provide the material basis for kindred interaction and identification that was once provided by co-operative labour” (Cheal, 1988, p. 95).

Sassatelli comments on the paradox of our society where we depend on commodities to fulfil our everyday lives, but in order to ensure that the objects and

services we consume have a greater meaning to us, we find it necessary to de-commoditise them. The process of commoditisation is defined as “a particular social construction of things: it is the social process through which things are produced and exchanged as commodities” (2007, p. 139). The commoditisation process is often described as an ‘enlarging’ process as few things or services can never be sold. Even priceless objects like art and sacred relics can be transformed into commodities at some point in time, to be ceded for an enormous amount of money at a moment when it is considered absolutely necessary.

However in the act of consumption, consumers often reframe the meaning and uses of the goods into “other forms of value...[such as] affection, relationships, symbolism, status, normality, etc.” (2007, p. 139) – a process of de-commoditisation where the meanings and uses of commodities are re-translated through daily life, based on the needs of the consumers. “Contemporary consumer practices can be seen as practices of de-commoditisation: diverse and varied, they all nevertheless inevitably engage with the process of commoditisation which they are built upon” (ibid.). Sassatelli used the example of how objects like an Ikea bookshelf go through a ‘ritual of possession’ (2007, p. 143) when price labels are stripped and the bookshelf is filled. The bookshelf, then, can only achieve any meaning within the domestic space of the home it is built for once it has been filled with books and other objects that reflect the personal and literary biographies of the owners.

While the ‘ritual of possession’ would differ, in that there would be no price labels to be stripped as such, the original TV, film or literary texts are the commodities in the case of fandom. The texts represent goods that have been assigned monetary value through network, cast and production crew contracts, overseas sales,

DVD, as well as merchandising sales, among other things<sup>17</sup>. These texts or commodities are consumed in various spaces from watching it in the cinema, on DVDs through one's TV or computer at home, to the purchase and collection of paraphernalia connected to the text, providing the fans pleasure (Grossberg, 1992, p. 55). This pleasure is further enhanced by fan practices as fans venture online to talk about the text with other fans, write fan fiction or edit a music video using clips from the original text. Here, the meaning of the text is reframed, or the original text is de-commoditised as fans personalise the show, and identify with the characters they have come to love.

The practice of collecting is another context of consumption that can be read as a form of de-commoditisation. Sassatelli defines collecting as a passionate form of consumption; as she attests, “a collection provides a particular pleasure which, according to Baudrillard (1996, 88 ff., orig. 1968) is just as that of a harem: the pleasure of an ‘intimate series’ and a ‘serial intimacy’ which evokes the thrill of a strongly passionate mode of relation differing from the symmetrical and exclusive Western ideal of romantic love” (2007, p. 146). The act of collecting reframes the goods by translating them into new circuits of value, “circuits for the initiated and the connoisseurs” (ibid.) that cannot be reducible to mere prices in the market. It is also a way of building separate cultures and symbolic universes that are relatively detached from dominant cultural hierarchies, particularly if the objects collected are considered marginal objects<sup>18</sup>.

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<sup>17</sup> In a 2006 fan campaign to save Canadian show *Blood Ties*, based on the series of novels by fantasy author Tanya Huff, fans of the show came up with the idea of gifting the series (available for download on the North American iTunes) to friends. This is done, so as not only to raise awareness of the show to their friends, but also to raise the value of the show itself in order to urge American cable network Lifetime TV to order another series of the show. Similar actions were encouraged in 2009 when Joss Whedon's *Dollhouse* was in danger of being cancelled after a mediocre first season. In this case, fans were encouraged to purchase the episodes on iTunes as well as pre-order the DVD and Blu-ray box set. More here: <http://www.dollverse.com/2009/05/save-dollhouse-preorder-your-doll>

<sup>18</sup> Sassatelli used children's collection of stickers as an example of a 'marginal object'.

Fans have been said to build a separate culture – an alternative social community – through their activities and practices within fandom: “Fan culture finds that utopian dimension within popular culture a site for constructing an alternative culture. Its society is responsive to the needs that draw its members to commercial entertainment, most especially the desire for affiliation, friendship, community” (Jenkins, 1992, p. 282). And de-commoditisation occurs further as fans collect paraphernalia related to their favourite texts, in the process ‘sacralising’ these objects as they become objects of collection that are available only to the most passionate of the fans. An ‘unaired pilot’ of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, for instance, became one of the most sought-after collectibles by fans when a bootlegged version of the 30-minute episode became available on the Internet<sup>19</sup>. Fans also go on to collect various other paraphernalia as well: a highly-anticipated comic book’s first issue that is still mint-wrapped in plastic; first issue DVD box sets with serial numbers, clothing and props from TV and film sets<sup>20</sup>. Furthermore, some fan fiction fans also collect their favourite pieces of fan fiction so as to be able to revisit these stories repeatedly<sup>21</sup>. These collections also sometimes become sources for new fans who want to be introduced to stories that were classified as ‘classics’ in the fandom but are no longer available due to changes in status of the author<sup>22</sup> or because websites and archives have been taken down.

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<sup>19</sup> According to Joss Whedon (2003), the 30-minute ‘pilot’ was used by 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox (the studio) to sell the show to networks in 1996 and was never meant to air. [Source: *An Interview With Joss Whedon* by Ken P. (23 June 2003), IGN. Available at <http://uk.movies.ign.com/articles/425/425492p1.html> Accessed December 2007).

<sup>20</sup> Realising the value fans place in these memorabilia, it is now commonplace for studios to auction the props off to the public as collectibles. See <http://www.battlestarprops.com> for an example of the extent Universal (the studio) went to auction off set pieces and paraphernalia from *BSG*. Also, see Stenger (2006) for a more detailed exploration on how clothes worn by characters from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* were auctioned by 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, and coveted by fans as collectibles, fetish objects, role-play, dress-ups and fantasy production (p. 27).

<sup>21</sup> A practice I will look into in more detail in Chapter 5.

<sup>22</sup> Fan fiction authors sometimes request for their creative material to be removed from archives. This could be for various reasons ranging from fans turning pro to no longer wishing to be associated with a

While the act of collecting might provide a space within which to situate the fans, it would appear that there are boundaries to consumption. “The consumer’s sovereignty is a double-edged sovereignty: hedonism, the search for pleasure, must thus be tempered by various forms of detachment which stress the subject’s capacity to guide that search, to govern pleasures, to avoid addiction, to be, in a word, recognisable as someone who autonomously chooses” (Sassatelli, 2007, p. 155). Sassatelli notes that de-commodification is normalised through the consumer, and the portrayal of the consumer here is one who is rational and autonomous. In order to consume ‘properly’, “people must be masters of their will” (ibid.).

The ‘addict’ is constructed as the Other of the autonomous self here, providing a dystopian image of the consumer – someone who over-consumes. Compulsive consumption is the boundary that consumers must not overstep, for when they do, they are no longer considered sovereign. “Consumer practices can be stigmatised as corrupting mostly through a denunciation of excess and addiction, which is nothing but a suspicion regarding the ability of the self to gain distance from his or her desires and – stretching the point – to get along without them” (Sassatelli, 2007, p. 156). In other words, desires must be governed, “hedonism must thereby be domesticated or tamed” (ibid.).

Fans have always been presented as excessive consumers, passionately collecting texts and paraphernalia related to the original texts. But, Sassatelli assumes that consumption only occurs within market exchange and argues that gift exchange or gift-giving has been unable to avoid the market. But the notion of gift exchange or gift-giving is radically changed within the context of fandom. Fans are both consumers and producers in this case; their creative works such as fan fiction are

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particular fandom or a particular genre of fan fiction (usually adult material, especially if fans fear their real identity has been outed in one way or another that could jeopardise their jobs).

exchanged as a way of gaining status within fandom rather than economic wealth. Fans de-commoditise the texts in order to reframe them within the context of their daily fannish lives so that they can produce and actively participate in the gift exchanges that are occurring across fandom, gaining status and factoring into the fan cultural hierarchies in the process. With this in mind, I shall now turn to look at gift exchange theory in more detail.

### *Gift exchange theory explored*

David Cheal (1988, p. 2) has suggested that there is a lack of research into gift-giving within the context of modern societies in the social sciences. Cheal hypothesized that this is due to the tendency to view gift exchanges as an archaic practice, maintained by a threefold obligation that is “deeply ingrained in the human mind to give, to receive, and to repay, ... all expressions of the principle of reciprocity upon which the solidarity relations between individuals and groups so greatly depend” (Harris, 2001, p. 487). As modern societies become preoccupied with the economic exchange of commodities, there is no longer any precedence placed on the practice of gift exchanges that was influential in pre-industrial societies. Research into gift exchange and gift-giving has been incorporated into research on consumer culture (as the discussion above can attest), with claims that society’s pre-occupation with economic exchanges of commodities have encompassed the act of gift-giving too.

However, Cheal’s proposal of situating the practice of gift-giving within a moral economy largely concerned with maintaining social relations remains useful to explore – a point I will come back to in Chapter 5. According to Cheal, the moral economy is a “system of transactions which are defined as socially desirable (i.e.

moral), because through them social ties are recognised, and balanced social relationships are maintained” (1988, p. 15). Jenkins et al. (2009, n.p.) has stressed the importance of the moral economy, particularly for Web 2.0 media companies, in building trust and sustaining a long term relationship instead of short term ones: “The measure of a moral economy is the degree to which participants trust each other to hold up their end of these implicit agreements”.

Much has been hypothesized about the nature of gift exchanges in pre-industrial societies, where gift exchanges take precedence. Marcel Mauss cautioned that the notion of a free gift is a gross misunderstanding: “The aim of all this (gift exchange) is to display generosity, freedom and autonomous action, as well as greatness. Yet, all in all, it is mechanisms of obligation, and even of obligation through things, that are called into play” (1954, p. 29). The obligation, here, is to reciprocate the gift that has been given. An unreciprocated gift will make the recipient of the gift inferior, and the tendency will be for the recipient of the gift to reciprocate with a gift of equal or greater value than the original gift.

Claude Levi-Strauss follows on from this, saying that there is a constant ‘besting’ of reciprocity: “The person who begins the cycle has taken the initiative, and the greater social ease which he has proved becomes an advantage for him” (1996, p. 22). The recipient of the initial gift might feel the pressure to reciprocate with a higher value gift, which propels the one who began the cycle to ‘up the stakes’, thus ensuring the continuation of the cycle of gift giving. For Levi-Strauss, the motives behind gift giving are not always conscious:

Goods are not only economic commodities but vehicles and instruments for realities of another order: influence, power, sympathy, status, emotion; and the skilful game of exchange consists of a complex totality of manoeuvres,

conscious or unconscious, in order to gain security and to fortify one's self against risks incurred through alliances and rivalry (1996, p. 19).

Bourdieu (1977) argued that in gift exchanges, the counter-gift must be “*deferred and different*” (1977, p. 5 – italics in original). The immediate return of a gift, especially if it is an identical object to the gift is often considered as ingratitude or a refusal of a gift (as it is essentially a return of the gift, a denouncement). “*The interval* between gift and counter-gift is what allows a pattern of exchange that is always liable to strike the observer and also the participants as *reversible*, that is, both forced and interested, to be experienced as irreversible” (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 6 – italics in original). Until the gift is returned or reciprocated, the giver is indebted to his benefactor, the gift-giver, and is usually expected to show his gratitude.

While Bourdieu proposed a ‘difference and delay’ model to gift exchange, there is a time limit within which the gifts should be returned. This of course depends on the time and occasion where these gifts or services are rendered. Bourdieu used the example of a marriage proposal, where the father of the bride should reply within a set limit of time if he is in favour of the marriage, and as soon as possible if the answer is no, lest he be accused of taking advantage of the situation.

This is not necessarily true in gift exchanges within fandom. In fan fiction fandom, where feedback, praise (or very rarely, criticism) and sometimes sequels and dedications are considered as reciprocated ‘objects’, the counter-gift can be, and usually is, immediate. In fact, rather than a delay in reciprocating, immediate feedback is often encouraged. Multi-fandom fan fiction posting and archive sites like FF.net offer a review/comment feature immediately following the end of the story, enabling readers to go straight to the comments or review page after they have finished reading. Writers who post their stories to FF.net particularly, appear to



constantly remind their readers to ‘R&R’ – read and review – in the summary of their stories<sup>23</sup>.

LiveJournal.com (LJ), the popular blogging site, where a lot of fan fiction is also posted, has “changed the way readers and writers interact” (2006, p. 15), Busse claims. Like FF.net, readers are invited to comment on the stories as soon as they get to the bottom of the page, allowing all feedback to the author to be archived in a single place, often attached to the post that featured the fiction. Rather than emailing feedback and comments to the author after reading the story, readers can easily hit the comment button and type out their reaction to the author’s work immediately: “Many writers have noted that the amount of feedback has increased” (ibid.), but the immediacy of feedback enabled by these sites has resulted in a decrease in more detailed responses or comments that some authors lament the loss of. Most feedbacks on fiction posted on LJ, for instance, feature one-lined responses like, ‘*Nice work*’, ‘*I like/love it*’ or ‘*Any chance of a sequel?*’<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, email correspondence between authors and their readers has not ceased with the popularity of sites like FF.net or LJ. Authors who post directly to their fandom’s archives still include their email addresses for feedback purposes, and some authors also include it when posting to their LJs, thus enabling fans who do not have LJ accounts to send them feedback as well.

For Cheal, the gift economy, particularly in capitalist societies is considered as “an extravagant waste of resources” (1988, p. 12), a redundancy. Gifts have no special advantage for the recipients as the givers may not necessarily know what the

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<sup>23</sup> This habit of ‘R&R’ has been known to go out of hand, when authors threatened to withhold from posting the next chapter of their stories if they do not receive enough hits (number of people reading) or reviews on their stories. The tensions created by this will be explored in greater detail later in the chapter.

<sup>24</sup> See, for example, the responses to a fan fiction here:  
[http://community.livejournal.com/xf\\_drabble/115423.html](http://community.livejournal.com/xf_drabble/115423.html) and  
[http://community.livejournal.com/xf\\_drabble/112733.html](http://community.livejournal.com/xf_drabble/112733.html)

recipients like or need. They may bring no net benefit to the recipients, particularly when the gift giving takes the form of “symmetrical reciprocity” (Cheal, 1988, p. 13). This is where the value of the gift exchanged is calculated to be the same value as the gift received. Therefore, there are no gains or losses if the gifts had not been exchanged in the first place. Gifts are also considered redundant as the objects received may be things which the recipients could have provided for themselves in the first place. And finally, there is the tendency to make ritual offerings in situations where the courtesy of social interaction would have sufficed. Likewise, fan fictions as objects of gifts can be considered as redundant. There is no apparent net benefit, as fan authors can not receive any monetary gains from their foray. They may have no special advantage either, as most fan fiction can be read and forgotten just as easily, while some may be hosted in archives, perpetually unfinished as the author has lost interest or left the fandom while readers have given up or forgotten about the work.

Cheal suggested that this all begs the question that if gifts are considered to be redundant, what then is their social value such that people attach such importance to them? Cheal proposed that, “gifts are used to construct certain kinds of voluntary social relationships” (1988, p. 14), particularly in light of modern social life where a lot of emphasis has been placed on networks of social ties and social support systems. As Kristina Busse (2006, p. 5) attests, “It starts like this. Somewhere in cyberspace, someone complains: ‘I had a lousy day! Need some cheering up.’ Soon after, a friend posts a story dedicating the piece: ‘This is for you, hon – your favourite pairing and lots of schmoopy sex. Hope it’ll cheer you up!’”

In fan fiction circles, it is fairly common to see, in the author’s notes at the end or beginning of the story, a dedication to the author’s friends. These are often other fans who share a similar interpretation of the text (or pairings), loyal readers, fans

who have acted as inspirations or beta readers to the author's work(s) or they are members of the same fan communities with the author. These fan fiction dedications do not just take place because the author's friends need cheering up upon experiencing bad days in their daily lives. These pieces of creative work are sometimes offered as gifts to commemorate birthdays, weddings, and anniversaries – any occasions deemed celebratory by the community – and even festive seasons like Christmas.

Fan fiction writers who were members of *The X-Files* fan fiction community, *I Want To Believe*<sup>25</sup>, for instance, used to write stories and present them as gifts on the community members' birthdays or other special occasions [see Appendix 1]. The fan fiction authors would find out their friends' favourite episodes or moments in the show, and write a story around that, based on their friends' preferences. These stories – gifts – would then be shared with the community, and in the case of *The X-Files*, the fandom at large, when the authors posted their stories to the various archives and websites, immortalising their dedication for as long as these archives (and their stories) remain on the World Wide Web. Members who were not as prolific in writing fiction were encouraged to contribute in other ways, be it writing haikus or poetry, creating a piece of artwork, or issuing 'fic challenges' to help writers. Sometimes, writers would get together and participate in a 'round robin'<sup>26</sup> to commemorate the anniversary of the creation of a beloved community, dedicating the finished product to members of that particular community. Fans also celebrate *The X-Files*' Fox Mulder's birthday – an event affectionately known as 'Muldermas' among the

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<sup>25</sup> <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/IWTBXF/>

<sup>26</sup> A fiction merry-go-round where writers each write a part as the story gets passed around.

fandom – by treating their readers to new stories, occasionally themed around the celebration of Mulder’s birthday<sup>27</sup>.

However, these dedications do not just occur around special occasions deemed worthy of celebration within the fan community. In the more active fandoms, new fan fiction is posted daily and fan fiction authors are frequently thanked by their friends (and fans) for sharing, be it their talents for writing or their views of the text or voicing solidarity for support of a particular pairing. In return, these authors are often showered with praise publicly, their creative works recommended to other fans who are in the process of being initiated into the fandom, or other creative works being dedicated to them.<sup>28</sup> Not only that, feedback and comments – more immediate actions of reciprocity compared to fan fiction sequels or even recommendations – are regarded as common courtesy to be paid to the author/artist.

At an *Angel* fan fiction forum, the administrator tells new members: “We pride ourselves in the participation levels here – especially where fic responses are concerned...There are Archives out there for people who prefer to read and leave. We don’t encourage it here, as we appreciate our writers taking time out to write and post. It isn’t a lot to ask that *all* members take a little time out when they can too, is it?”<sup>29</sup>

For fans who are involved in the production and consumption of fan fiction, this is hardly a redundant gift or practice, or an “extravagant waste of resources” (Cheal, 1988, p. 12). Like the ‘little presents’ Bourdieu (1977, p. 7) analysed, fan creative productions such as fan fiction, vidding (music video production), fanart, cosplay (costuming) and even the creation of icons and layouts for forums and sites

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<sup>27</sup> See, for example: [http://bdomander.700megs.com/mcru\\_1](http://bdomander.700megs.com/mcru_1)

<sup>28</sup> This includes fan fiction sequels, or stories inspired by the authors’ works, or even artworks inspired by their stories.

<sup>29</sup> <http://www.tio.goteamfiction.com/index.php?showtopic=637&pid=4809&st=40&#entry4809>  
Accessed 25 July 2007.

like LJ all encourage and ensure the continual interaction of fans, thus keeping their communities alive and ongoing.

For current shows, fan fiction and fan videos allow fans to sate their appetites for new episodes over the week or the American summer hiatus. As for shows that are no longer on the air, fan creative works strive to keep the fandom alive and communities together. For these shows, fan creative endeavours also offer fans the opportunity to continue the stories that pertain to their interpretation of the text, or just focus on their favourite characters or pairings: a series of *X-Files* fan fiction is currently on Virtual Season 16, veering off from the show's storylines (canon) since Season 7; *The West Wing* fans ran a Fantasy Season 8 that continued on from where the show ended in 2006, focusing on the lives of Josh Lyman and Donna Moss, who at the end of the series had gone on to work for the new administration; while fans of *Angel*, in particular of the character Cordelia Chase who had been killed off on the show's 100<sup>th</sup> episode during the final season, have been writing season 'fix-its' for fans who have been disappointed with the direction of the show (and especially Cordelia's character) in later seasons<sup>30</sup>. For the more prolific and popular authors, new works will be highly anticipated by their fans while their more 'classic' works will be recommended to new fans who are just being introduced to the text's fan fiction fandom.

Gift exchanges are also understood as "a feature of the institutionalisation of social ties within a moral economy (Scott 1976)" (Cheal, 1988, p. 15), as I have briefly highlighted at the beginning of this section. The system of relations in moral

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<sup>30</sup> *The X-Files* Virtual season can be found at <http://virtualseasonx.com/> (these stories are also archived at The Gossamer Project, the fandom's main central archive), and while *The West Wing's* Fantasy Season 8 is no longer in progress, these stories can still be accessed at [http://web.archive.org/web/20070526211133/http://jensfanfic.com/Fantasy\\_Season8.html](http://web.archive.org/web/20070526211133/http://jensfanfic.com/Fantasy_Season8.html). *Angel* fans, on the other hand, have been writing individual stories that fix the final season's storyline, most of which can be found at <http://www.stranger-things.net/justfic>

economies is formed by ‘part-societies’ (ibid.), small worlds of personal relationships where individuals in every society have lived out their lives. It is in these part-societies where trust is generated and instilled through a common way of life shared by members of the society, and the various fan communities that are formed within a specific fandom represent this ‘part-society’. “Individuals’ commitments to fulfil their customary obligations to others make their actions predictable, and thus keep the complexity of the social environment at a low level” (p. 16). The set of normative obligations are not mere social rules, but a pre-normative belief that these obligations are part of the natural order of things.

Appropriating E.P. Thompson’s (1971) treatise on how 18<sup>th</sup> century peasant leaders and rioters legitimise their revolts by asserting that their actions seek to protect the status quo – something Thompson identifies as ‘moral economy’ – Jenkins suggest that fans subscribe to a similar concept of obligation when they are writing fan fiction: “The ideology of fandom involves both a commitment to some degree of conformity to the original programme materials as well as a perceived right to evaluate the legitimacy of any use of those materials, either by textual producers or by textual consumers” (1988, p. 486). Fans see their writing of fan fiction as a way of preserving the core ideals of the show, specifically the ideals that have attracted them to the programme in the first place, rescuing it from what fans view as indifference of the network and official producers towards their emotional investment. Virtual seasons and season ‘fix-its’ fan fiction are examples of how fans organise a way of continuing storylines and/or restoring favourite characters that have been abandoned by media producers, by agreement among fandom – or at least the group of fans involved – that their version of the story remains true to what they view as the appeal of the show (or the character). In this sense, fans are not poaching the material, but

rather gifting their interpretation of the text through creative cultural production as the best parts of the original programme to fandom while maintaining a certain amount of conformity to the characters and universes the official producers have created.

Mauss (1954, p. 10), places a lot of importance in the nature of the gift itself.

The nature of the bond created by the transfer of possession is as:

[T]he thing itself is a person or pertains to a person... It follows clearly for what we have seen that in this system of ideas one gives away what is in reality a part of one's nature and substance, while to receive something is to receive a part of someone's spiritual essence.

For the Polynesians, according to Mauss, gifts hold a spiritual mysticism. If a person fails to repay the gifts he has received, he will be attacked by a spiritual force, for when a gift is given, an essence of the person who gives the gift stays with the object. Through the acceptance of gifts, a person builds up their honour or prestige, but this will all be lost if the appropriate gifts are not reciprocated, if the obligation is not repaid.

Thus far, I have proposed that fan fiction be considered as gifts that are exchanged within fan fiction fandom. The gift of fan fiction is reciprocated by fans through feedback or comments, sometimes even criticisms or suggestions all bestowed with the intention of making the story better. Sometimes this act of reciprocation appears in the form of dedications, sequels and perhaps a story inspired by another story. A 'besting' of reciprocity can equally occur as Levi-Strauss (1996) has suggested, whereby fans consider their criticisms of a story a 'gift' that can only be reciprocated in kind and accepted if the fan author responds to the criticisms and makes the suggested changes. If the suggested changes are not made, it can be considered as ingratitude as the gift in this sense (the criticisms, usually under guise

of feedback) is essentially returned. At times, callousness with the gift of feedback results in the form of ‘hack fiction’, which I examined briefly earlier, where the fan fiction and fan author are parodied by authors who appoint themselves as gatekeepers of the specific fandom’s cultural productions. If criticisms of the fan fiction these ‘hack fiction’ authors deem unworthy and subpar remains unreciprocated (that is, the ‘suckfic’ author does not stop writing or stop making the same mistake<sup>31</sup>), then they are merely exercising their rights, also as an obligation to fandom and to the media producers, to publicly criticise the fan fiction author. Because these authors do not reciprocate, their status within fandom has been forfeited, their honour and prestige lost for they have not reciprocated their gifts in kind.

Anthropological accounts have often observed gift exchanges occurring within the context of social feasts, such as *potlatches*, that are common among North American Native cultures (Mauss, 1954; Levi-Strauss, 1969). Parallels have been drawn between these potlatches (Cumberland, 2004, p. 266) and fandom: “a fandom-oriented email list, chat room, or convention is the fannish equivalent” (Sabotini, 1999, n.p.). Here, I suggest that these fannish potlatches can also be considered as fields of cultural production – a separate social universe with its own laws (Bourdieu, 1993) – where the exchange of gifts like fan fiction and other fan cultural productions influence fan social, cultural and symbolic capitals. In the next section, I will move towards exploring the exchange of fan social capital, subcultural capital and symbolic capital that occur within the context of the field of cultural production in fandom, and how that relates to gift exchanges.

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<sup>31</sup> This mistake can be as simple as the misspelling of a character’s name, for example.



### *The fan fiction potlatch as a field of cultural production*

The term 'potlatch', apparently a Chinook term that means 'to feed' or 'to consume', popularised by Marcel Mauss (1954), is now "used to describe competitive feasts which used to be held among peoples of north-west America such as the Tlingit and Haida of Alaska and the Kwakiutl of British Columbia" (Hendry, 1999, p. 50). These are considered social events where the hosts demonstrate their status and wealth to the invited guests. Gifts are exchanged, and the value of the gifts determines the hierarchy of the guests. Mauss (1954, p. 8) remarked that, "what is noteworthy about these tribes is the principle of rivalry and hostility that prevails in all these practices. They go as far as to fight and kill chiefs and nobles...It is a struggle between nobles to establish a hierarchy amongst themselves from which their clan will benefit at a later date".

Observed in the context of fandom, this struggle between nobles and chieftains to establish a hierarchy could also be applied, although not to the point of a fight to death. The clans can be the various fan communities within the fandom, all subscribing to different interpretations of the text or engaging in a different fan practice, a different fan community leader or subcultural celebrity, and perhaps more importantly for the fans, shipper groupings<sup>32</sup>. The leaders of the various fan communities, like the nobles and chieftains in Mauss's potlatch are always struggling to establish a hierarchy within their fandom. Fan fiction fans, as I have mentioned earlier would attest that their fan practice is the only legitimate practice within fandom. For Avalon, for instance, fan fiction is the "only aspect of the fan community" (2004, questionnaire interview).

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<sup>32</sup> One of the most divided groupings, is perhaps within the fandom of *Buffy* and *Angel*, among fans/shippers of Cordelia/Angel, Buffy/Angel and Buffy/Spike.

Rachael Sabotini (1999), writing in the Fanfic Symposium<sup>33</sup>, equated fandom to the potlatch, and pointed out that like the feasts, fandom is a ‘social occasion’ held by a host, or hosts in this case, to uphold his (or her) position in society. Mauss (1954) had claimed that the potlatch is an extreme form of institution found in every region around the world. It is an event where gifts are exchanged, and every gift that is reciprocated must be of equal or higher value to maintain the status and honour of the gift-giver: “The obligation to give is the essence of the potlatch” (Mauss, 1954, p. 50).

Most potlatches tend to centre around a feast, and Sabotini proposed that “the feast in the fannish world seems to be discussion of the episodes, non-fiction articles, and development of zines; creation of websites, reviews, critiques, recommendations and other onlist posts are all dishes served for the list members enjoyment...High quality feast dishes nourishes the fandom, and the reader, the list recipients feel emotionally enriched for it” (1999, n.p.)

However, as Sabotini went on to argue, while high quality posts and essays may elevate the status of the fan, honorary statuses are reserved for the fan creative producers, the fan fiction writers, artists, vidders. As Sabotini explained:

Gifts in the fannish community have a double message: they are the centrepiece of the fandom, the main focus of most discussion outside of the show itself, and the rite of passage for acceptance into the community at large. The gifts – art, songvids, and fan fiction – all require some level of artistry to master and are thus highly prized. Although creating feast dishes requires that same level of skill, because they are not included as ‘art’ in the community’s mind, the respect that is given to gift-givers is usually denied them.  
(1999, n.p.)

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<sup>33</sup> ‘The Fannish Potlatch: Creation of Status Within the Fan Community’ (20 December 1999) Available at <http://www.trickster.org/symposium/symp41.htm>. Accessed July 2007.

High status fans, or fans who possess higher-level social, cultural and symbolic capitals receive special treatment in fan communities: “Conversation onlist sometimes centres around eliciting a sequel from the high-status fan; discussions live or die by the position a high-status gift-giver takes” (Sabotini, 1999, n.p.). These fans are the community leaders, the subcultural celebrities, who through their high quality gifts of fan fiction, videos and artworks, have accumulated high amounts of fan social capital, subcultural capital and symbolic capital. Viewed from a different perspective, the potlatch, where gifts are exchanged and hierarchies are determined and fought over, can also be considered a field of cultural production.

In Bourdieu’s own terms, the field:

[I]s a form of *analysis situs* which establishes that each position – e.g. the one which corresponds to a genre such as the novel or, within this, to a sub-category such as the ‘society novel’ or the ‘popular novel’ – is subjectively defined by the system of distinctive properties by which it can be situated relative to other positions; that every position, even the dominant one, depends for its very existence, and for the determinations it imposes on its occupants, on the other positions constituting the field; and that the structure of the field, i.e. of the space of positions, is nothing other than the structure of the distribution of the capital of specific properties which governs success in the field and the winning of the external or specific profits (such as literary prestige) which are at stake in the field (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 30).

Hipsky suggests that the field “is best envisioned as a two-dimensional, metaphorical arena of cultural reception, in which are constellated the dominant works, authors, and genres of a given historical moment” (2000, p. 191); whereby the horizontal axis measures the profitability and popularity of the work, suggesting the

importance of commercial success leading to the accumulation of ‘economic capital’, and where the vertical axis measures prestige, or in Bourdieu’s terms, ‘symbolic capital’ (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 291). “This...form of ‘capital’ is clearly figurative; it conveys the risks of the original venture of seeking recognition on the...field, as well as the propensity of cultural prestige, once established, to maintain itself or accumulate if it is carefully ‘managed’. The metaphor vividly connotes the investment, accumulation, and convertibility of such prestige within the social context of a given field” (Hipsky, 2000, p. 191).

The emphasis placed on economic capital, or commercial success complicates the attempt to situate fandom wholly as a field of cultural production. While some fan films act as calling cards for fans into the industry (Brooker, 2002) and fan fiction authors in turn become professionally paid authors or media producers (Bacon-Smith, 1992; Penley, 1997; Pugh, 2005; Hills, 2010), often turning to write and produce officially-sanctioned fictions for the fandom itself as is common with those from *Doctor Who* and *Star Trek* fandoms<sup>34</sup>; a large portion of materials produced by fans are produced within the autonomous pole, that is, for the consumption of other fans and usually not transferred into economic capital in the ‘official culture’ (Fiske, 1992, p. 31). In fact, Penley (1997, p. 110) talks of the tension that exists between fan fiction authors and those who had turned pro: “they [the fans] are militant in their desire to maintain an unthreatening milieu in which women who want to write can do so without fear of being held to external, professional standards of ‘good writing’”.

Furthermore, Hills problematised the application of Bourdieu’s theory to contemporary fields in *The Pleasures of Horror* (2005) and suggested ways of circumnavigating these difficulties. Hills argues that Bourdieu’s tendencies to

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<sup>34</sup> See, for example, Bacon-Smith (2000) and McKee (2004) for a more extensive discussion.

objectify the fields he studied creates an assumption that the fields “have an autonomy from surrounding fields, and that they therefore possess a logic of their own, acting as a game apart from other social and cultural terrains. ... [But] exchanges between ‘impure’ fields, mediated via forces of journalism, capital and television, are increasingly becoming the norm” (2005, p. 168). Therefore, a contemporary field such as that of television production, for instance, “may powerfully intersect with other fields, for example journalism, academic subcultural production, literary, ... film production, and fan subcultural production” (ibid.). It also exposes the field to the other “social and cultural terrains” (ibid.), in this case, such as those of the various fandoms – that of different texts, genres, actors, producers and so on – with their own sets of rules, regulations and players. After all, “fandom...is never a neutral ‘expression’ of a singular ‘referent’, its status and its performance shift across cultural sites” (Hills, 2002, p. xii).

Hills also noted an absence of pleasure in Bourdieu’s concept of the field since any interaction within the field is reduced to a competition for the accumulation of different levels of capital. Again this appears to be in opposition to the concept of fandom, which Brooker claims is “built around love” (1999, p. 52). Pugh argues this further by stating that, “most fanfic readers are in it because they love either the universe in question or – in the case of ‘character junkies’ – a character or characters within that universe” (2005, p. 36). And the concept of love, for the characters or for the universe or for both, is more synonymous with the concept of pleasure rather than competition, particularly competition for the advancement of economic capital<sup>35</sup>.

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<sup>35</sup> I will go on to explore later in the thesis, that while much of fan practices are built around the concept of love, the notion of competition does not completely diminish. Rather than compete for the accumulation of economic capital, fans instead compete for something which is more symbolic (as in prestige and reputation within the fandom, particularly among fan fiction writers).

“One response to the problem of pleasure in Bourdieuan readings could begin by considering that the field of cultural production is divided into ‘autonomous’ and ‘heteronomous’ poles in Bourdieu’s work (1993)” (Hills, 2005, p.169). ‘Autonomous’ products, often that of an artistic nature are produced within a ‘restricted field of production’, where goods are produced for peers – other producers or specialists within the field – whereas ‘heteronomous’ products are commercially-driven ones geared for the ‘field of large-scale production’, usually for the general public.

Hills has also remarked that recent debates by scholars such as Webb et al. (2002) have called for “hybridizations of ‘autonomous’ and ‘heteronomous’ production” (2005, p. 169), and the debate, as Hills suggested, opens up the possibility that we can “view the ‘field of horror’ (in Hills’s case) as existing *between* ‘restricted’ and ‘large-scale’ cultural production. In other words, horror novels are written, and films are made, in part to satisfy pre-existing audiences/readers, but some of these readers do not merely constitute a pre-existent market, they are also subculturally knowledgeable fans” (ibid.). This observation can be shared within fandom as Pugh concludes:

One major attraction of this genre (fan fiction) for writers is the sense of having a complicit audience who already share much information with the writer and can be relied on to pick up ironies or allusions without having them spelled out. ... The human need for heroes and archetypes does not go away, but their faces change with time, and one avatar takes the place of another. ... [In] an age of fragmented rather than shared cultures the fan fiction audience is unusual in having as thorough a knowledge of its particular shared canon as Bible-reading or classically educated audience once did (2005, p. 219).

However, unlike Pugh who is interested in investigating fan fiction as a literary genre, I am interested in the fan interactions within fan fiction fandom – interactions that point to the construction of fan social hierarchies and the development of subcultural celebrity identity through the accumulation of fan social, cultural and symbolic capitals from the production and consumption of fan fiction. In this case, television production can be considered a field of large-scale production, where the continued production of the materials are determined by commercial success or economic capital, and where the symbolic capital – the reputation of the producer – is dependent upon the reception of his or her product by consumers (the audience). At the same time, it is not an autonomous field disconnected from other fields of production, such as those of literary and journalism. For example, the field of television production is dependent on the journalistic field to build up the reputation of the show, its producers and stars upon release to the audience.

Bourdieu's definition of the field of restricted production better fits the 'mini-industry' characteristics of fan fiction and the fandom that surrounds this particular textual productivity. I want to therefore situate the field of fandom in the "in between" fields as Hills proposed, where materials are produced "to satisfy pre-existing audiences" (2005, p. 169), like fans of a specific genre – scifi, fantasy, soaps – and "also subculturally knowledgeable fans" (ibid.), fans who are familiar with fan fiction as well as fans who have followed the work of a particular producer, director, or actor, and who possess the knowledge of the quality of the producer's work<sup>36</sup>. With

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<sup>36</sup> For example, fan discussions of *Dollhouse* will be made in reference to Joss Whedon's entire body of work, in terms of similar themes or character references. J.J. Abrams's new show, *Fringe* has not only been referenced to *Lost* and *Alias*, but also to other shows of the same genre like *The X-Files*, which fans are reminded of or through references made by the producers and the cast. Joshua Jackson, the star of *Fringe*, has identified his show as a replacement for *The X-Files* (<http://www.fringebloggers.com/joshua-jackson-fringe-is-a-proper-x-files-replacement>)

this in mind, I will now turn to discussing fan fiction fandom as a field of restricted production in the following section.

*Fan fiction fandom as a field of restricted production*

I have proposed that fan fiction fandom be situated as a field of restricted production where goods are produced, not for the general public, but for other producers and where it also “develop[s] its own criteria for the evaluation of its products, thus achieving the truly cultural recognition accorded by the peer group whose members are both privileged clients and competitors” (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 115). In this field, goods are thought to be produced under a ‘principle of disinterestedness’, “through the denunciation of the mercenary compromises or calculating manoeuvres of the adversary, so that disavowal of the ‘economy’ is placed at the very heart of the field, as the principle governing its functioning and transformation” (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 79). The production of art for art’s sake makes the field of cultural production an important space for creating meanings as well as for making sense of these meanings: “If the field is in fact ‘disinterested’, it can be presented as something that tells the truth because it has no investment – no ‘interest’ – in pleasing the government or sponsors, or in attracting buyers. And because this field is dedicated to making meanings – that is, to its symbolic function – cultural products can be seen as indicators of how members of society perceive themselves and their values” (Webb et al., 2002, p. 150).

While there is a level of ‘disinterestedness’ in the production of fan fiction, it is not thoroughly in the sense of the word as Bourdieu described, where any relation to the economy is rejected. Fan fiction is sometimes produced for the sake that it is



fan fiction and considered an ‘art form’ to some fan authors<sup>37</sup>. For some authors, though, their aim is not for a commercial valuation of their creative work, or the eventual conversion to economic capital when, or if they become professional writers or media producers; but rather because of their involvement in fandom, for an accumulation of fan cultural (production of high-quality fiction and possession of fan knowledge), social (knowing other fan celebrities and having access to industry insiders, therefore in possession of insider information that then links back to the accumulation of cultural capital) and symbolic (reputation) capitals. Bourdieu’s principle of disinterestedness does not allow for a middle ground where fiction is produced not with full disinterestedness nor interestedness; where the fan fiction author, while not producing work for the sake of commercial value (for the mass, officially-sanctioned markets) is nevertheless producing the fiction and promoting it to get a wider readership<sup>38</sup>. This can also be witnessed, particularly in the general fan fiction archive site, FanFiction.net, where some fan authors, upon posting their works of fiction on the site and receiving a lukewarm or no response from readers, threaten to discontinue the stories unless their work is reviewed and voted on.

The field of fan fiction production is also a site of struggles, “in which what is at stake is the power to impose the dominant definition of the writer and therefore to delimit the population of those entitled to take part in the struggle to define the writer” (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 42). In the case of fan fiction fandom, this struggle centres on the definition of what the original text is, or what the canon, “the source material

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<sup>37</sup> Cf. Jane Mortimer’s essay, “The Advantages of Fan Fiction as an Art Form” available on <http://web.archive.org/web/19981206114228/http://members.aol.com/janemort/fanfic.html> (accessed 1st July 2005).

<sup>38</sup> There is a boundary to this readership however. As much as fan fiction authors are enthusiastic about sharing their fan fiction with other fans, they can also be territorial about it. In the sense that stories are posted in specific communities or archives that will not devalue their work and effort. This can be seen most clearly via fans’ reaction to, and opinion of multi-fandom archives like Fanfiction.net and LiveJournal, which I will explore in more detail in Chapter 5.

accepted as authentic and, within fandom, known by all readers in the same way that myth and folk-tale were once commonly known” (Pugh, 2005, p. 26), dictates. The struggle also entails which slash subtextual readings or a particular ‘shipper’ grouping should be considered the dominant reading<sup>39</sup>, or who gets to be the popular fan author, fan leader and by extension, the spokesperson of the group, if not for the fan fiction fandom, and even where the fan fiction is posted and archived. The leanings of the fan leader’s ‘politics’ (their favourite character, shipper group, etc.) will also influence how the fandom is presented to other fans or members of the public in general.

In this sense, MacDonald’s treatise on fan hierarchies can be problematised. While MacDonald acknowledges that “fans may occupy multiple positions simultaneously, and thus fans’ positions within fandom are determined by their position within all possible hierarchies” (1998, p. 138), she fails to mention that these positions are constantly contested and never fixed. For example, a fan author who is celebrated among her social circle for an extraordinary depiction of Mulder and Scully’s relationship, and their friendship with John Doggett and Monica Reyes may not be celebrated in another circle of fans who reject the inclusion of Doggett and Reyes as canon<sup>40</sup>. Therefore, the author’s reputation and their position as a leader in one group of fans subscribing to one reading of the text is not transferable to another group of fans who interpret the original text in a different way. To use another example, fans who champion the relationship of Jack and Kate in *Lost* may be met

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<sup>39</sup> ‘Shippers’ is a term denoting supporters of the development of a romantic relationship between two characters. Fanlore has the origin of the term within *XF* fandom (<http://fanlore.org/wiki/Shippers>). Ensemble shows such as *Buffy, the Vampire Slayer* and *Lost* feature a more diverse groups of ‘shippers’ compared to a show like *The X-Files* which had two leading characters in the first 7 years of its 9-year run on the air.

<sup>40</sup> In this case, creating an unofficial ‘fanon’, fan-sanctioned source material, where Doggett and Reyes were never included into the developing storyline of the show. Within the fan fiction fandom of the show, it is mostly known as ‘Classic *XF*’, where fans recognise the canon of the show until the end of season 7, before the abduction of Fox Mulder.

with resistance from those who are more convinced of, and support a relationship between Kate and Sawyer. And fans will go on to write stories based on their interpretations of the texts, recognising and celebrating the authors whom they feel best represent their interests and who best capture the chemistry between their favourite characters and preferred pairing, often to the point of constructing those who do not share their views as an 'Other' within fan fiction fandom.

Therefore, it is difficult to determine fans' hierarchical position within *all* the possible hierarchies that exist within fandom, simply because it may be impossible to determine all the hierarchies, as well as to attain a complete picture of the various, intricate relationships between communities in fandom. Furthermore, while a fan may be celebrated for her contributions to fan fiction fandom, for instance, she may not be as popular within another group of fans who subscribe to a different interpretation of the text, not because she lacks the skills or dedication in producing a quality piece of fiction, but because her interpretation of the text is deemed unacceptable by those vying for power and authority to represent fandom. Possession of fan cultural capital, in this case, being able to produce high quality fictions or possessing the knowledge to read the original text and re-interpret it into works of 'art' does not immediately bestow fan social capital or fan symbolic capital. Furthermore, designating a singular voice of authority for a fandom is too deterministic, at the same time disregarding the various struggles that occurs within the field of restricted production on a regular basis.

The restricted field is a "structured structure" (Webb et al., 2002, p.158), where products are communicated through structures relevant to the field. So fan fiction fandom will be structured through apparatuses that distribute fan fiction (newsgroups, fan fiction posting lists); provide authors the social interaction and

research material (discussion lists and communities, research websites, beta readers); storage (archive websites, authors' personal sites, recommendation sites); and rewards (awards, feedback/comments). "So 'culture' is not just the product of a particular social organisation; it also shapes society by the representations it makes, and by how it chooses to make those representations" (ibid.).

From this 'structured structure' emerges a social agent, the 'art trader' who is:

[N]ot just the agent who gives the work a commercial value by bringing it into a market; he is not just the representative, the impresario, who 'defends the authors he loves'.

He is the person who can proclaim the value of the author he defends (cf. the fiction of the catalogue or blurb) and above all 'invests his prestige' in the author's cause, acting as a 'symbolic banker' who offers as security all the symbolic capital he has accumulated (which he is liable to forfeit if he backs a 'loser'). (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 77)

Similarly, within fan fiction fandom, a beta reader or veteran author who already possesses a certain amount of fan social and symbolic capital within the fan fiction community can invest in new up-and-coming authors, promoting their works of fiction to their fan audience, acting as a mentor – an advocate for quality, as well as taste, since the new authors these fans choose to mentor usually produce works that reflect very closely to the types of fan fictions they themselves produce and prefer. For example, it will be very rare for a well-known, vocal and unyielding supporter of MSR (Mulder-Scully relationship) to mentor a new author who writes Mulder/Krycek slash. If the new author then becomes a celebrated one, it further adds to the fan social and fan symbolic capitals of the initial agent.

The field of restricted production also progresses towards a certain level of autonomy by the developing of relationships between producers and critics; "a

‘creative’ interpretation for the benefit of the ‘creators’. So, tiny ‘mutual admiration societies’ grew up, closed in upon their own esotericism, as simultaneously, signs of a new solidarity between artist and critic emerged” (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 116). In fan fiction fandom, this solidarity is not so much between artist and critic, but between author and readers, who are not merely fans of the original text but also fans of the authors and the works these authors produce. Some ‘mutual admiration societies’ emerge through the act of fan fiction recommendation, usually generated through fan talk within fan fiction communities, for example, the semi-private messages found in the notes at the start or end of fan fiction to the author’s beta readers and cheerleaders where sometimes, personal in-jokes are shared with the general reader. At the same time, it is also not that uncommon to find discussion lists, predominantly in Yahoo Groups, set up by authors specifically for their readers to be informed of new stories, works-in-progress or to discuss the author’s works. More often than not these lists are limited to the author’s immediate circle of fans and friends, where entry into the list is by invitation from the list owner.

This will be reflected upon in later chapters, but a constant allegation in fan fiction fandom is that authors are accused of moving in tight cliques with their band of beta readers, ‘critics’ and fans, commenting on and recommending the works of those members of their own cliques and excluding other (new) authors from the field. Frey\_at\_last, who claims her primary fandom to be on *XF* fan communities on LiveJournal explains the generational difference between fans as such:

The ‘real’ Philes who ran [the fandom] for so long, are kind of like Ents, hiding who knows where. The **really** old ones, who seem to have been pre-1998/99, have all disappeared...But there are a group of fic writers who wrote pretty prominently starting around 1999, and they can still be found on LJ in isolated area...They are most-

ly only friends with themselves (2005, questionnaire interview).

Some fans have voiced concerns over how personal friendships between authors dissipate whatever criticisms they might have for one another's creative works for fear those criticisms might come in between their friendship and possible future collaborations<sup>41</sup>.

The field of restricted production, as I have stated at the beginning of this section, strives to achieve a true "cultural recognition accorded by the peer group whose members are both privileged clients and competitors" (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 115), at the same time achieving an autonomy within the field by "its power to define its own criteria for the production and evaluation of its products" (ibid.). And within the restricted field of fan fiction production, this is executed by the players (authors and readers) through the exchange and accumulation of fan social, cultural and symbolic capitals. Having examined the field within which these capitals are exchanged, I shall now move on to look at these capitals.

### *Fan capitals*

Harker et al. (1990), quoted in Webb et al. state that, "capital acts as a social relation within a system of exchange" (2002, p. 22). The system of exchange is usually the field of cultural production, or in this case, a field of restricted production. I have argued that previous scholarship into fandom as a field of production has delegated fans to being part of a 'mass', where their practices are always assumed to be performed in a group, thus making fans appear to be one-dimensional as they are either posited as consumers or producers, writers or readers. I have proposed that, by

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<sup>41</sup> This trait in fan fiction fandom is discussed in a somewhat hostile, (mostly anonymous) discussion on *fanfic\_hate*, a community on LiveJournal, which I will go on to discuss in more detail in Chapter 5.

looking at fan fiction fandom as a field of restricted production, it would allow us to observe the exchange of fan capitals via their interactions with one another, thus restoring the identity of the fan to an individual level rather than en masse as part of a cheering crowd or participant in an online discussion, or fan fiction 'round robin' collaboration.

Firstly, it is important to note that fandom, as an 'in between' (Hills, 2005) field and fan fiction fandom as a field of restricted production exist within the notion of *illusio*. *Illusio*, according to Bourdieu (1998), quoted in Webb et al. (2002, p. 26) is "the fact of being caught up in and by the game, of believing...that playing is worth the effort..., to participate, to admit that the game is worth playing and that the stakes created in and through the fact of playing are worth pursuing; it is to recognise the game and to recognise the stakes". The fan social, cultural and symbolic capital gained from the cultural game played by fans (authors and readers) in fan fiction fandom only applies within their fandom; "a 'truth' believed only by those who already have an investment [in the field], and disregarded by those outside" (Webb et al., 2002, p. 149). Translated into the context of the text that so captured the fans' imagination, it is almost like the basis of the relationship between Mulder and Scully of *The X-Files* – the relationship that fascinated the fans – in that Scully, being invested in Mulder's work and beliefs (or some would argue, obsessions), believes almost completely in him, despite his reputation as a joke to outsiders. Within fandom, the reputations earned by fans will not necessarily mean anything cross-fandom (although for some authors, it can do, where their names serve as a guarantee of quality or familiarity for the reader, provided they do not change their name or use a different pseudonym altogether) or outside of fan fiction fandom:

The existence of the writer, as fact and as value, is inseparable from the existence of the...field as an autonomous

universe endowed with specific principles of evaluation of practices and works...In fact, the invention of the writer, in the modern sense of the term, is inseparable from the progressive invention of a particular social game...which is constituted as it establishes its autonomy, that is to say, its specific laws of functioning within the field of power (Bourdieu, 1993, pp.162-163).

Within the context of fandom, then, the invention, development and maintenance of the fan identity are inseparable from the invention of the social game in the various fields of fandom. Bourdieu's theories have been reworked for popular culture and fan studies as I have mentioned, by scholars like Fiske (1992) and Hills (2002). By examining their criticisms and appropriations of Bourdieu's theories, especially the further development of the 'cultural capital' metaphor, I will attempt to apply that to fan fiction fandom.

John Fiske (1992) views Bourdieu's description of culture as a metaphor for an economy where people make investments – in education, in knowledge, in social networks, in other accepted institutions like art galleries and museums in order to accumulate capital. Fiske also points out two weaknesses in Bourdieu's work: firstly, his emphasis on economics and class as major denominators of distinction and the absence of gender, race and age as further axes of distinction; and secondly, his failure at paying attention to the "culture of the subordinate" (Fiske, 1992, p. 32) which prevents consideration of "forms of *popular cultural capital* produced outside and often against cultural capital" (ibid. – own emphasis).

The term 'popular cultural capital', introduced by Fiske in the book chapter, 'The Cultural Economy of Fandom' (1992) is used to present a dichotomy against official cultural capital (high culture). With few exceptions within fandom, popular cultural capital does not automatically convert into economic capital, unlike official



cultural capital. It also does not provide upward class mobility as suggested by Bourdieu. Rather “its dividends lie in the pleasures and esteem of one’s peers in a community of taste rather than those of one’s social betters” (ibid.), allowing fans with possession of ‘popular cultural capital’ to build on the fan’s social (the fan’s social network: who they know, what communities they belong to) and symbolic (the fan’s reputation and prestige within their fandom) capital; just as the reverse could occur.

Sarah Thornton took a different approach in *Club Cultures* by coining the term ‘subcultural capital’:

[S]ubcultural capital confers status on its owner in the eyes of the relevant beholder. ... [It] can be *objectified* or *embodied*. Just as books and paintings display cultural capital in the family home, so subcultural capital is objectified in the form of fashionable haircuts and well-assembled record collections (full of well-chosen, limited edition ‘white label’ twelve-inches and the like)” (1995, p. 11).

Subcultural capital, unlike most of Fiske’s popular cultural capital is transferable to economic capital through the notion of ‘hipness’, although it may not be with the same amount of ease or financial reward as official cultural capital: “DJs, club organisers, clothes designers, music and style journalists and various record industry professionals all make a living from their subcultural capital. Moreover within club cultures, people in these professions often enjoy a lot of respect not only because of their high volume of subcultural capital, but also from their role in defining and creating it” (Thornton, 1995, p. 12).

Sandvoss (2005, p. 40) argues that, “through subcultural capital...discrimination and power relations are maintained and reconstituted in fandom”, sites where new cultural hierarchies are formed as consumption practices

now act as signifiers of distinction. Thus, “variations in fan practices – rather than objects of fandom – are increasingly indicative of social and cultural differences ... [At the same time] it is mainly fans who will recognise the nuanced differences in consumption choices – between a season-ticket in the supporters’ end or elsewhere in the stadium, or between white label bootlegs and compilation albums – and consumption practices, such as appropriate forms of appearance and participation at, for instance, a screening of the *Rocky Horror Picture Show*” (p. 38). However, Sandvoss’s model appears to be too dependent on fan consumption choices and practices, disregarding the distinctions that may be created through fan production, even down to the choice of place where fans post their fan fiction, and the social distinctions that reflect fan positions *within* their fandom.

Objectifying ‘subcultural capital’ within fandom may not be as obvious as Thornton (1995) specified within the club cultures she examined. In the clubbing cultures that Thornton analysed, identities are performed through dress, style, speech and collection of the ‘correct’ records - the subcultural capital in this sense is much more visible<sup>42</sup> compared to the expression of fan identity through other practices. For fans who participate in “textual productivity” (Fiske, 1992, p. 37), fan cultural capital is presented in the form of the written word: ‘high-quality’ fan fiction that adheres to canon, or one that presents a unique understanding of the characters, ‘bringing them to life’ in the readers’ eyes; knowledge about the show, access to spoilers<sup>43</sup>, contact with producers, cast, crew and sometimes the network; and within the context of

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<sup>42</sup> While fan identities may be performed similarly through dress, style, speech and an impressive collection of artefacts, Thornton’s version seems to suggest a prolonged and constant state, rather than one that might be more temporary. For example, fans may dress up as their favourite characters when attending conventions rather than practise dressing up with Spock ears in their everyday lives.

<sup>43</sup> Spoilers are major details that might give away a plot from upcoming episodes that have not been aired. Fans may get access to them through industry sources, or as is the norm now with current shows like *24* and *Lost*, producers leave teasers to upcoming plots through official discussion boards where fans and producers both frequent.

online fandom, knowledge of technology and how to make use of the software and programmes available on the Internet. Possession of these fan cultural capitals adds to the accumulation of fan symbolic capital – recognition and reputation – that enables specific fans to become leaders, or earn celebrity status among their fan audience. Andrea MacDonald identified these fans with a wealth of fan symbolic capital as those on the top level of fan hierarchies, allowing them to act as the spokesperson of a fan group: “Outsiders to fan discourse (such as journalists and academics) will usually be directed either by fans or by production people to fans who have achieved a certain level of recognition or authority...Only authorities are able to speak uncontested to outsiders such as journalists” (1998, p. 138-139). It is also important to note, however, that this position is never permanent and frequently contested, whether it be by another fan from within the community, or from another group of fans.

At the same time, the symbolic capital, both fan and general, that may have been gained from the possession of ‘group-sanctioned’ or ‘lifestyle-conditioned’ subcultural capital is like non-transferable (or even non-refundable) plane tickets. For example, it may take the fan to the top position of their fandom (as fan celebrity) but their fan symbolic capital is not necessarily applicable in another fandom or in their everyday lives. In other words, their achievements are contained within the *illusio* of their fandom. Bourdieu has claimed:

To be able to play the games of culture with the playful seriousness which Plato demanded, a seriousness without the ‘spirit of seriousness’, one has to belong to the ranks of those who have been able, not necessarily to make their whole existence a sort of children’s game, as artists do, but at least to maintain for a long time, sometimes a whole lifetime, a child’s relation to the world...This is why the logic of the game has already assigned them roles – eccentric or

boor – which they will *play* despite themselves in the eyes of those who know how to stay within the bounds of the intellectual illusion and who cannot see them any other way (1984, p. 54).

In *Fan Cultures* (2002) Hills offered a problematisation of both Bourdieu's work and the re-workings of cultural capital through Fiske and Thornton's work on fandom and club cultures respectively by pointing out the moral dualism that is seemingly present in their works. Bourdieu's four major categorisation of cultural groups – the *dominant bourgeoisie*, *dominated bourgeoisie*, *petit bourgeoisie* and the *working class* – assumes that cultural capital remains fixed and legitimate instead of taking into account that at any single moment, it can fragment, become inconsistent or struggled over with another:

Our objects of cultural knowledge and education are various and are themselves caught up in networks of value which may vary between communities and subcultures as well as across class distinctions. Such a fixed model also neglects the possibility that struggles over legitimacy of 'cultural capital' may occur both between and *within* class fractions, communities and subcultures (Hills, 2002, p. 48-49).

Applying Bourdieu's theory as such assumes the treatment of popular culture; and by extension, media fandom as a 'scandalous category' that violates the assumed (and accepted) cultural hierarchies. Jenkins' work also poses a dualism whereby fan appropriations of popular texts disrupt the 'natural' cultural capital decided by gatekeepers or ruling classes (i.e. media producers). Non-fans are posited against fans, who are imagined to be dangerous and deviant as they oppose the ruling classes by inserting their own (often considered to be scandalous) interpretations to popular texts.

Fiske's popular cultural capital acts in a similar fashion by creating binary oppositions between the popular versus the official, "a moral dualism desperately seeking some kind of stable theoretical distinction between 'good' popular culture and 'bad' high culture, but unable to alight on anything substantial enough to divert attention from its incessant splitting of terms, cultures and experiences" (Hills, 2002, pp. 51-52). By creating divisions between popular and official culture, Fiske builds on the binary set up by Jenkins (1992) between fans and non-fans.

Thornton (1995) too faced a similar dilemma with the moral dualism in her work. While she criticised previous subcultural works' reliance on binary oppositions, she also "constructs a 'good' and authentic in-group and a 'bad' and deficient out-group which lacks taste and knowledge" (Hills, 2002, p. 53) within the club subculture she was studying. Furthermore, her usage of the term 'subcultural capital' limits the study of fandom, positing it once again within the confines of subcultural studies which scholars like Crawford (2004) have been trying to avoid as I have discussed in Chapter 1.

Hills (2002) also criticises the over-emphasis on cultural capital by academics who had applied Bourdieu's theories in their work. Social and symbolic capital, along with their relationship with one another and to cultural capital is often neglected. Hills suggests that "'fan social capital' (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) must also be closely investigated in future analyses. ...[It is vital that] fan social capital cannot be entirely divorced from fan cultural capital, since it is likely that fans with a very high fan cultural capital will become the 'executive fans', and will therefore possess high level of fan social capital" (Hills, 2002, p. 57).

Possession of fan social capital also ensures fan position within the fandom. Knowing the 'right' group of fans, associating with highly respected fan communities adds to the fan social capital. For readers who become friends with authors or belong to the same community as they do, it is possible to read a newly written fan fiction before it is 'officially' released, as fans/readers often become 'test audiences' as well as editors (beta readers) and researchers for the authors. As part of the inner circle of a popular and celebrated fan author, they might attain the opportunity of having their name mentioned in a fan fiction, have a story dedicated, and specially written for them on occasions such as birthdays, thereby building on their fan social capital as well as determining their fan symbolic capital.

For a new author, on the other hand, to be associated with the majority-sanctioned communities, and by extension the popular author/fan celebrity would sometimes warrant a mentoring system whereby the new author's works can be highly recommended and received by the veteran author's fans, all of which adds to the fan symbolic capital based around reputation. "In its apparently variant forms, then, symbolic capital is both a form of recognition (fame, accumulated prestige) and the specific 'legitimation' of other conjunctions of capitals" (Hills, 2002, p. 57). The combination of fan social and cultural capital contributes to the possession of fan symbolic capital, which will determine their status and hierarchical position within the fandom.

The exchange and accumulation of fan social, cultural and symbolic capitals, in this case, occurs within the realm of fan fiction fandom, which I have earlier proposed should be considered as a field of restricted production. Bourdieu attested that, "there is no way out of culture; and one's only chance of objectifying the true nature of the game is to objectify as fully as possible the very operations which one is

obliged to use in order to achieve that objectification” (1984, p. 12). Bourdieu’s suggestion, that there is no way out of ‘the game of culture’, leaves us with an option to understand the game, and to work out the ‘best strategy’ available with which to participate in it. “Bourdieu’s writings on the field of cultural production go some distance to help us understand the ‘game’, and play it more effectively” (Webb et al., 2002, p. 147), as well as highlighting the relationship between the cultural producers (in this case, the fan fiction authors) and “producers of the meaning and value of work – critics...and the whole set of agents whose combined efforts produce consumers capable of knowing and recognizing the work of art as such” (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 37).

In short, capitals govern the success of the players or agents within a given field. And a field of production is made up of the strategies employed by these players in order for them to accumulate and increase their capitals. Within the restricted field of fan fiction production, the accumulation of fan symbolic capital becomes the aim in order for fans to develop their own criteria for evaluating, as well as managing their products (fan fiction and other creative works), maintaining a level of autonomy from the field of large-scale productions (the media industry, or those who work for the official media industry who try to capitalise off fans). In other words, fans can give their favourite characters more ‘screen time’, transport them to another universe, kill or make them fall in love autonomously from the plots unfolding (or that have unfolded) on their television, and they can do so without intervention from official culture.

### *Conclusion*

Matt Hills (2010) asserts that, “fan studies has moved away from fan/producer binaries, beginning to focus instead on fans’ career paths” (p. 57). This concept was

first suggested by Garry Crawford (2004) who argued that common typologies and definitions of the 'fan' are too restrictive a view. Indeed, I began this chapter looking at how Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) examine and define the role of fans, arguing that their impression of fans is still significantly confined within the context of the mass or communal audience.

The figure of the fan as part of a mass audience remains problematic, as it does not allow the flexibility of exploring fans as multifaceted individuals with very specific roles to play within the microcosm of their community structures. It also assumes that fandom exists as a unified whole, where fans move from being the casual consumer to fans to professionals at the same pace, without deviating or acknowledging conflicts that occur in fandom. In essence, fandom is presented as stable and communal. Furthermore, it assumes fandom as a space where hierarchies are of little or no concern to fans. But in truth, fans place great care and attention on their every activity, be it writing fan fiction, creating costumes or fan films, splicing together clips for a music video, or reporting on a fan or official event. The accumulation of fan social and cultural capitals drives a lot of fan interactions, although this is mostly always implicit.

One of the ways I suggested where this could be observed is in the practice of fan fiction writing. I suggested that while fans may start off by reading (or writing) fan fiction because they are fans of the original text, they eventually form bonds with other fans in a sub-set community (or communities) and become fans of other fans. These are usually fans who have acquired a higher amount of status due to their extraordinary writing skills (fan cultural capital) or due to their association with certain fan social circles (fan social capital). This not only implies that social hierarchies exist but it also opens up possibilities that fandom is a site of struggles for



control, a contested space for dominance in determining the reading formations surrounding the text, or the accepted practices within a fandom.

Fans are traditionally considered as textual poachers, and there is a sense of marginality that is attached to fan practices. That, despite their courtship by the media industry to provide grassroots marketing and promotional support and documented evidences of fans turning pro, fans are still considered as poachers who infringe upon material produced by official media. I suggested that this is unhelpful since it would suggest that fan social hierarchies would then be rendered as petty territorial markings rather than possessing any symbolic value to the fans. In the second section, I argued that media texts are de-commoditised by fans, and the ensuing cultural products from which are produced (fan fiction, fan videos, etc.) are exchanged like gifts in fandom, thus making them valuable to fans. The gift exchanges that occur in fandom further determines the social hierarchies of fans.

This suggests that fandom exists as a separate social and cultural field with its own set of rules and regulations, where instead of goods being exchanged for economic gains, fan cultural productions are treated like gifts. In the final section, I turned to look at the field within which these gifts are exchanged by appropriating Bourdieu's theorisation of the field of cultural production. In this section, I also looked more specifically at Bourdieu's notion of social, cultural and symbolic capitals and how they can be appropriated into fandom's field of cultural production in which fan fictions are exchanged as gifts and social hierarchies are determined.

Having set up my theoretical frameworks for the research, I shall now turn to look at the methodologies that I have used in conducting this research, as well as the complications that arose from applying those methods practically.

## Chapter 3:

### Methodology: The Journey

In this chapter, I will explore the methodological implications of the research method I have chosen to implement in this project. I will first start by discussing how ethnography has been adapted into fan studies and then problematise it, as Hills (2002, p. 66) had done by questioning fan scholars' acceptance of fan talk as clear evidence of fan knowledge. As Hills argues, "given the fan's articulate nature, and immersion in the text concerned, the move to ethnography seems strangely unquestionable, as if it is somehow grounded in the fan's (supposedly) pre-existent form of audience knowledge and interpretive skill...Fandom is largely reduced to mental and discursive activity occurring without passion, without feeling, without an experience of (perhaps involuntary) self-transformation" (2002, p. 66). Hills suggests that an autoethnographic exercise be performed where the "tastes, values, attachments and investments" (2002, p. 72) of the academic fan come under constant scrutiny of cultural analysis.

In a recent piece, Monaco (2010) commends the benefit of performing this autoethnographic exercise which would enable the researcher to question his or her own knowledge production, and how that affects his or her choices on methodology and how to respond when interacting with fans. Monaco argues that in performing the autoethnographic exercise, "the author is left with the challenge of constructing a cohesive account, although not necessarily a linear or unproblematic one, which encompasses a life story that constantly moves back and forth between the tensions of past and present and inner and outer worlds" (2010, p. 109).

I will first explore the issues surrounding the application of ethnography in the context of an online study. Next, I will perform a short autoethnographic exercise, as a form of self-reflection on how the media texts and fan communities I chose to study and the positioning of certain fan fiction archives like FanFiction.Net (FF.net) are influenced by my own involvement with *XF* fandom prior to the popularity and growth of multi-fandom fan fiction archives. Following that, I will go on to map out the research process and the complications that ensue from employing ethnography as a research method.

### *Applying ethnography*

Most studies into fan culture have appropriated ethnography as a method of observing fans within the context of their communities. Traditionally a key anthropological concept, ethnography required the ethnographer to venture to an often-exotic location in order to observe a foreign culture's social and cultural life: "Fetterman (1989: 11) has defined ethnography broadly as 'the art and science of describing a group or culture'. There is an emphasis on 'the study of people in naturally occurring settings or 'fields' by means of methods which capture their social meanings and ordinary activities, involving the researcher participating directly in the setting' (Brewer, 2000: 10)" (Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 2009, pp. 84-85).

However, ethnography has also been adapted to explore socially constructed sites such as fandom (Jenkins, 1992, p. 213). Bacon-Smith presented the most traditionally anthropological account of fandom, identifying herself as a curious ethnographer venturing into a previously undiscovered culture that is foreign and exotic: "Exposure is the ethnographer's prize and the community's fear: when my investigations took me too close to sensitive topics, the community sidetracked me

with something of value, something that conserved the risk I as ethnographer sensed was present but that did not expose *too* much, that did not reveal the heart of the community. The symbolising heart of the community, by its very nature, remains both dangerous and out of sight even to most of the participants, who incorporate its forms and structures integrally throughout their work” (1992, p. 283). Hills problematises this by arguing that ethnographic accounts like Bacon-Smith’s “are unable to construct more complex characterisations of fan culture beyond a sense of ‘communal conspiracy’ to be battled by the detective-ethnographer (Bacon-Smith), or a sense of ‘communal creativity’ to be recognised and valued by the scholar-fan (Jenkins)” (2002, p. 70).

The growth of online (fan) communities in the 1990s shifted the attention from physical locations of fan practices (fan club meetings, conventions) to the virtual, with fan scholars (Baym 2000; Zweerink and Gatson, 2002; Bury, 2005) making use of unlimited access to fans and their discussions on newsgroups and forums. With this development, Hine (2000) called for a re-examination of ethnographic discourses in order for ethnography to be more appropriately situated into an online setting. “The role of travel and face-to-face interaction in ethnography; text, technology and reflexivity; and the making of ethnographic objects,” (Hine, 2000, p. 43) – these fundamental basics of ethnography, which are usually taken for granted have to be re-evaluated and re-examined in order to be adapted into the context of Internet research.

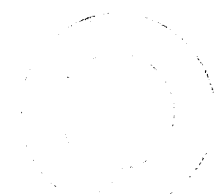
Scholars such as Monaco (2010) propose a multi-sited approach<sup>1</sup> that has evolved out of Hine’s open-ended, exploratory process (Hine, 2000, p. 71), where data is collected from a variety of spaces through “the following of people, things,

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term ‘multi-sited approach’ here to mean different spaces of online communities (e.g. mailing lists, forums, LJ) rather than the traditional offline and online multi-sited spaces.

metaphors, narratives, biographies and conflicts” (Hine, 2000, p. 60) that represent the culture that the researcher is observing – an endeavour that the Internet facilitates since the researcher does not need to be physically confined to one specific physical site. As Hine explains, “the development of the ethnography was an exploratory process, with each activity and each new form of data leading to another and further adding to the understanding of what ethnography could mean in this kind of context” (2000, p. 71). Despite this seemingly convenient shift to the gathering of data on the Internet, Lotz and Ross remind us that we should consider why “one chooses to use the Internet before beginning a project, since the ease of the Internet may lead researchers to choose it primarily for reasons of expediency and monetary expense that could ultimately interfere with the goals of the research project” (2004, p. 510).

Indeed, Lotz and Ross raise an interesting point as the concentration of research within an online context has often neglected the physical locations of fan practices like conventions and fan club meetings, which still occur today, often as an extension of online communities and vice versa. A multi-sited approach could also be implemented in this circumstance, where fans are observed within the context of online communities as well as conventions, fan club gatherings and/or charity screenings. But Brooker also points out that, “the Internet enabled many fans to take their first step into a larger world, and it is fitting that online communication forms the heart of [the] research, as it links and unites so many of the various fan communities [to be] discussed” (2002, p. xv). Since my initial interest resided in fans of other fans, particularly popular fan fiction authors, which later evolved and developed into fan subcultural celebrities, and whose activities are based online, it seemed prudent to utilise an ethnographic method, at the same time appropriating Hine’s open-ended, multi-sited approach to ethnography. Furthermore, obtaining data



from the Internet ensured that I was not bound to fans who are only based in the UK. Given that I was mostly interested in the social hierarchies that exist between fans, an ethnographic approach seems prudent compared to an approach that combined quantitative methods.

Hills, however, questions the advantage of relying on fan ethnographic accounts as whole truths or representations of 'the real' (2002, p. 71). He argues that researchers fail to take into consideration the "processes of auto-legitimation" (p. 66) in fan cultures as these researchers always naturally assume that fan narratives guarantee the evidence and legitimation of fan knowledge. Instead, Hills calls for a thorough interpretation and analysis of fan talk:

[I]n order to focus upon its gaps and dislocations, its moments of failures within narratives of self-consciousness and self-reflexivity, and its repetitions or privileged narrative constructions which are concerned with communal (or sub-cultural) justification in the face of 'external' hostility (2002, p. 66).

Hine supports this notion, arguing that the contexts within which these ethnographic accounts are produced and situated should be taken into consideration. "This does not necessarily entail judging them as true or false accounts, but it does enable a view of the text as an account which has a situated author producing text within a cultural context and a situated audience interpreting text within other cultural contexts. Viewing texts ethnographically, then, entails tying those texts to particular circumstances of production and consumption. The text becomes ethnographically (and socially) meaningful once we have cultural context(s) in which to situate it" (Hine, 2000, p. 52).

Hills proposes the adaptation of autoethnography, which he defines as an exercise "in which the tastes, values, attachments and investments of the fan and the

academic-fan are placed under the microscope of cultural analysis” (2002, p. 72), enabling the researcher to reflect on their own knowledge formation, and in the process, reveal “partialities and positionalities” (Monaco, 2010, p. 103) that influence the choices made when designing the research. Busse and Hellekson proposed a slightly different take on Hills’s suggestion of autoethnography by encouraging researchers to embrace both identities of the fan and the academic fan:

By remaining fan-scholars at the same time that we become scholar-fans, we hope to shift the concerns from a dichotomy of academic and fannish identity to subject positions that are multiple and permit us to treat the academic and fannish parts as equally important (2006, p. 24).

Busse and Hellekson suggest that researchers can play the dual role of both academic and fan without conceding the integrity of either identities, at the same time stressing the importance of being “embedded in a community” (ibid.) to provide a balanced insight. I wonder, however, if it is actually possible to present a balanced view of fandom without prioritising one identity over the other, or celebrating one community over the next. Busse and Hellekson’s work, for example, celebrates LiveJournal as the new space that fans appropriate but both do not highlight the possibility that tensions may exist between fans whose first introduction to fandom is via LiveJournal and those whose fannish activities and practices are still centred on other online spaces, and thus may view LiveJournal as a threat to their carefully constructed social and cultural practices.

However, Monaco (2010, p. 133), argues that an ethnographic exercise on the self is a method to explore knowledge production of the researcher:

This kind of understanding forms the essential starting point for realising how we can make ourselves accountable for the knowledge that we produce about the people and cultures we study.

What I am asserting here reflects my direct attempts...to respond to Couldry's 'principle of accountability' (2000: 126), as noted in the introduction and extended in the context of fan studies by Hills (2002), which demands that we must employ the same theoretical frameworks to analyse ourselves as we would when we analyse others (Couldry 2000: 126).

Monaco incorporates Briggs's model of 'semiosis' (2010, p. 106) into her autoethnographic exercise which proposes that the audience's meaning-making is "always 'embedded' in a cultural context formed by historical events and processes, discourses, politics as well as moralities and identities" (Briggs 2010 cited in Monaco, 2010, p. 106). In other words, Briggs's autoethnography looks at how a wider set of texts and discourses inform the audience's choice for making meaning in their everyday life, including the viewing of television programmes. As Monaco argues:

If Hills' autoethnography examines patterns across an individual's consumption choices which lead him/her to choose certain 'relevant and meaningful' texts in the course of a life history (Hills 2002: 82), Briggs's autoethnography follows a specific period of time in his life stage when the regulating discourses that construct common sense notions of 'proper parenting' (2006: 448) powerfully address him and his partner as new parents and contribute to their experience of a TV programme (2010, p. 106).

In combining these two approaches to autoethnography, Monaco examines her own engagement with the show, *The Sopranos*, by "writing the self into an examination of the processes of fieldwork" (2010, p. 107). I find Monaco's incorporation of Briggs's model to be useful in this case, in examining my own engagement with *The X-Files* at a specific period of time (university in Australia), how those discourses might contribute towards the formation of my own "partialities and positionalities" (Monaco, 2010, p. 103) and how that has been inherently shaped



by my position as a researcher and active participant in the fandoms I observe, which I will do in the next section.

### *Autoethnography of the researcher*

Hills (2002) suggests that a useful starting point in beginning an autoethnography would be to map out all of one's objects of fandom, from the past to the present. But as I am only performing a partial autoethnographic exercise, I would like to begin at the point where my own engagement with active media fandom began: with the discovery of *The X-Files* while studying in Australia in 1995. Citing Charles Taylor, Lavery et al. suggest that the success of the show reflects the zeitgeist of the era, especially in America, where "Mulder and Scully are working to get out from under the most enduring legacy of the Reagan/Bush era: the way government, in the words of the Situationist philosopher Guy Debord, '[proclaims] that whatever it said was all there was.' In other words, that the truth is irrelevant" (1996, p. 3). Cornell et al. attributed that the show created a vast, complicated storyline and made use of it innovatively through the way the writers and producers apply the mythology story arc: "the central storyline wasn't restricted to episodes in which our heroes discovered something more about it, but informed other episodes as well. ... And then there are Mulder and Scully...Intelligent, sexy people, who aren't involved with each other" (1998, pp. 1 and 2). Cornell et al. go on to argue that Mulder and Scully represent the Internet generation "writ glamorous" (1998, p. 2).

*The X-Files* resonated more personally for me though. For the first time in our lives, my best friend and I were in different time zones and geographically further away from each other than we have ever been – she in the US while I continued my studies in Australia. We depended on our university emails to communicate with each

other; a reprieve from our long, handwritten letters that would often take a week, sometimes more, to be delivered before we had access to the Internet. Our mutual love for *The X-Files* became the centre of our email (and sometimes long-distance phone) conversations. Out of those in-depth weekly discussions, grew the curiosity to find out more about the show. The Internet then, introduced me to the world of fandom, through the fan websites offering detailed episode guides, research information on the themes and the mythological, as well as scientific possibilities of the cases Mulder and Scully investigated, and background information, not only on the main actors but also on the creator and the producers.

But even as I continue to enjoy consuming the discussions and information fans were sharing, I remained a lurker, mostly in the show's newsgroup, *alt.tv.xfiles* and the official website's forum. Fandom fascinates me but I was not ready to become totally immersed as an active fan. I surmised that this had to do with my own background: growing up in Malaysia, the family institution, educational institution and media institution all inform me that becoming a fan is a dangerous obsession that should be avoided as it was something that 'the West' indulged in. When this obsession is not controlled, it will often end up in tragedy<sup>2</sup>. However, the fact that I was pursuing a film and media degree meant that I could conveniently disguise my heightening interest in fan practices as a matter of academic pursuit, especially when *The X-Files* is constantly used as a reference text in various university classes. The release of *Deny All Knowledge*, the collection of essays on the show by Lavery et al. (1996) further cemented and legitimated my excuse. However, Hills (2002, pp. 86-87) argues that:

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<sup>2</sup> The death of John Lennon is often brought up as an example, as well as stories of Jackie Chan's Japanese fans who committed suicide upon learning of his marriage (see for example, <http://www.contactmusic.com/new/xmlfeed.nsf/story/jackie-chan.s-marriage-sparked-suicides>)

[T]his statement is a type of self-legitimation which fails in the very moment of its performative claim. 'I'm not one of those sad fans who hangs out at conventions' this claim attempts to announce, trying to ward off pathologising fan stereotypes by constructing a 'self'/'other' split. But this attempt at self-legitimation simultaneously reveals that I cannot sustain this moral dualism:...I can't rationally dispel the force of this fan stereotype, or the possibility of it being applied to me, simply by wishing it away or by creating moral dualisms to do this work for me magically.

Or, in my case, I cannot remain detached, professing and legitimising my interest in fandom merely as an academic pursuit while performing the same kind of fan analysis and discussion among a very small, select group of friends who share the same interest in the show privately. When I finally decided to become more involved in the discussions a few years later, I chose to participate in the newer mailing list communities that were based on ONElist (which eventually evolved to become the current Yahoo Groups). This was usually set up by fans who felt that the newsgroups had become increasingly inhospitable towards new fans, and flame wars among the participants dominated fan interaction rather than genuine discussions about the show.

While I was not necessarily a 'new fan', my lack of participation on the newsgroup meant that I lacked fan social capital, and it was often difficult to jump into what was essentially a 'private' conversation between several fans who were already familiar with one another based on their past interactions in a public forum like a newsgroup. I had also wanted to participate in an environment that I felt would allow me to explore participation in discussions at my own pace rather than be pressured to be continually active in discussions (thus accumulating fan social capital) so that others may be familiar with my online persona or pseudonym, or to perform what is perceived to be the accepted and 'right' analysis on the text with a strong

command of the English language (possessing fan cultural capital). Starting over, with other fans who were new seemed appropriate at the time, especially considering I was 'new' to active fandom.

By this time, I was also living in the UK and had no access to new episodes of the show (which was shown on Sky One), being fully dependent on my best friend in the US who would record the show every week and then send the VCR tapes every few months. To fill the void in this time, I started reading fan fiction. Since I was already starting to become more involved with fan discussions, I followed fans' recommendations to The Gossamer Project, as well as smaller fan fiction recommendation sites such as Sparky's Doghouse and Chronicle X<sup>3</sup> and read fan fictions that were considered to be 'classics'. As I became more comfortable with participating in fan discussions, I also started to send feedback to some of the authors whose fan fiction I had read.

Correspondence with these authors led to invites to fan fiction-specific mailing lists, and it was from there that I became a member of the I Want to Believe (IWTB) mailing list community. The community was specifically set up to cultivate fan fiction authors new to the fandom, where most members were encouraged to contribute creatively at least once. The community also frequently featured discussions topics for members that ranged from how to improve feedback and how to approach an author with constructive criticism to the impact general fan fiction archives such as FF.net have on the quality of fan fiction. And while I was not a prolific fan fiction author, my eventual comfort with the core members led me to

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<sup>3</sup> Chronicle X would feature frequent interviews with authors who have written fan fictions deemed to be classics in the fandom (see, for example, <http://web.archive.org/web/20000604052244/chroniclex.simplenet.com/spotlight/dasha.htm>). It also hosted the 'Lost & Found' board where fans could post questions looking for a specific fan fiction or recommendations for a specific genre of fan fiction – the board is still active today on <http://www.boards2go.com/boards/board.cgi?&user=anwyltd>. Unfortunately, neither of these fan fiction recommendation sites are still around today.

participate in some of the impromptu writing sessions or collaborations that were produced and circulated only among members of the community.

In those interactions, the values of the community, and by extension of the fan fiction fandom, were passed on, and along with it, the biases against other fan communities as well as other spaces for the archiving of fan fiction. Monaco has highlighted the importance of memory work in self-reflexive accounts, claiming it to be dialogic, influenced by the texts that came before and “other texts with which it traverses” (2010, p. 109). So, rather than view these personal testimonies as a record of the past, Monaco reminds us that we should understand these accounts as “productions of meaning in ‘the act of remembering’ (2002: 9)... Kuhn’s definition of memory work places priority not on ‘*what*’ is remembered or left out, but on ‘*how*’ the ‘relics’ of the past are used to make sense of the present (ibid.: 187, emphasis in original). Memory work therefore is akin to a journey, which not unlike detective work allows one to ‘[patch] together reconstructions out of fragments of evidence’ (Kuhn 1995: 4)” (Monaco, 2010, p. 109). In a sense, my first memory of FF.net is already framed by what members of the IWTB community have instilled in me, as a fellow fan who appreciates quality fan fictions. However, my position as an aca-fan questions if there is anything more towards the apparent social and cultural hierarchies that are drawn between FF.net and *XF* fans who still obtain their fan fictions from the well-established places defined and organised by the fandom.

It is also through fandom that I learned to appreciate the works of specific directors and TV writers, as fans often go on to discuss in detail the merits of the writer’s episodes. These media producers and writers become signifiers of quality television and when they move on to work on other shows or develop their own, the fans they gained while writing for *XF* followed. Fiske has argued that, “fan

discrimination has affinities to both the socially relevant discrimination of popular culture and the aesthetic discrimination of the dominant (Fiske, 1989a)” (1992, p. 35). It is through this discrimination of popular culture that I became a fan of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, and later, its spinoff show, *Angel*.

While I was already a fan of science fiction and supernaturally inclined television programmes (this was instilled from young by parents who are scifi fans), what eventually brought me to the show were the producers who previously worked on *XF*. Their contribution, to me, was a mark of quality. Citing Fiske, Brower argues that, “fans engage in textual discriminations of what or who is ‘worthy’ of their fandom: ‘These textual discriminations are often homologous of social discrimination. Choosing texts is choosing social allegiances...The links between social allegiance and cultural taste are active and explicit in fandom, and the discrimination involved follows criteria of social relevance rather than of aesthetic quality’ (147)” (1992, p. 180).

Likewise, admitting a preference for *Angel* over *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* later when I was part of both fandoms, led me to the Stranger Things forum, where fans were able to share their frustrations that in admitting a textual allegiance to *Angel* (and by extension the characters of the show who had crossed over from *Buffy*), they – or we – were suspected of being disloyal, and having misunderstood the original text (i.e. *Buffy* and its characters). For the fans however, that distinction had already been drawn, just as when I participated in IWTB in the *XF* fandom, I was therefore choosing to align myself with the specific interpretations of the text (or what is considered as quality fan fiction) as supported and promoted by the members of that particular community. In other words, my fan social capital and fan symbolic capital were dependent on the textual interpretations of specific fan factions.

From here, I will now move on to look more specifically at the research process I have undertaken in this research project, reflecting on the complications I encountered along the way, as well as the decisions to include and exclude certain positions and sites of study.

### *The research process and its complications*

In this section, I will reflect more directly on the methodological positions I have chosen to take during the research process, as well as the complications that arose from those decisions and choices. Hine has observed that social research needs to be adaptive:

When we set out to research social interactions we cannot specify in advance just what form those interactions will take, nor how we will be able to participate in or observe them... To a certain extent, then, social research methods have always had to be adaptive (2005, p. 2).

Hine's call for open-endedness and a constantly adaptive approach was a good reminder to start with. Once I had decided to apply a qualitative approach – combining participant observation and interviews conducted online via questionnaires and email correspondence – rather than a quantitative or mixed methodology, I conducted sixty-five open-ended questionnaire interviews altogether from 2003 to 2008. Before the interviews were conducted however, I set out to determine the spaces where I was going to obtain my data from. IWTB proved to be the best starting point due to my own participation with the community, as well as the members' familiarity with me and my role as a researcher<sup>4</sup>. Brooker (2002) argues that fandom works on the supposition of trust – the trust that fans have for one another even if they

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<sup>4</sup> Several members have previously participated in my questionnaire interviews for my MRes research.

have never met but are only familiar with each other through their textual correspondence. As a fellow fan, he views his relationship with his correspondents will work on the same basis of trust, so conducting online interviews without meeting fans face-to-face is “appropriate rather than...a drawback” (2002, p. xiv).

The next fan community I considered was *Angel's* Stranger Things forum. The forum's existence on the periphery of the overall *Angel* fandom, gave me initial insights into how conflict can eventually splinter fandoms into smaller, specialised communities that often remain independently detached from the rest of the fan communities. The interpretation of the text that Stranger Things members adhere to, being supporters of the character Cordelia Chase as well as supporters of the Cordelia/Angel relationship within the larger *Buffy* and *Angel* fandoms positions these fans as ‘Others’.

However, it wasn't until several members of IWTB began to splinter off into a smaller community after a private conflict that I began to become interested in how fans manage these conflicts. The IWTB conflict, which began with the owner and moderators' strict adherence to keeping off-topic discussions to weekends, resulted in the creation of a smaller mailing list community, Beyond the Sea (BtS). Membership to BtS was only open to select IWTB members who were personally invited – of which I was one – by the creator and moderator of the group.

IWTB's strict off-topic ruling also found some fans migrating over to LiveJournal around 2002-2003, which was beginning to gain popularity. Membership to LiveJournal was limited and there was a notion of exclusivity for fans who had made their way there, as new members would need an invite code from LiveJournal, which could only be generated by those who already had an account<sup>5</sup>. What

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<sup>5</sup> The invite code was abolished in December 2003, opening membership of LiveJournal to all.



LiveJournal represented at the time, before it became popular with fans (its community features have yet to be implemented), was an extension of the fan relationships that had developed on the IWTB mailing list. Reflecting on her move over to LJ, Lori (2003, email correspondence) wondered if the turn to the journal (and other weblogs in general) represented a frustration with fandom that was largely based on forums and mailing list communities: “I notice that, for myself, I’m...very tired of web-based fandom, just because I’m tired of people interfering (that’s how it feels) with my enjoyment of a show”.

Lori’s reflection poses an interesting question in relation to some fans’ initial move to LJ. It may certainly explain the extent of the divide between fans of the two platforms (LJ and mailing lists/forums) when the subject was brought up in IWTB later as part of a group discussion, especially when fans who prefer mailing lists and forums view the intrusion of LJ as a threat to the social system they have painstakingly set up in *XF* fandom’s early days.

It is also important to note here that my view of LJ is that of a space which fans have appropriated for their activities that offers them the possibility of combining the personal (development of personal relationships that may be hindered by rules that govern some communities like it did for IWTB members, for instance) and the multi-fannish (as in, due to the nature and structure of LJ, fans are not limited in their participation of just one fandom, as is often the case with mailing lists and forums). In this way, LJ is an extension of mailing lists and forums rather than a new (feminised) space that scholars like Busse (2006) and Senft (2008) have suggested.

As I reflected in Chapter 1, I have refrained from occupying an overtly feminist position in my observations of LJ and fan communities in general. Alvesson and Sköldberg criticised the narrow approach of “gender-based organisational

research...[that mostly focuses on] the way women are disfavoured” (2009, p. 247). I also pointed out that feminist accounts of fan culture have a tendency to portray fan communities as a supportive, alternative social community for women (Bacon-Smith, 1992; Bury, 2005; Hellekson, 2009), but in the course of portraying it as such, preventing more complex issues to be brought up, such as the issue of social hierarchies and the ways in which fans draw a distinction between themselves and other fans in different fan communities. The notion of conflict in fan communities is a contrast to the picture of the nurturing fan community.

Much like Penley’s observation on female fan fiction writers “unwilling to identify themselves as feminists” (1997, p. 104), the fan fiction authors I was corresponding with are not as preoccupied with issues brought on by gender. An example would be the topic of Fanlib, commercial culture’s attempt at commodifying and marketising fan fiction (Jenkins, 2007; De Kosnik, 2009). Fans and aca-fans alike have always noted the gender divide between fandom (feminine) and Fanlib (masculine), but when I brought the issue up in various mailing list communities, fans’ comments were, on the contrary, centred on the concerns that fans have to sign away their rights in order to post their fan fiction on the site (Anjou, 2008b, mailing list discussion). The gender divide, as pointed out by scholarly accounts was mostly the preoccupation of LJ meta communities<sup>6</sup>.

Therefore, LJ provided a space to develop the friendships forged on mailing list communities beyond that of (*XF*) fandom. Initial migration to LJ exhibited weariness with discussions on mailing lists, as reflected by Lori’s comments here:

[T]here’s sometimes a feeling of getting lost in a discussion group. That is, if you’re an occasional poster, your posts

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<sup>6</sup> Most of which can be found here: [http://community.livejournal.com/life\\_wo\\_fanlib](http://community.livejournal.com/life_wo_fanlib) and here: <http://www.delicious.com/metafandom/fanlib>

on a discussion list may or may not be noticed by the group at large; more often they're noticed by your friends and deleted and/or ignored by those who don't know you (2003, email correspondence).

Lori's reflection also speaks of the problem with conducting research within an online fan community. My familiarity with most of the core members of IWTB ensured that my posts, when I put a call out for fans who would be interested in answering questions on a questionnaire (with the possibility of continuing the conversation via email), would at least be acknowledged and answered. This is provided that I posted at a time when most members would be around to notice it (i.e. suited to the US time zone). However, when I posted a similar message on a popular forum, IdealistsHaven<sup>7</sup> (known among fans as Haven), of which I am an infrequent poster, I received no response. This could be due to the fact that because I was mostly involved in IWTB, my fan social capital (and I suspect, subcultural capital) within the context of Haven was almost non-existent.

This sense of familiarity versus non-familiarity (or, to a certain extent, trust) can be problematic in the research process. When I realised that conflict was occurring in IWTB, albeit privately among the group of moderators, it was impossible to get any of those involved to share their experience with me. Most professed that, because I was familiar with all parties involved, no one wanted to paint the other party in a bad light to a fellow community member<sup>8</sup>. This was a problem that, again, arose with *Buffy* fans: because I was a member of the Stranger Things forum, the social and cultural capitals (even when I have previously been active in several *Buffy*

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<sup>7</sup> <http://community.idealistshaven.com/forums/index.php>

<sup>8</sup> It was only years later that I could get a couple of the parties involved in the conflict to talk about what happened. Even then, it was difficult to get them to be forthcoming, and it was only after several assurances that no names will be revealed unless explicit permission has been granted that I was given a condensed version of the conflict.

forums) I had accumulated before being barred from the *Buffy* communities for publicly professing to liking, and defending the character of Cordelia Chase had been rescinded. Fans of the Buffy/Angel relationship (with whom Cordelia/Angel shippers come into most conflict with) declined to participate because I wasn't active in their communities and more importantly, because I do not share their love and beliefs.

In observing the conflicts that were occurring in the various mailing list communities and forums, I also noticed that this sense of 'othering' the fans were also being implemented within fan fiction fandom. Distinctions were being drawn between mailing list communities and forums (beyond *XF* fandom), and multi-fandom archives like FF.net and Fanlib. In order to present a more balanced view, I set out to contact fan fiction authors who post exclusively to FF.net and Fanlib. As I have reflected in the previous section, my involvement with IWTB has shaped my approach towards archives like FF.net and Fanlib so I was therefore unfamiliar with the community aspect of the sites. I resorted to contacting random fan fiction authors directly as an initial posting of a message on FF.net's community section yielded no response.

Fanlib had a star rating system for the fan fiction authors on its site. As Kristen Fuertsch (2008, questionnaire interview) explains: "You're ranked as a member based on your submissions,...only the fifty most active people on the site can submit ideas for contests". As with FF.net, since I was not a participant of Fanlib, I contacted authors based on their rating system, notably aiming for those at the top or had the most stories posted on the site. With the exception of two fans out of the eleven (three from Fanlib and eight from FF.net) who participated in the questionnaire, none of the authors who posted their fan fiction on FF.net nor Fanlib have ever been directly involved in mailing list communities or forums.

This revelation inherently questions the previous assumption of fans, especially those involved in fan cultural production, as part of fan interpretive communities. It is apparent that some fan fiction authors will only post their fan fiction and interact with fans via the feedback they received but do not actively participate in any communal activities. Ruth (2008, questionnaire interview), for example, only posts her fan fiction on LJ and is not interested in being involved with mailing list communities or forums, reasoning: “mailing list/discussion forums have just never appealed to me...I’m only mildly interested in meta and not at all in episode squee (analysis)”. Amal Nahurriyeh (2008, questionnaire interview), another LJ poster shares: “I don’t like joining new conversations. I’ve also heard that places like Haven are insane”.

In Chapter 2, I criticised fan studies’ tendency to observe fans as part of a mass and communal setting, in the process often eradicating the figure of the fan individual. Much like Lyn Thomas, who was anxious about falling into the “trap of ‘othering’ the audience” (2002, p. 11), my anxiety lies in falling into the same trap as previous fan accounts and portraying a view of fandom that is homogenous, and one where the fan is once again depicted merely as part of a mass audience or communal group without any individual agency. The testimonies from FF.net, Fanlib and even LJ fans complicate the fan-as-part-of-community view, and warrants further investigation which I will further reflect on in Chapter 8.

I surmised that one of the ways I could ensure that the fan individual is not forgotten is to design an open-ended questionnaire and allow the flexibility of being able to go back to the participants and hold more detailed but less structured email conversations with them should they raise a point that needed to be followed-up. I also made sure to research into the works of the fan fiction authors who participated

(if I wasn't already familiar with their works) in the questionnaire, the reception of the fan fiction (especially for the novel-length ones) and how fans/readers talked about the piece. From there, I designed another list of questions that asked them to reflect on the writing process and the fan fiction's reception instead of merely conflict in fan communities and the idea of fan fiction as a form of gift [see Appendix 3].

In 2008, I had the opportunity to participate in the fan-directed promotional events for the second *XF* film that took place in London. While at the various 3-day events, I noticed fans gravitating towards one particular individual, whom I later learned was Gia Milinovich, a social media consultant who was hired by the producers and 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox to liaise with, and promote the fan-directed campaign at various online *XF* fan communities. On online communities such as Haven and Big Light<sup>9</sup>, fans were celebrating the role and the work of Milinovich and several of her peers, including Alison Groves (moderator on Big Light) and XFilesNews.com (XFN) members for acting as liaisons for the fan community with the media producers. Fans were reading their blogs, following them on Twitter and making connections on Facebook – in fact, much like what they would do when encountering a celebrity who has a presence in the various social networking sites. Similarly, while attending a *Battlestar Galactica* (*BSG*) convention later in 2008, I noticed the same attention directed towards several convention attendees whom I later discovered were website owners who have managed to schedule one-on-one interviews with the celebrity guests.

Fan reactions suggest that these fan intermediaries, whom I later term 'fan journalists', were also treated like celebrities. Their collaborations with media producers and actors of these cult shows have increased the status these fan journalists

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<sup>9</sup> A social networking site (<http://biglightnetwork.ning.com>) set up by producer Frank Spotnitz for fans of *XF* and some of his other productions.

have in fandom. These experiences frame the arguments I present in Chapters 6 and 7 on the creation of subcultural celebrity status in fandom. Milinovich, the social media consultant was the first person I contacted as she was based in London, and this was the only open-ended interview I conducted face-to-face [see Appendix 4]. Via her recommendation, I contacted Alison Groves on Big Light and Avi Quijada, Tiffany Devol and Perla Perez, who all hold different posts on the XFN website. Access to these fans was straightforward, especially since I mentioned being at the events surrounding the *XF* film London premiere as well as being a frequent participant in discussions on Big Light in the months leading up to the film premiere.

Locating Marcel Damen, who was at the *BSG* convention, was a slightly different experience. I was aware that a considerable section of fans of the re-imagined version congregated on LJ<sup>10</sup> but am mostly a lurker rather than an active participant on the fan community. When I decided to look into the *BSG* fandom – this was to see if there was a differing opinion to the testimonies provided by *XF* fan journalists on the notion of subcultural celebrity status and the apparent code of professionalism that the fans have to uphold in maintaining the relationship with the media producers/celebrities – I first approached the owner and maintainer of a fan site for one of the *BSG* actors. I have corresponded with the fan a few times, but this was mostly to do with the sharing of photos from the convention I attended. She declined my request on account that she wishes to remain anonymous when I asked if she would be willing to speak to me in more detail about her website, but offered to ask other fansite owners. Only one person – Damen – responded, and was willing to share his stories and experiences of convention attendance, especially after his website

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<sup>10</sup> The LJ community, Battlestar Blog ([http://community.livejournal.com/battlestar\\_blog](http://community.livejournal.com/battlestar_blog)) has 3600 members. The profile page of the community indicates that it is one of the biggest fan community online for the show (this presumably includes the original series as well as its spinoff show, *Caprica*, which also features some actors who have appeared on *BSG*)

gained popularity among fans for the in-depth interviews they are able to conduct with both cast and crew of the original and re-imagined series.

The entire research experience indicated that Hine's suggestion in keeping an open inquiry on the research process (2000, p. 71) proved to be the most fruitful, as it led me to the discovery and development of the second half of the empirical research on subcultural celebrities (media producers and fans) and fan journalists. Additionally, performing an autoethnography on the self allowed me to view my own knowledge production, and made me more conscious of how FF.net and LJ fans were portrayed and analysed by sections of fandom.

Of the sixty-five questionnaire interviews I conducted, there were twenty-four interviews from mailing list communities; fourteen from LiveJournal – a mixture of participants who volunteered after a post on the LJ *XF* community and several through the recommendation of an LJ friend; ten from *Angel's* Stranger Things forum; eight from FF.net; six fan journalists; and three from Fanlib, one of whom was a contact I made from the *BSG* convention. All questions were designed to be open-ended, and all participants gave permission to be contacted for further conversation.

Fans were generally hesitant to reveal details of conflict within their communities, with a couple going into greater detail only after I gave them repeated assurances that I did not need names of the parties involved, merely the incident and their reflection on it. Several replied to my request for more information by abstaining from answering, although they did not wish to withdraw their overall participation. I also gave participants the option to indicate if they prefer to remain anonymous, use their real names or an online moniker they are comfortable being identified with. When a fan indicates that they wish to remain anonymous, I identify them as 'Fan A, B, C' accordingly when quoting them.



Revealing early drafts of the research findings to the various fan communities proved to be a complicated issue. Several fan fiction authors from mailing list communities had only agreed to participate if I did not reveal or refer directly to their interview data in any way, despite the fact that their testimonials were referred to anonymously. These authors were worried that fans who have been in the fandom for a longer period of time and are generally familiar with fan fiction will be able to tell their identity, even under the semblance of anonymity. An incident occurred when I was contacted by one of the authors privately by email after I shared general thoughts and conclusions on the apparent division between LJ and mailing list communities on a discussion about LJ as a 'new space' on IWTB. This particular fan author who have opted for anonymity had named several other authors with whom she have had conflict with in the past. While I did not single out any incident or named any specific fan, the fan author assumed I had further shared – off-list – details of what she had revealed to me in the questionnaire with one of the authors she mentioned (who was incidentally not on list of interviewees). But in an unrelated incident, the fan had coincidentally made her journal on LJ private with an explanation that she was no longer interested in allowing fans access to her stories only to have them criticise her behind her back. Despite my assurance of the confidentiality of her interview data, the fan author remained unconvinced but when questioned if she wanted to withdraw her testimony completely, opted to allow me to continue using the data I have collected from her.

The commentary on the LJ/ mailing list division that started this incident, however, received one response arguing against the idea of a generational divide. Subsequent offers to discuss the issue in further details have not generated any interest among community members, however. In reflecting on this issue and looking

back at the fan participants who have volunteered, I conclude that many have left the fandom, or while they remain a participant in the community, have moved on to other texts. The list was populated by new members, many of whom were not familiar with some of the original members, only by virtue of their reputation through their fan fiction. Nor were they witness to any of the conflicts mentioned. A list owner I later spoke with revealed that she kept one of the mailing lists open because members professed to feeling a sense of attachment to it but she herself had moved on, and had therefore passed the moderating of the community to others. It is also possible, I realised, that because of my community ties to the mailing list communities, fans volunteered to share their views out of friendship and a genuine desire to help a fellow fan/friend. Monaco highlights this complication of conducting virtual ethnography, that fans leave forums or change email addresses. She also reminds us, “drawing on Hills and Jenkins (2001), that academic knowledge may be devalued in some fandoms” (2010, p. 134).

Another complication of virtual ethnography work is the impermanence of websites. One of my greatest regrets for the research project was the inability to draw on some of the very specific issues and references raised by Fanlib fans as the website had completely disappeared from the Internet. Likewise, posts on LJ can be made private by the original poster overnight. The loss of these references means that a particular example or discussion could no longer be directly linked.

Lotz and Ross suggest that Internet researchers should generally refer to a research space to maximise anonymity: “Internet research introduces variables that result in participants whose ‘locations’ and accessibility shift, which must be considered as important aspects of privacy and anonymity. One’s initial efforts to protect information can be subverted at any moment, making this a formidable

challenge” (2004, p. 506). They infer that Internet researchers should do more to protect the privacy and anonymity of their respondents by taking into consideration that traditional audience data is not usually made available to the reader either. For example, analysis of fan letters to producers is taken on account of the researcher’s word. In that sense, Lotz and Ross (2004) reason that Internet researchers should be able to refer to a fan testimony without having to actually give away the location (and therefore access to past discussions) to readers. Perhaps a similar consideration should also be adapted to apply to the problem of having sites disappearing or discussion topics being suddenly made private.

Having reflected on the methodological concerns and complications when conducting ethnographic work online, I shall now turn to look at the empirical results of this research. I will first look at how distinctions are drawn within the fan community, and how fans resolve that conflict of taste by going on to form micro-communities and constantly negotiating the boundaries of their communities, containing difference and maintaining the accepted status quo. I will follow that argument with a discussion on the value of fan cultural production in Chapter 5, exploring how fans assign value to fan fiction that is exchanged within the context of a gift economy and how that affects the fan social, subcultural and symbolic capitals in the field of fan fiction production. From there, I will move on more specifically to a different field of cultural production: that of media producers who blog, and how their response to fans in the context of blogging sees a shift in the relationship between the media industry and fandom towards a more collaborative position. This collaboration, I argue, culminates in a mutually beneficial relationship which sees the establishment of fan roles I identify as ‘fan journalists’. In Chapter 7, I argue more specifically at the impact this collaborative relationship has on fandom, looking specifically at how

fan journalists maintain a distance from other fans as they are imposed to embrace a discourse of professionalism in order to continue collaborating with media producers. Before I move to look at the figure of the fan subcultural celebrity however, I examine fans within the context of the fan community.

## Chapter 4:

### From Communities to Micro-Communities of Fandom

Fandom is no longer conducted behind the closed doors of a fan's home, or more specifically, in a convention space. The easy access to fan practices, aided by online spaces, means that a more intricate web of relationships between the various fan communities catering to different opinions about the text or a different genre of fan fiction, from heterosexual 'genfic' to 'real person' (RP) fiction, can be mapped out. At the same time, computer-mediated communication has also made it easier for fan communities to fragment into smaller, more specialised factions which I will go on to identify as 'micro-communities'.

This chapter will explore the notion of 'community' within the context of fandom and propose a recognition of micro-communities, (smaller) communities that cater to very specific shipper groups or interpretations of the texts. These micro-communities have their own sets of boundaries, rules and hierarchical structures that may not necessarily conform to the wider fan community. Although work has been conducted on communities that cater to very specific interests of fans (Clerc, 1996; Baym, 2000; Bury, 2005), these often smaller communities have yet to be theorised as 'micro-communities' and recognised as fully-fledged communities that exist under their own hierarchical structures while sometimes maintaining a unique (if not antagonistic) relationship with the overall fandom.

I will look in particular at *Stranger Things*, an *Angel* fan micro-community and how its members view their relationship to the general *Angel* (and by extension, *Buffy*) fandom. This is in contrast to micro-communities within *The X-Files* fandom, for instance, that have evolved from bigger, specifically fan fiction-centred

communities like I Want To Believe (IWTB). Most of these communities are often portrayed as ‘single issue’ fan groups (Zweerink and Gatson, 2002, p. 248), centred on one specific fan practice (e.g. fan fiction or fan discussions).

I want to suggest that these micro-communities are, in many instances, established as a result of conflict, propagated by fans who want to shape the communities to their own version of what they think constitutes a (fan) community, often disregarding the fact that members form relationships beyond the specific text or a particular fan practice. Zweerink and Gatson rightly wonder if the fact that *Buffy* fans, specifically participants of the popular forum, the Bronze, identify themselves as Bronzers rather than merely fans of the text means that “once the ‘fan of’ identity is formed (or indeed any initial community identity is marked), a space for broader and more diverse communal ties may open up” (2002, p. 248), thus complicating the relationships between members of a community.

I will firstly give a brief overview of how online communities are defined, drawing, as many scholars like Cherny (1999) and Chayko (2002) do, on Benedict Anderson’s notion of the imagined community (1983, p. 6). I will also look more specifically at online fan communities, and how these communities are maintained and fragmented as rules and norms are implemented and negotiated among the community’s members. In the second section, I will look at the various ways fans create boundaries to determine who are insiders and outsiders, arguing that fandom etiquettes are developed as rules, not merely to create boundaries but also to contain difference and to maintain the status quo. I go on to look at how fans are positioned as ‘other’ in the third and final section of this chapter, and how through this ‘othering’ process, fans who are discriminated against often go on to form micro-communities.

### *Defining community and micro-community*

For Lynn Cherny (1999, p. 248) the term ‘community’ refers to social groups which are bounded by their geographical locations that range from local neighbourhoods to nations, as well as communities of shared values and interests like religious groups or fan clubs. This notion of community can also be expanded to those social networks of community formed on the Internet. Early discourse on Internet communities tends to be polarised between the celebratory creation of new communities (Jones, 1995; Rheingold, 2000) and the lack of obligation these very communities promote (Postman, 1993). “Wellman et al. (1996) note that public discourse about the Internet tends to describe it as if it had been invented yesterday, as being either thoroughly good or evil, as if life online had no connection to life offline, and as if the past century’s research on the nature of community were irrelevant” (Cherny, 1999, p. 248).

While Benedict Anderson spoke of nation-building in his book, *Imagined Communities*, his theorisations are also a useful starting point for arguments concerning community, both online and off. In his now seminal work, Anderson proposed that a nation can be defined as “an imagined political community” (1983, p. 6). Anderson went on to suggest that the nation, or the community, is imagined because even members of the smallest nation will never meet, know, or hear of most of their fellow members “yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (ibid.). For Anderson, the development of print media such as the newspaper and the novel further expedite this sense of shared culture and community among members or citizens of a nation: “Nothing perhaps more precipitated this search, nor made it more fruitful, than print-capitalism, which made it possible for

rapidly growing numbers of people to think about themselves, and to relate themselves to others, in profoundly new ways” (1983, p. 36).

As Anderson goes on to suggest, nations are always conceived as “deep, horizontal comradeship” (1983, p. 7) despite any actual sense of inequalities and exploitations among the nation’s people. “Ultimately it is this fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings” (ibid.). In other words, in order for these nations to exist, they must first exist in the minds of the collective, that is, the minds of members or citizens of its communities; a shared existence or a common culture that is promoted, as Anderson suggested, by the nation’s media and cultural artefacts.

The growing influence and interest in virtual or online communities from mid-to-late 1990s onwards meant that Anderson’s theory of the imagined community was re-contextualised to the virtual realm: “Given that our everyday and ‘common-sense’ understandings of community have at least in part been determined by spatial relationships and a sense of belonging to a place, then the metaphor extends into thinking about belonging with one another in particular ‘spaces’ in the non-place of cyberspace” (Lister et al., 2003, pp. 172-3). Mary Chayko drew parallels between Anderson’s theory and Internet communities in her book, *Connecting*, commenting that, “members of very large communities of the mind (nations, religions, academic disciplines) *never* meet ‘all together’ in a face-to-face context. They maintain their connectedness mentally and may even exist without *any* of their members *ever* meeting in literal space, as in an Internet community” (2002, p. 41 – emphasis in original). If Anderson’s community members used media and cultural artefacts such as newspapers and novels to maintain a sense of connectedness with one another, then



members of Internet communities made use of computers and the various networks and software applications such as the World Wide Web and Internet browsers to mediate and maintain their connection to one another in the space of newsgroups, mailing lists, chat forums and social networking sites that double as communities.

Cherny has proposed that interest-based groups who interact frequently in newsgroups, mailing lists and chat forums online “conform to the requirements for social interaction and common ties, if not for shared geographical area” (1999, p. 248). With computer-mediated communication becoming more common, interest-based groups too become a norm, enabling Internet users to easily locate communities that suit their varied interests – a feat that may not have been possible before Internet communities became a norm. The fans I interviewed have often confessed that the Internet has made it much easier to connect with other like-minded people that they may not necessarily have the opportunity to meet in their real life social circles:

The Internet has made it easier to ‘be’ with other fans, even if you can’t make it to a convention... You don’t have to leave the comfort of your own home in order to ‘meet’ other fans (Fan A, 2008, questionnaire interview).

Another fan, Bellefleur, agrees, claiming that the Internet allows her to “just point and click. No searching for fanzines or travelling to conventions. If no one in your everyday life (RL) shares your obsession, go online and you’re guaranteed to find a hundred other nuts just like you” (2008, questionnaire interview). Cherny identified shared interest groups as ‘intentional communities’, claiming that these communities are more interesting as “the motives of participants are more relevant than the external forces (political, economic or social) that influence unintentional communities” (1999, p. 248). However, she also warned against the preconceived assumption that the word ‘community’ would immediately connote that these are

positive and co-operative spaces: “communities may be marked by conflict and divisiveness” (p. 249).

Citing Marc Smith, Howard Rheingold argues that “virtual communities require an act of imagination to use” (2000, p. 54), and through the extension of Anderson’s line of thinking to the realm of cyberspace, reiterated that “what must be imagined is the idea of the community itself” (ibid.). Baym (2000, p. 218) has made similar arguments in thinking about technologically mediated communities, suggesting that<sup>1</sup>:

[O]ne way in which to understand the imagination of community is through close examination of one of the most primal forces that ties people together – interpersonal interaction. It is in the details of their talk that people develop and maintain the rituals, traditions, norms, values, and senses of group and individual identity that allow them to consider themselves communities.

However, it is also useful to note that interpersonal interaction can be a site of conflict as members negotiate their notions of community. Anna Smith argued that both harmony and discord are necessary for the survival of social systems: “Conflict structures a system, strengthening existing bonds...and forming new ones as participants become polarised into blocs that persist beyond the conflict” (1999, p. 135).

So, on the one hand, as Baym suggested, interaction can provide a way of understanding how individuals imagine themselves as communities; but on the other, interpersonal interaction can also shed light on how communities fracture as boundaries are shaped and formed while members negotiate the values, rituals and norms of their community: “Boundaries indicate who is inside and who is outside a

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<sup>1</sup> See also Baym (2010).

community; they distinguish the members from those they differ from or wish to be seen as different from. These boundaries are usually in the minds of the members and those excluded from the group...Boundaries are often symbolic, dependent on abstractions like friendship, rivalry, jealousy, similarity” (Cherny, 1999, p. 254). In other words, boundaries inform how a community, its norms, values and rituals are developed and maintained.

Rhiannon Bury has highlighted that early debates on online communities that created a “hooray/boo” binary (Hartley, 1992 cited in Bury, 2005, p. 4) should be re-imagined. Employing the theory of identity performance to understand communities, Bury suggested that, “if the body is a truth effect, then the same can be said for community. Judith Butler (1990) states that the former has ‘no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality’ (p. 139)” (2005, p. 14). It is therefore the repeated acts of members within the [online] community that gives the community substance. In other words, “being a member of a community is not something one *is* but something one *does*” (p. 14 – emphasis in original).

Bury also called for a distinction to be made between Benedict Anderson’s notion of an ‘imagined community’ (1983, p. 6) and an interactive community: “While both involve a sense of belonging, an imagined community constitutes larger formations such as a nation in which members share a set of identifications but do not necessarily interact with one another, or perhaps more importantly, do not necessarily desire to do so” (Bury, 2005, p. 14). Interactive communities, on the other hand, are dependent on the social interaction of its members on the Internet; not unlike Cherny’s definition of intentional communities. Therefore, fan communities whose activities are concentrated online should be considered interactive, intentional communities rather than merely imagined communities.

However, in the scholarly works of Jenkins (1992), Bacon-Smith (1992, 2000), Penley (1997), Baym (2000) and Bury (2005), fan communities are often discussed and presented as abstract wholes. For example, fans of the various television texts observed all seemed to read and write slash fiction. None of the scholars acknowledged the possibility that while their respective *Star Trek* fan fiction authors and readers may be active in the practice of writing or reading slash and are relatively popular within the fandom, it does not immediately guarantee that the fan symbolic capital these fans have accumulated is transferable to other fan fiction communities that do not cater to slash, or even the particular slash pairing in the relevant fandom.

Furthermore, much of this scholarly work has also used the terms ‘community’ and ‘fandom’ interchangeably, as if suggesting that one seemingly cannot exist without the other, or that they are both one and the same. This paints a picture of a homogenous fandom, where there is just one big fan community, or several large ones that cater to fan practices such as in-depth episode analysis and the production of creative works such as fan fiction, music videos and fan films. In actuality, however, fandom is made up of a variety of small-scale communities that serve different factions of the fandom at large: where instead of sizeable communities, there are smaller ones for fans that live in the same geographical area, for instance, or for those who subscribe to the same interpretation of the texts such as slash fans, shipper groups and so forth.

Bacon-Smith suggested that fans go on to form or join smaller communities because these fans feel that the ones they initially joined have grown too big for their comfort, and/or when these larger communities cease to fulfil their needs: “Fans...may find that their enthusiasm wanes as members gradually lose interest in

the topic of the list – move their active participation to a new media product or subgenre list – or when a personal crisis uncovers the fact that the very adherence to topic that drew the fan limits the list’s capacity to provide communal support” (2000, p. 79). That is not always the case, however, as divisions among community members can cause the community to splinter as well. Fan A postulated that as far as she has observed, any major divisions within fan communities or fandom can, and have been “resolved by [members] leaving” (2008, questionnaire interview), especially if such an exodus is propagated by a fan with a wealth of social and symbolic capitals within fandom.

According to Paige Caldwell, who co-founded a popular *XF* fan community, I Want To Believe (IWTB)<sup>2</sup> in 2000, arguments among the moderators behind-the-scenes affected the morale and overall camaraderie of the community that eventually led to IWTB’s dissolution:

I felt that there was way too much OT [Off Topic] on the list. Other moderators felt that the OT was the best part about IWTB. One moderator...kept trying to take over the list as her own and kept referring to the listmates as ‘her babies’...Some moderators didn’t like certain list members and wanted me to unsubscribe them. Other moderators didn’t think that was fair. Arguments ensued.  
(2008b, email correspondence).

Caldwell reclaimed complete control of the community in the end, prompting the co-creator of the community and the rest of the moderators to resign and go on to form a smaller, more exclusive group, Beyond the Sea (BtS) where initial

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<sup>2</sup> The community, which grew to have more than 200 members within the first year it was established prompted Caldwell and IWTB’s co-founder, Kimberly, to add more moderators to help them manage the discussions. At one point, any off-topic discussions were limited to weekends only, prompting some members to complain that the community has become too rigid as they were no longer sure what was considered (by the moderators) as off-topic and what was not.

membership was by invite-only: “IWTB’s restrictions were so ridiculous, that none of the members could post anything” (Fan B, 2009, email correspondence). *XF* fan fiction – in particular fan fiction that featured Mulder and Scully as the preferred pairing – was less of a major concern for BtS, and members were encouraged to post any original or multi-fandom creative works they were willing to share, as well as discuss their explorations into other pairings and fandoms. Another community, Believe the Truth (BTT) was later formed to cater specifically to the fans who were only interested in exploring Mulder and Scully’s relationship, generally identified as MSR in the fandom. Fan B, who formed BTT explained:

[Many] members wanted to explore just MSR , and BtS was open to every *XF* pairing known to man. When it became plain that BtS was heading for conflict, I spoke to BtS Mod/owner, and told her I would go ahead and form BTT so that MSR-centric folks had a place to go when they didn’t want to listen to others rhapsodize about Skinner boinking Scully. Many BtS-ers joined BTT but also kept their BtS membership (2009, email correspondence).

Fan B also stressed that both BtS and BTT members often collaborated in ensuring that their community members remained happy, despite the divergence in interests. This is in contrast to fans’ split from IWTB, where Caldwell was described as a “Little Hitler” (ibid.) due to the regulations she imposed on the community and the manner in which those restrictions were executed on members (by publicly reprimanding anyone who started any discussion that was considered off-topic outside of the designated time frame for off-topic posts and stopping any discussions, whose threads may have evolved into a different topic not necessarily related to fan fiction). The crux of these community groups – BtS and BTT in particular – remained the friendship of the community members, which was something members felt they were

unable to share and develop due to the off-topic restrictions on IWTB. Caldwell eventually shut IWTB down when many of the members migrated over to BtS. “After some time, David [Caldwell’s partner, a fellow author and community member] and I picked up the pieces of what remained of IWTB and recreated it as IWTB-XF<sup>3</sup> with a renewed focus on my original premise – fanfic and support for writers, especially new writers. This time, I decided to run the list myself with the help of my husband” (Caldwell, 2008b, email correspondence).

On the contrary, *Stranger Things* (ST), an *Angel* community dedicated to fans of the pairing of Angel and Cordelia, as well as the actress who played Cordelia Chase – which I will look at in more detail later – has arguably been created out of the discrimination that fans felt when participating in other *Buffy* or *Angel* fan communities. The community appears to be like any other web-based forum for the show *Angel*, but the majority of fans who gather in this particular community all share a rather similar story of how they came to participate in the forum. Furthermore, a more in-depth browse through the community and the discussions revealed a somewhat antagonistic relationship with the show’s co-creator, Joss Whedon, who many fans at the ST community felt had ‘assassinated’ the character of Cordelia. The community too, appears to exist independently of the larger network of *Angel* and ‘Whedonverse’<sup>4</sup> fandoms even though discussions of the show and fan fiction continue to be produced by the community members.

What I want to suggest here is that communities like *Stranger Things* are micro-communities – fan communities that appear to have broken away or remain largely disconnected from the ‘main fandom’ because their reading of the subtext

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<sup>3</sup> The smaller community was established in 2003, with slightly over 100 community members. The smaller number may also be due to the possibility that newer fans are mostly concentrated on LiveJournal and have not ventured to Yahoo Groups.

<sup>4</sup> Fans often refer to the universes of Whedon’s works (*Buffy*, *Angel*, *Firefly*, *Dollhouse*) as the ‘Whedonverse’, spanning across TV, graphic novels and comics.

between two characters proved to be phenomenally unpopular among the majority of fans. The fan fiction authors who continue to produce ‘quality’ stories featuring Cordelia and Angel may be revered by the subset of fans who subscribe to similar interpretations of the characters’ relationship, but the fan symbolic capital these fans have accumulated will not be transferable to the overall fandom of *Buffy* and *Angel*. Claessens and Dhoest (2010, p. 51) argue that the “basic process of ‘distinction’...[is] ‘the stratification of tastes in such a way as to construct and reinforce differentiations of social status which correspond, in historically variable and often highly mediated ways, to achieved or aspired-to class position’ (Frow, 1996: 85).” The ‘quality’ of the stories is a constructed value determined by those who hold status within the framework or the habitus of the fan community. This might even go on to create a case of ‘micro cultural celebrities’ rather than ‘subcultural celebrities’ (Hills, 2003, p. 61), where fans are only regarded as ‘celebrities’ within their micro-communities.

This is not to say that only fan communities who have seemingly broken away from a main fandom can be considered as micro-communities – IWTB, BtS and BTT are fan fiction communities within *XF* fandom that focus on different aspects (as well as different pairings and/or fandoms) of the fan practice. To a certain extent, each micro-community within fandom stands somewhat independently from others as these communities exist precisely to cater to very specific interpretations of the text. ST is but one example of where fans of Cordelia and Angel group together. What I want to propose here is that there are pockets of symbolic ‘universes’ that exist within fandom that each subscribe to very specific rules and values, have very distinct – often rigid – ways of reading the text and, by extension, that this dictates how members of a micro-community interact with fans outside their immediate social circle. In essence,



communities like ST indicate a non-homogenous fandom, where micro-communities exist that subscribe to different interpretations of the original text.

The establishment of new fan fiction communities, of new factions within fandom, is sometimes done so that minority voices within fandom get the same opportunities to produce their own creative material, as is the case with a micro-community like Stranger Things. Perhaps the formation of these micro-communities can also be seen as a way for fandom to maintain a variety of differing voices rather than have these alternative readings drowned out by a homogenous fan voice that subscribes to a fandom-wide 'discursive mantra' (Hills, 2002, p. 67). However, fan communities do not necessarily fragment from flame wars that fans engage in to resolve conflicts. Rules and regulations of fan communities are promoted as fandom etiquettes which further serve not only to create boundaries, but also contain difference within these communities. The success or failure in fans' ability to abide by those rules determines their insider or outsider status within specific fan communities. In the next section, I will explore how these insider/outsider notions are determined within fan fiction communities.

### *The fan (fiction) community in conflict*

Henry Jenkins (1992) talked of the function of fandom as an alternative, and to a certain extent, utopian social community. Camille Bacon-Smith continually spoke of getting to the heart of the fan community she was studying; where "exposure is the ethnographer's prize and the community's fear: when my investigations took me too close to sensitive topics, the community sidetracked me with something of value, something that conserved the risk I as ethnographer sensed was present but that did not expose *too* much, that did not reveal the heart of the community" (1992, p. 283 –

emphasis in original). Nancy Baym equally saw her fans as a “dynamic community of people with unique voices, distinctive traditions, and enjoyable relationships” (2000, p. 1).

Sharon Cumberland has remarked that, “a remarkable aspect of the development of online fandoms and fan fiction communities is the culture of inclusion that embraces anyone (including men) who joins in, both as readers and writers” (2003, p. 265). Rhiannon Bury, however, argued that the range of literature on online communities has failed to problematise the members’ – or fans’ – desire for community:

Community is an understandable dream, expressing a desire for selves that are transparent to one another, relationship of mutual identification, social closeness and comfort. The dream is understandable, but politically problematic... because those motivated by it will tend to suppress differences among themselves or implicitly to exclude from the... groups persons with whom they do not identify (Young, 1990: 300 quoted in Bury, 2005, p. 15).

For Bury, this dream of community-building resonates powerfully with female fans who have felt excluded in male-dominated forums, although Bury did not go on to specify which forums, or more precisely, what sort of forums these are, especially since portions of (media) fandom have traditionally been presented as a predominantly female space. But while Cumberland applauded fandoms for their culture of inclusion, Bury cautioned that it is vital these communities, supposedly formed out of exclusion and/or marginalisation, are not romanticised. This is in contrast to what scholars like Jenkins and Bacon-Smith seemingly suggest in their observations of fan communities that appear to exist without much hierarchical conflict (Bacon-Smith, 1992, p. 41), and where fan communities provide fans with an

alternative, as well as a more democratic social existence (Jenkins, 1992, p. 282). Bury goes on to argue that within every fan community, there is a minority of participants who are either not willing or able to engage in the “established communal practices but their desire to belong to the community will keep them from leaving” (Bury, 2005, p. 15). More often than not, it is the friendships that fans form in these fan communities that keep them from leaving, even if they have stopped watching the show that initially drew them to the fandom and fan community in the first place.

Bury argues that, “creating a group that uses the pronouns ‘we/us/our/ours’ necessitates the establishment of practices that set out to create conformity and contain difference” (2005, p. 14). This can be exemplified by the example I gave in the previous section, where Caldwell brought attention to one of the moderators on IWTB who started referring to the community members as “her babies” (2008b, email correspondence). She was perceived to be laying claim to the community, and thus overstepping her role as one of a group of selected moderators to oversee and manage the community. Caldwell created IWTB with a very specific agenda, to provide a supportive environment for *XF* fan fiction writers “after the *Wicked X-Files Witches*<sup>5</sup> debuted their ‘page of punishment’...[that] was designed to humiliate writers by parodizing [sic] their stories” (ibid.) so Caldwell viewed some of the moderators and members’ attempt at injecting more off-topic discussions as deviating from the aims she, as owner and co-creator of the community, had established. Anna Smith has suggested that, “diversity of values, perspectives, beliefs, interests, knowledge and expectations is also a source of conflict” (1999, p. 136), especially in common interest online communities, where members are exposed to people who come from diverse cultural and socio-economic backgrounds who may not necessarily share the same

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<sup>5</sup> The *Wicked X-Files Witches*’ website: <http://www.reocities.com/wickedxwitches/>

values and beliefs. In reclaiming control and ownership of IWTB, aside from preventing further arguments and in-fighting among the group of moderators as she had claimed, Caldwell is also containing the difference (in opinions, especially with regards to the running of the community and its agenda) within IWTB. Furthermore, by seemingly continuing to claim the community members as her own, the moderator appears to have failed to conform to the role assigned to her by Caldwell, who saw the community as 'her' creation despite her constant absences from the community at that time.

Bury also argued that the naming of a community creates conformity and contains difference. She used the group, 'David Duchovny Estrogen Brigade' (DDEB), the community dedicated to *The X-Files*' actor as an example, suggesting that its name signals that the group adhered to a heterosexual identity rather than a lesbian or bisexual one. The simple act of naming a community, as Bury suggests, can be seen as a step towards creating conformity. Naming the group after the primary female sex hormone clearly states the intention of the fans to exclude male fans and also to celebrate female desire, but in so doing, "it also had the effect, intentional or not, of excluding female fans of *The X-Files* who may have wanted to join a women-only list but identified as lesbian" (Bury, 2005, pp. 14-15)<sup>6</sup>.

While the fan groups for both *XF* actors David Duchovny and Gillian Anderson were prominent on the Internet, for many fans, fan fiction was, and continues to be an important aspect of their fan experience as well as fan community experience. When queried if he felt fan fiction was an important practice for fans, Jay, a fan fiction author responded: "For media fandom, yes. I think it's an integral part of many fans [sic] enjoyment of TV show and film fandom regardless of the genre"

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<sup>6</sup> Male fans of Gillian Anderson retaliated by forming the Gillian Anderson Testosterone Brigade (GATB), as Clerc (1996) informed, "The GATB seems to be the only functioning men-only private list on the Internet, or at least the only one whose existence is known" (p. 44).

(2004, questionnaire interview). Another fan, Jenna, added that she finds fan fiction “more interactive than, for example, making videos or fan art – it’s like creating part of the [show’s] mythos” (2004, questionnaire interview). Nina suggested that for the television shows which have ended, fan fiction becomes even more essential “because it is the thing that keeps alive the fandom...Fan fiction in this case become the source of new stories [sic]” (2003, questionnaire interview); while Deslea (2003, questionnaire interview) offered that “fiction serves as a record of and source of meta...The development of a fandom's philosophy about what the show was and what it set out to do, and how the fans related to it, can be traced to a certain degree in its fanfiction”.

Perhaps because of the time the show debuted, when the Internet was still in its infancy – Deslea had called the *XF* fandom “the last of the geek fandoms” (2003, questionnaire interview) – the fan fiction communities of *The X-Files* organised themselves differently, with major archives like Gossamer and Ephemeral<sup>7</sup> serving to archive any piece of fiction posted on a public list (this can be any fiction-centred communities on Yahoo Groups, forums like Haven and the show’s creative newsgroup, alt.tv.xfiles.creative), regardless of the genre or rating. As Jenna testified, “other fandoms don’t seem to have the central archives like Gossamer, where everything is accepted and there’s no particular focus or slant” (2004, questionnaire interview)<sup>8</sup>. Mariann, who used to run a *CSI* fan fiction archive that was aiming to

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<sup>7</sup> Both sites can be found on <http://fluky.gossamer.org> and <http://www.ephemeralfic.org>. According to the Gossamer website, as of 1<sup>st</sup> March 2007, the site has 35,100 stories stored in its archive since it was established in 1995. On the other hand, Ephemeral “is a collection of home grown, and open source software that monitors *ATXC*, and archives stories marked with NEW: and REPOST: tags. Its general reason for existence is to fill the gap of silence on the web between updates on the Gossamer archives. Because of this, Ephemeral is cleared with each update of Gossamer, so it isn’t truly an archive, more like a temporary repository for material posted on *ATXC*” (Scott Miller, 1999: n.p. Available at <http://www.ephemeralfic.org/ephemeral-faq.txt>, accessed 31<sup>st</sup> January 2008)

<sup>8</sup> That is not to say that these archives do not exist entirely. *Star Trek* has an archive (<http://www.trekiverse.org/>) for stories that were posted on the newsgroups, but there are no information as to how many stories are actually stored on the site. Likewise, there were also attempts at

have a collection of fiction as extensive as *XF*'s Gossamer stated that "the depth of organization and updates (on Gossamer) has always impressed me, and its presence as a central archive was something I wanted to mimic for *CSI* fanfic" (2003, questionnaire interview).

Deslea offered a possible explanation for the development of central fan fiction archives for the fandom based on the timing of *XF*'s debut on American television. According to her, the Internet was the domain of "techie geeks" who had their own codes of conduct, which was the kind of environment *XF* fandom thrived and developed in:

People had a strong sense of preserving the resources the fandom had and of encouraging more, because that's how techie geeks think. They think about communal knowledge and by-products and domino effects...they were investing big money producing and making available whatever the fandom had – much bigger [sic] money than people have to spend today. And people not capable of producing in any other way would fund people who could (2003, questionnaire interview).

At the time of the show's debut, fan discussions and communities were mostly centred around newsgroups, mailing lists or text-based chat rooms that required familiarity and access to computer networks to work and manoeuvre around, and this encouraged the "preservation of fandom resources", according to Deslea. What this also means is that to submit a piece of fiction to places like Ephemeral and Gossamer

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creating a centralised archive for *Buffy* (<http://archive.shriftweb.org/>) but the site appears to have ceased updating in 2009. Both *Lord of the Rings* and *Harry Potter* also have extensive archives for fan fiction (mostly centred on specific pairings) but none appear to have the structural continuity Ephemeral and Gossamer provided for *XF* fandom. It is also possible that the debut of LiveJournal and Fanfiction.net also changed the dependence fans have on newsgroups and mailing lists. Fanfiction.net, for example, is convenient and multi-fandom, and fans do not have to worry about the high costs, management and providing staffing (often voluntary) to sustain a large archive.

is more complicated than sites like LiveJournal or Fanfiction.Net, where members are able to post a journal entry or load a story with a simple click of a mouse<sup>9</sup>.

On the other hand, while sites like Gossamer and Ephemeral serve to “centralise fanfic archival” (Deslea, 2003, questionnaire interview), fan fiction-centred communities also sprang up with mailing lists<sup>10</sup> and the introduction of Yahoo Groups, a space where Internet users can “privately share info, images, ideas and more” (Yahoo Group Help Page, n.p.<sup>11</sup>), which eventually became a base for a lot of *XF* mailing list communities. Mailing list communities, as well as communities based on the structure of discussion forums<sup>12</sup> offer fans opportunities to create communities that cater to more specific genres or exclusivity of a particular fan activity, be it role playing games or fan fiction.

For example, Yahoo Groups allow community owners or leaders to control the amount of members to be admitted to the community, as well as the option to list the communities as public (where everyone can join) or private (where membership is by invitation only). Some communities require new members to issue a statement of age, particularly for those that allow its writers to post adult-themed fan fiction; while others request potential members to state their reasons for wanting to join the community. An *Angel* fan fiction community based in Yahoo Groups which featured

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<sup>9</sup> Fans familiar with LiveJournal and FanFiction.Net have often complained of the rigidity that places like Ephemeral and Gossamer represent when it comes to posting their fiction. This will be explored further in the following chapter.

<sup>10</sup> The earliest *XF*-centred mailing list was thought to be the ‘E-mail X-Creative’ (*EMXC*) list, created on 13 December 1994. Sources: The *EMXC* Archive FAQ (<http://afterthefactx.com/MIJ2/EMXC2/faq.html>. Accessed 31 March 2008) and *The X-Files* Fan History Wiki (<http://www.fanhistory.com/index.php/X-Files>. Accessed 31 March 2008).

<sup>11</sup> <http://help.yahoo.com/l/us/yahoo/groups/original/members/basics/basics-01.html>. Accessed 28 March 2008.

<sup>12</sup> For example, Haven (<http://community.idealistshaven.com/forums/index.php>) is a popular *XF* forum community that has been around since the early days of the show. The community started as a discussion forum for ‘shippers’ of Mulder and Scully, and is probably one of the few *XF*-based forums that is still going strong despite of the growing popularity of LiveJournals and social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter. Newer – particularly those who became fans in the latter seasons of the show or after the show has been off the air on American TV – have equated getting into the tightly-knit community as a sign that fans have been accepted into the inner social circle of *XF* fandom. Of course, this may not necessarily be the case from the perspective of Haven community members.

the pairing of Cordelia and Angel, which I attempted to join, required me to send in a statement describing my favourite episode or moment that featured the pairing of Cordelia and Angel, followed with a short explanation why – this is so that the community owners can be certain that potential members are real fans and supporters of the Cordelia/Angel relationship.

All these are efforts to draw boundaries around the community: “Boundaries indicate who is inside and who is outside...they distinguish the members [and communities] from those they differ from or wish to be seen as different from” (Cherny, 1999, p. 254). Within these communities, rules can also be set determining what topics can be discussed by members, what kinds of fiction genres are allowed to be posted and if off-topic discussions (for example, discussions about other shows, the sharing and discussion of fan fiction written by non-members as well as the sharing of the members’ personal lives) are limited to certain days of the week only [see Appendix 2].

Bury’s argument, then, seems to propose that every community exists on the binary of inclusion/exclusion, however (un)consciously these divisions may be created – the establishment of community norms and practices, through naming or through the development of rules and regulations for a community (often by an individual or a group of individuals), all work towards this. “It is imperative to recognise that communal practices do not just bring together but end up functioning as norms that lead to insider/outsider divisions within the community” (Bury, 2005, p. 212). In her examinations, Bury highlighted some of the concerns faced by her respondents, which she hypothesised exemplified the insider/outsider divisions experienced by fans within their communities. According to Bury, fans were worried about not being witty enough in their online interactions with other members. So by



abstaining from discussions, they are thus categorising themselves not only as lurkers, but also as outsiders within communities where the very nature of interaction is at times wholly dependent on the crafting of words or the mastery of (the English) language<sup>13</sup>. Some fans dislike aspects of the community's activities such as a DDEB member's aversion to critical episode discussions (Bury, 2005, pp. 63-64), while others make use of the community setting (especially when there is a strong sense of a clique among members) to mock their fellow fan fiction authors for 'bad' writing.

Fiske (1992) and Jenkins (1992) have remarked on the discriminatory nature of fandom, although the line is usually drawn between fans and non-fans<sup>14</sup>, and this observation is equally shared by fans themselves: "fans often develop an 'us vs. them' attitude toward 'mundanes' i.e. non-fans" (Jay, 2003, questionnaire interview). The so-called inadequacies fans felt, or their unwillingness to engage in critical analysis of episodes or participate in debates may not necessarily result in 'flame wars'. At times, the only possible resolution to fans' difference or the conflict is for one of the affected parties to leave the community and go on to create another. Busse and Hellekson (2006, p. 15) credit LiveJournal in splintering fandom into "nearly innumerable factions...It is easier to avoid stories, styles, or pairings that one does not like", but this is possible for all online fan communities in the spaces that fans have appropriated, not merely LiveJournal.

Cherny suggested that boundaries can also exist in the minds of community members: "Perceptions of the boundaries may differ among individuals, even those on

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<sup>13</sup> This is also an issue that permeates fan fiction, as fans have reflected in their meta discussions on various platforms. See, for example, in FanFic Symposium, Alison's essay on 'The Americanisation of British Fandoms' (<http://www.trickster.org/symposium/symp157.html>) and Nora Charles's LJ post, 'International Fandom Represent' (<http://nora-charles.livejournal.com/145160.html>).

<sup>14</sup> I use the term non-fans here to include what Gray (2003) described as anti-fans: "not necessarily...those who are against fandom per se, but...those who strongly dislike a given text or genre" (p. 70) as well as those who delegate fandom to the infantilising domain of hormonal fangirls or the fanboy who lives in his mother's basement.

the same side of a boundary. Boundaries are often symbolic, dependent on abstractions like friendship, rivalry, jealousy, similarity” (1999, p. 254). Fan fiction authors, whose stories have been well-received and favoured by fans, often claim that they are outsiders in their communities or that the stories they choose to write do not necessarily fit into the expectations that their fans have of them. Despite being one of the popular authors whose stories usually end up in recommendation lists for fans looking to read classic *XF* fan fiction, Jenna called one of her alternate universe novel-length pieces “a strange little story. I thought...with so many readers insistent on how they only read fic to read about Mulder and Scully they’d never want to read something so far-fetched” (2004, questionnaire interview).

In 2003, Avalon, a fan fiction author, posted *Queen of Mist and Memory*, a story that placed Mulder and Scully into the legendary world of King Arthur’s Camelot as Lancelot and Guinevere. The fan fiction became so popular that Avalon gained a fan following who identified themselves as ‘Mistaholics’ in various fan forums and communities – chiefly in Haven – and who faithfully cheered her on, providing encouragement and feedback as she posted the story in parts. When queried about her apparent subcultural celebrity status, Avalon deflected this, explaining:

I have never been what I would consider to be a ‘popular’ author in the [*XF*] fandom. I have won some Spooky Awards<sup>15</sup>, and my stories were read and commented upon, but I was not normally mentioned in people’s talk about ‘great’ writers or stories. (2004, questionnaire interview).

In these cases, it can be argued that much of the concern voiced by fans did not reflect how other members of the community viewed the fan in question, as exemplified by some of the fan fiction authors’ testimony I highlighted above. Jay

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<sup>15</sup> The Spooky Awards (<http://www.spookyawards.org>), an annual *XF* fan fiction awards for stories that were posted on the *XF* creative newsgroup, *alt.tv.xfiles.creative*, ran from 1995 to 2005.

equates it to a guilty pleasure when fans play the outsider role, even within their community: “it’s fair to say I think that they cultivate that outsider role in many ways” (2003, questionnaire interview). At the same time, fan fiction authors are bound by the long-accepted fandom etiquette, particularly in *XF* fandom, to refrain from any self-promotion of their fan fiction. Gina explained:

I kind of came in when fanfic was at its peak and there were a lot of ‘rules’ set by some of the original divas of fic....It was a bit self-serving. There were definitely ‘favourites’ and newbies weren’t really all that welcomed. And newbies who ‘advertised’ their fics were viewed in the same light as those neighbors who keep their rusty old Buicks on the front lawn as decorations. It was almost a rite of passage. If you managed to find an audience in spite of no promotion, no one knowing your ‘name’, and no one else pushing your fic, then you ‘deserved’ to be in the *XF* community. (2007, mailing list discussion).

By contrast, in *CSI* fan fiction, which Gina also writes for, promoting one’s story is an accepted practice for fan fiction authors. Gina goes on to speculate that this could be due to the lack of a central fan fiction archive like Ephemeral, adding that “there is a very well-known board (à la The Haven) and in the fic section, there is a whole thread where writers simply state that they have just completed a new fic, give a brief description and links. And no one is saying, ‘ooh, shameless hussy! Promoting herself’” (2007, mailing list discussion).

Fandom etiquettes such as the one mentioned by Gina further create insider/outsider divisions in *XF* fan fiction fandom, positing any fan who does not subscribe to the rule as an outsider, an ‘Other’<sup>16</sup>. Paige Caldwell, in a discussion on

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<sup>16</sup> Fans often accuse those who post their fan fiction at FanFiction.Net to conform to this very practice, even going to the extent of withholding updates for a story if the author receives feedback that is unsatisfactory to them. I will look at this issue in greater detail in the following chapter.

the topic in the fan fiction community she set up, IWTBXF, concurred that such a practice among more established *XF* fan fiction authors was very discouraging for new authors who were just starting out in the fandom or in their roles as fan fiction writers. “On one hand, your fic is subject to scathing public critique because it’s done in the real world. On the other, you can’t promote your fic like the real world because it’s considered tacky in fanfic. What’s a writer to do?” (Caldwell, 2007b, mailing list discussion). Bury (2005, p. 15) suggested that fans’ desire to belong and be associated with a community will eventually keep them from leaving. I would also argue that the community will collectively pressure fans to conform by normalizing these rules and regulations as a form of criteria.

While fans like Gina and Caldwell both express the desire that self-promotion in *XF* fan fiction fandom should be considered less of a taboo, none have gone on to break this norm – Caldwell goes on to state that she still feels uncomfortable advertising her own work, and often waits for her usual readers/fans to notice that she has posted new stories. *XF* fan fiction authors equate these norms to a form of elitism in the fandom, where, as Gina mentioned, if new authors eventually get noticed then they have earned the right to be part of the fandom as well as the respect of other authors, thus proving that they are skilled writers or possess the desired fan symbolic capitals to be noticed and celebrated.

Cherny (1999) had suggested that some of these divisions exist in the minds of the members themselves, where fans embrace the role of the outsider, even within fan communities. I have used the examples of fan fiction authors to suggest that the division can also be a result of fandom etiquette collectively agreed upon by members of the community (usually those in possession of fan social and cultural capital), which new fans are subjected to upon their introduction to the fandom. In order to

remain a part of the community, fans abide by rules presented as ‘fandom lore’, set in place long before they became active participants<sup>17</sup>. These regulations do not just create boundaries in fan communities, they also contain difference and maintain the status quo, thus promoting homogenous fan communities.

But what happens when fans subscribe to a different interpretation of the text, or support a non-canon pairing not collectively sanctioned by the majority of the fandom?<sup>18</sup> How strongly are these insider/outsider divisions enforced then? Baym had observed how soap opera fans employed a strategy of friendliness to contain difference in their newsgroup, rec.arts.tv.soaps (r.a.t.s.): “Instead of flaming, participants in r.a.t.s. attended to an ethic of friendliness by playing down the disagreement with qualifications, apologies, and reframings. They built social alignment with partial agreements, naming, and acknowledgments of the others’ perspectives. They moved conversation rapidly away from the disagreement itself and back to the group’s primary purpose of collaboratively interpreting the [text]” (2000, p. 129). But it can also be argued that this is a subversion of conflict – a form of pacification that is not necessarily replicated outside of soap opera fandom, or for that matter, outside of the newsgroup Baym observed. In containing difference, fans can – and have – presented their fellow fans as the (bad) ‘Other’, where their contributions and participation are often excluded or intentionally boycotted in general fan forums or popular fan communities, for instance. Fans make use of strategies where they

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<sup>17</sup> As the discussion on fandom etiquette on IWTBXF progressed, none of the members, especially those who have been around the fandom for a longer period of time, could remember who or how the taboo surrounding promoting one’s own stories came about, just that the rules have been set in place by the earliest members of the fandom and were expected to be followed and carried out in order to be accepted as a member of the *XF* fandom.

<sup>18</sup> In the *Buffy* and *Angel* fandoms, for instance, this distinction is very clearly laid out, especially when it concerns the character of Cordelia Chase, who is generally less popular than the rest. While the pairing of Buffy/Spike became incredibly popular and was widely accepted towards the end of the show’s run, the pairing of Angel/Cordelia was less widely accepted. I will look more into this division in the next section of this chapter.

imply that these fans, positioned as ‘others’ are not reading the text correctly, and thus are not considered ‘real’ fans.

In the following section, I will turn to look at how the practice of slash fan fiction writing is categorically excluded from more general fan fiction practices in *XF* fandom. Correspondingly, supporting or ‘shipping’ an unpopular pairing can also result in the exclusion of fans from fan communities where fans supporting the alleged canon-approved pairing are in the majority, as discovered by fans who support the unpopular pairing of Angel and Cordelia from *Buffy* and *Angel* fandoms. The discrimination and exclusion often leads to the creation of micro-communities, where fans who share and support similar views have the space to engage in their own version of fan cultural production. However, the divisions do not stop there, as fans continue to map the boundaries of their micro-communities, forming cliques and positioning those who disagree with their views as ‘others’.

#### *Micro-communities and fringe fandoms*

Dasha K (2008, questionnaire interview), a popular fan fiction author, claims that in the early days of *XF* fandom it was often common for writers to use one pen name for their slash fiction and another for other general stories that mostly featured Mulder and Scully’s relationship (generally referred to as MSR). Deslea alleged that there is a cultural divide between slash authors and the rest of the fan fiction fandom in *XF* fandom, “a byproduct of past homophobia (the one really big negative of the fandom’s age). Slashers were driven out of the mainstream in the early days of *XF* fandom, and sadly, slashers now perceive themselves as quite separate. New slashers are indoctrinated by older ones that the mainstream is not welcoming to them” (2003, questionnaire interview). Lily (2004, questionnaire interview) supports Deslea’s

observations, adding that “there have been times that slash authors haven’t posted their work to major outlets like atxc (alt.tv.xfiles.creative) because [slash fans] perceive [these spaces] as anti-slash”.

While the exodus of slash fans occurred during *XF*’s fandom’s infancy, prompting slash authors to shift their activities to private and self-contained mailing lists<sup>19</sup>, discrimination against slash fans in communities like IWTBXF and Haven still occurs, albeit covertly. For example, while IWTBXF prided itself in being a community where all writers of *XF* fan fiction, new or established, are welcome, where all genres of fiction regardless of pairing or rating are embraced, in the wide range of fan fiction-related topics that have been proposed and started for community discussions over the years, none specifically concerns slash fiction. Some fans even go on to argue that posting slash in a public space like Ephemeral is almost always a guarantee that one’s story will not be read:

Slash doesn't have a big following. I can justify that comment by the number of recommends or lack there of for slash at Ephemral [sic]. If you don't want to have your story read just put slash in the header and I guarantee you will kill any readership you might have had  
(Marcella, 2003, questionnaire interview).

Some fans also voiced their opposition to the inclusion of slash authors into the nomination for the fandom’s best fan fiction in The Spooky Awards, which ran annually from 1995 to 2005. As Sallie (2004, email correspondence) commented:

The favourite author for the 2003 awards was a slash writer.  
I do not think that most of the voters or fanfic community  
have even \*read\* a story by Mik, much less voted for him

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<sup>19</sup> Slash fans in *XF* fandom maintain a separate archive called The Basement (<http://basement.ditb.org/>), its name an obvious play on the location of Fox Mulder’s office in the FBI’s basement, which he referred to as the place for the ‘FBI’s most unwanted’. While Gossamer also archives slash fiction, most of the fandom’s slash stories are archived in The Basement.

(her?) for the favourite. I suspect some kind of campaign whereby some people voted many times...That's cheating.

Opinions like Sallie's and Marcella's were a common occurrence in *XF* fandom, according to Dasha K. Some communities like Haven, for instance, are "populated by very militant fans of...Mulder/Scully relationship (MSR)...[where] I've seen quite a bit of intolerance...such as...anti-slash, and anti-GLBT sentiment" (Dasha K, 2008, questionnaire interview). In my interviews with fans who are participants on IWTBXF, I had asked if they consider slash as a subculture within the fan fiction fandom they participate in, given their almost unanimous indifference to the genre's presence. While some retained their apathy in the matter, others were not as restrained. Carol replied that assigning the term 'subculture' to the practice "might...be giving it more substance than it deserves" (2003, questionnaire interview). Nina (2003, questionnaire interview), on the other hand, sees the activity as "destructive" (particularly to the characterisation of Mulder and Scully) while Marcella claims "the thing that makes [her] the maddest if [sic] for someone to waste good talent writing slash" (2003, questionnaire interview).

Some of the fans' bias against slash is clear in this case, which they usually rationalise by insisting that the characters of Scully, and in particular, Mulder, were never meant to be read in such a manner. Lily, who writes erotica that features Mulder, Scully and Krycek in a dominant/submissive relationship mentioned that she has received feedback from her readers that were concerned with the way the characters' relationship was portrayed in her stories. One in particular "was...attacking the story on every level – the implausibility of Mulder and Scully sleeping with Krycek in the first place...He (the reader) felt that all characterisation was ignored in order to write a 'long winded buggery scene'" (2004, questionnaire interview). Marcella maintains her disbelief in how slash authors view the characters,



especially Mulder, arguing that “[Krycek] shot Mulder’s father for goodness sake! I sometimes wonder what show slash writers were watching” (2004, questionnaire interview).

Responses like Marcella’s in this case, paint slash fans as an ‘other’, where the suggestion is that they are not watching the same show, or at least are not interpreting the show as it should be interpreted. This process of ‘othering’ the fan is common as a strategy utilised by fans to create and maintain boundaries around their communities. In positioning slash fans as ‘other’, fans are ensuring that their communities are not accessed by those they deem as outsiders (in this case, the slash fans). Aside from building this insider/outsider division, this strategy also advocates conformity. Marcella admits to being particular about the types of fan fiction she chooses to read: “no Doggett or Reyes, no character death, no colonisation, no slash, no Scully or Mulder with any other lover” (2004, questionnaire interview). By suggesting that good writers are wasting their talent writing slash, she is exerting her interpretation of the text, and of the characters’ relationship on those who may choose to read the text differently. Or, as Lily puts it, fan fiction authors use the creative outlet of fan fiction as an opportunity to take “things that were fun to contemplate but which I wouldn’t want to see on the show (such as Mulder/Scully romance, which I didn’t want to see until the show wrapped up) and things which would never ‘really’ happen (such as hot Mulder/Krycek sex)” (2004, questionnaire interview).

This strategy of discounting fan dedication, or even fan knowledge of the text is frequently employed, as fans of the Cordelia/Angel relationship can attest. Fan C explains that she has had to refrain from visiting and being part of various *Buffy* fan communities ever since she started ‘shipping’ the characters of Cordelia and Angel (known as C/Aers) on the spinoff show as supporters of the Buffy/Angel relationship

(B/Aers), who populate general fan forums and communities, had made it difficult to do so:

[H]ardore [sic] B/Aers made a planned, deliberate effort to ‘get their voice heard’...and by getting their voice heard, I mean spreading their hatred of the current shows and characters far and wide – and at any website or forum that will let them talk. They refer to season 3 as ‘the rape of Cordy’s character’<sup>20</sup>, and imply that anyone who happened to like season 3 is obviously not a ‘true’ fan, or someone who’s only watched recent seasons (2002, questionnaire interview).

However, Fan C argues that she has been a fan of Whedon’s shows since the very first episode of *Buffy*, and resented the predominance of the Buffy/Angel shippers, forming a majority of the communities. “I...occasionally tried to voice my resentment (on being regarded as a non-true fan). And any time I did, I was quickly drowned out – because I was a C/Aer, and my opinion didn’t count” (Fan C, 2002, questionnaire interview). Ophelia (2002, questionnaire interview) agrees, saying that, “there seems to be a bizarre need on the part of some to make all fans of C/A fit some silly stereotype – that we are ‘new’ fans who ‘don’t understand canon’”. Elisha adds that Buffy/Angel shippers “think they are the ‘true fans’ because of their ship and also because they think most C/A shippers never watched *Buffy*” (2002, questionnaire interview).

In the case of the fandoms of *Buffy* and *Angel*, being a Cordelia/Angel shipper immediately renders the fans as outsiders in relation to the overall fandom – a position fans themselves acknowledge. Fan C (2002, questionnaire interview) suggests this is

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<sup>20</sup> For a lot of *Angel* fans, in particular Cordelia/Angel shippers, season 3 of the show marked a turning point of the relationship as well as the development of Cordelia’s character from a shallow cheerleader in Sunnydale to a selfless warrior and Angel’s friend and partner in LA. Many fans/shippers also see the relationship between the two blossom to a more adult one in this season, which they believe surpasses the futile, teenaged love affair of Buffy and Angel in earlier seasons.

because for most fans, the relationship between Buffy and Angel has been central to the show and by extension, their identity as fans:

I think B/A will always be considered a sort of 'default' pairing, because it was first and it was the most prominent for a long time. But Spuffy (Spike/Buffy) certainly has made great inroads...C/A will never be default. While many B/Aers can handle Spuffy, they despise C/A with a purple passion. (IMO, they all identify so strongly with Buffy that they feel sort of jilted themselves by the very thought of Angel with another woman – especially Cordy, who was actually meant to Buffy in high school...).

Fan D candidly asserts: "I fell for a couple that wasn't all that popular. If I'd fallen for Spike/Angel, I probably would feel like I was the head cheerleader, lording it over the dweebs in the high school cafeteria" (2008, questionnaire interview). For some fans like Argel, the support of an unpopular pairing has resulted in "being frozen out of a few message boards and fan groups" (2002, questionnaire interview). Kelly (2008, questionnaire interview), however, has a different experience:

There is a sort of an unspoken animosity...I've had trouble getting my fanfic and icons linked in these places too because...it is mostly Cordelia/Angel.

When occurrences such as these take place in fandom<sup>21</sup>, fans with the (unpopular) opposing viewpoints usually move on to form other communities that

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<sup>21</sup> Both *Angel* and *XF* fandoms have seen massive shifts in their fan communities at one point since the shows' debut. *Angel's* fandom has largely existed on the periphery of *Buffy* or Joss Whedon fandom, being the spinoff sister show of *Buffy*. But when some fans began to start supporting the pairing of Angel with Cordelia (with some *Buffy* supporters starting to show signs of support for the developing Buffy and Spike storyline), the core and vocal fans/shippers of Buffy and Angel started to protest: public web forums start to shut down their membership while flame wars erupt in various communities over the support of an unpopular character (Cordelia) as well as an unpopular pairing (Cordelia/Angel). *The XF* fandom divide, on the other hand, occurred when new characters, John Doggett and Monica Reyes were added to the show. 'Classic *XF*' fans were adamant on not liking actor Robert Patrick as well as the character he played, Doggett, thus starting numerous flame wars with those who wanted to give the characters a chance. Several major fan fiction archives reworked their submission regulations, not only shutting out any fiction that featured the new characters, but also shutting out the authors who

will better cater to their interpretations of the text, just as fans like Paige Caldwell had done with IWTBXF and Fan B with BtS in the *XF* fandom. Some communities, like *Angel's* Stranger Things forum, become a 'safe' place for fans who have had opposing opinions to the majority in *Buffy* communities, where it has become increasingly difficult for them to identify as fans of a particular character or pairing.

Kelly, for example, branded members of Whedonverse and Beyond, a forum that supposedly caters to all the different universes of Joss Whedon's creation, as "elitists who hid under sheep's clothing. They appeared at the surface to be very welcoming, very accommodating but as time went on, I realised that if you had an opinion different than the 'regulars', you were outcast. And if you had information that challenged the views of the regulars, you were called a liar" (2008, questionnaire interview). For these fans, it would appear that the community at Stranger Things provides them with a reprieve from the ostracization they were feeling within other fan communities. Kelly goes on to reflect, in comparison to the experience she had in Whedonverse and Beyond:

At Stranger Things, I feel welcomed. I feel safe. I feel like I can say what I like and not have to worry about being called names or being hassled for my activities and views of my fandom. ... I would have left the fandom...if I hadn't been directed to Stranger Things.

Aside from their shared love of *Angel*, and the relationship of Cordelia and Angel, these fans depend on the existence of a community like ST to be able to perform their fan identity without being subjected to the pressure to conform to how the majority of *Buffy* and *Angel* fans interpret the texts, and in this case, *Angel's*

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include Doggett and Reyes into their stories as well. The popular fan forum, Haven, for a time, only allowed fan discussions and fiction that centred on Mulder and Scully (rules and regulations has since then been relaxed, even though the subject of Doggett, Reyes, and seasons 8 and 9 can still create tensions in discussions across several communities).

relationship with both Buffy and Cordelia. When I posted a discussion thread on the community entitled ‘What does ST mean to you?’, sharing my own experiences on how I ended up becoming a member of the community myself, other fans followed suit, sharing similar stories of how they were either banned or driven out of general *Buffy* and/or *Angel* communities because they dared to share a viewpoint that was different from the majority, and which prevented them from the pleasure of the whole fan experience.

Some, such as Bigbird811 grew tired of how Buffy/Angel shippers were trying to convert her: “There came a time when I got really tired of B/A shippers telling me ‘Oh, but B/A was so much more real than C/A!’ and then trying to convince me to ‘get back into the good ship’ ...[But] I found a special place here. Somewhere I could ship in peace and not have other people tell me I’m in the wrong” (2008, forum discussion). Both DamnSkippy and Livvie even went on to say that discovering *Stranger Things* was what kept them from leaving fandom altogether. As DamnSkippy elaborated: “Until that moment, I thought the Buffy/Angel fandom possessed the most mean spirited, cruel people in fandom” (2008, forum discussion).

However, this is not to say that micro-communities like ST does not produce cliques among its members just because the creation of the community is largely based upon the notion that this particular group of fans are considered outsiders within the context of *Buffy* and *Angel* fandoms. Baym warns that, “the idea of the shared-interest community as a utopia ignores the tension and contradictions that evolve in any ongoing community where new people continually come into a world rich with traditions they did not create. Shared interest need not mean like-minded” (2007, p. 207). In the context of a fan community, no matter the reason for its

creation, fans will continue to create insider/outsider divisions among themselves, depending on the cliques and interactions among fans.

Fan D, for instance, has confided that she has been made to feel unwelcome, and has had her opinions drowned out by “a clique at *Stranger Things*” (2008, questionnaire interview). When encouraged to elaborate, Fan D explained:

There's an offshoot of ST called the Lemon Board that was started as an invitation-only inner group with only the ‘cool kids.’ I felt flattered to be invited, and joined...in part b/c [sic] I was flattered, but mainly because some of my favourite people were there. As time went on, things happened on the show that really hurt to watch (the build-up to the C/A ship in S3, which not only didn't pay off, but resulted in a breakdown of the show we'd all fallen in love with). The people who I liked left the board to follow other shows, and the only people left were the Negative Nancies.

Fan D apparently came across some unflattering insider information through a friend and fellow ST community member regarding *Angel* actress, Charisma Carpenter. When information was passed onto the board via Fan D's friend, who she explains was more of a lurker than an active participant:

[A] sh1t-storm [sic] exploded because the one thing you \*never\* do at ST is diss CC - even if it's the truth from a reliable source...The main Pessie decided that BF was a troll or a plant from the network...The rest of the Lemon Boarders took it up, not only disparaging her, but saying that I was untrustworthy too. They started calling me names, saying they never liked me, that I had bad taste in friends and wasn't a true friend of ST...This included the person I'd... thought was my friend.

Likewise, another *Angel* fan, Lea, experienced similar treatment when she first joined the ST community and started posting her fan fiction to share with the group.

[M]y writing has certain errors grammatically mainly and I don't [sic] maybe it was at the time I posted a lot of stories I can't remember who is was to be honest... They pm'd<sup>22</sup> me and told me that I was a complete waste of space and why continue writing and make the readers suffer, if I had any readers. I had no idea why they said that to me maybe I am a really bad writer or something I did they hated (2008, questionnaire interview).

However, both Fan D and Lea remain active within the community; their experience having not hindered their view of what would be considered as a fringe fandom within *Angel*. Lea had gone on to explain that while she took all the criticisms directed at her writing personally at the time, there were also “a lot of people [who] pm'd [sic] me and gave me a lot of hope. ... [Y]ou get a few rotten apples but the majority of people are great” (2008, questionnaire interview). Like Lea, Fan D also agreed that it was only a small group of the ST community that has made her experience unpleasant. “It made me realize that, where people might be careful not to display their pettiness or negativity in real life, when they're hiding behind online personas they wear it as a badge. It made me less innocent and more cautious, and more self-protective. ... I'm just more careful now about who I let into RL (real life) from fandom, and I try not to assume that nice people are really nice” (2008, questionnaire interview).

Fan D and Lea's experiences prove that despite the solidarity of the C/A shippers against a bias from the majority of the *Buffy* and *Angel* fandoms, within the micro-community of ST, lines are continually being drawn where fans are still positioned as insiders and outsiders. The process of 'othering' the fan still occurs in this case, in spite of the circumstances that brought about the establishment of ST in

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<sup>22</sup> 'PM' is an acronym for 'private message'.

the first place. Fan D and Lea may choose to continue participating in ST in spite of their experience because their support of the Cordelia/Angel pairing already makes them outsiders within the general fandom. Furthermore, ST remains interestingly divorced from the rest of the *Angel* fandom with a somewhat antagonistic, if one-sided relationship with Joss Whedon. This is at times reflected in some of the members' signature files, which have ranged from the somewhat playful 'Joss Whedon sunk my ships'<sup>23</sup> (SlytherinAngelic) to '*And, honestly? I'll be damned if Joss fucking Whedon breaks this board apart. We survived S4, we survived Charisma's firing, we're surviving the mess of S5. We're stronger than we think*' (fiddly – italics in original).

When I asked members at ST to reflect on their love/hate relationship with Joss Whedon, a man who had created two of their favourite characters in the Whedonverse, out of the thirteen responses I received in the public post, eight professed no love for Whedon and proceeded to explain why: "I hated what he did with the Cordy character and it annoyed me that whenever Buffy was mentioned or seen everything stopped because of her" (Lea, 2008, questionnaire interview). Samsmom writes: "I have no love for Joss Whedon. I think he's a fantastic writer, but...I don't understand the sycophant worshipping that goes on at some comms and sites" (2008, forum discussion). DamnSkippy provided a more punitive rationale:

I just hate him. Can't really say more than that and it's mostly based on how he treats people and less about his writing although that's certainly enough to despise him. As far as what he gave us, I give more credit to others associated with the show...who were more responsible for keeping the characters 'in character' so I don't have to love him for Angel and Cordy. (2008, forum discussion)

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<sup>23</sup> The ship in reference here being Cordelia/Angel.



The fans at ST hardly mention any involvement with the general *Angel* fandom beyond the confines of their beloved community. When asked, a few mentioned being marginally involved in a competing Cordelia/Angel community, *Angel's Oasis* and a general Cordelia/Angel community on LiveJournal. It is as if ST exists on the periphery of the general fandom, thus rendering it more a micro-community rather than a community that still holds strong ties to its show's fandom in general. Therefore, Jenkins's declaration that "women who have low prestige jobs or who are homemakers can gain *national* and even *international* recognition as fan writers and artists" (1992, p.159 – own emphasis) is questionable here as it would seem that status is confined to the fans' reputation within a community, which is for the most part, largely self-contained.

Rather than just continuing the assumption that fan and/or fan fiction communities are formed as one general, homogenous community that appears to unify the various fan practitioners (fan fiction authors, fan video producers, fan artists, and the like), attention should also be paid to the smaller, fringe groups that have dispersed from major ones to form sets of new and differential communities<sup>24</sup>. The establishment of new fan fiction communities, or new factions within fan fiction fandom, is sometimes done to warrant that minority voices within communities acquire the same opportunities to produce their own creative material. One might find that new communities are often set up after a particularly bitter flame war among members of a bigger, parent community, where the only option remaining for fans with the minority opinion is to leave and set up new communities; a process which could ensure the continued existence of not only the communities, but also the

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<sup>24</sup> This could happen due to a number of reasons. Some communities change 'ownership', prompting new rules of governance to be introduced whereby old community members might move on to establish new communities. Some fan fiction communities might faction off to become more specialised in certain pairings or interpretations of the text, thereby also prompting members to start new communities.

fandom and its creative industry. In a sense, these fans go on to develop their own *illusio* (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 33), as they continue to play the cultural game of fan cultural production, continually generating the boundaries that determine who the insiders and outsiders of the game are.

Therefore, a particular fan author may be celebrated within his or her own fan fiction community for her contributions, but she may not necessarily hold the same status outside of that micro-community. So while the fan writer may come bearing gifts of fan fiction, icons, videos and the like, these gifts may not necessarily be appreciated by the hosts or the members of the particular community, thus causing the gift to be devalued<sup>25</sup> – an argument I will explore in more detail in the following chapter. This insinuates that there is perhaps another level of subcultural celebrity at work here. Instead of being merely subcultural celebrities, some fan fiction authors become ‘micro-cultural celebrities’, as their gift of fan fiction is only appreciated within the (very narrow) scope of the community that favours the same pairing or a similar interpretation of the text. This could also be extended to the fan factions who show a preference for specific spaces or archives to post and store their fan fiction, which may not necessarily subscribe to the same rules of the game as those determined by previously established fandom etiquette, for instance.

### *Conclusion*

I began this chapter by suggesting that previous observations of fan communities paint a homogenous picture of the fan community, as well as fandom.

While scholars acknowledge the boundaries that fans draw, these are often limited to

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<sup>25</sup> This also insinuates that fan symbolic and cultural capital may also be invoked should the fan author produce a piece of work that may not be well-received by the community, or should they suddenly write for a different pairing or genre not favoured by the community.

those boundaries drawn to distinguish between fans and non-fans. Ultimately, this assumption still creates an image of fandom that is whole and united, where fans as Bacon-Smith suggested, “have no established hierarchy” (1992, p. 41), and fan communities provide an alternative democratic space. However, interactions among fans in fan communities are complex, and often fraught with conflict – something that fan scholars can be reluctant to recognize.

I have suggested in this chapter that boundaries can also be internalised by fans as they position themselves as outsiders in their fan communities. This brings tension to various fan communities, forums and mailing lists as fan leaders interpret rules based on their bias. At times, this tension will lead to conflict that threatens to splinter the community. However, Smith (1999, p. 135) has argued that harmony and discord are necessary to ensure the survival of social systems. Baym (2000, p. 218) has also suggested that interpersonal interaction ties people in communities together, which I argue heightens the potential for conflict.

It is also important to note that community boundaries are forcibly policed sometimes, because fans want to shape the community in a certain way, interpret a text in a very specific manner, or because a particular pairing or character is extremely unpopular. In this process, fans who are considered outsiders are usually positioned as the ‘Other’, much like the slash fan fiction authors in *XF* fandom and shippers of the Cordelia/Angel relationship in *Buffy* and *Angel* fandoms. The reaction to this discrimination is often the establishment of micro-communities, communities that cater to very specific interests that have branched out from more general communities, where members have banded together because they have experienced some form of discrimination and marginalisation due to their opinions or choice of creative outlets.

The community of *Stranger Things* provides an example in this case, where disparaged fans who share a love for the pairing of Cordelia and Angel from *Buffy* and later, its spinoff show, *Angel*, retreat to. While the establishment of ST was a result of conflict within the larger *Buffy* and *Angel* fandoms, this does not mean that the community itself is liberated from further struggles. Like every other fan community, new boundaries are mapped out and regulations set, which members are expected to adhere to and through which the potential for conflict is replicated.

What is more important, however, is not merely the conditions with which these micro-communities are set up. The existence of these micro-communities allows for a portrayal of fandom that is not one-dimensional; as much as shared interest creates communities, conflict among fans makes its existence more complex. Micro-communities also complicate fan accumulation of social and symbolic capitals. To a certain extent, micro-communities are self-contained and at times, divorced from the main fandom (as in the case with ST) even though both sides may be aware where the other plays. The subcultural celebrity status of fan fiction authors is not necessarily transferable, as iterated by slash authors receiving recognition from *XF*'s Spooky Awards, but with that recognition having no bearing in micro-communities like IWTBXF, BTT or BtS, especially among fans who will never accept slash as a legitimate practice within their fandom. Thus, the slash author's status is significantly less compared to an author who focuses her stories on the relationship of Mulder and Scully in these communities (especially given that Mulder and Scully is the accepted canon pairing in the fandom).

Authors can be celebrated within their micro-communities, winning numerous accolades and the respect of other members of their community, but they may be writing about the wrong pairing, or pontificating upon their love for a character that is

not widely accepted. This raises questions over the value of the fan fiction as a gift to the fan community, as the value of that gift (along with the status the fan fiction author stands to gain) is innumerably tied to the conditions with which they are produced: the pairing, genre, and as I will go on to explore in the following chapter, the spaces where these fan fictions are posted and archived.

## Chapter 5:

### The value of fan cultural production

Busse suggested that fandom has witnessed a so-called “shift from a more formalised mailing-list culture to LJ as the primary mode of interaction” (2006, p. 222), reflecting a trend among current fan scholars (Busse & Hellekson, 2006; Busker, 2008) who embrace this new fan space, but in doing so, disregard those who staunchly remain in the comfort of forums and mailing-list communities. IWTBXF fans, for instance, perpetuate a lot of myths about LiveJournal (LJ), some of which are based on assumptions, hearsay, and an abject fear of the unfamiliar (especially in regards to the technology), and in the process, they construct LJ fans as ‘Other’. FanFiction.net (FF.net), on the other hand, is accused of harbouring writers who are not serious about their craft or the text, often producing large quantities of work in order to gain a greater amount of attention. However, value that is assigned to fan cultural production that originates from LJ is considered to be higher by fans on mailing list communities like IWTBXF compared to those originating from FF.net, even though both LJ and FF.net can be regarded as a threat to the centralised order of the *XF* fan fiction fandom.

In this chapter, I will look at multi-fandom spaces like FF.net and LJ, in particular from within the context of fandoms such as that of *XF*, which were established before these spaces became popular for fans. If these spaces – arguably with their adherence to a different set of cultural norms – are constantly being positioned as the ‘Other’ by so-called first generation *XF* fans, what of the value of fan fiction and its authors that populate and make use of LJ and FF.net? The relationships between the fans on mailing list communities/forums and LJ, as well as FF.net are marked by tension, but there is hardly any direct interaction between them. Yet, new fans who find their way into the various fan fiction micro-communities on Yahoo Groups are consistently warned of the threat FF.net seemingly poses to the integrity of the fandom (possibly one of the few things all the various micro-

communities based on forums and mailing lists could actually collectively agree on). Discussions are common on communities like IWTBXF on how to encourage those fans who exclusively post at LJ to be more active in their participation in fandom out of LJ, and more importantly, to encourage quality fan fiction authors to post their fan fictions to Ephemeral or Gossamer so that fans who do not frequent LJ could equally enjoy the new fan fictions. However this invitation only extends to LJ fans and not those who frequently post at FF.net, suggesting a marked distinction on how fans from micro-communities such as IWTBXF view fan fiction authors at LJ and FF.net.

What I also want to propose here is that while fan scholars talk of fan fiction being written and circulated among fandom, with some semblance of a non-profit mini industry (Penley, 1997, p. 105) or gift economy (Hellekson, 2009; De Kosnik, 2009), little work has been done to explore the social and cultural value of a fan fiction once it has been distributed. Certainly for *XF* fans, *where* fan fiction authors post their fan fictions – on Ephemeral or LJ/FF.net – is often a reflection of the generation of fans they belong to, that is, whether they were fans when the show first came on the air or they discovered the show in the post-Mulder seasons, or during a re-run. This is especially relevant now that fans who prefer the accessibility of multi-fandom sites and archives have developed a culture that is seemingly independent of the one that was already established, even when first generation fans continue to insist that the system they have developed remains the best and most efficient. Fan reactions to sites like FF.net and LJ suggest that certain values are assigned to stories, depending on where the author posts their work and the accumulation of their fan symbolic capital.

I will first explore how fans assign value to fan fiction, and how the act of collecting these stories is a way for fans to preserve the fandom's history. The dedication a fan author illustrates on the craft of writing builds the reputation of the fandom. When multi-fandom

sites like FF.net are introduced, offering easy access and straightforward procedures to post stories, older (or first generation) fans argue that FF.net's structure promotes a culture of instant gratification. Thus, boundaries are created where fan fiction 'quality' is judged according to the place the fan author posts his/her story – which I will look at in more detail in the second section of this chapter. Next, I turn to a specific example of a fan fiction community on LJ, where fans attempt to challenge the status quo of celebrated fans on forums and mailing list communities, as well as the criteria with which to judge what the fandom has considered to be quality fan fiction.

*Value of a story: the act of collecting*

In 2009, Yahoo announced that it was closing down its free web-hosting service, Geocities, which Shankland (2009) of CNET News referred to as “a relic of the Web's early days”. Geocities' popularity in the 1990s and its simplicity in setting up personal web pages enabled fans, particularly fan fiction authors, to set up their own websites to archive their fan fictions. Announcement of the closure prompted a rally among *XF* fandom to preserve the variety of fan fiction author and recommendation websites hosted on Geocities<sup>1</sup>. Geocities' closure is also a reminder that “the nature of the web...is a unique mixture of the ephemeral and the permanent...[Web] content is ephemeral in its transience, as it can be expected to last for only a relatively brief time” (Schneider and Foot, 2004, p. 115). Forum discussions are purged to save space and bandwidth, fan fiction authors can suddenly ask for their fan fictions to be removed from archives and as witnessed by Yahoo's announcement, website hosts can be shut down at a moment's notice leading to the loss of not only websites, but also

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, the fan discussions here: <http://fandomonium.net/index.php?showtopic=9450> for the effort to save all the websites, and a list of the sites known to be on Geocities: <http://fandomonium.net/index.php?showtopic=9249>. The Organisation for Transformative Works additionally started a Geocities Rescue Project (<http://transformativeworks.org/projects/geocities-rescue>), offering fans an option to archive their fan fiction on another of the organisation's projects, An Archive of Our Own (<http://archiveofourown.org/>).



fan fiction files (and essentially, a fandom's history and the hyperdiegetic universe that fans have expanded on through these fan fictions, many of which are from authors who are no longer active in the fandom).

To rectify the loss of these discussions or fan fictions, fans often keep copies of their favourite stories to be re-read, much like collecting tapes or DVDs so they could repeatedly watch their favourite episodes. By her count, Mimic has "8,053 files [of fan fiction], 73 folders for individual authors, taking up 358 MB of spaces...I haven't read them all, but...the advantage: I can provide about 80% of the fic that isn't online any more" (2008a, mailing list discussion). Fans often exhibit a system for storing the fan fictions they have saved, suggesting signs of a curatorial behaviour. As Mimic (2008c, mailing list discussion) goes on to explain:

I just started saving everything I found, in case I wanted to read it later. Authors I especially liked got their own floppy disk(s) and the others went onto multiple floppies, alphabetised by author name. Then I wrote the entries down on index cards so I could find them easier.

Ravenwald (2008, mailing list discussion) concurs:

[All stories are] sorted by subjects (problems, cases, smut, etc. with sub-categories and when I collect everything by a specific author, it's filed by title under their names with descriptions of each story for all).

Fans have a practical reason behind this seemingly random activity of 'saving everything' they can get their hands on, however. Unlike fanzines that were circulated in print that can be preserved, most of the fan fiction written for *XF* was in electronic format. Many fans often begin collecting, or saving fan fiction on their computer hard drive or portable drives because "you just never can count on an archive staying around" (Toni, 2008, mailing list discussion). Patrick recalls how difficult it was to locate some of the fan fiction

posted in the early days of *XF* fandom, and after a lengthy web search, finding out that the files on the author's website had disappeared, or that the author had withdrawn all the copies of the story from various archives around the web including Gossamer<sup>2</sup>. "The moral is, if you find a story you think you might ever want to read again, make a copy. Even if it's on Gossamer, which hopefully will never go away, it's still possible for an author to withdraw some or all of their work from the public domain" (Patrick, 2008, mailing list discussion).

This act is obviously not limited to fan fiction or DVDs and other collectibles, however. Lorie Brau explained that fans of *rakugo*, a form of traditional comic storytelling that evolved from the traditional Japanese theatre *kabuki*, collect recordings of the artists' live performances, sometimes even going to the extent of recording them illegally, as a way of preserving the declining art form. These recordings are then exchanged among fans as collectibles, for many of these recordings are of performers who have not caught the interest of major recording companies. Brau argues that in recording these performances, fans are "creating for themselves a source of capital in a cultural economy [of *rakugo* fans]" (2004, p. 135), especially in retaining the performances of lesser-known artists, while their "tape collections serve as catalysts for social relationships among fans" (p. 136).

Some fan reputations are built around the kinds of objects fans have in their possession, and the knowledge these fans gain as a result of acquiring one-of-a-kind or rare objects for their collections. Brown (1997) and Tankel and Murphy (1998), for example, have explored how fans collect comic books. Comic book fandom centres on a physical text (the comic book) that can be possessed or owned, and fans' comic book collections become a marker of status within the fandom, much like the collectors of rare *rakugo* performances. However, it is not the size of the collection that marks the status of the collector so much "as

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<sup>2</sup> There are several reasons for this occurrence: fans who have turned pro often request for their stories to be removed from archives; some authors who have left the fandom take their stories with them, unwilling to associate in any way with the fandom; some authors have just lost touch with the fandom or have passed away, leaving their websites unattended and eventually closed down.

its uniqueness and its inclusion of canonized comics that counts” (Brown, 1997, p. 23). Revered collectors within the fandom who frequent traditional fan conventions<sup>3</sup> – where fans trade, buy and sell comic books – are known to possess the ability to distinguish between the worth and worthlessness of not only the comic, but also the writers and artists associated with the particular comic universe:

[Q]ualities that permit differentiation among a range of mass-produced artefacts...By reading and collecting comics for an amount of time, by participating in conventions, and reading various fanzines, fans develop an ability to discriminate between different writers, different version of a character, and most commonly between different artists (Tankel & Murphy, 1998, p. 58).

Susan Pearce (1995) ascribes three categories – the souvenir, the fetishistic and the systematic – to the act of collecting, based on her observations on the relationship of collector to object. Pearce also notes that the three categories are not exclusive and collectors often embody characteristics of all three. In the first category, the souvenir collector “creates a romantic life-history by selecting and arranging personal memorial material to create what...might be called an object autobiography, where the objects are at the service of the autobiographer” (Pearce, 1995, p. 32).

The souvenir collector appears to correspond with Baudrillard’s notion of the act of collecting, that one constructs a world through the subject’s interpretation of, and relationship with the collected objects. In other words, the objects might be collected because the collectors have built a story around them – Belk (1995) had noted how some collectors

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<sup>3</sup> I use the term ‘traditional’ here as a lot of these fan conventions have evolved to include media fandom. The annual San Diego Comic Con, for example, attracts more attention in the mainstream media for the introduction of new, highly anticipated TV shows and films than they do comic books in recent years. Shows are no longer limited to those inspired by what is traditionally considered as cult and science fiction anymore, with 2010’s line-up for the convention including *Glee*, *Weeds*, *Californication* and *Bones*. The mainstream press has also remarked on the proliferation of fangirls at the SDCC due to the *Twilight* franchise; see, for example, Fangirl Invasion: The Changing Face (and sex) of fandom on Newsarama.com (<http://www.newsarama.com/film/090827-fangirl-invasion-1.html> Accessed 28 August 2009)

started collecting when they were dealing with the loss of a loved one, as a sense of “symbolic self-completion” (Wicklund and Gollwitzer cited in Belk, 1995, p. 90). In other words, the stories the collectors create around the objects they collect are built around and against this loss. Arjun Appadurai also argues that “commodities, as Igor Kopytoff points out, can usefully be regarded as having life histories...[The] commodity phase of the life history of an object does not exhaust its biography; it is culturally regulated; and its interpretation is open to individual manipulation to some degree” (1986, p. 17).

In the second – the fetishistic mode – objects are the ones that create or shape the self of the collector. In this case, the collector merely responds to his or her obsession by collecting as many items as possible to complete the collection, even if they do not necessarily have a preference for the object. Brau (2004) made this observation with the *rakugo* fans who consider themselves archivists, one of whom stated that there were two other *rakugo* recitals that were being performed on the same evening as the monthly recital he has been taping for more than twenty years. Even though the fan was more interested in the other two recitals, “he felt obliged to document the less interesting performance” (2004, p. 136) so that he did not break the continuity of his collection. In this case, it would appear that collecting becomes a habit; the collector ceases to discriminate between what is unique or valued but merely responds to a need to complete his or her collection. Fiske (1992, p. 44) seems to situate fan collecting into this category, arguing that:

[Fan] collecting...tends to be inclusive rather than exclusive: the emphasis is not so much upon acquiring a few good (and thus expensive) objects as upon accumulating as many as possible. The individual objects are therefore often cheap, devalued by the official culture, and mass produced. The distinctiveness lies in the extent of the collection rather than in their uniqueness and or authenticity as cultural objects.

This is not necessarily so, as some film and TV studios have made use of fans' tendency to collect rare and exclusive materials by auctioning off entire set pieces to fans for collection after a series ends<sup>4</sup>. Fiske's suggestion has also been challenged by Brown (1997), whose comic book fans often emphasized the uniqueness of a comic book collection rather than the quantity of comics collected; so much so that certain strategies are expertly employed in selecting the comics worth collecting: "A fan's comic book collection only reflects well upon the collector if it proves his/her ability to exercise cultural knowledge in making discriminating choices of what is, and what will be, valuable" (Brown, 1997, p. 23). Tankel and Murphy too argue that the collection and preservation of comic books by fans share more similarities with the activities of museums and libraries than those of a disposable mass culture, positing that fans are 'curatorial consumers' who are "concerned with meanings that derive from the purchase and preservation of the product" (1998, p. 59).

This relates somewhat to Pearce's third category: systematic collecting, which is "based on an intellectual rationale that emphasises the completeness of assembled items" (Hosokawa & Matsuoka, 2004, p. 155). While Fiske's theory suggests an attempt at the completion of objects, Pearce's model stresses a more structured approach rather than the blind collecting Fiske has alluded to. In this category, collectors illustrate their possession of extensive knowledge about the objects they are collecting. For the vinyl record collectors in Hosokawa and Matsuoka's study, the record represents more than just a means of listening to their favourite music: "It is a total object composed of visual, graphic, material, and audible elements" (2004, p. 156). The record collectors were not merely fans of the music genre they were collecting, they were also fascinated by other aspects of the record, such as the artwork

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<sup>4</sup> *Battlestar Galactica* is a good example of this. NBC/Universal auctioned off all the props and set pieces associated with the show at the end of its 4-year-run through Propworx, a specialist auction house that is akin to the art world's Christie's. The BBC also similarly auctioned off various *Doctor Who* props through Bonhams in February 2010. These auction sites can be accessed at <http://www.battlestarprops.com> and <http://www.bonhams.com/cgi-bin/public.sh/pubweb/publicSite.r?sContinent=EUR&screen=entertainmentdoctorwho>. Also, cf. Stenger (2006).

that accompanied the records. So they trained themselves to be knowledgeable in all aspects relating to record production. In the process, these collectors develop their own criteria in judging the value and authenticity of the records, often going to the point of rejecting digitized versions of the recordings, claiming that digital versions lack the aura attached to vinyl records.

At one point or another, fan fiction collectors appear to fit into one or all three of Pearce's categories. While not all fans consider fan fiction as the primary or most important fan practice within fandom, those who do view it with utmost precedence typically fulfil Pearce's first category of the souvenir collector. As Alvarado explains:

Fic is an important addendum to the fan community. It fleshes out the [sic] story lines, and more importantly provides a means of 'ownership' of our beloved characters. They become no longer the property of 1013, but communal mythos. As we write and re-read stories Mulder and Scully become ours, their losses, their hero's quest, ours too – in a way that is much more deeply felt than passively watching them on TV (2003, questionnaire interview).

While it would appear, as Ravenwald and Mimic have earlier shown, that fans save fan fiction files compulsively, they justify the act by claiming that it is a necessary thing to do. Hosokawa and Matsuoka argue that, “what outsiders consider to be fetishism is to insiders a fine-grained attention to systematising material differences” (2004, p. 157), and in the process collectors build their knowledge of the collected object. For fans, the act of collecting is a form of preservation, as not only do websites and smaller archives disappear<sup>5</sup>, authors sometimes withdraw their stories without warning, taking with them what fans like Alvarado would term part of the ‘communal mythos’, the fandom's history. In a fan essay

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<sup>5</sup> Mimic was the fan who led the *XF* fandom's project on preserving the various fan fiction recommendation and author sites that were hosted on Geocities. She formed a committee of volunteers, with fans contributing to a list of sites hosted on Geocities that they have saved in their bookmarks and proceeded to track down and contact as many of the authors and site owners as possible to aid these fans in moving and finding new spaces for them to archive their fan fictions.

published on LJ, Xie wrote: “I don't see fandom as just something I participate in or write fic in or consume. It's a structure, a community, a place with a history. Taking away these pieces of that history, making them so new fans can never find them, is like losing our past” (2008). It is this notion, that fans are preserving a part of the fandom's history, that renders fan fiction of value to its collectors. And as it serves to build the *XF* ‘communal mythos’ as Alvarado suggests, the perceived quality of the story and the dedication of the fan author are equally significant.

That compulsion to save as many pieces of fan fiction as possible enables these fans to develop criteria in judging the value of the stories, and particularly, of the authors who write them. However, I want to suggest that the criteria fans develop in judging the value of fan fiction can often be dependent on the fan author's social capital and the community's boundaries. In the next section, I will turn my attention to how first generation fans in forums and mailing list communities like Haven and IWTBXF define the boundaries and value of fan fiction produced and distributed in considerably newer fan spaces like LJ and FF.net.

#### *Ephemeral/Gossamer, LJ or Fanfiction.Net: the boundaries of fan fiction posting*

As I have proposed, through the act of collecting and constituting the value of fan fiction, fans develop the knowledge to differentiate between good stories (or genres) and bad ones; between fan fiction authors who take their craft seriously, researching carefully the topics they are writing about and those who write and expect constant “instant gratification [in generating immediate feedback]” (Frohike, 2003, email correspondence) in exchange. However, unlike revered comic book collectors who spend time attending conventions and educating themselves on differentiating the quality of collectible works, fans' knowledge and expertise is often dependent on the recognition of fan author's social and cultural capitals. The value of the [fan fiction] knowledge that is attained and exchanged is embedded within

the cultural norms of the specific fandom or fan community, the “cultural knowledge of the creator, an historical sense of tradition, [and] a knowledge of generic conventions” (Brown, 1997, p. 27).

While fan fiction that is posted on FanFiction.net (FF.net) may be acceptable to some fandoms, like that of *Bones*, *Glee* and *Gilmore Girls*<sup>6</sup>, for instance, it is considered a reflection of the author’s lack of commitment to the craft of developing polished, in-character and plausible fan fiction in *XF*. Dasha K explains that the idea of FF.net is embraced by very few fan authors in *XF* “because our fandom already had a huge archive in Gossamer. We didn’t need FF.net” (2008, questionnaire interview). Hipsb4hands perhaps sums up the *XF* fandom’s attitude towards FF.net succinctly:

What struck me about most of the *XF* fanfic at FF.net...is that much of it is clearly posted as is, meaning that the authors don’t view their writings as a craft or their stories as something that will be undergoing draft changes because it doesn’t ring true, the language is poor, the story concept is implausible, etc. What Vic-ky and Mimic said about the polished nature of much of the older *XF* fanfic and how being involved in the actual fandom might bring a sense of accountability for what the writers put out makes a lot of sense to me. I also think age of the author plays a role. (2010, forum discussion).

The fans’ observations may be true to a certain extent: out of the eleven FF.net writers who responded to my questionnaire, only two<sup>7</sup> would classify themselves as being active in fan discussions, while the others classify posting fan fiction and icons on LiveJournal as part

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<sup>6</sup> According to FF.net itself, *Supernatural* has the largest collection of fan fiction under the TV category with 41,592 pieces of fan fiction, followed by *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *CSI*. Overall, *Harry Potter* has the largest collection of fan fiction with 479,441 pieces, followed by a Japanese anime called *Naruto* (252,556) and *Twilight* (165,341).

<sup>7</sup> The two fans who specifically list active fan participation in forums and/or communities have both been involved with fandom for more than ten years.



of their fan community involvement<sup>8</sup>. One expressed concern that no one would like her stories before she started posting, but when she eventually did, also noted her irritation with her readers who kept commenting on her spelling problems (Cleary, 2008, questionnaire interview). Cleary also goes on to say that at the behest of her readers, and to keep them from pestering her, she got herself a beta reader “who I hardly ever use!” As Hipsb4hands (2010, forum discussion) mentioned, fans have argued that the lack of attachment to, and active participation in, a specific fan community may be a reason why the quality of stories posted on FF.net is generally considered to be inferior. Writers who regularly participate in forums or communities have unrestricted access to a support system where everything from plotlines and characterisations can be discussed. Those who are only interested in posting the stories and getting the most and quickest feedback are assumed to be less concerned with going through the process of editing and re-drafting with their beta readers, or participating in discussions to debate the finer points of writing fan fiction.

*XF* fans’ emphasis on quality fan fiction and the importance of improving on the craft of writing suggest value that is placed on educational capital. Bourdieu’s theorisation of cultural capital has included “both formal educational capital (degrees) and cultural knowledge” (Claessens and Dhoest, 2010, p. 50), a point that Williamson (2005, pp. 51-75) alluded to that requires further investigation in relation to fandom. Claessen and Dhoest further suggest that, “cultural appreciations and tastes are...strongly linked to levels of education: a cultural object is only meaningful when one has the cultural capital to read and understand it” (2010, p. 50). Phantagrae (2010, forum discussion) speculated that the

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<sup>8</sup> Which also suggest that these fans may have a different interpretation and concept of community. Fans who are active in forums and mailing list communities emphasize on talk and discussion (arguably, these are meta discussions but conducted in a decidedly more public forum compared to meta on LJ, which is mostly on the LJer’s personal journal – the ‘metafandom’ community, serving much like a news aggregator that feeds the subscriber’s friends list with a list of the various meta that has been written across LJ, available for all to read and comment rather than just being limited to the poster’s friends). A lot of the icon and fan fiction communities on LJ are only specifically for the posting of such fan cultural productions, with comments and feedbacks available through the post’s comments thread – in-depth discussions are rare, and most likely, confined to meta communities. This also means that these fans do not even need to participate in any discussions should they wish not to.

difference between the quality of the fan fiction in FF.net and elsewhere in *XF* fan fiction fandom has to do with the age and experience of the authors, as well as “the kind of books you read as you go through college or life in general have a lot to do with how you approach writing and storytelling and the kinds of stories you tell”.

First generation *XF* fans who are based in mailing list communities and forums assume that FF.net is populated by younger fans, and therefore lack the educational capital to critically engage with their writing and the more complicated subject matter of the original text. As Piper (2003, email correspondence) noted: “we all know that a huge portion of the fics posted [at FF.net] were posted by kids”. Frohike (2003, email correspondence) used the disclaimers on fan fiction to gauge the age range of FF.net posters, leading her to the conclusion that FF.net posters are “presumably young teens from the sound of their disclaimers”. 2Shy (2010, forum discussion) declared that FF.net “is mostly infested by teens or younger. There [sic] a few ‘adults’, but their stories aren’t that great either because they think like the teens”.

However, there is no concrete proof that these fans’ assumptions were right. Out of the interviews I conducted with fans from FF.net, only one was a teenager. The oldest was a childminder in her sixties while the rest of the fans were in their twenties and thirties. Suggesting that FF.net is only populated by young teenagers appears to be a myth perpetuated by the faction of fandom that do not depend on FF.net for the archival of their fan fiction stories, and appears to be a way of further creating boundaries between themselves and other fans. The difference lies, not so much in their age, as with their preference in where to post and archive their fan fictions, and more importantly, the fan fiction author’s attitude towards the production of these stories. What may be more accurate is the fans’ involvement with fan communities and how that influences the way in which fan fiction authors view and develop their craft. As Mimic reflects:

I suspect the idea of running into someone on a message board or list who would hold you accountable for your writing put the fear of Phile into a lot of us. Plus we always knew we could get an honest opinion, rather than the canned ‘OMG! That’s sooooo gude! I <3 it! Rite more!’ that I see on ff.net [sic]. It’s just fan-girling, not discussion. It’s sad to think that might be all the authors over there want. (2010, forum discussion).

The issue of providing and receiving feedback is one of the most debated topics in fan fiction fandom. For *XF* fans, “it’s not politically correct...for writers to ‘care’ about feedback” (Caldwell, 2008a, mailing list discussion) but it does not necessarily mean that fans do not expect some form of acknowledgement, praise or even constructive criticism of the effort they have put into writing the story. The exchange of fan fiction and feedback – a detailed feedback that contains a combination of constructive criticism and positive things about the story, not merely a ‘fangirling one-liner’ as Mimic demonstrated – fulfils the moral economy of fan fiction fandom, in this case, where the participants are each upholding their end of the agreements in reciprocating the gift of fan fiction with feedback. “The best way to improve feedback...short of ‘selling out’ and writing what the masses demand...[is] not asking for it. A quick ‘feedback appreciated’ goes a long way,” Maidenjedi (2008, mailing list discussion) suggests.

But this opinion may not be shared by those who post at FF.net. Rockstarpeach, who posts *Buffy/Angel* fan fiction on FF.net observed that “certain pairings in [the fandom]...get a lot more attention/feedback than others so...even though [her] favourite pairing is one of the less popular ones [she] sometimes finds [herself] writing something that [she knows] more people will appreciate” (2008, questionnaire interview), essentially catering to what is deemed popular by the majority. The X-Filer (2008, questionnaire interview), on the other hand, insists that writing skills in fan fiction are less important than “an idea of a good plot line”. But for the first generation fans, particularly fan fiction authors, an idea for a good

story is never enough to ensure that one will be able to execute the plots convincingly. Avalon explains how she will immediately stop reading a story when she finds a “glaring plot or detail error...That is sloppy storytelling...In *X-Files* fanfic, there are plenty of places online where a writer can go check facts and ask questions about plots, backstory, timelines, etc. Get it right, or don’t write it<sup>9</sup>” (2004, questionnaire interview).

But The X-Filer has a different agenda, and a strategy that involves “[finding] out what people like, and [writing] to cater for their needs...I in a way ‘test the market’, before submitting my story...to know when the best time to put on the story, for maximum viewing” (2008, questionnaire interview). For *XF* fans, Rockstarpeach and The X-Filer’s revelations would not only be interpreted as ‘selling out’ but also viewed as tantamount to begging for feedback<sup>10</sup>, short of threatening to withhold the ensuing part of a story unless a specific amount of feedback is received<sup>11</sup> – a trait that fans like Piper find “arrogant and selfish...[and] it sounds pathetic” (2003, email correspondence).

Mauss suggests that, “the unreciprocated gift...makes the person who has accepted it inferior, particularly when it has been accepted with no thought of returning it” (1954, p. 83). However, there is a marked difference between not reciprocating a gift and openly asking for one in return, especially when fans view this as a way of demanding (public) acknowledgment. In a sense, it is not wrong for fan authors to expect some form of acknowledgment or feedback. Blackwood infers that, “we all want recognition, strokes and praise. We give ourselves awards and banners...It’s part of the game” (2003, mailing list discussion). Michelle, a 16-year-old writer on FF.net claims that she has never withheld, or

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<sup>9</sup> Unlike fan fiction sites, which sometimes disappear from the web some of the online places that Avalon alluded to continue to be available to fans for reference. Two examples are the *XF* transcript website, Inside The X (<http://www.insidetheX.co.uk>) and an *XF*-centred medical reference site, Ask Dr Scully (<http://www.askdrscully.com>). Both sites have been around for more than 10 years.

<sup>10</sup> Or, at the very least, to get more people to read their stories.

<sup>11</sup> Some of the FF.net author’s notes on feedback include: “I’m still not happy with the outcome of the reviews I’m getting...I’m not joking here people I will stop if I don’t get any more reviews...5 at least before I post another one” (oOLittle-BonesOo, 2010) and in a less extreme manner: “Please, please review – praise, criticism, what you had for breakfast...I don’t care; I just want to see reviews in my inbox” (St. Hedwig, 2010).

threatened to withhold a story because she did not receive a satisfactory number of feedbacks, but she has considered discontinuing a story due to the lack of feedback. She defends her decision by emphasizing the importance of reader feedbacks in order to become a better writer: “I would not know how to improve the story if there is a lack of feedback...without [it], one would not know where their mistakes are” (Michelle, 2008, questionnaire interview). But it is precisely this method of posting that FF.net encourages which infuriates fans like Piper, who vented her frustration at the rare chance of finding a good, engaging story on FF.net, only to “then find out om [sic] the middle of a nerve-wrecking cliffhanger that it’s a WIP (work in progress) that hasn’t been updated in two years” (2003, email correspondence).

“The aim of all this is to display generosity, freedom and autonomous action, as well as greatness” (Mauss, 1954, p. 29). For the first generation fans, in order to be gifted with feedback in reciprocity of accepting the gift of the story, the author would first have to earn that gift, as well as reputational status: “If an author can’t be bothered to make an effort to post stories of decent quality or at least a story that THEY feel is good, then why bother writing at all?” (Frohike, 2003, email correspondence). In effect, demanding feedback in this case would be like showing up at a dinner party with a bottle of wine, only to have the hosts deem the gift to be insufficient and demand that they should be compensated with a better bottle of wine before guests are allowed to be seated at the dinner table. The obligation to reciprocate a gift must be implicit, Alan Stuart (1993) argues. When it becomes explicit, it turns into something else, “a bribe or a failed gift performance, which may lead to its devaluation without the receiver feeling ungrateful” (1993, p. 393).

The different reactions to feedback indicate that fans in the different online spaces have very divergent expectations when it comes to the etiquette surrounding the practice. While the first generation fans at Haven and communities like IWTBXF enjoy lengthy discussions on the merits of receiving constructive criticisms, negative and/or positive

feedbacks, FF.net fans may not take to what is considered as constructive criticism as kindly<sup>12</sup>. Jody says, “the trend seems to be that if you try to give constructive criticism on spelling, grammar, use of English language in general...you get shot down in flames for allegedly spamming the writer” (2003, email correspondence). Likewise, 2Shy’s more recent experience reflects a similar incident to that shared by Jody:

It is a sad day in fanfic when someone tells you that a few grammatical errors doesn’t matter as long as their story is readable. They don’t want constructive criticism because they’ve gotten a lot of good feedback and reviews. It doesn’t matter if the story is rushed as long as ideas are conveyed (2Shy, 2010, forum discussion).

Cheal argues that, “gifts are used to construct certain kinds of voluntary social relationships” (1988, p. 14). Many authors, even ones who post on FF.net have commented that some of the correspondence that began from a simple reader to author feedback has evolved into not only friendship but a relationship that brings about collaborations, either as authors or as beta readers for each other’s work. 2Shy’s experience in this case can be interpreted as a refusal of a reciprocated gift (the constructive criticism/feedback in exchange for the fan fiction), and by extension, a social relationship she was trying to engage the author in. As 2Shy goes on to say:

I told [her] I would beta for her if she couldn’t find one and that she had a good story, but her characters were acting uncharacteristic [sic]...She was okay with her mistakes and asked me not to read her story because they were going to become more uncharacteristic...It gets infuriating to read these catastrophes and try to be helpful, but then your advice it [sic] unwanted because any critici-

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<sup>12</sup> In fact, it would be safe to assume that not every first generation *XF* fan fiction author would take to constructive criticism (of which, what constitutes ‘constructive’ and ‘criticism’ is wholly subjective and relative to the individual) the same way either. Participants of communities like FicTalk and Fanfic Hate (more on the latter in the following chapter) would argue that their communities exist to provide constructive criticism of fan fiction, much like a book club. However, fans like Paige Caldwell have created communities like IWTBXF to counter what she deems as an extreme form of discouragement to (new) fan fiction authors whose stories are unfairly picked on.

sm of their story is bad criticism (2010, forum discussion).

This kind of rejection further fuels the antagonistic relationship between fans at FF.net and those who frequent forums like Haven, which FF.net fans have described as frequently “snooty towards the uninitiated...[since] FF.net is dismissed as a serious place to post fiction<sup>13</sup>” (Francesca, 2008, questionnaire interview). The ensuing responses on the discussion thread 2Shy started confirm Francesca’s supposition, with Haven members reiterating to one another that their opinions on FF.net remain accurate, that the archive harbours an exceptional amount of bad stories from authors who “only like the attention posting fic brings them...It’s one reason a lot of us don’t even go to FF.net for fics. There are very few recognisable names of *XF* authors there” (Mimic, 2010, forum discussion) – an important aspect for fans in recognising quality attached to a particular author’s work<sup>14</sup>. Belle (2008, questionnaire interview) outright declares herself as an “elitist [who doesn’t] have the highest opinion on FF.net”.

This creates a continuous, if not vicious cycle where fans from both sides portray the opposing side as an ‘Other’ – one of the common criticisms directed towards first generation fans has been the almost militant emphasis on producing well-researched, errorless stories. Anna alleges that this striving for errorless stories takes the pleasure out of reading and writing fan fiction: “I myself do not care that much about the accuracy of detail...who cares?” (2003, questionnaire interview). However, this distinction – dedication to the craft of writing, despite it being merely fan fiction – is how fan fiction fans who still obtain their stories from Ephemeral, Gossamer or fan fiction communities draw the boundary between themselves and those who prefer the easy clickability of FF.net. The value of a particular fan

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<sup>13</sup> It should also be noted that none of the FF.net authors I corresponded with frequents Haven or have been there – one had no knowledge of any fan communities that exist outside the bubble of FF.net. The warning about Haven was passed from other authors and/or others who claims to have ventured to the forum. At the same time, the claim is one that is frequently repeated, even among fans who themselves frequent the forum.

<sup>14</sup> This could, of course, be equally disadvantageous towards an author as well, as fans (in particular, the more vocal ones) are just as likely to remember an author who writes bad fiction as they do with those who write exceptional ones.

fiction, its worth to be appreciated and kept for later enjoyment becomes attached to a specific place, just as much as it is about the fan author's social and cultural capitals within fandom. Neoxphile, who has been collecting stories for her own archive, The Nursery Files, has commented that her website contains a lot of stories that originated from FF.net "and people like them well enough when they don't know where the stories came first from [sic]" (2010, forum discussion).

While *XF* fans on mailing lists and forums disregard FF.net and the kinds of audience the site has been alleged to attract, there is no denying that the archive succeeds in building support and participation, complete with its own cultural norms. Cheeza mentions that the archive can be considered as "a kind of 'Beginner's Guide' because it's where most newbies that are looking for fic start...You enter 'fanfic' into any search engine and FF.net is the first result you'll find" (2008, questionnaire interview). Michelle explains she was introduced to FF.net through one of her friends, and has continued to post her fan fiction there because she was familiar with the posting procedures. It is also where she has built a rapport with some of the other fans who post on the site, in comparison to trying to post to "some [forums which] have a really tight knit community...I feel awkward posting somewhere where I won't get any comments about my work" (Michelle, 2008, questionnaire interview). Francesca (2008, questionnaire interview) applauds FF.net for facilitating her efforts in posting her story, which is a WIP (work in progress) "chapter by chapter...[A]dding additional chapters is easy and automated, which is perfect for the WIP process. The added benefit is that I can get direct feedback chapter by chapter, which is...a nice motivator".

The ease with which fans are able to post their stories on FF.net is constantly mentioned, especially in comparison to *XF* fandom's more complicated procedures for



posting to Ephemeral and/or Gossamer<sup>15</sup>. Katherine remarks that not only does Gossamer not update immediately should she choose to bypass the confusing system at Ephemeral, “they can turn you down if the formatting is incorrect” (2008, questionnaire interview). The complexity of the Gossamer/Ephemeral submission process has been brought up numerous times, and not just by fans who prefer to post to FF.net. *XF* Fan fiction authors who post exclusively on LJ find the task equally intimidating:

Reading the rules for document submission were daunting enough...In addition to that, I utilise a fair bit of ‘special’ formatting in my fan fiction (i.e. italics for emphasis), most of which would be lost in the conversion to plain text. Some of the text simply would not work well without this formatting. Having said that, though, I have to acknowledge the fact that italics/other special text formatting can be denoted another way in plain text. Still, I personally prefer to have control over the display of the text itself (Ruth, 2008, questionnaire interview).

The subject of control is also brought up by Fan F, who prefers to have complete control over her stories. “I don’t have to worry about formatting, I can go back and fix a typo, etc. I decide what happens to it...I [also]...like the ease of communication and the way you can have fairly involved ‘conversations’ about things...it makes feedback a breeze” (2008, questionnaire feedback). Katy (2005, questionnaire interview) presents a similar scenario about fan fiction posted on LJ:

[I]t gives a sense of personal interaction with the author, relating to them as people instead of just producers of fic. I think that could translate to more care taken on the part of the author, since the fic is more closely associated with their journal and thus with their true identity, or it could translate to readers leaving more

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<sup>15</sup> As the system was set up in the early days of the Internet, all files are saved on the server in text format, fans who want to post their fan fiction to Ephemeral and have it automatically transferred to Gossamer in the next update would have to save their story as a text file, remove smart quotes and ensure that each line has a maximum of 70 characters; most of which would have to be executed manually. Gossamer has a set of instructions on fulfilling the process: <http://fluky.gossamer.org/local/writing.html#general>

feedback<sup>16</sup>.

Mimic disagrees, however, stating that the way feedback is left for stories on LJ is one of the foremost things she dislikes about the place: “I’ll keep reading and reading then suddenly the story’s over and ¾ of the page is comments” (2008, mailing list discussion). Wylfcynne, too prefers feedback that is sent via private emails, equating them to receiving snail mail: “feedback that comes by private email is more satisfying than a comment at the bottom of a blogpost: it means someone actually had to pay attention and address it correctly. It’s almost the same difference between getting a snailmail [sic] letter and email; which shows more effort...[and is] more flattering to receive” (2008, mailing list discussion).

Age appears to be a main factor of difference between fans at IWTBXF and those on LJ. The older fans on IWTBXF who dislike LJ find its structure and format to be unmanageable: “fic sprawls across the screen like a large, sprawling thing. I have to cut and paste it into Word to be able to read it” (MaybeA, 2008, mailing list discussion) while Wylfcynne finds it “incredibly user-hostile...and unorganised” (2008, mailing list discussion), with Belle (2008, mailing list discussion) commenting that there is no central place like Gossamer on LJ for fan fiction. For Mimic, LJ authors’ claims that the posting rules and regulations for Ephemeral and Gossamer are too complicated is ludicrous. She reasons:

I’m not from the generation that knows what to click safely on a site. I’m always afraid I’ll blow up my computer or agree to donate my body to science if I click the wrong link, so I’m very reluctant to explore...[but] if I can post to Ephemeral in less than 5 minutes, anyone can! If you can't figure it out on your own, there are plenty of people who will help you find a way that works for you<sup>17</sup> (2008b, mailing list discussion).

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<sup>16</sup> That is assuming, of course, fan fiction authors do not maintain separate journals for their fannish works and personal life, which most authors I interviewed on LJ eventually admits to. But as the feedbacks are not private, fans can turn the comments into a group conversation, both with the author and with other fans.

LJ fans' indifference to Ephemeral and Gossamer is bewildering to IWTBFX fans, especially when they view it as an opportunity for these new authors/fans to reach new audiences, and not only that, "read the classics...that are safely stored at Gossamer for our pleasure" (Wylfcynne, 2008, mailing list discussion). Their continued resistance leads Mimic to the following conclusion:

I'd be willing to bet the people who hate the Ephem/Goss formatting are the ones who came from other fandoms where FF.net or LJ are the normal. The rest of us have 'grown up' with that formatting, so it's nothing odd to us (2008b, mailing list discussion).

In essence, both sides in this case are resistant to change, preferring to conform to the cultural norms they are each comfortable with. FF.net fans are content within their group, with most of the authors who participated in the questionnaire I sent out largely ignorant of how their community and fan fictions are projected as the 'other' by both first generation and LJ fans<sup>18</sup>. LJ fans, on the other hand, remain apathetic to gestures from the first generation fans to venture out of LJ and participate in their communities<sup>19</sup>, or make use of the archive space provided at Gossamer:

Part of my reluctance to post elsewhere is just that I don't care. I understand there's apparently some unrest about how newfangled writers don't post to the 'right' places, but my feeling is: it's there. On the Internet. If you want to read it, come on over. And the other part is a little bit of laziness. I don't want to go through the formatting hassle to post my stories somewhere

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<sup>17</sup> Mimic has written a 'how to' guide in order to assist writers in their formatting when they post to Ephemeral and Gossamer, combining tips that she has received from other writers and others that she had figured out herself. The document is available on her website: <http://mimicmusings.com/fics/helpful-writing-stuff> and she makes sure to make it easily available to all writer to ask for assistance in posting.

<sup>18</sup> Some of the LJ fans started posting their fan fiction at FF.net but eventually grew out of it and moved on to LJ. Rachel, one of the LJ authors, was critical of the inner workings of the FF.net administration and the archive's policy on adult fics rated NC-17. "Essentially it's become the place where all 12, 13, and 14 year olds post fic" (2008, questionnaire interview).

<sup>19</sup> In an attempt to bring LJ fans into mailing list communities, Caldwell mentioned having extended the invitation for several LJ authors to join IWTBFX. "We've had mixed successes...I had one author explain to me that she really didn't know there was a fandom beyond LiveJournal and didn't have the time or interest to be involved beyond the LJ fandom" (Caldwell, 2008, mailing list discussion).

I'm not all that jazzed about in the first place (Fan F, 2008, questionnaire interview).

While fans at IWTBXF appear confused as to why LJ fans would reject posting their fictions to Ephemeral and Gossamer in order to reach a wider readership, they are equally resistant in embracing LJ as well<sup>20</sup>. Wylfcynne suggests that the fact that *XF* fandom is well-established on the Internet should not deter LJ fans from discovering Ephemeral and Gossamer. As she argues, "I've successfully survived without reading *XF* fic posted at other places; I can survive without fic posted at LJ. Eventually someone will tell the good authors about Ephemeral and Gossamer, and the fix will show up" (2008, mailing list discussion). Wylfcynne's statement indicates that these fans insist that LJ fans submit to the system the first generation fans set up in the early days of the fandom, without them having to compromise their views and embrace those who prefer the LJ format. For Wylfcynne and others like her, if LJ fan authors are not willing to conform and post to Gossamer as other *XF* fan authors have done, then their fictions are not worth reading or investing in anyway. Belle (2008, mailing list discussion) is equally adamant, even suggesting that LJ does not have the kind of permanence associated with Gossamer:

What annoys me most about LJ is that so many people who post there now refuse to post to Ephemeral or Gossamer... These archives are a Godsend and a precious commodity that most other fandoms have no equivalent for. LJ may be fine and well for posting new fics for your buddies to read, but what about 5 years from now when someone recs<sup>21</sup> the story on a random message board?

Belle's assumption about LJ here showcases one of the myths non-LJ fans have about

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<sup>20</sup> Fan discussions on IWTBXF and Haven suggest that the quality of fan fiction posted at LJ is held to a higher value compared to those at FF.net. This could be due to the reason that several fan fiction authors who are popular within the fandom has transitioned to LJ and gradually become involved with the fan communities set up on LJ, thus introducing them to a new generation of fan fiction authors with whom they have started corresponding with. Dasha K, for instance, has been extolling the virtues of LJ and trying to bridge the gap between the two (LJ and forums/ mailing list communities) spaces.

<sup>21</sup> 'Rec' is fan terminology for recommendation.

the site: that there is no guarantee of permanence, even though Gossamer and Ephemeral's continued existence and maintenance is wholly dependent on a few dedicated fans who volunteer their time to update the archives and manage the servers. The fictions stored at Gossamer are as transient as Belle assumes LJ's to be. But what fans like Belle did not account for is that while she and other mailing list community members may see the benefit of a central archive like Gossamer, and have become familiar with rituals associated with posting to the site, fans on LJ do not necessarily share that view, and have since developed their own rituals and norms associated with posting on their personal journals or a community-related journal on LJ.

Cheal (1988) argues that the problem with Mauss's approach, which posits that the exchange of gifts creates the obligation to reciprocate – Levi-Strauss (1996) suggests that the cycle of gift exchange will always result in a constant 'besting' of reciprocity – is that it ignores the situated character of social practices. That is, the same form of behaviour will mean different things in a different social context so there is never really a uniformity in what is acceptable. While he was writing about commodity exchange, Arjun Appadurai's proposed "regimes of value" (1986, p. 15), can also be useful in this case. The concept, as Appadurai argues:

[D]oes *not* imply that every act of commodity exchange presupposes a complete cultural sharing of assumptions, but rather the degree of value coherence may be highly variable from situation to situation, and from commodity to commodity. A regime of value, in this sense, is consistent with both very high and very low sharing of standards by the parties to a particular commodity exchange (ibid.).

This distinction can also be witnessed between the fans and their approach to fan fiction on forums and mailing list communities, FF.net and LJ, where each staunchly adheres to their own set of cultural norms and practices. For fans at IWTBXF and Haven, the fans on

FF.net and to a lesser extent, LJ are positioned as ‘Other’, often without regard to the fact that each space has, in the years it has been in existence, developed their own systems of posting, distributing fictions and gathering feedbacks that their users are familiar and comfortable with. Feedback, especially constructive criticism beyond one-liners to tell the author that their story is loved and appreciated, is almost as precious a gift as the story itself for first generation fans. Even when they acknowledge that private feedback is on the decline, with newer fans preferring the easy clickability of those provided at spaces like LJ and FF.net, these fans insist on maintaining the status quo that was established in the early nineties when *XF* first debuted, often commenting on how much more convenient and user-friendly it is compared to the services offered on LJ and FF.net.

On the other hand, authors on FF.net are frequently positioned and assumed by fans on mailing list communities and forums to be younger, where writing and posting a story is just another method for gaining attention<sup>22</sup> or obtaining instant gratification for immediate feedback. The fictions (and by extension, their overall contribution to fan fiction fandom) are considered to be of little or no value to most fans who frequent forums and mailing list communities in *XF* fandom<sup>23</sup>. The status of these fans becomes even more inconsequential as first generation fans believe that most of the stories written and posted on FF.net were done to cater to the majority’s taste – authors who show no real appreciation of why a text like *XF*

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<sup>22</sup> Something that was briefly brought up in conversation with other fans and authors about FF.net that I did not have the opportunity to highlight, was the issue of plagiarism in fictions posted at FF.net. A lot of first generation authors (some of whom are no longer active in the fandom) have discovered that their works have been plagiarised, then made available on FF.net. When confronted, these FF.net authors claim ignorance (of the concept that plagiarism is bad) or issue a challenge that since fan fiction is not officially sanctioned material, the claims to plagiarism (and ownership) is therefore baseless and unfounded. A collaborative multi-fandom community ([http://community.livejournal.com/stop\\_plagiarism/](http://community.livejournal.com/stop_plagiarism/)) was set up on LJ to investigate these claims, and when proven, name and shame the authors responsible, and most, if not all fictions reported are based on FF.net. This has certainly made *XF* authors more weary of the archive, since most community members who wish to post fan fiction will be encouraged to post to Ephemeral and avoid FF.net.

<sup>23</sup> While I have mostly concentrated on *XF* fan reactions to FF.net here, this opinion is not limited to *XF* fandom. Anjou informs that within *Harry Potter* fandom, the archive is “commonly referred to as the Pit of Voles” (2008a, mailing list discussion). FF.net author, Katherine (2008, questionnaire interview), who also posts her *Harry Potter* fictions to a different archive, recalls the feedbacks she received from other fans who expressed surprise that someone who first posted her story at FF.net was actually capable of writing a story they found good.

is culturally important and have no interest whatsoever in improving or developing their writing skills. Bourdieu (1984) argues that “to appropriate a work of art is to assert oneself as the exclusive possessor of the object and of the authentic taste for that object which is thereby converted into the reified negation of all those who are unworthy of possessing it, for lack of the material or symbolic means of doing so, or simply for lack of desire to possess it strong enough to sacrifice everything for it” (p. 280). In this sense, first generation *XF* fans are determining the criteria of what they perceived to be quality *XF* fan fiction.

Additionally, by way of time spent on the fandom, building the communities and developing the system, first generation fans play the role of gatekeepers, “the producers of meaning and value of the work” (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 37). They have issued criteria by which to determine quality of fan fiction is accepted, but rather than examining these fan fictions based on the actual writing itself, they write off any and all fictions posted on FF.net. On the other hand, fan fiction authors based on LJ are usually courted because some of these gatekeepers are themselves active in the LJ-based fandom. They straddle the two fan spaces, not only promoting the merits of LJ as a fan space itself, but also acting as guarantors of the new authors’ quality of work (therefore, an assurance that unlike FF.net authors, they share the same views and concepts towards writing as a craft, or at least, have been cultivated by first generation fans on LJ to embrace the norm), bestowing legitimacy through the act of consecration (Bourdieu, 1993, pp. 120-125).

Their efforts, however, are not received in kind, as most LJ-based *XF* fan authors are not interested in making use of the Ephemeral/Gossamer posting and archiving system, reasoning that the system used by Gossamer is too complicated. Kate, an LJ fan author admitted to having assumed Gossamer was just another archive and was never really sure what it was trying to achieve (2008, questionnaire interview), while Casey (2008, questionnaire interview), because of the way I had framed my question on posting to

Ephemeral and Gossamer in the questionnaire, deduced that they were both *XF* fan fiction sites of some kind, but was not aware of the site as a central archive that many fans insist is unique to *XF* fandom.

It is not that LJ fan authors are not interested in participating in the cultural game of fan fiction production; it is that they have a different system of archiving the stories, different sets of value criteria in judging the quality of a fan fiction, different players (authors, readers, fans who recommend stories, usually identified as ‘reccers’) and a different concept of fan reputation and status within *XF* fandom. It further speaks to the notion that the reputation a fan earns, even if they achieve subcultural celebrity status, is not necessarily recognised and transferable beyond the specific fan community or fan space. So while members of IWTBXF may have attained a certain level of subcultural celebrity or micro-celebrity status in their immediate mailing list community, in forums like Haven and fans who make use of Ephemeral and Gossamer, their celebrity status may not necessarily be applicable among *XF* fans based primarily in LJ.

Furthermore, LJ enables fans to combine both the personal and communal: “LJ has effectively placed public and private personas next to each other, allowing them to intersect, mix and merge” (Busse, 2006, p. 222). Rather than just becoming a member of a private mailing list or forum that caters specifically to one particular text or pairing, LJ allows the fan to become a member of multiple (fan) communities while maintaining a personal journal at the same time where the fan can share personal information as well as their fannish activities. The LJ user’s community memberships, as well as their social circle (people they list as friends and vice versa, that is, the journals that these users are reading) are publicly displayed on the profile page. As Busse and Hellekson (2006) suggest, “some fans like the individualised discourse that allows for multifandom interaction and more personal conversation” (p. 15).



LJ also facilitates multi-fandom communities such as ‘Crack Van’, which, as its profile page explains, is “a place to find everything you need to enjoy new fandoms without fear of bad!fic, WIPs or confusing scenarios. The goal is a balanced and sustainable recs community serving all fandoms”<sup>24</sup>. These communities harness fandom’s collective intelligence (Jenkins, 2006, p. 4) in gathering and imparting information to the fans, especially new ones, that are facilitated by the fan culture on LJ which encourages multi-fannish identities. The production of fan fiction has also become more multi-fannish within LJ, with communities like ‘Yuletide’, a multi-fandom fan fiction gift exchange community, and ‘Porn Battle’, an adult-centred bi-annual ‘event’ where fans respond to prompts suggested by other fans by producing fan fiction and fan art<sup>25</sup>.

Given this multi-fandom aspect of LJ, communities like *fanfic\_hate*<sup>26</sup> also become more publicly accessible. But where the space was initially created for fans to “vent about all the bad!fic”, it eventually turns into a public naming and shaming of what used to be internal tensions and fan factions. In the following section, I will look in more detail at *fanfic\_hate*, suggesting that fans – anonymously – make use of the community to challenge the accepted status quo of the value and reputation associated with *XF* fan fiction fandom.

### *Contesting fan cultural status and value: fanfic\_hate on LJ*

Busse argues that LJ has personalised interaction for fans in the way that mailing list communities did not. On LJ, “all levels of discourse – personal, public, fannish – exist on the same level...Fannish discourse is...often merged with the personal, and someone’s stories

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<sup>24</sup> [http://community.livejournal.com/crack\\_van/](http://community.livejournal.com/crack_van/)

<sup>25</sup> Both communities can be found at <http://community.livejournal.com/yuletide> and <http://battle.oxoniensis.org> respectively. ‘Porn Battle’ was initially started on LJ, but has since moved to Dreamwidth (<http://www.dreamwidth.org>), where some fans are based after an incident (generally known among LJ fandom as Strikethrough 2007) where LJ suspended or deleted journals as they deem those journals to be inappropriate based on the interests listed on the user’s profile page. For more on the issue, see Castele (2007) and Fanlore’s write-up on the issue: <http://fanlore.org/wiki/Strikethrough>

<sup>26</sup> [http://community.livejournal.com/fanfic\\_hate/](http://community.livejournal.com/fanfic_hate/)

become inextricably linked with the way she performs her identity on LJ. People as well as stories become central to fannish interaction because the fan follows an individual's LJ, where before she would have joined a fandom or pairing-specific mailing list" (2006, pp. 213-214). For Busse, the structure of LJ enables the reader to read and engage with whatever the LJ post entails, whether it be a personal anecdote or a new fan fiction that the fan has written, regardless of the fandom, when a user's LJ friends list (often referred to as 'flist') updates: "LJ places all information on an equal level, whether it be an intensely personal revelation, a random show discussion, a generic quiz, or a political call for action. As a result, the LJ poster becomes a performer of her own life, sharing private details next to fannish ones, switching between her various roles and between a variety of discourses" (Busse, 2006, p. 222).

However, Busse fails to mention or examine LJ's filtering system that enables users to group their friends into different sub-groups, thereby giving the individual complete control over which group sees what information, depending on the intimacy level of the individual and his or her LJ friends, a feature LJ users fully utilise. In this sense, the fan and private persona are not necessarily placed next to each other as fannish posts might be public but anything that is personal to the individual poster can be locked or filtered to a very small group of personal friends. Fans also have the option of keeping separate journals for their fan and private identities, reserving the fan journal for their fan fiction, icons and/or meta commentaries. For example, all fifteen of the LJ fan authors I interviewed keep a different journal for their fan fiction that is completely separate from their private one. Amal Nahurriyeh (2008, questionnaire interview) explains the need for keeping her fan and private identities separate:

I'm an academic by trade, with ambitions to make significant policy contributions. My field also happens to be one that is subject to severe ideological attacks in the current American

political climate, and I practice in several marginal subfields and specialities that don't have a lot of institutional clout. You know who doesn't get the tenure-track job/ambassadorship? The girl who, when you google her name, you find out she writes porn on the Internet.

Busse does, however, make an interesting point about how the fannish discourse is shared with the personal on LJ. For a group that is often observed within the context of a mass audience, LJ enables the fan individual to emerge so they are not merely sharing fan fiction, but also parts of their personality through their use of icons, ways of presenting their story by including images and special, formatted texts, and (if those entries are not locked for a different group of friends) personal posts. What this also entails is that the fan individual is able to share their other fannish pursuits, making LJ more amenable to multi-fandom interests compared to the traditionally fandom or shipper/pairing-specific mailing lists and forums. For example, LJ users have a choice of making a post to a community journal or one to their personal journal. A fan whose fannish interest is making LJ or forum user icons can make a group for various different fandoms and then cluster all the icons into one post. They can then make an announcement in all the related fan communities, linking it back to the icon entry on their personal journal. When other fans click on the link and get to the original poster's journal entry, they see all the icons the fan had made for the different fandoms. So the fan is presenting her identity as a fan of the various texts to those who will read the post [See Figure 1].

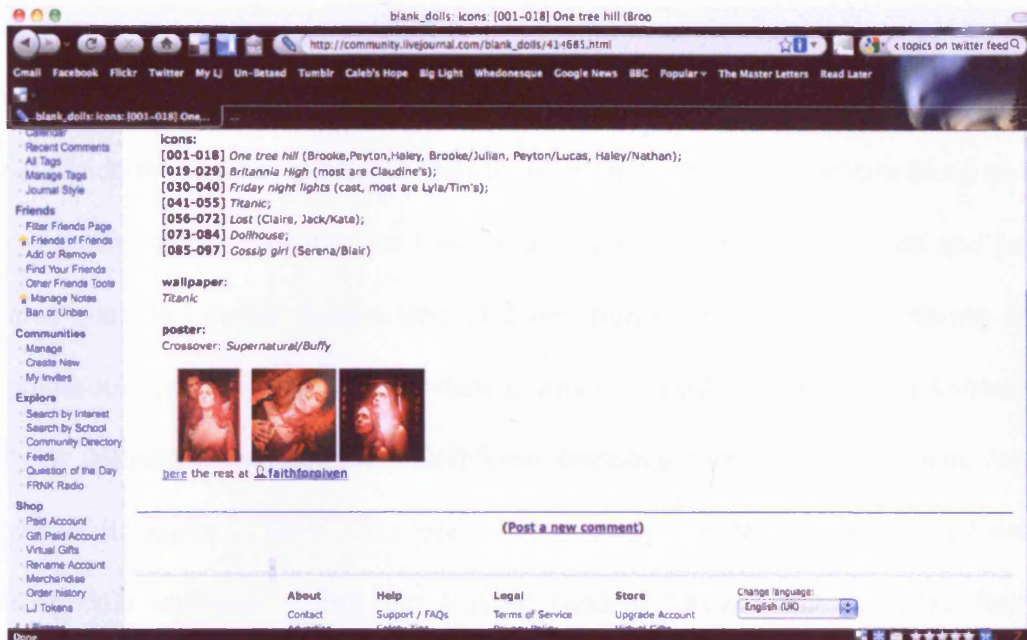


Figure 1: Example of a multi-fandom icon post on a *Dollhouse* community, which directs to the fan's personal journal for the full post.

This multi-fandom perspective on LJ has given rise to icon communities and those concentrating on meta discussions like 'metafandom'<sup>27</sup>, which offers an opportunity to fans who are not creatively inclined as fan fiction authors to participate more explicitly in fandom: "Fans whose central fannish function is to post fan fiction reviews or *rec lists* (recommendations of noteworthy fan fiction, with links) or to produce meta may be friended for these contributions to fandom" (Busse & Hellekson, 2006, p. 14). Busse claims that this shift from mailing list communities to LJ brings "issues of popularity and fame" (2006, p. 222) to the forefront, as the accumulation of fan symbolic capital is no longer limited to fan fiction authors: "the very nature of Big Name Fan as something to be aspired to (or derided), the repeated discussions on how to become 'someone' in fandom, all suggest that online persona is indeed an important aspect of many fans' identity and affects their self-worth in a supposedly separate 'real life' as well" (ibid.).

<sup>27</sup> <http://community.livejournal.com/metafandom>. Which is just one of the many meta communities on LJ. Others include Metablog, life\_wo\_fanlib and Fanthropology.

However, some of the LJ communities also challenge the fan hierarchy previously established in mailing list communities and forums, making the various conflicts and fan factions that divide the fandom public (at least to other fandoms). Communities like Fandom Wank, for instance, are a repository for fans to document – often with sarcasm and jest – various flame wars and online dramas that have occurred in fandom<sup>28</sup>, thus making these conflicts public and accessible to others when it was previously private and a knowledge shared only by community members. As Hellekson describes, “anything is fair game for the site, as long as it results in things like peevish posts, angry exchanges, destroyed online friendships, people announcing they are leaving fandom forever (the so-called fandom flounce), and people anonymously revealing what they probably shouldn’t” (2010, p. 59).

Another type of LJ community that has emerged is ‘fanfic\_hate’, which allows fans to comment anonymously on fan fiction that participants consider to be bad. These are usually considered to be over-rated or hyped fictions, and within the *XF* fandom, ones that are often listed in numerous ‘Classic Fic Rec’ lists in various fan communities outside of LJ. As forums and mailing lists usually require a name and valid email address to register and post a comment, this allows fans an opportunity to challenge the established hierarchy of fan fictions that are taken to best represent that particular fandom. The added anonymity of the fanfic\_hate community allows participants to be less restrained in their opinions, indicating that this struggle for legitimacy is perhaps more profound than scholars like Senft (2008) and Busse (2006) would like to acknowledge. By naming names and exposing the inner politics of the *XF* fan fiction (especially regarding authors who have accumulated a certain degree of symbolic capital that still remains years after the authors have left the fandom), fans are challenging the accepted status quo of those who possess higher status.

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<sup>28</sup> Fandom Wank ([http://www.journalfen.net/community/fandom\\_wank](http://www.journalfen.net/community/fandom_wank)) began as an LJ community but was reported to be violating the terms of service of LJ. The journal was deleted by LJ’s administration, and it is currently housed on Journalfen, another clone site of LJ’s. Details of its history, and its various versions and spin-offs can be found at [http://wiki.fandomwank.com/index.php/Main\\_Page](http://wiki.fandomwank.com/index.php/Main_Page)

The subject of fan fiction criticism has been a particularly controversial topic within *XF* fandom, as I have suggested in the previous section. Most discussions on feedback, while encouraging readers to be critical constructively, emphasize positive critique in order to encourage new and younger authors to continue bestowing the fandom with more stories. Paige Caldwell argues that the trick is to find a balance in the critique: “I would follow the way members of WhyIncision<sup>29</sup> used to critique a story. If there was criticism, it was constructive and not presented in a manner to offend the author. I would also invite the author to participate in the process. Authors have the absolute right to respond back to any criticism, even well-meaning” (2007a, mailing list discussion).

On the other hand, for fans like Fan G, who runs an *XF* book club community on LJ (for the discussions of *XF* fan fiction), some fan authors’ reluctance to accept constructive criticism is confusing as she views both fan fiction and professional writing as essentially similar: “People write reviews of novels online all of the time. Why should fan fiction be exempt from critical review?” (Fan G, 2008, questionnaire interview). As Fan G goes on to say:

I think fandom in general is very divided about what is the proper role of criticism. There has been a lot of discussion, most of which is linked from metafiction...A writer named Paige Caldwell tried to shut down fictalk<sup>30</sup> or at least make it work the way she wanted I don't think our discussions on fictalk were ever hate-filled. And the worst thing I've ever said at book\_club was to say that someone's fic was in need of drastic editing...I wish people felt free to express their true opinions out in the open<sup>31</sup>.

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<sup>29</sup> The WhyIncision (<http://tv.groups.yahoo.com/group/WhyIncision>) was probably one of the most popular fan fiction discussion lists in the early noughties. Discussions faltered when the production of *XF* fan fiction began to drop after the series ended. The group is no longer active; the fan fiction authors who started it have also left the fandom.

<sup>30</sup> A similar fan discussion forum to fanfic\_hate, but limited only to *XF* fan fiction which has since become an exclusive, tight-knit, invite-only community, presumably on LJ.

<sup>31</sup> It is also perhaps interesting to note that Fan G was the only one of my interviewees who termed the *XF* fan fiction fandom as ‘elitist’.

As I have suggested earlier, the notion of what defines ‘constructive criticism’ is dependent on the fan fiction community’s expectations, a communal criteria agreed by members of the specific fan community. While Fan G may have felt that the discussions she had engaged in with her community were harmless and meant to be constructive, others may not have felt the same way. Belle recalls a scenario where the fan fiction of an author from a different fandom who was just starting out in *XF*, ended up being on the list of fictions that were critiqued on FicTalk: “Within a couple of days, the writer was thoroughly offended, and despite my attempts by email to provide her a much more positive experience with the fandom, she had disappeared completely” (Belle, 2007, mailing list discussion). So while Fan G may view communities like FicTalk (and maybe even *fanfic\_hate*) as a method for exploring and challenging the criteria of how a particular piece of fan fiction is judged to be good or bad, fans like those on IWTBXF see it as one reason why fans become disillusioned with the fandom. MuldersRefuge argues that *fanfic\_hate* and Fictalk appear to:

[C]omprise of a bunch of negative old whiners, most of which are too idle to string a sentence together of their own or are just plain nasty and obnoxious. I always tell nervous writers never to venture there...I am all for feedback and constructive criticism but alas a lot of what is there is just bitching and only serves to put off writers. We have lost so many good writers the last thing we should be doing is scaring them away (2008, mailing list discussion).

However, the discussion threads on *fanfic\_hate*, given its anonymous nature, were certainly public and less restrained. Most stories considered to be classics by the fandom are systematically berated:

12 Degrees of Separation by Paula Graves (a.k.a Anne Hayes):  
Milquetoast sap that's been deemed the ultimate MSR classic for nearly a decade. It sucked way back when, it sucks now.  
Iolokus by Mustang Sally and RivkaT: Smug and over-the-top,

not to mention insanely OOC<sup>32</sup>. Must have been hard to write while simultaneously patting themselves on the back on the endless reams of OMGCleverness!!!!

Prufrock's fic. Ego-laden, self-conscious, headache inducing.

Must I go on? (Anonymous, 2004a, LJ discussion)

Instead of limiting discussions to fan fictions, talk soon turns to other fans who are normally considered to possess a certain level of status within the fandom such as a moderator on Haven:

Wait a second, coolredwyne = sybil = redwyne the mod at Haven? The one that can't spell for shite and can't punctuate a post properly to save her life?...I always thought redwyne was as dumb as a sack of bricks. Now she has proven it (Anonymous, 2004b, LJ discussion).

I always thought she had a learning disability. I don't know why I thought that (Anonymous, 2004b, LJ discussion).

As the thread accumulated more responses, accusations against named *XF* fan fiction authors became more personal, as this one on Dasha K exhibited:

Dasha in her day was wank personified. I was one of her contemporaries and I knew her. She was more than a little whacked in the head over her 'fame'. Overall, not a pleasant person when it came to ego. Her fic nauseated me (Anonymous, 2004c, LJ discussion).

Dasha herself was aware of the remarks, commenting: "Because it was anonymous, I have no idea who bore such ill will against me. I couldn't help but wonder if any of my 'friends' were posting such bile about me" (Dasha K, 2008, questionnaire interview). Senft has proposed that online popularity is usually established through the web of social networks that the subcultural celebrity has forged. Dasha revealed that it took a long time before she wanted anything to do with *XF* fandom again after finding out what was exchanged on

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<sup>32</sup> OOC is an acronym for 'out of character'



fanfic\_hate, and it certainly reflects what Senft has suggested on the establishing of one's popularity through social networks, where the fan fiction author's popularity and subsequently, her unpopularity are dependent on how the fan fiction author's social networks promote, defend, and/or simultaneously discredit her.

In her brief theorisations on micro-celebrity, Senft argues that the audience's interest in Web celebrities "takes an ethical turn: rather than speculating on who a Web personality 'really is', viewers tend to debate the personality's obligations to those who made her *what* she is. This is because on the Web, popularity depends upon a connection to one's audience" (2008, pp. 25-26), driven by the intimacy between the micro-celebrity and his/her fans. But once that intimacy is established, and the micro-celebrity turns out to be not what the fan expected, that insider knowledge about the micro-celebrity can be used against him or her. As one fan revealed: "[Dasha's] personality got a little too big for her britches...what Dasha did was act like she might be willing to be your friend, even encourage you in your fic, but as soon as you got too close to the invisible line she never told you about, you got shut down...Maybe that seems like self-preservation to her friends, but to those of us outside the clique, it was really hurtful" (Anonymous, 2004c, LJ discussion). Relationships between fans tend to be volatile, as fans move among different social groups and cliques, while personality clashes occur on a regular basis. Once the relationship between the fan fiction author and the fan has been severed however, for whatever reasons, fan fiction authors may find themselves in a situation similar to that of Dasha's, whose 'friends' could very well be the proponents of the smear against her character on communities like fanfic\_hate.

These debates on fanfic\_hate are not one-sided, of course, as supporters of the fan fiction authors targeted also show up to defend them, often trying to provoke the anonymous authors to out themselves: "You may think you're gifted, but if you're still posting X-Files fanfiction and you're still flailing your arms about in despair that a good author like you isn't

getting the attention you deserve, it's pretty much a given that you're a hack with an inflated ego...Un-anonymous yourself and let the masses tell you whether you're any good" (Anonymous, 2005, LJ discussion). Debate on the subject of *XF* fan fiction not only shows divisions within the fandom, but also the struggle among fans (despite anonymity) to impose an alternative view to that accepted by the fan fiction community at large: that specific authors that are recommended and considered as representative of the *XF* fandom's variety of fan fiction may not necessarily be as widely accepted as most fans assume. Or perhaps more accurately, *XF* fans' judgement of and criteria for quality fan fiction is dependent on their social networks, and linked to the author's fan social capital. As one fan astutely remarks, the definition of 'over-rated' in the *XF* thread appears to be "a fic that is more popular than mine/my friend's" (Anonymous, 2004d, LJ discussion). Another observes:

So these seem to be the categories of over-rated-ness so far: we don't like the author so her fic is over-rated; we don't know the author so her fic is over-rated; the author isn't here anymore so her fic is over-rated. These reasons or categories seem very personal to the author rather than critical of specific fic (Anonymous, 2004d, LJ discussion).

Bourdieu argues that there are "tactics which are designed to enhance one's own reputation and distinction at the expense of another's" (Jenkins, 1992, p. 160). The first is the act of labelling, and the second, the use of qualifiers "to characterise someone's work as more simple, and more simple-minded than it is" (ibid.). The first generation fans have consistently applied these tactics to FF.net fans, labelling them as 'young' and 'teenaged' (an 'other' to their older, wiser selves) and qualifying the fan fiction FF.net fans produce as subpar and inferior to those posted at Gossamer (even though like FF.net, Gossamer accepts all forms of fan fiction, regardless of quality as long as they are related to *XF*). Likewise, anonymous posters have used similar tactics of distinction here, challenging the status of fan fiction authors whose works have been celebrated within the fandom. While they do not explicitly

indicate which fan fictions they would consider better in their definition compared to the ones they have vehemently criticised, the insinuation, as one poster remarks, is always that someone else the anonymous poster is friends with is more deserving of status. As one fan concludes:

It seems that if someone is talked about too much or talked about too much by people the people posting in this thread don't like they get creamed over here. I'm not sure what that tells anybody about the fic except that an author had better keep her head down, not respond to public discussions about her fic and keep readers from talking about her fic. Seems like alot of rules just to keep from pissing people off, especially if the writer's writing is actually good (Anonymous, 2004d, LJ discussion).

However, as the majority of the comments were posted anonymously, and these anonymous posters do not suggest alternatives to the fan fictions and fan authors they have declared to be over-rated, the status quo of the *XF* fandom remains intact with the fan fiction and authors deemed unworthy by these anonymous posters still being recommended on numerous fan fiction lists as 'classic'. Furthermore, as the anonymous fan's comment above attests, none of the discussions on the *XF* thread actually tell the reader anything about the quality of the fiction itself, except insinuating that the fan fiction stories they classify as over-rated are either written by fans of a different clique to the anonymous posters, or that they have had a conflict with the fan fiction author: "[it seemed] personal. Someone doesn't like a writer and that makes her fic over-rated? And, there's some discussion of writers who don't 'play the game' so they must be stuck up so even though we don't know them, we don't like them, and therefore, their fic is over-rated? Then there's the writers who once were active in the fandom and developed a following, but now, they're not active so they must be over-rated?" (Anonymous, 2004d, LJ discussion).

Paige Caldwell suggested that communities like FicTalk and fanfic\_hate are “created by a group of writers who are pissed that their work is being ignored” (2007a, mailing list discussion). Some of the more personal attacks on individual authors would appear to suggest that Caldwell has made a valid observation. However, as the comments on fanfic\_hate were made anonymously, it is impossible to determine if these anonymous posters are indeed fan fiction authors whose cultural productions have been ignored in favour of others’ who they see as less worthy of the status *XF* fandom has bestowed on them. What communities like fanfic\_hate show is that the status that highly regarded fan fiction authors accumulate can be challenged, and while conducted anonymously, they nevertheless portray fandom as constantly evolving, with fan communities forming and breaking, and fan relationships forming and fracturing. Furthermore, the decidedly more public (at least accessible to multiple fandoms) nature of LJ and communities like fanfic\_hate highlights the struggle fans engage in when attempting to impose their version of the text (both original and creative) and their values of communal interaction as dominant.

### *Conclusion*

With the popularity of multi-fandom archives like FF.net and LJ, fan fiction fans from *The X-Files* were confronted with the possibility that the carefully organised system of fan fiction distribution and reward they have been so used to (i.e. Gossamer and Ephemeral) is becoming decentralised. The archives’ largest competition is the multi-fandom, FF.net, which *XF* fans presumed to be populated by young, (new) teenaged fans who are only concerned about producing the greatest quantity of fictions in order to generate attention without paying attention to the careful crafting of a story – something that *XF* fan fiction fans have a tendency to stress. But fans continue to attest that while the fandom has its share of mediocre writers, the number of quality fictions far outweighs the bad; thus employing both

strategies of labelling and use of qualifiers to draw a line between themselves (the first generation fans) and those who only post their fictions at FF.net. At the same time, FF.net fans are often accused of rejecting constructive criticism, which first generation fans take to imply that they are not diligent writers creating quality stories deserving of the fandom, and the status that comes with the production of these creative works.

The fan fictions of FF.net are devalued in the tight-knit fan circles that populate forums and mailing lists, as these fans are viewed as pursuing instant gratification, often resorting to withholding from their readers more chapters of their stories unless they receive a specific amount of praise and feedback that they deem satisfactory. First generation fans, on the other hand, view fan fiction as part of the legacy of the show, and their dedication to producing errorless, quality stories builds on the reputation of the fandom. In other words, certain fan fiction authors will take the time and effort to develop and finish a story, regardless of the number of feedbacks they receive from fans. Williamson (2005, p. 108) argues that, “unlike the bourgeoisie who want a rapid return of profits through rapid circulation of products (1993: 97), those at the ‘autonomous pole’ will eschew short-term popularity in favour of becoming a long-term classic and the winning of the symbolic capital that is conferred from this sort of recognition”.

LJ fans, on the other hand, are seemingly not interested in continuing the tradition of archiving their fictions on Gossamer, claiming that the conservative method of posting to the archive is much too troublesome and intimidating for them to attempt when LJ easily allows them full control of archiving the stories on their personal journal as well as community ones; and more importantly, they are not restricted by the plain text of Gossamer’s files when LJ offers them complete freedom to experiment with textual aesthetics. Being able to click on the ‘comment’ button at the end of the story is also more convenient than starting a separate, but private email, LJ fans claim, so feedback has not only improved, its communal setting has

actually fostered the social relationships of not only fan fiction authors with their readers, but also readers with one another (since the comment or reply button on the end of the LJ post renders the feedback public). But LJ also produces very specific kinds of communities that allow for the cultural production of other creative material like fan meta, and also communities like *fanfic\_hate*, which while extreme in its personal attacks nonetheless attempts to challenge the status quo of the fan hierarchy based in forums and mailing list communities. These communities, with their variety of practices and conflicts present a view of fandom that is strongly non-homogenous. And as I began to suggest the previous chapter, one marked by tension over very divergent “regimes of value” (Appadurai, 1986, p. 15).

What I have not explore in this chapter, however, is fans’ definition of community. Fans on mailing lists and forums appear to view and define community differently than fans on LJ and FF.net. LJ fans, for example, may post their fan fiction to LJ communities, but they do not necessarily participate in any fan discussions. Fan authors on LJ can also post a link to the story that will take readers back to their personal journal instead of posting the story on a community journal, where the community journal in this case is used merely as a platform for making announcements. Communities like Metafandom link to meta discussions on fans’ personal journals, so fans are not necessarily conducting their discussions in the space provided by the community. One of the other things I suggested was how LJ facilitated the formation of multi-fandom communities where previously private grievances between fan factions can now become public, multi-fandom knowledge. I used *fanfic\_hate* as an example, as a community that claims to allow fans to share their dissatisfaction with fan fiction in their fandoms but which often turn into personal attacks on certain fan individuals but other LJ communities like Fandom Wank and Metafandom are also worth further exploration.

Another aspect I have not fully explored is the concept of educational capital in fandom. *XF* fans position FF.net fans as teens and non-serious authors, lacking the life

experiences and exposure to classic literature to reproduce quality works of fan fiction. This suggests that fans place an importance on the possession of educational capital, as *XF* fans on mailing lists and forums have used that criteria to draw a boundary between themselves and *FF.net* fans. Educational capital is often neglected in academic fan studies, and that could be another direction in which this research could develop.

Chapters 4 and 5 demonstrated the various conflicts within fan fiction fandom as well as the process of ‘othering’ fans tend to engage in, in their struggle to determine and legitimate their version of interpretation and communal practices – interpretation of the texts, fan fiction (including genre, pairing, place of posting, etc.), community, and the fan leaders (which I have interchangeably used with ‘subcultural celebrities’) – as the dominant version. But the underlying suggestion has also been that the symbolic exchange and accumulation of fan capitals creates a class of subcultural celebrities (celebrated fan authors, popular community leaders) within fandom that further informs and changes fans’ relationships with one another. Busse proposes that the shift from mailing list culture to LJ in the last few years has also seen “issues of popularity and fame [becoming] more pertinent and visible” (Busse, 2006, p. 222), but I would suggest that this obviously extends beyond LJ (LJ being *one* of the venues where fannish activities are performed but is by no means *the* only representation of fandom).

In the next chapter, I will begin to shift my focus to the creation of this subcultural celebrity class and how it also illuminates a shift in fans’ relationships with media producers. In the age of convergence (Jenkins, 2006), sections of fandom may be more open to the concept of being co-opted into marketing strategies promoted by film and TV studios, and executed by media producers and other celebrities.

## Chapter 6:

### The symbolic power of the media producer

The previous two chapters reveal that fans exercise very elitist notions in determining the boundaries of their fan communities and what constitutes value in the production of fan fiction. They also reveal a generational gap in the selection of spaces that fans choose for their fannish practices (in the way IWTBXF and Haven fans view LJ and FF.net) and that this generational difference can be used as a way of constructing the 'Other' (*Buffy* fans accusing Cordelia/Angel shippers of being 'new', and therefore, not understanding the depth of relationship Buffy and Angel had). Both sets of conflicts are about exercising elitist notions in fandom, in the struggle to determine which group can provide the dominant, accepted reading (or the acceptance of fan space). The conflicts also reveal that fan social, cultural and symbolic capitals that are accumulated within the context of specific fan communities or micro-communities can be non-transferable.

MacDonald suggests that hierarchies within fandom are broken into different levels, one of which is the "hierarchy of access" (1998, p. 137). MacDonald talks of how fans sometimes have access to actors, or are invited to film sets so they can relay insider information back to their fan communities or provide set reports of their visits, where the sharing of this information is sometimes met with jealousy by other fans. However, Web 2.0 has changed the proximity fans have to media producers (Jenkins, 2006, 2009a; Scott, 2008) as they too make use of social networks and blogs to communicate with fans directly (or via an assistant who writes the blogs or tweets on behalf of the media producer or celebrity, but is certainly closer in proximity compared to fans obtaining information from third parties like the entertainment press). So, reading the blogs of media producers and/or celebrities heightens the



possibility that the celebrity may respond directly to the fan's questions or comments, thus elevating the fan's social status (even if it may just be momentary).

The gift that fans receive, in this case, is the idea of intimacy with the media producer or the celebrity, and the prospect of being given access to insider information that the fan can later spread to the rest of the fan community. Continued exposure or contact with the media producer/celebrity blogger may in turn lead to the fan's role being celebrated within the community he or she is a part of, thus rendering him or her a fan subcultural celebrity. But while fans may view this connection as the forging of a kind of intimacy between themselves and producers, the media producers, on the other hand, could very well be indirectly co-opting the fans into a marketing strategy to promote their products. This begs the question: should we be cautious of this fan-producer collaborative relationship or does it negate the idea of fandom-as-resistance completely?

In this chapter, I will look at how the fan-media producer relationship plays out by looking at the blogs of two media producers: Frank Spotnitz, the former producer and writer of *The X-Files*, and Javier Grillo-Marxuach, former producer of *Lost* and creator of *The Middleman*. I will briefly look at the academic discourse on blogging, drawing in particular from journalism studies, before moving on to look more specifically at Couldry's (2000) theorizations of media power, applying these to the genre of the 'celebrity confessional' (Redmond, 2008, p. 109) blog before focusing on the case study for this chapter.

### *The personal blogger*

There have been many attempts at defining the blog but the general consensus defines it as a "frequently updated website, with posts arranged in reverse

chronological order, so new entries are always on top” (Blood, 2003, n.p.). Susan Robinson calls weblogs, “a cross between a column, a news story and a journal” (2006, p. 65), while Melissa Wall (2006, p. 113) calls attention to the weblog’s “texts and/or hyperlinks, the latter of which facilitate the speedy spread of ideas (Hiler, 2001)”. Dan Gillmor (2006) highlights the fact that weblogs enable readers to comment on a particular post, which facilitates audience discussion. The absence of the personal blog in academic debates leads Gillmor to propose that, “personal blogs...tend to be part of running conversations. One blogger will point to another’s posting, perhaps to agree but often to disagree or note another angle not found in the original piece. Then the first blogger will respond, and other bloggers may join in the fray” (2006, p. 31).

However, personal blogs can also be in the form of web diaries where the author’s thoughts and opinions are chronicled. They can contain the author’s creative writing, for instance, ranging from poetry to fiction, to photos, often acting more as archives of self-expression rather than diaries. These posts may not necessarily be a reaction to another post from a corresponding blog and may not become ‘running conversations’ as Gillmor has suggested. The seemingly more personal nature of blogging is often overlooked by scholars working on the subject, who have thus far been mostly situated within journalism studies. Scholars within journalism studies and cyberstudies are more concerned with the political and public sphere (Poster, 1997; Kahn and Kellner, 2004; Robinson, 2006; Singer, 2005; Gillmor, 2006), so when a personal blog is encountered and commented on, it is often viewed negatively. Critics often claim that “bloggers are narcissistic: endlessly remarking, and in luridly public fashion, on what...is gravely unremarkable: namely, the blogger’s own life” (Cohen, 2006, p. 162). Cohen goes on to argue that these critics imply that personal bloggers

have not earned the right to speak about their banal lives publicly, for these bloggers do not possess the necessary capitals to participate in the field of citizen journalism.

However, critics' opinions change whenever a blog is considered extremely well-written and popular<sup>1</sup>, or the blogger is in the public eye: "their reliance on standard assessments of literary quality – e.g. they are always willing to make exceptions for the well-written blog or the blog written by someone who is already famous – is further evidence that an a priori standard of 'earned' publicity is operating within this judgement" (Cohen, 2006, p.163). Furthermore, Redmond argues that, "through the confessional text (played out in the biopic, documentary, talk-show interview, self-reflexive song lyric, blog, and magazine interview), the star and celebrity seemingly attempt to speak openly and honestly about where they have come from" (2008, p. 110). This creates an intimacy between the fan and the celebrity, between the reader and the blogger.

This judgement of blog popularity also demonstrates that bloggers still retain forms of symbolic power (Couldry, 2000). While bloggers may not possess the official capitals that Bourdieu (1984, 1993), and later, Keen (2008), argue are necessary to retain the privilege of experts who participate in the field of production, they nevertheless accumulate social and cultural capitals that render them as subcultural celebrities. Redmond points out that the "star or celebrity confessional is also...a marketing tool and promotional technique used to brand, commodify, and profile an individual" (2008, p. 111). What this shows is that Nick Couldry's work on media power can be usefully in play here as we will see in the case studies; media producers create an intimate relationship with their fans through their blogging, but at the same time, use their positions to build a loyal fanbase and inspire fan activism

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<sup>1</sup> This often means the blogger has a high number of frequent readers who regularly participate in discussions, and their blogs are often linked and quoted within the general blogosphere by other bloggers.

(Cochran, 2008). In the next section, I will go on to explore these notions of media power and intimacy.

### *Media power and celebrity intimacy*

The Hollywood entertainment industry has also started to recognise the benefits of incorporating blogs into their marketing strategies, with major film and television studios investing in this new media genre to sell their products to fans and potential new audiences. For example, the films *Terminator Salvation* and *Watchmen*<sup>2</sup>, both released in 2009, featured blogs that combined text written by the film's directors, and videos submitted by various production team members, including interviews with cast and crew that were linked from the official websites. Both films stem from popular media franchises – the former a popular and successful film (and television) franchise, and the latter a cult comic book series by English writer, Alan Moore, that already have “pre-viewers” (Chin & Gray, 2001) that can be easily courted. These pre-viewers, already invested in the texts, are symbolically invited into the production process by cast and crew alike, as they allow fans to preview teaser posters, spoilers, as well as exclusive clips from attending conventions like the San Diego Comic-Con in 2008.

In one blog post, for instance, *Terminator Salvation's* director McG announced that filming for the film was done: “We wrapped principal photography. Now we're heavy into post. I've already shown early cuts to Christian and Sam. They seem pleased with where the film is headed. Our focus is on story and character, but it's fun diving into the world of visual effects” (McG, 2008). Fans of the *Terminator* franchise who were eagerly anticipating the film were kept informed throughout the

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<sup>2</sup> Both official blogs can be found at <http://rss.warnerbros.com/terminatorsalvation/> and <http://rss.warnerbros.com/watchmen/> respectively.

filming process. The director reassured fans that both the stars, Christian Bale and Sam Worthington were pleased with the end product, thereby cementing the stars' approval of the film. On the other hand, the official blog for *Watchmen* featured video journals that consisted of interviews with the director, Zack Snyder, and the various cast and crew, sharing their thoughts on, among other things, character evaluation as well as development. Various production crew also contributed by giving fans access to exclusive content such as the artwork developed during the film's design process and teaser posters.

Producers of blockbuster films are not the only ones using blogs to keep their audience and pre-viewers informed about the production process; many current popular cult television shows also feature blogs written by producers at their official sites, giving fans a behind-the-scenes look into production and writing processes, sometimes on a weekly basis. In the introduction to their *Cult TV* anthology, Sara Gwenllian-Jones and Roberta Pearson remark that, "'cult' is often loosely applied to any television programme that is considered offbeat and edgy, that draws a niche audience, that has a nostalgic appeal, that is considered emblematic of a particular subculture, or that is considered hip" (2004, p. ix). The range of publications available in the UK that are targeted towards the niche cult audience feature names like *ScifiNow* and *SFX*.

*SFX*, for example, has a circulation of 31,634 according to the Audit Bureau of Circulation's (ABC) February 2008 figures<sup>3</sup>. A browse through *SFX* and two other cult TV magazines, *Cult Times* and *Starburst* from January to November 2008 reveals roughly similar coverage on the range of television shows and films. These magazines usually have a feature or two – usually an interview or analysis – on shows that are

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<sup>3</sup> ABC is available at <http://www.abc.org.uk> (accessed 20 November 2008). A circulation number for the other magazines mentioned is unavailable, whether through ABC or through the magazine's websites.

already off the air like *Star Trek*, *X-Files*, *Buffy*, *Quantum Leap* and *The 4400* but still have material (films, comic books, book series<sup>4</sup>) coming out connected to the franchise or actors who have gone on to star in other cult programmes. The rest of the magazine is filled with interviews, write-ups, reviews and the latest news for current favourites like the re-imagined *Battlestar Galactica*, *Doctor Who*, *Primeval*, *Supernatural*, *Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles* and *Heroes*<sup>5</sup>.

These publications also feature coverage on upcoming new shows, particularly if these shows are helmed by auteurs like Joss Whedon or Ron Moore. Special issues are put out to celebrate the premiere or return of favourite shows or to commemorate milestone anniversaries<sup>6</sup>. Aside from these general science fiction, fantasy and cult magazines, shows like *Doctor Who*, *Torchwood*, *Heroes* and *Supernatural* also have official magazines catering to their fans, featuring detailed interviews, spoilers and news.

While these niche print or 'old media' publications provide us with an idea of which TV texts are considered as 'cult', the advent of new technologies such as blogs and social networking sites, and media producers' embrace of Web 2.0 has allowed cult media fans to interact more directly with their favourite media producers. Instead of merely having those opportunities in packed autograph halls or conference rooms at popular fan conventions like the San Diego Comic Con and Dragon\*Con, for example, where interaction is limited to, at most, three to five minutes if the fan is able to get a chance to ask a question during the talks or engage in a quick

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<sup>4</sup> According to the official 4400 forum (<http://forums.usanetwork.com/index.php?showforum=3>) at the USA Network, a book series has been announced to continue the show.

<sup>5</sup> *ScifiNow*, for instance, has a section called 'TimeWarp' for features on classic TV shows. And *Starburst* has at least one feature on *Battlestar Galactica* in every issue in 2008.

<sup>6</sup> These magazines often have special issues of *Torchwood* and *Doctor Who* prior to the show's scheduled return to the BBC. Another example of special issues would be the 10-year anniversary of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* in 2007 where the magazines dedicated an entire issue to look back at the show.

conversation with the celebrity during the autograph session before being harried by the convention's minders. What the medium of blogs offers, despite being mediated through the computer (compared to the possibility of having a face-to-face meeting with the celebrity at a fan convention), is a sense of intimacy (the media producer or celebrity responding directly to the fan in the blog) and immediacy (some are prolific enough to post regularly).

Ron Moore, the creator of the re-imagined *Battlestar Galactica (BSG)* hosts a weekly podcast as well as a blog to accompany new episodes of the show. These were originally hosted out of *BSG's* official site at Syfy Channel but Moore moved all the material to his own website during the 2007 Writers' Guild strike in order to be able to comment on and update fans on the status of the strike directly. The producers, casts and crews of *Stargate SG-1* and *Stargate Atlantis*, on the other hand, blog from a fan-run site that has become a centralised source for the latest news and spoilers on the *Stargate* franchise<sup>7</sup>. However, the fervour with which some producers embrace blogging does not mean that their interactions with fans are in any way unmanaged, or that these producers immediately become 'one of the fans' hierarchically.

These producers maintain their gate-keeping roles by limiting the contribution of material from users/readers, as some journalists have done (Singer, 2005). Media producers retain a symbolic power over their fans/audiences that is naturalised through what Couldry terms "the symbolic hierarchy of the media frame" (2000, p. 20), where this 'frame', Couldry proposes, "connects to the media's function of 'framing' the social" (p. 16). Couldry was concerned with traditional media institutions like television and the press, examining this symbolic hierarchy played out through audience's pilgrimages to filming sites like the *Coronation Street* set at

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<sup>7</sup> <http://gateworld.net/blogs/index.shtml>

Granada Studios – a physical set that audiences/fans can travel to. However, fan pilgrimage can also be symbolic, as Roger Aden (1999) proposed: “Rather than embarking upon a ‘real life’ journey to a holy shrine, symbolic pilgrimages feature individuals ritualistically revisiting powerful places that are symbolically envisioned through the interaction of story and individual imagination” (Aden, 1999, pp. 9-10).

Fans’ visits to (official) websites of their favourite film franchises or TV shows, or to the blogs of media producers, can be argued to be symbolic pilgrimages. Reading firsthand accounts from directors or writers, fans are revisiting ‘places’ that have captured their imagination. These journeys are made on a more regular basis compared to physical pilgrimages, such as travelling to filming sites or studios. Much like walking down the set of *Coronation Street*, reading about the process of writing for the latest episode of *The 4400* or the production of the multiplatform, alternate reality game *The Lost Experience* that ties in to the storyline of the TV series “commemorates people’s practice as viewers and allows a negotiation of [the symbolic] hierarchy” (Couldry, 2000, p. 179) between ‘media’ and ‘ordinary’ worlds.

Couldry’s theoretical model proposes five dimensions through which the naturalisation of the media’s symbolic power can be analysed: framing, ordering, naming, spacing and imagining. The first dimension, *framing*, views the media as a frame for the social world, “a space through which everyone can access simultaneously what marks off the ‘social’ from the private and particular” (2000, p. 42). The second, *ordering*, divides or orders the world into the ‘media world’ and ‘ordinary world’. In this second dimension, Couldry argues, “it is ‘common sense’ that the ‘media world’ is somehow better, more intense, than ‘ordinary life’, and that ‘media people’ are somehow special...The media sphere itself is not different in kind from the world in which viewers live; it is part of the same world dedicated to



mediating it. Yet, through the naturalised hierarchy between the constructed terms 'media world' and 'ordinary world', this division of the social world is generally reproduced as legitimate" (p. 45). The third, *naming* refers to the media's authority as a source of truth as well as a site of trust.

Before turning to discuss the final two dimensions, spacing and imagining, I want to first discuss the three dimensions I have just mapped out. Couldry suggests that the three dimensions (framing, ordering, naming) reinforce each other to make up the 'symbolic hierarchy of the media frame', establishing a (symbolic) power the media holds over the 'ordinary world' or 'ordinary people': "The media's status as a reporter of 'the facts' about social reality (naming) helps naturalise their status more generally as the 'frame' through which we obtain access to social reality (framing). This helps reinforce the symbolic hierarchy between 'media' and 'ordinary worlds' (ordering), which in turn helps reinforce the status of media material (whether fact or fiction) as social 'reality' or 'actuality' (naming again)" (2000, p. 52).

The naturalisation of this symbolic power is continually replicated by the people and their relationship to the media, although there are challenges to this when people immerse themselves into the media process, by participating in high profile protests as Couldry explored in his book<sup>8</sup>. Bloggers who constantly report on news not covered by traditional media, or act as fact-checkers of reported news can also be said to be challenging the boundaries set up by the 'media world', a further dimension (spacing) that reinforces the hierarchy. Mobile phones equipped with powerful cameras have also enabled the ordinary citizen to capture breaking news or provide live firsthand accounts since videos and photos can be uploaded automatically via emails or text messages. In the 2008 terrorist attack in Mumbai, for instance, citizen

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<sup>8</sup> For a more extensive and astute argument, see Couldry (2000).

journalists were asked by the Indian government to stop updating to Twitter – a micro-blogging website where people can send short messages updating their friends/readers via the Internet – as too many unconfirmed reports were being circulated around in the frenzy (Ahmed, 2008)<sup>9</sup>.

This symbolic power can, and does exist within fandom as well, as witnessed in fans' relationships to media producers and celebrities. Storylines within film and TV are considered as canon that shapes the universe the media producer has created. When these media producers go on and communicate their creative decisions, writing processes and so on to the fans, these comments are often considered as 'truths' shared among the fandom. The dimensions Couldry suggested work to reinforce the power the media producer and/or the celebrity has over fans<sup>10</sup>. Pullen comments that, "celebrities from all forms of media engage in live, interactive, online discussions with their fans, especially when promoting a new film, special television programme, new season, or music release" (2004, p. 84). This is reinforced by a fifth dimension: that of *imagining*. In this dimension, our pleasure and emotional investment in the 'media world' further legitimates the power of the media: "The media/ordinary boundary may be implicated in our sense of identity as 'ordinary people', and in our sense of media people or the media world as somehow special, so that contact with them seems compelling and desirable" (Couldry, 2000, pp. 178-179).

These dimensions not only naturalise the power of media institutions but also the power of producers as media insiders. Media personalities are "presented, at one level, as 'just' 'ordinary people'...Yet they remain 'extraordinary' because they

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<sup>9</sup> The '#mumbai' feed set up on Twitter was being updated every 2 seconds at the height of the siege in the city.

<sup>10</sup> That is not to say that fans would not argue over canon as depicted by media producers. A constant discussion among *XF* fan communities is the storylines affecting Scully and Mulder in the show's final two seasons. While fans will not directly challenge the producers, some have declared that they do not acknowledge some of the storylines, preferring to submit to their own interpretation, or one offered by the collective fandom that the fan agrees with.

appear in the media” (Couldry, 2000, p. 5). Hence, fans often congregate around blogs that a celebrity has set up. It represents a chance for these fans to communicate with their favourite celebrities, as well as to attain a sense of connection with the ‘extraordinary’, an intimacy with the people whose works fans admire<sup>11</sup>.

For John B. Thompson, this mediated interaction, or quasi-interaction as he calls it, establishes a ‘non-reciprocal intimacy’ “which does not involve the kind of reciprocity and mutuality characteristic of face-to-face interaction” (1995, p. 219). Thompson further testifies that, “in many cases, an important part of being a fan is the cultivation of non-reciprocal relations of intimacy with distant others” (p. 222). This non-reciprocal intimacy is often developed with the celebrity the fan adores, as Thompson illustrates through the account of Joanne, a Barry Manilow fan who imagines a one-sided love affair with the singer. The inclusion of ‘Mary Sue’ characters, where fan authors insert a version of themselves as a character in fan fiction can also be seen as a form of non-reciprocal intimacy that fans try to achieve with their favourite stars through the characters they play in films or television series, or even through the currently popular ‘real person’ or actor fan fiction<sup>12</sup>.

Christine Yano also argues that the drive to achieve intimacy, no matter how brief on the fans’ part, “impels individuals to act in ways that go beyond the bounds of self to seek greater communion with the object of their adoration” (2004, p. 44). This materialises in various forms – in Thompson’s example, Joanne imagines herself making love to Barry Manilow every time she makes love with her husband. For Yano’s Japanese pop music fans however, the fans work towards acquiring

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<sup>11</sup> This can be further extended to fans who have gained subsequent amount of social and cultural capitals to have access to media producers as well as actors, which I will explore further in Chapter 7.

<sup>12</sup> Versions of real person or actor fiction is believed to date back to the 1960s with *Star Trek* (source: Fanlore.org), its mass expansion developed within the fandom of Peter Jackson’s *Lord of the Rings* trilogy and the *Harry Potter* films. Large television fandoms such as those of *Star Trek*, *The X-Files* and *Buffy* are generally intolerant of real person or actor fictions, and fans who indulge in these fictions are often relegated to the fringe by ‘fandom proper’.

knowledge of their favourite celebrities, no matter how mundane; and find ways of establishing a relationship with them, be it through attending fan club meetings or fan conventions. Or, in this case, I argue that fans achieve intimacy with their favourite celebrities through commenting on blogs maintained by these stars: “Most of us enjoy competing for media-related symbolic ‘capital’ at a low level: exchanging knowledge about ‘media people’ we have been acquainted with, spottings of a ‘media person’, and so on” (Yano, 2004, p. 58). Acknowledgement from celebrities, directly through a response or indirectly by referring to the fan elevates the status of the fan who is now in possession of higher fan social capital for receiving some form of acknowledgement or connection with the producer, which may potentially also contribute to the accumulation of the fan’s symbolic capital.

And as I suggest elsewhere, fans also partake in ‘selfless acts’ (through associating themselves with causes that their favourite celebrities support or being on their best behaviour in public events like concerts and sports matches) “to gain and retain a sense of intimacy with the stars by upholding the star’s status and reputation in public” (Chin, 2007, p. 213)<sup>13</sup>. During the 2007 Writers’ Strike, as fan support was incredibly strong, Jeff Berman, a Hollywood screenwriter came up with a ‘Pencils 2 Media Moguls’ campaign by mobilising supporters to donate money (twelve pencils for a dollar)<sup>14</sup>. At the end of the campaign, the pencils would then be delivered to the various studios around Hollywood as a sign to the studios that support for the writers was strong. The campaign evolved when several celebrity producers<sup>15</sup>, most notably

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<sup>13</sup> For a more extensive argument on fans and intimacy, see Yano (2004) and Stevens (2004).

<sup>14</sup> See the United Hollywood blog that details the campaign:  
<http://unitedhollywood.blogspot.com/2007/11/pencils2mediamoguls.html>

<sup>15</sup> I am referring to these producers as ‘celebrities’ because of their reputation among fans. Fans of the shows these media producers/showrunners, or to borrow an industry term, these hyphenates (writer-producer) create have evolved to become fans of the producers themselves. For example, the marketing strategy of *Dollhouse* which 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox adopted was dependent on Whedon’s loyal fanbase. See <http://www.filmcritic.com/features/2009/01/joss-whedon-cabin-in-the-woods>

the creators of *Smallville*, Alfred Gough and Miles Millar; Damon Lindelof and Carlton Cuse of *Lost*, Ron Moore and Joss Whedon informed fans through their blogs and websites that fans who donated the most money in the name of the show they nominated would win a variety of prizes (usually exclusive show memorabilia) as well as personal phone calls from the producers and cast of the respective shows. As Moore (2007) blogged:

Our very own Aaron Douglas will take one fan to a Canucks hockey game, along with another buddy of his up in Vancouver. And how can you score this treat? Simple. By going to Pencils2MediaMoguls.com and buying as many boxes of pencils as you can. On the first page...you'll see a place to identify which show you're supporting. Type in 'BSG Aaron Douglas' and we'll enter your name into a raffle, with the lucky winner getting to attend the hockey game with Aaron.

A day later, Moore added the names of other cast members to the raffle, informing fans that the likes of fan favourites like Mary McDonnell, Tricia Helfer, Michael Hogan, Jamie Bamber and Michael Trucco would make a personal phone call to those whose names have been picked. This direct appeal to the fans, at a time of an industrial dispute between writers and the TV/film studios, clearly mapped out by these celebrity producers via their blogs, can also be viewed as a calculated move in strengthening the producers' position against studio executives by exploiting fans' desire to help under guise of collaborative fan-producer activism. By participating in the campaign, fans are also showing solidarity with the writers (essentially the creative personnel), and the money donated will go into helping non-union Hollywood labour who have been affected by the strike. Producers' utilisation of the

blogs<sup>16</sup> to reach out to fans, albeit with a motive to advance their cause during the industrial strike illustrates an “evolution from the celebrity as a manufactured product to the celebrity as something more genuine in a human sense” (Gillmor, 2006, p. 78). Television fans have been able to communicate with producers such as Joss Whedon<sup>17</sup>, Ron Moore and J. Michael Straczynski, and to participate in conversations about their fandoms and the products these auteurs are linked to through blogging.

As Sean Redmond suggests:

Through the confessional text [like the blog] the celebrity attempts to speak openly and honestly about where they have come from – their humble beginnings; the troubles, hardships and corruptions they may have faced along their journey to fame; who they are underneath the fame gown; and how alike they are to the everyday people who watch their films, buy their records, go to their concerts and watch their soccer or tennis matches (2006, p. 37).

There is thus a cultural shift between Thompson’s concept of stardom, where non-reciprocal intimacy between the fan and the celebrity is thought to intrude on daily life and “can be a source of confusion and...pain” (Thompson, 1995, p. 221), and the current concept of stardom, where intimacy with the star is sought, and sometimes achieved through new media technologies. The technological advancements of Web 2.0, in the form of weblogs, podcasts, video journals and social networking sites like Twitter and Facebook, all enable celebrities and fans to co-exist within the same symbolic space through using the same technological apparatuses and software.

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<sup>16</sup> Some of the writers/producers also contribute to Why We Write, <http://whywewriteseries.wordpress.com> at the time of the strike.

<sup>17</sup> Fans found out that former *Angel* actress Amy Acker has been cast as a recurring character in Whedon’s *Dollhouse* before the official press and media got wind of the news. This was because Whedon first made the announcement on his fan-run site, Whedonesque.com (<http://whedonesque.com/comments/16096#223812>).

This interactivity has instigated a different kind of intimacy between fans and celebrities who make use of the same technology. As Redmond has argued, “the confessional, taken to be any moment in which a star, celebrity, or fan engages in revelatory acts, has become one of the dominant ways in which fame is circulated and consumed. ... Similarly, the fan/consumer who confesses their desire for, and identification with, the star or celebrity, online, in diaries, reveals a para-social relationship that is in part devotional, obsessional, but also potentially intimate and fully lived” (2008, pp. 110-111).

Fans of cult media are directly courted, not only by film and television studios, but also by media producers: “Fandom has begun to furnish a model of dedicated and loyal consumption which does, in point of fact, *appeal* to niche and non-terrestrial TV producers and schedulers operating within a fragmented multi-channel media environment” (Hills, 2002, p. 36). Furthermore, the expansion of TV programmes into other platforms such as DVDs, Blu-Ray, mobile phones and games consoles have also shifted the producer and fan/audience relationship. Johnson (2007a) maintains that audiences are, “invited to partake in the promotional and creative processes of production through the new spatial organisations of labour permitted by digital technologies. Simultaneously, they have been encouraged to enter the hyperdiegetic spaces of television worlds sewn together across a network of media platforms” (p. 71).

The courtship is not a one-way street, as fans make use of the availability of media producers in all these various spaces as a way of forging conversations, if not relationships. So in the case of celebrity bloggers, fan readers will seek connection through the comments feature of blogs (or if there is no such feature, for fan voices to be heard and validated by producers through other means such as discussions at

forums where media producers are known to frequent). These fans are closer to Yano's notion of achieving intimacy, where "intimacy may be marked by the degree to which [fans] share and sometimes compete for objective, non-public (that is, not known to outsiders) knowledge" (2004, p. 44). Acknowledgement from media producers or writers to a fan's query or comment elevates not only the status of the fan within the fan community but also the fan's social and subcultural capitals. This gives fans who are less creatively inclined an opportunity to contribute to the fan community, and acknowledgement from creators and producers of media texts fans have strong attachments to represent – to fans – immediate and public validation. Celebrities are not merely responding to fan letters addressed to fans privately. They are acknowledging fans personally, by name, in the public space of the media producer's blog or website.

So, fans post comments and avidly discuss storylines on discussion forums producers are known to frequent in the hope that their comments will be answered or acknowledged by the producers/celebrities. For example, Amy Berg, a staff writer on USA Network's *The 4400* did just that by posting (after the show's 2<sup>nd</sup> season finale):

I'm loving the debate between Cubex, philo4400, Jcor66, and rockingmule about the nature of Isabelle's character. All your arguments have merit, so I'm not taking sides... I want to echo rapierguy's take on the finale. He's right on the mark...I'd like to give props to cujoy, aliza, abductedwhiledriving, r2roswell, ranadiel, leob, and the rest of the gang over at 4400 Abductees (2006).

The public acknowledgement of fans by Berg, particularly the ones she mentioned by 'name' has elevated the position of these fans as experts of the text (possessing fan symbolic capital). The producers (or a representative of the producers, in this case, staff writer Amy Berg) not only recognise the support of fans in the



various communities and forums, but also to a certain extent, appear to validate fan speculation about plot developments.

Despite this, the power fans seemingly possess to influence future storylines is minimal. Fan social, cultural and symbolic capitals that fans accumulate and earn exist in the *illusio* of their fandom, or in the “in between” (Hills, 2005, p. 169) field of fandom. Fans may speculate on future plot developments based on clues left by producers on blogs or interviews, but these speculations remain just that. The power and contact fans have with producers and writers are still ‘managed’ to a certain extent by the media producers. Or, as Couldry suggests, “media institutions have a particular interest in protecting the boundaries around their own symbolic power” (2000, p. 59).

Couldry argues that media institutions maintain this symbolic power largely through pathologisation, particularly of media fans. While self-professed cult fans/auteurs like Lindelof, Whedon and the like may not pathologise media fans (publicly), they employ different tactics to protect the boundaries of their power as media producers: “The television text itself has been mobilized to narratively construct ‘acceptable’ fan activity – bolstering extra-textual legal measures by building critiques of unruly fans directly into the text that supports unauthorised discursive activity” (Johnson, 2007b, p. 295). Johnson used the example of *Buffy*, where some fans publicly criticised producer Marti Noxon’s creative decisions for the show’s sixth season. Joss Whedon had left Noxon in charge as he went to oversee the production of *Firefly*, which fans saw as a “challenge to the hyperdiegetic security of auteurism” (Johnson, 2007b, p. 292). Noxon responded to this criticism by shepherding “the narrative construction of fans as the Big Bad in *Buffy*’s sixth season”

(p. 295) personified through the geeky trio of Jonathan, Andrew and Warren whose dialogues consist of frequent references to other popular cultural texts.

The emergence and growing popularity of blogs did not suddenly encourage or enable media producers to communicate with their fans. The pilot of *Star Trek* was reputedly screened in 1966 at Worldcon, a science fiction fan convention that creator Gene Roddenberry attended<sup>18</sup>. The producer and creator of *Babylon 5*, J. Michael Straczynski, maintains constant contact with his fans through various Usenet newsgroups<sup>19</sup> while Joss Whedon posts messages and responses to fan postings at a fan-run website dedicated to him and his various television, film and comic projects, Whedonesque.com [see Image 1]. Other media producers maintain their blogs, hosted by popular blogging platforms such as Blogger and Livejournal, making use of similar software and platforms that fans do<sup>20</sup>. Twitter, considered a micro-blogging site that allows its users to read each other's short messages (referred to as 'tweets'), has not only become a space for producers like Hart Hanson (*Bones*), Shawn Ryan (*The Shield*) and Seth MacFarlane (*Family Guy*) to communicate with their fans, but has further attracted celebrities like Stephen Fry, Tim Roth, Wil Wheaton and Greg Grunberg.

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<sup>18</sup> A fan report is available here: <http://fanac.org/worldcon/Tricon/w66-rpt.html>

<sup>19</sup> Straczynski posts and interacts with fans in the following newsgroups: *rec.arts.sf.tv.babylon5.moderated*, *rec.arts.comics.marvel.universe* and *rec.arts.sf.tv*. These messages and responses to fans, dating back to 1991 are archived at <http://www.jmsnews.com/>.

<sup>20</sup> Producers like Paul Cornell of *Doctor Who* and *Robin Hood* (<http://paulcornell.blogspot.com>), Jane Espenson of *Buffy*, *Battlestar Galactica* and *Caprica* (<http://www.janeespenson.com/>), Mark Verheiden of *Battlestar Galactica* and *Heroes* (<http://verheiden.blogspot.com/>) and Tanya Huff, the author and producer of Canadian series, *Blood Ties* (<http://andpuff.livejournal.com/>) are some of the media producers who regularly use the blogging platform to interact with their friends or spread information.

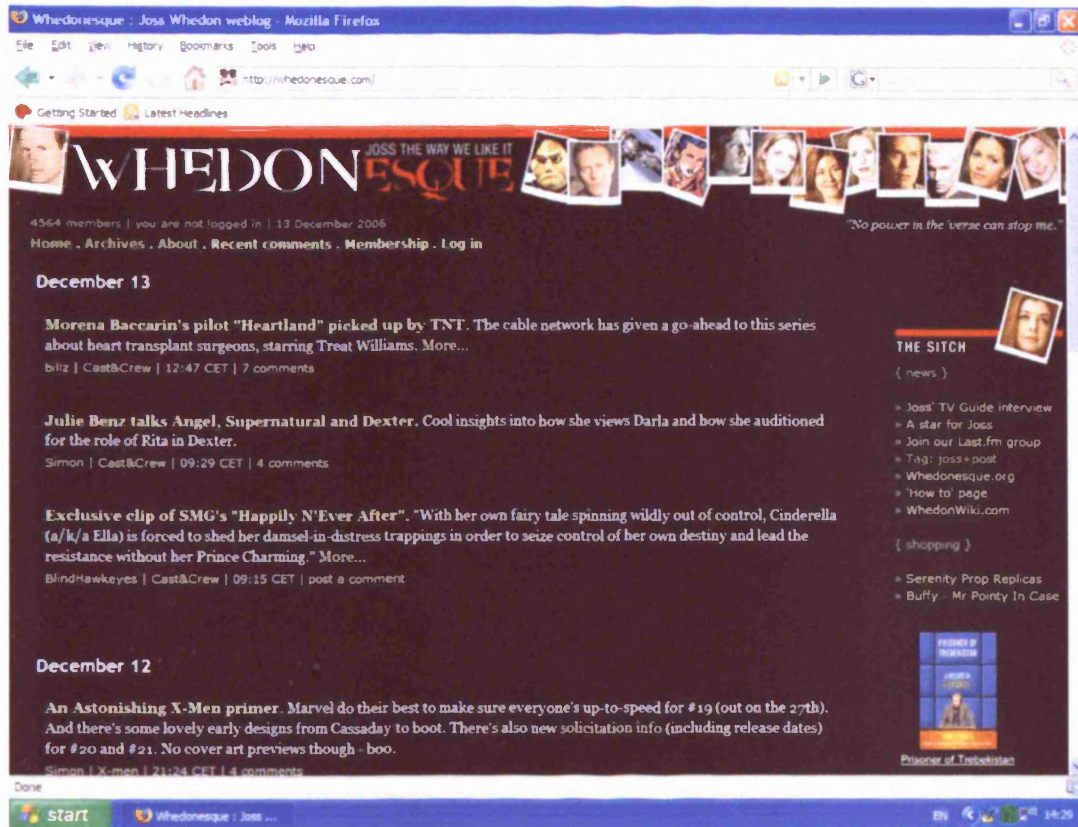


Image 1

At the same time, there are media producers who communicate with their fans through blogs (or sites) run by their production companies, film studios or television networks. Frank Spotnitz, a former producer and writer for *The X-Files* and the short-lived *The Night Stalker*, maintains a blog through his production company, Big Light Productions. *The X-Files*' David Duchovny, briefly blogged about his experiences of filming *The X-Files: I Want to Believe* the follow-up to the first *XF* feature film through a blog set up by 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox using Blogger in the lead up to the film's 2008 summer release<sup>21</sup>.

These mostly public interactions on media platforms that fans simultaneously use begets the question how these media producers present themselves to the fans while still retaining the symbolic power of their roles. Couldry reminds us that the

<sup>21</sup> These sites are accessible at: <http://www.biglight.com/blog/> (Spotnitz's blog via his production company, Big Light) and <http://duchovnyfiles.blogspot.com/> (Duchovny's blog for the *XF* film sequel).

five dimensions he theorised are not the only ways in which media power is constantly naturalised: “We all contribute to that naturalisation in our competition for, or play with, the symbolic power focused within the media sphere; such competition is generally masked, rather than seen directly for what it is” (2000, p. 179). But do media producers who blog independently from the official website of the product(s) they are associated with maintain a different relationship with fans compared with those who blog from official sites sanctioned and supported by the media institutions they are deeply involved with?

In the next section, I will look more specifically at how the fan-media producer relationship is managed through the blogs of two media producers. While one of the producers presented himself as ‘one of the fans’ while the other maintains a more distanced disposition, I argue that the interaction between fans and media producers on both blogs are equally managed so that, in the end, the roles of media producers and fans are reinforced, despite the apparent embrace of fans into the fold as a form of free labour: “Fan audiences are economically important to the industry, but they must be *managed* to fulfil that function; they are not naturally resistant or complicit” (Johnson, 2007a, p. 64).

### *The media producer blogs*

I am going to focus on two blogs maintained by two media producers, Javier Grillo-Marxuach, former writer and producer of *Lost*<sup>22</sup> and Frank Spotnitz, who is best known as executive producer and writer for *The X-Files*. The two blogs appear to be radically different in structure and in the tone of language used, and in particular,

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<sup>22</sup> While Grillo-Marxuach left *Lost* in 2005, he continued to work with the producers of the show, appearing at fan conventions to speak about the show as well as developing the multi-platform game, *The Lost Experience*, eventually going on to play one of the characters in the game. He also started a separate LJ for the game to allow fans and players to comment and discuss the development of the game. See <http://hansofoundation.livejournal.com/>

the persona presented to fans who regularly follow the writings of these writer-producer hyphenates. However, I question the freedom as well as the limitations both authors face in their contact with fans.

Grillo-Marxuach, whose blog is based on LiveJournal (LJ) is affectionately known as Javi to fans. On his blog, entitled 'Radio Free Javi' – possibly an homage or reference to science fiction author, Philip K. Dick, of whom Javi has professed to being a fan – Javi shares his views on a variety of topics: politics, the shows and comic book projects he has in development, his identity as a fan, and sometimes, anecdotes about his family<sup>23</sup>. The blog makes use of one of the simple and classic LJ templates, offering links to a personal website and then to other spaces within the LJ community (see Image 2). The soft colours create a warm, inviting atmosphere, and the LJ icon featuring Javi himself (apparently made by a fan) frames the LJ. As well as being a member of an LJ community dedicated to himself, *javiminions*, Javi also produces a weekly show called *Ask Javi*, aired from his personal website of the same name<sup>24</sup>, where he invites fans to ask him any questions which he attempts to answer every week. Grillo-Marxuach's LJ entries reiterate Redmond's point on how celebrities use the confessional text to present themselves as not being too different from their fans (2006, p. 37).

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<sup>23</sup> Cf. Marshall (2010).

<sup>24</sup> <http://www.radiofreejavi.com/>

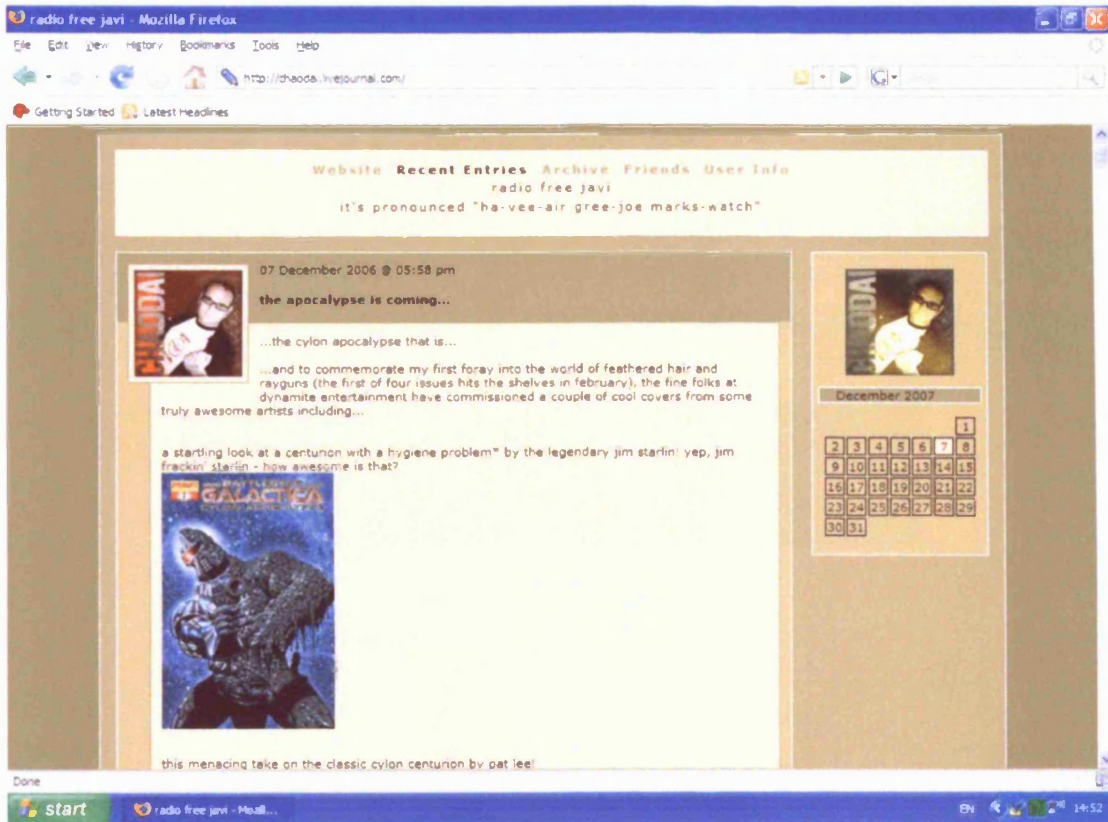


Image 2

On the other hand, Frank Spotnitz's blog forms part of his production company's (Big Light Productions) official website. Spotnitz's blog is presented in plain colours that match the look and logo of Big Light Productions. Fans can opt to peruse Spotnitz's current and past projects, his biography and a links page to take readers to, among other places, amazon.com (to purchase copies of Spotnitz's works) and *The X-Files* fan club (see Image 3). Rather than posting entries which he has written, Spotnitz invites fans to write in and pose questions which he will in turn attempt to answer<sup>25</sup>: on the very first blog entry, Spotnitz writes that he considers the blog "less a blog than a conversation" (2004a). Spotnitz's tone appears more impersonal, compared to Javi's often-exuberant entries. Furthermore, Spotnitz

<sup>25</sup> That is not to say Spotnitz does not write any entries without first answering a query from a fan. His entries tend to be announcements, such as promoting Stuart Townsend's (whom he worked with on *The Night Stalker*) new self-penned directorial debut, *Battle in Seattle* (23 September 2008).

chooses which fan questions he wants to answer before posting them, and the comment feature is turned off so fans cannot take the discussion further<sup>26</sup>.



Image 3

These blogs have been prioritised, not only because of their different platforms, but more specifically for the differences in their interaction with and management of intimacy with fans. Spotnitz's position is official and distant, very much like a professional media producer embarking on a career path independent of the success of his previous show, *The X-Files*. Javi, on the other hand, performs his fan identity more clearly by speculating on the finales of his favourite shows, reviewing films he has seen and openly 'worshipping' *Star Wars* and Joss Whedon. Occasionally, Javi will promote his comic book projects. On the surface, Javi's LJ seemingly bears no startling difference to those of other LJ journallers who use the site.

<sup>26</sup> Commentary, however, continues in the forum on Spotnitz's Big Light Social Network, and sometimes in Haven, spread by fans who frequent his site.

In his book *Interacting with Babylon 5*, Kurt Lancaster suggested that the public persona the show's creator, J. Michael Straczynski, presented involved a social performance of the non-typical Hollywood producer who genuinely cares about his fans:

Straczynski performs a front that includes self-effacing humility (he's just an average 'Joe'), while at the same time maintaining roles as educator (he wants to teach people how television is made so viewers can demand better TV – *his* brand of television), 'underdog' producer (who had to face challenges to get his vision onscreen), and creative artist (who will not compromise his vision). When it comes to the *Babylon 5* universe, he is the authoritative producer whose every word is canon (2001, p. 3).

Lancaster further argues that these attributes are clearly demonstrated in Straczynski's interactions with fans, and in his expectation or "moral demand" (Goffman, 1959 cited in Lancaster, 2001, p. 3) on fans to respect his authority and knowledge about the world *he* has single-handedly created. At the same time, unlike the stereotypical Hollywood producer who only cares about selling their shows without much thought for their fans, he is also the 'average Joe' who cares about his fans and his show. The difference being, his position within the industry enables him to educate fans about the processes of making a television show:

He believes that when viewers understand how television shows are made, then 'viewers can demand better tv. That's why I've been online every day, for hours a day, since the show went into production. I want those who watch our show to understand why things are done the way they're done in tv, what elements go into the creative and decision-making process. You cannot control what you do not understand' (1997e). (Lancaster, 2001, p. 19)



Spotnitz does not explicitly declare his intentions of educating his fans on the development processes of producing quality television shows like Straczynski did, but he tends to answer questions that are concerned with the writing and production process of filming a particular episode of the show. In his first post, Spotnitz wrote that:

This space is primarily for those who want to talk about projects and series I've done and projects I hope to complete. The conversation writers, producers and directors have with their viewers is typically filtered through reporters and editors at the various media. My hope is that this more direct link via the Web might lead to more interesting conversations, less tilted toward celebrity and gossip and more toward the substance of the work (which is, I think, really what interests most of us, but somehow doesn't manage to sell as many magazines). (2004a).

From the first post, Spotnitz seems to be drawing a line, appealing to those fans who are interested in what he has to offer, as someone within the industry with experience, as opposed to merely reiterating information that can be easily gathered from gossip magazines and the mainstream press. When a Brazilian fan writes in with a question about his writing and television career, Spotnitz gives a lengthy answer, advising the fan to engage with other aspiring writers while reassuring her that the learning process is a never-ending one, even if it may be frustrating at first:

Even if you are fortunate enough to become a professional screenwriter, you continue to learn new things about the craft – and yourself. That's one reason writing can be such a frustrating career. No one ever truly masters it. But that's what makes it endlessly rewarding, too. (Spotnitz, 2005)

Spotnitz's responses are always stoically polite. When asked if he visited any of the fan message boards during his tenure as writer and producer for *The X-Files*, he

explained that, especially in the early years of the show he saw online fan reaction as a useful tool to “gauge how the show played with the audience at large” but admitted that as the show continued on, he found it less useful: “the discussions generally became more baroque, views of various fans (both positive and negative) more entrenched and predictable” (Spotnitz, 2004b).

On the other hand, Javi appears to directly engage with fans/readers on a more regular basis. He occasionally participates in discussions fans have on his posts, at times responding directly to comments. He also admits to adding loyal and frequent readers to his friends-lists, often reading their journals in return. Javi also presents himself as a “genre fan” (Grillo-Marxuach, 2005) who actively supports the fan communities and their campaigns. He states his “discovery of livejournal” was one of the “coolest developments of 2004” for it afforded him the opportunity to “share what i [sic] have to say...in that most incongruous and bizarre way that only seems possible in the digital age” (ibid.).

Javi not merely uses his LJ to share his enthusiasm for the texts and other media producers he is a fan of, he also uses it to share his disdain for films by Jim Carrey and Martin Scorsese, his personal stories and loss at the 9/11 tragedy. He also seemingly develops relationships with readers of his blog whose LJ he also presumably reads<sup>27</sup>. Despite this, the professional constraints acting on him as a television writer whose “single responsibility [is] to create artistic and commercial success for a television network” (2004) are clear. As a media professional, no matter how much of a fan he presents himself as to his fans, he is also bound by the code of professionalism that is expected of him from the industry. As Hills argues:

[W]hereas Big Name Fans are not generally or always restricted by powerfully normative codes of ‘media profess-

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<sup>27</sup> His user info states that he has 381 journals on his LJ friends list.

ionalism' (which constructs an 'us' versus 'them' moral dualism of the 'professional' versus their 'audience'), fans working on the primary text...have to much more carefully police the ways in which they articulate fan and producer identities. (2006, p. 115)

In this sense, in positing himself as a 'genre fan' on his LJ, Javi has taken on the role of the dual media producer/fan who must nevertheless maintain his 'media professionalism'. Javi (2004a) also goes on to say:

[A] good friend of mine uses as a mantra hyman roth's statement that 'this is the business that we have chosen,' and that is especially true of working tv writers. few people just 'wind up' here. folks like me write for television because we want to – very badly... so if you ever hear me mewling like a wounded lamb ('the network doesn't respect my show!' 'i'm not getting enough promotion!' 'why did they cancel my series when i worked so hard on it?'), feel free to slap me like a bitch.

Javi presents a public persona that is often self-deprecating in his humour, representing himself as a confessed geek and a cultural studies graduate, "who read more post-structuralist literary analysis than [he cares] to recount" (2005). In comparison to Straczynski, who has a tendency to react to fan criticism with sarcasm, as Lancaster (2001) has shown, Javi rarely presents a persona of the 'underdog producer' who does not fit into the Hollywood stereotype. Instead, he openly talks about his love and appreciation for other television and film auteurs he has high opinions of: Abrams, Whedon, Roddenberry and Lucas. He also constantly reminds himself (and his readers) of his love for his job – and role – as a television writer. When he expresses frustration, it is mostly toward the political situation in the US,

particularly his identity as a Puerto Rican, and his annoyance with current popular films and actors (that will in no way affect his television career directly).

Javi's LJ and his personal website allow him to interact with fans online as long as they do not infringe on his professionalism as a media insider. And the fans who read his LJ certainly respect that division, suggesting that the 'ordering' dimension of the media institution – or in this case, the media producer's – symbolic power that Couldry (2000, p. 45) theorised is still in place. Fans thank Javi for being generous with his time and for sharing tips on writing for television (Grillo-Marxuach, 2004a), and they in turn share their personal experiences, directly responding to his blog entries without posing any direct questions about his role in *Lost* or as a television producer in Hollywood who is in the process of developing his own television show.

In a sense, the interaction between Javi's fans (through the responses they give to his posts) and Javi himself almost mirrors the 'non-reciprocal intimacy' that Thompson (1995, p. 219) proposed. Each of Javi's posts has an average of about thirty-to-forty responses from fans, usually from the same posters who diligently read his LJ. But he rarely, if ever, responds further. When there is evidence of a conversation between himself and another poster, it appears that the relationship is already an existing one, suggesting that the person he is corresponding with is either a personal friend or someone who has ties to the industry, or is in the industry. At the very least, it would be someone he knows, or knows of, as the following exchange between Javi and a poster, Rachet suggests:

Hey, my best friend was on SeaQuest. She become friends with Deluis and Raimi and ended up heading to LA after SeaQuest was over, stayed at Raimi's house while he was off Joxer-ing until she found her own place. It sounds like

they were a great group of people to work with.

Yeah, i met ted raimi and the deluise bros. during my brief trip to the set when i produced those little behind the scenes docus for the show, and along with the rest of the cast, they were pretty darned fantastic... (2004b).

The fan-celebrity relationship, then, is still policed by Javi himself, who, it appears chooses to respond (publicly) to a select few. Like Russell T. Davies, the producer of the new and revamped *Doctor Who*, Javi is “less accessible to rank-and-file fans” (Hills, 2006, p. 112). Javi sets himself up to be like his fans – a fan of genre television, gushing over Joss Whedon and the re-imagined *Battlestar Galactica*; he provides tips for writing on television and shares anecdotes about his childhood and current world events, but the fans that he chooses to respond to and the exchanges that ensue, insinuate that these contacts already have a prior relationship with him. So while fans have access to his writings, and may feel they have achieved a sense of intimacy since he addresses his readers as a whole on his LJ, the interaction is still one that is tightly managed by the media producer.

On the contrary, Spotnitz’s approach is seen to be more formal. His responses are methodical and straight to the point and unlike Javi, he rarely reveals his enthusiasm for other current media texts. Throughout his interactions with fans, Spotnitz does not reveal whether he is a fan of any other media texts<sup>28</sup>. His sole function appears to be promoting his projects to an audience who were initially more interested in finding out if a sequel to the 1998 *X-Files* film was going to be made<sup>29</sup>.

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<sup>28</sup> Spotnitz does later go on to praise the work of his former *XF* colleague, Vince Gilligan on the success of *Breaking Bad* (18 July 2008). He also uses the blog as a platform to raise awareness for Stuart Townsend’s (who worked with Spotnitz in *The Night Stalker*) writing and directorial debut, *Battle In Seattle* (23 September 2008).

<sup>29</sup> Spotnitz’s blog began in 2004, prior to the official announcement that a sequel to the 1998 film was confirmed.

Questions posed were answered meticulously, with no option for further comments or discussions.

Having said that, Spotnitz would not hesitate to contact former *XF* colleagues in search of answers to the questions fans posed if they appeared to go beyond his expertise or knowledge, as his reply below indicates:

Excellent, but difficult, question. To answer it, I had to place a call to my old friend Paul Rabwin, the 'X-Files' producer in charge of post-production during all nine seasons. (2004c)

In a sense, while Spotnitz determines which of the emails and messages he receives will be posted, he appears to respond more directly to fans who send in questions, whereas for Javi, fans who send in questions to his LJ comments rarely get entertained or acknowledged. In September 2007, Javi announced that the comic character he had created, *The Middleman*, would be developed into a TV show. At around the same time, 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox officially announced that the studio had greenlit the follow-up *XF* film, and the cast and crew would be returning to Vancouver, the show's main location for the first five years, to shoot the film. The news presented a marked shift in the way both media producers handled their interactions with fans.

With the announcement of *The Middleman*, Javi's posts on his LJ became more centred on the development of the show. By January 2008 when the show was officially picked up for a full season, Javi's LJ became a promotional tool for his own television show. While the same group of fans still responded to his posts, cheering him on with the project, he was rarely seen responding to comments any longer. Instead, the LJ was inundated with trailers for the show, pictures from various convention attendances, such as Comic-Con, as well as links to press coverage putting

Javi in the same league as the Hollywood “geek elite” (Grillo-Marxuach, 2008) made up of the trinity of media producers he has admired on his LJ in the past: J. J. Abrams, Joss Whedon and Ron Moore.

In a seeming reversal of roles, Spotnitz’s blog became more ‘fan-friendly’. In essence, Spotnitz appeared to have realised that promoting a franchise that had been off the air for six years on television may require more of a grassroots approach to promotion than a new show<sup>30</sup>. This tactic, of course, was not a new one. Universal Pictures, in the promotion of Whedon’s film, *Serenity* based on the short-lived but cult favourite *Firefly* utilised the same approach: “In the months leading up to *Serenity*’s release, Universal Pictures capitalised on fan enthusiasm by constructing a members-only online community that awarded points and eventually products (t-shirts, hats, movie tickets, etc.) to those able to recruit more members” (Cochran, 2008, p. 246).

Through his blog, Spotnitz organised for fans to be able to attend premiere screenings of the *XF* sequel in Los Angeles and London. For the London premiere, for instance, Spotnitz ran a contest for fans to win tickets to the screening with both himself and Chris Carter, and David Duchovny and Gillian Anderson in attendance. Throughout the filming process, Spotnitz continued to give fans information such as timings and schedules of promotional events. While Spotnitz was never one to gush like Javi, nevertheless, as the blog posting dates moved nearer to the release of the film, Spotnitz became more personable (in his language and tone) with his fans. When urged to confess that he and co-writer and creator Chris Carter had intentionally leaked spoilers while filming in Vancouver, Spotnitz (2008a) replied:

I've been waiting for this! Pictures of Chris with werewolf

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<sup>30</sup> I will go on to look at how this grassroots promotion creates a level of fan hierarchy in *XF* fandom in the next chapter.

head: fake. Photoshop image of David as werewolf: fake.  
Several call sheets: fake. Some script pages: fake. Expect  
more details on the ‘making of’ documentary on the DVD.

Effectively, while directly answering a fan query about film spoilers released during filming, Spotnitz is also indirectly promoting the future release of the feature film on DVD, promising more information fans would cherish beyond what he is offering on his blog. The shift in interaction is rather obvious in this case. Both producers are promoting a soon-to-be-released product at around the same time (summer of 2008, or the months leading to it): one a new franchise whose success probably depended heavily on the subcultural capital Javi had gained while working on cult shows like *Lost*, and another a trusted franchise that had been off the air for close to a decade.

As the interactions between Javi and his readers on LJ became few and far between – he averaged about 2 short blog posts every month in 2007 and 2008, compared to the longer, more personalised entries around 2004 and 2005 – Spotnitz’s blog became somewhat more personalised. Rather than merely posting emails that he would politely respond to, he was also posting emails of support sent by fans to the film and those principally involved in making the film (particularly, Chris Carter, David Duchovny and Gillian Anderson), or relaying messages from Carter to the fans.

Spotnitz also claims to “read each and every e-mail (even the ones that for one reason or another don’t get published on the blog)” (2008b), and in a rare break of form from his seemingly official ‘blog’, allowed a playfully manipulated poster fashioned in classic *XF* style that made a non-complimentary remark on the American Republican party, and specifically, on the 2008 presidential and vice-presidential candidates (see Figure 4).



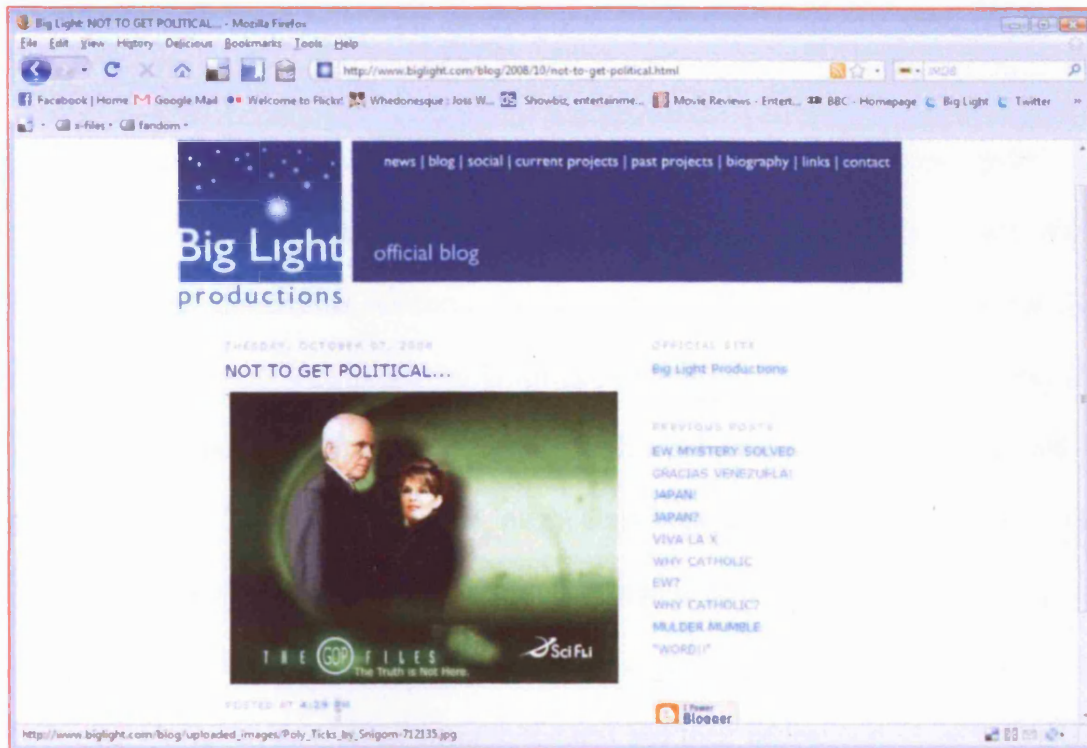


Figure 4: The GOP Giles – The Truth is Not Here (7 October 2008)

Of course, this change in demeanour could very well be due to the fact that the longer he posts, the more comfortable Spotnitz becomes with interacting with his fans, be it discussing past or current projects (even though the bulk of mail he receives is still *XF*-related). Alternatively, it could be viewed that Spotnitz's changing relationship with the fans could be a strategy for promoting the brand (*The X-Files*). In responding enthusiastically to the little information about the filming process or the behind-the-scenes information or stories he chooses to answer fans, Spotnitz is essentially generating talk<sup>31</sup>, not only on his production company's social network forums, but also on other fan communities like LJ, Haven and IWTBXF as fans who frequent his blog spread the information around, directly linking to specific blog entries he has responded to. The deference to Spotnitz's authority in providing

<sup>31</sup> Most fan communities did become more active as the date drew closer to the release of the film. Of course, this could also be entirely due to the fact that it has been six years since new material surfaced for the show so fans were enthusiastically responding like they used to when the show was still on the air.

information reinforces Couldry's theorisations on the media (in this case, the media producer's) symbolic powers.

Couldry has argued that, "the media's differential symbolic power is naturalised through the media's role in framing, ordering, and naming social reality. Together, these dimensions reinforce each other to produce...the 'symbolic hierarchy of the media frame'. This hierarchy is further naturalised through a spatial order (in which media operations are segregated from other spheres) and through imaginative play and fantasy" (2000, p. 57). The interactions between media producers and fans facilitated through the blog indicate that this symbolic power is retained, especially in terms of providing fans (or specific fan factions) insider information deemed as authentic. However, fans' attachment to the text and their endeavours to help promote the text provide a convenient source of free labour (Terranova, 2000, p. 33) for the media producers. The symbolic power of the media producer is further emphasized when the producer singles out a group of fans to convey the message, or chooses to answer specific fan questions that represent a particular textual interpretation, thus creating a level of hierarchy within fandom or be seen as prioritising certain fan groups – all of which I will explore further in the next section as well as the following chapter.

### *The producer's symbolic power*

Earlier in this chapter, I have argued that media producers retain a symbolic power over their fans which Couldry says is naturalised through the categories of framing, ordering, naming, spacing and imagining. Analysed in a different way, one could also argue that Spontitz's tactics, from being stoic and distant to playing a kind of patient, accommodating fatherly role, are a method of co-opting fans into a

grassroots marketing strategy for the *XF*'s follow-up film (and possibly for the entire franchise). Spotnitz himself, along with the show's creator, Chris Carter, has openly admitted to creating "fake buzz" (Caldwell, 2008, p. 62) by leaking false spoilers (the werewolf spoilers referred to above) on the Internet, all in the name of keeping the film's plot a secret.

Their actions also effectively inspired fans to start speculating about possible film plots once the photos circulated around the Internet as fans posted them on forums and mailing list communities, generating the kind of talk that corporate media would welcome, especially for a show that is out of circulation in the mainstream (that is, it is no longer on the air). Caldwell speaks of how corporate media infiltrates message boards to seed them with news and information as part of viral marketing campaigns:

[Industry insiders] uses the analogy of religious proselytizing to explain how viral seeding works: 'If you can lock onto someone and make them an evangelist for your project, it's worth it...The logical extension is for entertainment companies to try to create buzz on projects' (2008, p. 62).

In this case, instead of having to infiltrate fan forums and communities, Spotnitz could very easily access these spaces via his blog, in the way fans spread information gathered on his blog to the various fan forums and mailing list communities. As a respected and beloved media producer in *XF* fandom – his blog, social network, and numerous meetings with fans at events in recent years have endeared him greatly to *XF* fandom, with some affectionately referring to him as 'Uncle Frank' – Spotnitz obviously still retains a symbolic power over the fans.

This begs the question if Caldwell was right in declaring that this kind of behaviour practised by the media industry "should change how we describe and

address online agency and cherished academic notions of audience ‘resistance’” (2008, p. 329). However, I would argue that Caldwell has been a little too quick to jump to this conclusion. Firstly, Caldwell is, like most fan scholars, subscribing to the notion that fandom is homogenous, implying that infiltration to one fan forum such as Television Without Pity means that an entire fandom would have been co-opted into the industry’s marketing strategies. As a fan forum, Television Without Pity is known for its sarcastic summaries and commentaries of television shows, often to the extent of making a mockery out of them. Furthermore, the site clearly states that it is “powered by Bravo”, which is a subsidiary of the NBC Universal conglomerate. Caldwell’s conclusion over corporate infiltration on the site may be justified in this case. However, given Television Without Pity’s agenda and nature of discussions, fans who frequent this community may not necessarily be participants in fan fiction fandom. And even if they were, and have amassed a certain level of status on the forum, those capitals do not necessarily translate outside of the forums that the fan frequents and where the cultural norms of a fan fiction community can be different. Either way, there can never be a guarantee that fans would receive a particular piece of information because some groups tend to be isolationist and prefer to subscribe to the traditional notion that being a fan means that they are resistant towards commercial culture.

Secondly, fans may place information coming from the media industry on a different level of authority compared to information coming from a beloved media producer like Spotnitz. What this means is that the symbolic power of the media is maintained in fandom precisely because the conduit of that power is a media producer (the creator of their favourite texts) and not the film/TV studio (the corporate engine who does not necessarily care about the texts). “Free labour...not necessarily

exploited labour” (Terranova, 2000, p. 48) is provided via fans’ love for the text, and to a certain extent, their love and appreciation of the media producer, not the studios.

So on the one hand, the existence of Spotnitz’s blog exemplifies that media power continues to exist and is naturalised by the categories Couldry (2000) mapped out. But the power is not absolute and fan relationships are often too unstable to judge and guarantee that audience empowerment is a myth, so Caldwell’s assessment is a little bit premature here. In fact, the symbolic power producers retain over fans and audiences might actually fuel conflict among fans. In the space of a blog, if we are truly to assume that it exists in order for Spotnitz to harness the kind of free labour fans are able to provide, Spotnitz would have to prioritise either a group or several fans<sup>32</sup> to convey the appropriate message to the rest of the fandom. In doing so, it gives the group of fans he singled out a form of authority, thus creating a level of hierarchy where these fans will in turn be treated like subcultural celebrities, and which some fans will challenge.

In other words, Spotnitz is generating this cycle of power and conflict that is continuous, aided by fans who choose to participate in this game. The media industry views this as a way of minimizing cost, when you can have free labour provided by eager fans who have a greater reach to the desired audience than any form of targeted advertising or marketing campaign. But in doing so, in inviting fans into the fold, producers also have to take into account that fans, being emotional stakeholders, will not hesitate to challenge them. At the same time, the fans chosen for the task of dissemination also have to exhibit a certain level of professionalism (especially in terms of disseminating the correct information at the opportune moment) that would ensure that they remain useful to the media producers to continue this (beneficial)

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<sup>32</sup> In this case, it is represented by XFilesNews.com (XFN), which I will go on to look at in more detail in the following chapter.

relationship, even if these fan subcultural celebrities would also have to deal with challenges coming from different fan factions, something which I will go into more detail in the following chapter.

### *Conclusion*

I first suggested in this chapter that the advent of blogging and Web 2.0 applications has enabled fans to seek out a new form of intimacy with media producers and celebrities. Fans' fascination with the media world assures the continued power that media producers have, as Couldry (2000) proposed through the five dimensions of framing, ordering, naming, spacing and imagining. The blog – the 'celebrity confessional' (Redmond, 2008, p. 109) – provides another avenue where this contact can be made. But technology is changing the relationship between fans and producers as well as continuing to naturalise the power of the media. I have concentrated on the activity of blogging in this chapter, but media producers and other celebrities like actors and musicians are also making use of other social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter, which I did not explore in greater detail in this case<sup>33</sup>. On Twitter, for instance, entire networks of social connection exist (this social network of media professionals all validate one another, and often combine their forces to expose an imposter) as fans not only communicate with media producers, but also cast and other crew members of a film or television production.

Direct access to fandom is allowing media producers to make use of fans and the labour they are willing to provide in helping producers market their products. This co-option, I argue, creates another dimension to the fan hierarchy: that of the fan subcultural celebrity, which I will go on to look at in more detail in the next chapter.

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<sup>33</sup> See, for instance Warner (2010) and McNutt (2010a, 2010b).

## Chapter 7:

### The semi-professional fan as fan celebrity

In previous chapters, my explorations into the various spaces where fan fictions are distributed have highlighted a system of hierarchies within fandom. Celebrated fan fiction authors and fan community leaders assume, or are accorded leadership roles, not only within the micro-communities these fans are active in, but sometimes across the larger expanse of fandom that adheres to the same readings and interpretations of the original text as the fan leaders. However, in the course of my research process, I have also encountered a group of fans who have yet to be widely acknowledged by fan scholars; a group I would identify as ‘fan journalists’. The role of the fan journalist often stems from the free labour fans have been providing for media producers and celebrities, usually in the form of website or fan club maintenance<sup>1</sup>, through which a mutually beneficial, but not necessarily financial, relationship has developed.

These fans retain a semi-professional status, volunteering their time just like fan fiction authors and fan community leaders do to maintain the fan sites but continually balancing a relationship with both the producers – in order to gain access for future interviews and coverage of the cast and crew’s new projects – and the fans for continued support and interest. In a sense, it could be argued that fan journalists work within the in-between field of fandom. These fan journalists obtain news and interviews to share with other

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<sup>1</sup> Instead of having an official website managed by a production or management company, some celebrities officiate a fan site to help inform their fans of their latest news and projects. Often, the owners of these sites are contacted directly by the celebrity’s management or the (subcultural) celebrity themselves. And as these site owners have direct contact with the celebrities, they in turn, become celebrated for their dedication and connection to the celebrity by other fans. *BSG* actor, Aaron Douglas, also has a fan community based on LiveJournal, maintained by a fan/friend of his to whom he feeds updated information on latest news and convention appearances. Douglas recently announced that he will also be using Twitter as a tool to keep his fans informed (<http://community.livejournal.com/aarondouglas/199891.html>), and in a follow-up post (<http://community.livejournal.com/aarondouglas/200779.html>), meshel73 (or Michelle, as she is widely known among Douglas’s fans) can be seen trying to work out the intricacies of using Twitter by asking for tips on behalf of Douglas.

fans who frequent their websites (a form of autonomous production), but there is always a possibility that the news and interviews will also serve as a resource for official entertainment news outlets, which are increasingly dependent on fansites for updated news (a form of heteronomous production). In both these instances, fan journalists have to maintain a level of professionalism to emphasize and build on a legitimate reputation in the eyes of both fans and producers alike.

Media industry professionals are bound by an ethical code of professionalism not to divulge sensitive information, be it about present and future film/TV developments or the personal lives of the industry's celebrities. Fans, however, do not necessarily share this ethical code: spoiler fans are constantly challenging producers by obtaining and disseminating information to the fan communities (Jenkins, 2006) while fan talk is often filled with speculation and gossip about the actors' personal lives<sup>2</sup>. Exercising the skills and knowledge to disseminate specific information and refrain from revealing others when this code of professionalism is not necessarily required in fandom ensures that these fan journalists will continue to receive inside information, and in the process be legitimated "corresponding to 'bourgeois' taste and to the consecration bestowed by the dominant factions of the dominant class" (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 51); in this case, the media professionals.

In celebrating the work of media producers and celebrities within a specific fandom, these fans in turn become subcultural celebrities themselves. Fans view these semi-professional fan journalists as connections and paths of access to the producers, celebrities and other industry insiders, thus increasing the fan journalists' fan social and symbolic capitals. Within the field of fan journalism, particularly in the specific fandom the fan

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Gray & Mittell (2007) as well as Gray (2010) for a different view about spoilers' fans, and Marshall (2010) on how celebrity gossip is a form of self-production.



journalists are active in, these fans become key members of the fandom, or to employ a term used by Tulloch and Jenkins, “executive fans” (1995, p. 149).

In this chapter, I argue that the changing relationship between media producers and fans has created a hierarchy of fans that appear to possess the status of subcultural celebrities. In re-appropriating scholarly work on celebrity culture in the context of fandom, I will look at the phenomenon of fan celebrities, a hierarchy of fans whose roles within fandom have become even more apparent with the kinds of technology available through Web 2.0. Some of the earlier works on celebrity culture have often polarised fans and celebrities, with fans positioned as consumers who are hungry for any kind of information about their favourite movie or music stars (Thompson, 1995; Barbas, 2002; Théberge, 2005) or as participants in an imaginary relationship with their favourite celebrity (Rojek, 2006). More recent works have noted the blurring of boundaries between film and television stardom (Pearson, 2004) while others have suggested that media fans can potentially become celebrities themselves (Hills, 2006) and that the confessional aspects of blogging have created a greater sense of intimacy between the celebrity and the fan (Redmond, 2008; Chin and Hills, 2008). Media producers still retain their symbolic power, as I have observed in Chapter 6, and this fan-text-producer relationship is prone to an “ongoing, competitive struggle” that Johnson described as “fan-tagonism” (2007b, p. 287). The struggle is not limited to media producers and fans, as fan journalists too draw a line between the roles they inhabit and other fans, be it fans who are sceptical of the fan-producer relationship or fans who treat these fan journalists as celebrities – a boundary we shall observe further in this chapter.

Subcultural celebrity theory (Hills, 2003, 2006; Hills & Williams, 2005) is useful here in exploring the positions these fan journalists inhabit along with the works of fan scholars like Penley (1997), Bacon-Smith (2000) and Crawford (2004) who have looked at the tension between fans who become professionals and fans who retain the amateurish practices of fan

production. But what these scholars fail to acknowledge is the semi-professional fan who maintains their connection to fandom, so they not only play the role of a fan, but also that of someone accorded celebrity status within fandom. To be successful in this, though, fans need to maintain a standard of professionalism in order to continue and build on their relationship with the industry they are essentially providing free labour for. In doing so, they often end up drawing a clear distinction between themselves and other fans, positioning those who choose to perform their fannish identities through adulation of celebrities, for instance, as an ‘Other’.

In the next section, I will look at how fans are being co-opted into marketing campaigns by media producers. In singling out a specific group of fans to disseminate information to fandom on their behalf, producers/celebrities are creating a group of fan celebrities who are treated as liaisons between fandom and the media industry, which is what I will explore in the following section. Finally, I will turn to the notion of “fan-tagonism” (Johnson, 2007b, p. 287) to explore the tension between fan journalists and other fans that has stemmed from the fan journalists’ elevated status within fandom and with media producers.

#### *Fans as co-marketers*

The role of the fan journalist is most evident in sites like XFilesNews.com (XFN) and Galactica.TV (GTV) – two fan sites I will mainly be referring to in this chapter – which not only provide the latest news and happenings centring on the cast and crew of *The X-Files* and all versions of *Battlestar Galactica* respectively, but also feature news articles and interviews that require the fans running the sites to engage in writing that goes beyond the writing of fan fiction. Unlike other fan sites that heavily feature episode guides, character dossiers or links to news articles produced by entertainment news outlets, XFN and GTV offer news items that are presented in the style of a feature or news blurb, and original interviews written and

conducted by fans. However, these fan-celebrity discourses occur within an unofficial capacity, with interviews conducted in the spaces of fan conventions, charity screenings or via emails, all subject to the co-operation of the celebrities involved. For instance, despite being officiated by 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox as an approved *XF* fan site, the XFN staff all volunteer their spare time to help with the running and managing content on the site. Perla Perez, one of the site's correspondents, recalls "moving schedules and commitment to spend money and time wherever it was called for" (2009, questionnaire interview), suggesting that the possession of economic capital underpins the accumulation of fan symbolic capital. The position of these fans are different in comparison to fans of *Doctor Who* fandom who eventually go on to work in the media industry and become deeply involved in the making and production of the new series (Hills, 2010), and whose roles have shifted from fans to official gamekeepers of the franchise.

At the same time, the existence of a site like XFN displays a change in the relationship between media producers and fans, in particular for a media text that had debuted at a time when fans were starting to make use of the Internet for fannish activities. X-Philes<sup>3</sup> are often considered as "among the first to use cyberspace to create their own virtual fan culture and specialized interest groups" (McLean, 1998, p. 3), perhaps preceded only by David Lynch's cult favourite, *Twin Peaks*. At the height of the show's popularity in its earlier years, fans were congregating on newsgroups, email lists and chat rooms – spaces that have since then been overshadowed by the emergence of LiveJournal and social networking sites. But interaction with the producers was mostly indirect, with persistent rumours of the writers and producers lurking in newsgroups and chat rooms, gauging fan reactions to story developments but not necessarily directly interacting with them (Clerc, 1996).

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<sup>3</sup> The term *XF* fans use to refer to themselves.

Fans, particularly those who were active on the official FOX forum, were often name-checked on the show, whether as characters (for example, FBI Agent Leyla Harrison in season 8's *Alone*) or featured in the opening sequence<sup>4</sup> (see Figure 1). With XFN however, information pertaining to former cast and crew of the show is disseminated through the website and XFN staff have covered various events at the invitation of the producers. Even though some of the news is gathered from entertainment news media outlets, XFN has volunteer staff reporters who edit the news write-ups for the website, ensuring that the news reflects fan interests and concerns but does not touch on gossip and speculation on the celebrities' personal lives. As XFN has a set number of staff members who are active in various *XF* fan communities while maintaining access to former producers, how does this affect the relationships between fans within the fandom?

By the time GTV was established in 2004, online fandom had become the norm. It was also more common for fandom to interact with multiple versions of the text<sup>5</sup> beyond television in the form of webisodes, comics, alternate reality games and so forth, giving rise to what Jenkins (2006, pp. 20-21) termed 'transmedia storytelling'. Despite the franchise's long history, the re-imagined *Battlestar Galactica* "was one of the first television series to embrace the continuous dissemination of varied new media content (from podcasts to vlogs), in addition to dabbling in transmedia storytelling techniques (most notably the webisode series and Dynamite Entertainment's *BSG* comic books)" (Scott, 2008, p. 211). Fan-produced podcasts such as the *Galactica Quorum*<sup>6</sup> would regularly feature the cast and crew of the show, with special interviews and sessions recorded mostly during conventions. Unlike the

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<sup>4</sup> Every opening sequence for the entire duration of the show's final season highlighted the online monikers of different fans. The producers intended for it to be a public thank you note to fans, especially those who have been fans from the earliest days.

<sup>5</sup> That is not to say that *The XF* had no other tie-ins besides from the show itself. Novels and comic books were the most common, but they were usually not considered to be a big part of the universe's continuity by fans. The tie-ins that came after for shows like *Lost* and *BSG*, for instance, are closely tied to the plot's developments on the show, and is sometimes referred to as a nod to fans who have conscientiously follow these other versions.

<sup>6</sup> The *Galactica Quorum* can be accessed at <http://galacticaquorum.com/>

mere rumoured presence of *XF* producers in newsgroups and forums when the show was on the air, fans of shows like *BSG* have more direct interaction with media producers, building a different kind of fan-producer/celebrity relationship than the ones *X-Philes* were used to.

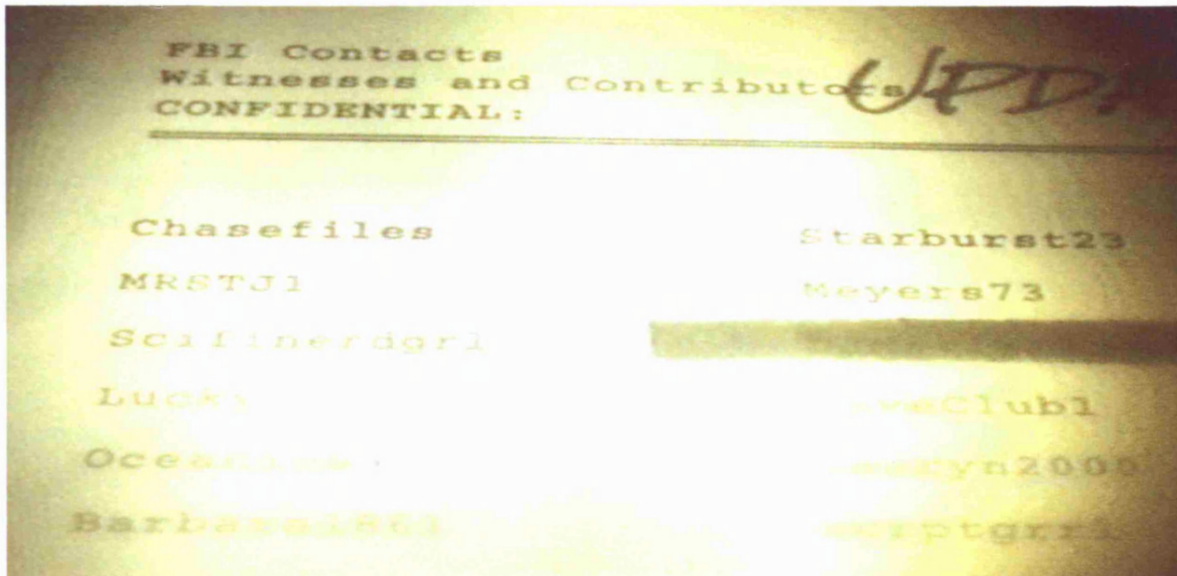


Figure 1: Screen cap from *XF* opening sequence featuring online usernames of fans who were regulars at the official message board<sup>7</sup>.

The collaboration between fans and producers showcases a different kind of relationship, as well as a different outlook on fans, who have been traditionally observed academically via the concept of resistance. Fan creative practices are often cited by cultural studies scholars as acting in opposition to meanings that media producers generally envision for their products. As Williamson (2005) argues, Jenkins (1992) initially classified fans as social insubordinates and threats to corporate power, which many fan scholars then embraced as a sign that the audience was indeed active. Murray questioned if, “cultural studies’ residual disciplinary attachment to reading off fan oppositionality has inhibited engagement with contiguous streams of media analysis” (2004, p. 9), given the media industry’s current disposition to ‘crowd-source’ fans in viral marketing campaigns. Hills suggests that, “rather

<sup>7</sup> Picture credit: XFRoadRunners (<http://xfroadrunners.com/>)

than being viewed simply as ‘poachers’, fans have become part-time collaborators with official producers seeking to incite and retain dedicated fan audiences, and part-time co-opted word-of-mouth marketers for beloved brands” (2010, p. 58). Jenkins (2006) himself later proposed that the onset of convergence culture has led studios and media producers to respond in sometimes contradictory manners, with some welcoming input from fans on their media products while others continue to resist, often going as far as to seek to control and limit this active fan participation. “Media companies are giving out profoundly mixed signals because they really can’t decide what kind of relationships they want to have with this new kind of consumer. They want us to look at but *not* touch, buy but *not* use, media content” (Jenkins, 2006, p. 138 – italics in original).

On the other hand, media producers who take on a collaborative position with audiences are “trying to win grassroots creators over to their side” (Jenkins, 2006, p. 169) by actively engaging fans in dialogue or producing fan-friendly material specifically to enhance fans’ enjoyment of the products. Whereas first generation X-Philes who were watching the show as it aired had to speculate on whether their post-episodic online discussions were being read by the producers, fans of newer television shows are used to interacting with media producers, often in official forums and communities set up by networks or studios. It was common, for instance, to find *BSG*’s executive producer, Ron Moore engaging in heated debates with fans on Syfy’s official forum over his creative decisions on the show’s plot, particularly towards the end of the show’s run<sup>8</sup>. Fan-producer interaction is not limited to official spaces set up by the studios or networks, however. I have observed how producers like Frank Spotnitz and Javier Grillo-Marxuach interact with fans in the space of their personal blogs and social networking sites in Chapter 6. These producer-fan interactions are not merely confined to blogs and forums either. Hart Hanson, the creator and executive

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<sup>8</sup> Some of the discussions can be found here:  
<http://forums.syfy.com/index.php?s=e6dea1bd6a7160691d00e29f14a8a448&showtopic=2329378>

producer of *Bones* also frequently interacts with the show's fans on his personal Twitter rather than merely using it as a broadcast medium as other media producers do.

Derek Johnson (2007a, p. 73) pointed out that it is important that “we must not uncritically accept this shift as evidence of growing audience power”, as the proximity often produces conflicts, not just between fans and producers but also between different groups or factions of fans who interpret the text or perform their fan identity differently. Furthermore, the empowerment is ambiguous, as Johnson has argued that in the eyes of the industry, fans are more like the “domestic help, invited in so as to perform labour” (2007a, p. 78) rather than honorary houseguests. Their engagement with the text and the producers will be controlled so they remain within the boundaries determined by, and suited to, the needs of the industry. Suzanne Scott warns that this newfound collaboration between fan and producer stifles fan creativity as there is a “continuously diminishing amount of time for [fan] narratives to be consumed and embraced by other fans before being replaced by authorised content” (2008, p. 215), where these official extra materials reinforce the authority of the producer.

In an exploration of contemporary production culture in Hollywood, Caldwell (2008, p. 328) suggests that there is a pervasive presence of the media industry in fandom, for media producers or network executives will ensure that even if they themselves “do not produce positive pre-emptive disinformation about their shows and films on [sites like TelevisionWithoutPity.com],...their employee minions at lower levels do”. Caldwell's argument presents a limited view of fandom however, as it suggests that fan discussions are constantly managed by industry workers who have infiltrated fandom. While he does not completely rule out the practice of culture jamming by fans – Caldwell does point out that fans are not afraid of exposing frauds or industry setups when they come across these occurrences – Caldwell's model does not account for the agency of fans, where fan

discussions and practices occur outside of official fan communities and discussion forums, or the possibility that certain factions of fandom may reject any form of intervention or coercion from the media industry, preferring instead to independently explore creative ways of extending the hyperdiegetic world of the text as they (the fans) see fit. Furthermore, scholars like Williamson (2005) and Thornton (1995) have proposed that fans are not the oppressed rebels that many scholars make them out to be. Just as corporate culture makes use of fans to tap into a wealth of free labour to market their media products, it can be argued that some fans only engage with corporate culture and participate in collaborations with media producers when they stand to gain something in return for their services (and their loyalty).

Murray presented a more collaborative scenario between producers and fans, as she argued that in co-opting and incorporating fans into their marketing strategies, film studios and television networks are able to “scotch commercially damaging fan hostility...[as well as] capitalise on elaborate extant fan networks to distribute project publicity more rapidly and cost effectively than could conceivably be achieved through traditional film marketing channels” (2004, p. 8). In an example of this process, 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox sought out XFN, offering to officiate the site, and it “became the only authorized fan site in conjunction with *IWTB*...a link to XFN was placed on FOX’s official ‘X-Files’ site” (Devol, 2009, questionnaire interview). Subsequent coverage of the franchise and the cast and crew related to *XF* was mostly procured through former executive producer, Frank Spotnitz, who has remained approachable to fans since setting up the Big Light social network for fans.

However, officiating a fan site, giving fans exclusive access to promotional materials and the like does not necessarily mean that fans will be less critical of the film studios or TV networks. Fans of *The X-Files* have often criticised the studio for the \$30 million budget allocated to the filmmakers for making the 2008 follow-up film. In a poll on the show’s oldest fan communities, Haven, slightly more than 88% of members who took part were not



happy with the overall marketing campaign (in terms of consistent and visible TV spots as well as posters, particularly in the US) and felt that the studio could have invested more money and effort to promote the film<sup>9</sup>. X-Philes' criticism of the studio's lack of support – at least in the fans' eyes – for the franchise and the producers show that fans have not become complacent in their acceptance of a corporate presence in their fannish lives.

Many discussion threads on Haven suggest that fans draw a distinction between the studio (whose interests in the media products concern how much profit they can gain) and the media producers (who, despite being part of the media industry, fans believe display artistic integrity). In their discussions, fans were critical of the studio's lack of support, attributing it to Fox having forgotten the fans who tuned into the show every week, making both the (then underdog) network and the show a success. As Philiaer observed on Haven: "Fox television was a struggling 'alternative' television station when *The X-Files* was launched. Fans helped pull them up to high ratings. I think they've totally forgotten the fans" (2008, forum discussion). Contrastingly, the producers were seen as someone whom fans could approach to rectify the mistakes made by the studio, and at times, as parties whom the studio had equally wronged: "And people wonder why Chris Carter didn't do anything after *The X-Files*? He probably went off to a mountain in Tibet somewhere to get his sanity back" (Calraigh, 2008, forum discussion).

As I have suggested, this does not mean that fans are less critical of the media producers either. Media producers such as Ron Moore and Hart Hanson have had to deal with fans, directly and publicly, confronting their decisions for plotlines and characters on various social media platforms. Fans are consistently critical of plotlines and characterisations, as well as the marketing and promotional campaigns of their favourite texts, often keeping a

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<sup>9</sup> For more on this discussion, see the thread 'Are you happy with XF2 marketing?' <http://community.idealistshaven.com/forums/showthread.php?t=25185>

close eye on developments and discussing at length in various fan communities how things can be done differently and better. The access and proximity to producers and insider information not only enables fans to collaborate with media producers or to play the role of co-marketers; access and proximity also facilitate an outlet whereby fans can voice their dissatisfaction, and as far as the fans are concerned, offer an opportunity for those complaints to be heard: “The Internet and digital media now provide optimum conditions for realising the culture-jamming imperative, since access to the master’s ‘machine’ is now ostensibly available to everyone” (Caldwell, 2008, p. 329).

Caldwell (2008, p. 62) also points out that fans are not afraid of exposing fraud when they catch it, using an example where NBC faked fan amateurism for the online promotions of one of its shows, going as far as to post production stills marketed as fan surveillance photos, only to be forced to shut this promotional website down amidst fierce criticism when fans exposed the site as a fraud and promotional gimmick. XFN Editor-in-Chief and Art Director, Avi Quijada (2009) speculates that fans, “live in a community that praises...not trusting your neighbour, ‘Trust No One’, but then there’s the other balancing act that we have, that is ‘I Want to Believe’”. While she was reflecting specifically on X-Files, fans – some more so than others – can be sceptical of any corporate or industry involvement in their practices even when certain groups or factions welcome any collaborative effort or partnership with media producers as well as studios and networks. Being emotional stakeholders, fans’ loyalty is usually directed towards the media text rather than the producers even if fans may seemingly embrace any form of acceptance or acknowledgment from media producers, and to a lesser extent, media conglomerates.

Furthermore, in collaborating with the producers, fans stand to gain something in return: recognition within fandom that will build on their fan social capital. The fan journalists on XFN and GTV attend conventions, film premieres and other events, often at the

invitation of convention organisers and media producers. For the fans, these fan journalists represent their voice, and often their interests through their collaborations with, and acknowledgement from, the producers. But when network executives are only interested in generating traffic to a corporate sponsored website disguised as a fansite<sup>10</sup> that claims to offer insider information, fans will respond critically as with the case Caldwell highlighted in his observation.

Neither Murray (2004) nor Caldwell (2008) examined possible impacts the producer-fan relationship has on fandom – the potential for conflicts, as Johnson (2007a) has warned. The producer-fan relationship or collaboration will undoubtedly prioritise certain factions of fans, e.g. a particular group, individual or fans who are participants of a specific forum or community. This ultimately alters the relationship fans have with other fans as well, especially if the collaboration is an ongoing one<sup>11</sup>. In a sense, both Caldwell and Murray were more concerned with how this change in relationship – be it collaborative or seemingly shrouded in manoeuvrings worthy of a James Bond film – impacts the industry. The changing markets<sup>12</sup> and the evolution of media technology mean that fans and audiences have more access to a variety of information, and new, more creative ways have been devised on the industry's part to not only control but also to attract and ensure the loyalty of fans. But the relationship between fans also changes, especially if a particular individual or group of

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<sup>10</sup> As with Caldwell's example as well as fan reactions to corporate-sponsored sites like Fanlib where fans fear they are being mined for creative resources without proper compensation. I looked at the case of Fanlib in an earlier chapter.

<sup>11</sup> This could be both by coincidence, as in the particular fan's comments were randomly chosen by the media producer to respond to, or through more official arrangements, such as the roles played by the fan journalists in XFN and GTV.

<sup>12</sup> Websites now exist, for instance, for budding and small, independent filmmakers to fundraise for a film, where the initial costs are not covered by Hollywood studios but instead through the social networks of the film community, as well as the fans. See, for example, sites like <http://www.indiegogo.com> and <http://www.kickstarter.com>. It is also now not uncommon to see cult TV actors getting involved in web series and generating viewership, again based on their social networks on Facebook and Twitter, and through word-of-mouth on fan communities. Web series like *The Guild* (<http://www.watchtheguild.com>), *Riese* (<http://www.riesetheseries.com>) and *The Ex-Convicts Guide* all feature actors and collaborators who have either appeared, or gone on to appear in cult shows like *Battlestar Galactica*, *Buff* and *Glee*.

individual fans are seen (by fans themselves) to be prioritised by the media producers over others.

Suzanne Scott (2008) suggests that Jenkins's take on the collaborationist position between producers and fans may be too optimistic. She warns that the collaborationist stance media producers have assumed is directing fans to consume authorised content that is traditionally associated with fan narratives (fan fiction that explores a character's back story, fan videos that promote the relationship between a non-canon couple and the like). This leaves fans with no creative space to explore alternative narratives, and fan-friendly official materials only serve to reinforce the authority of the producers, as they provide a guide to fans on how to read and interpret the material. It could also be surmised that the prioritisation of particular groups of fans over others (which could be a matter of convenience or availability of access for media producers) might lead fans to conclude that media producers are indirectly encouraging and endorsing a particular reading of the text. This was certainly suggested by the members of the micro-community of *Angel* fans I examined in Chapter 4, who believed that this reinforces their marginality within the fandom.

While Scott's concerns are certainly valid, these collaborations, nevertheless, are not limited to creative endeavours, and neither do fan-producer collaborations stop fans from supporting a particular relationship. Furthermore, official producers also feed news and spoilers to fans (Jenkins, 2006; Gray & Mittell, 2007; Gray, 2010), which fan journalists and other fans with insider access have taken and shared with the rest of the fandom<sup>13</sup>. Rather than just assume that these fans are being exploited by the media producers, where the media

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<sup>13</sup> Jenkins (2006) hypothesized that *Survivor* fans seek out spoilers as an act of resistance, treating it like a competitive game with the reality show's producers while Gray and Mittell (2007) suggested that *Lost* fans seek out spoilers as "a way of getting *into* the text" (Gray, 2010, p. 149). Hills presented a different argument, explaining the lengths the BBC Wales production team goes into protecting leaks to fandom and to the press in the name of preserving "the intense emotional value ascribed by fandom to experiencing *Who*...during transmission (for the 'unspoiled'). It is by shocking, surprising and moving audiences that the programme comes alive effectively" (2010, p. 11).

conglomerates and media producers act as evil puppet masters to the helpless fans, perhaps we should not undermine fans' emotional attachment to the text (and the characters), and instead, question if there is a beneficial trade off for these fan journalists in exchange for access?

Murray argues that the, "selective non-enforcement of corporate [intellectual property works] in the interests of product publicity and commercial gain" (2004, p. 14); that media companies exploit fan enthusiasm for a media product, therefore giving media corporations access to a wealth of free labour at their convenience. As Caldwell maintains, "the audience hive [is] a source for production not just consumption" (2008, p. 334). This is especially apparent when movie studios have a franchised film to promote. Cochran (2008) uses the experience of one particular *Firefly* fan to illustrate how media conglomerates (in this case, Universal Pictures) capitalised on fan labour when promoting *Serenity* but at the same time, sent mixed signals when they also issued cease and desist letters to the very same group of fans they were trying to court. Gia Milinovich, an online media consultant who worked for 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox to promote the 2008 *XF* film chiefly among fans in Europe found herself served with a copyright infringement notice by Fox's American legal department after she was asked and given permission to publicise the film's teaser trailer on her personal YouTube account. Milinovich immediately got in touch with her then employers, and the notice was retracted in the end. Fans became familiar with this incident when Milinovich blogged about it, and the post was then shared on Haven by a fan who frequents Milinovich's blog<sup>14</sup>.

Milinovich's problems with Fox endeared her to fans who had been experiencing the same treatment from the studio, especially when she actively participated in fan discussions on the studio's actions in removing trailers from various video sharing websites, including

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<sup>14</sup> Milinovich's post, entitled 'Movie Marketing vs. The Lawyers' can be found on <http://www.giagia.co.uk/2008/06/16/movie-marketing-vs-the-lawyers> and the thread on Haven discussing this very issue can be found here: <http://community.idealistshaven.com/forums/showthread.php?t=27063>

YouTube<sup>15</sup>. Murray remarks that it is a worrying trend as media companies “conflate highly conditional granting of fan access to media properties with a legally enforceable *right* to comment creatively” (2004, p. 21), although in this case, it is interesting to note that Milinovich herself is employed by the studio for the sole purpose of implementing a more grassroots method of promoting the film. But Milinovich’s case does exemplify Jenkins’s (2006) suggestion that media companies send out profoundly mixed signals, inviting fans in on one hand to collaborate on, co-market and ultimately consume a media product, but at the same time, curbing how much freedom the very same group of fans have on making use of the material creatively. Johnson (2007a) has similarly observed how the industry controls audiences at the level of production and text in order to render them useful, but goes a step further in suggesting that this fan-producer proximity has resulted in ‘fan-tagonism’, where the industry or the producer is constantly in conflict with the fans.

Milinovich revealed that as a result of her experiences with Fox, she received a lot of requests from fans asking for her help in contacting the studio to retract the legal notices they have been sent in order for YouTube to reinstate their accounts (Milinovich, 2008, interview). Although Milinovich explained there was nothing much she could have done to help those fans, “I did try to reason with my contact [at Fox] that a lot of the fans were just happy to help promote the film after such a long dry spell” (Milinovich, 2008, interview); it stands to reason that the fans who contacted her assumed she could be an official voice for the fandom as well as a possible solution for their potential legal entanglement with the studio. Milinovich’s commiserations with them on Haven exemplify to fans that Milinovich is a fan like them, who merely happens to be an industry insider.

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<sup>15</sup> The thread of discussion can be found here: <http://community.idealistshaven.com/forums/showthread.php?t=26986> and Milinovich’s response, in particular, is here: <http://community.idealistshaven.com/forums/showpost.php?p=512569&postcount=43>

Alison Groves, the moderator for Spotnitz's Big Light social network believes that being a fan as well as being a part of the fan community has helped her tremendously in her role of managing the fans: "It is my philosophy that if you immerse yourself within the community you are working with, things tend to run very smoothly and you can put out any fires before they even really begin. It also helped me tremendously that I was already a huge fan of the show, in that I could spread the 'one of you' mentality which I think goes a long way in maintaining a quality community" (Groves, 2008, email correspondence). Likewise, Groves receives requests from fans that, "range from 'do you think Frank [Spotnitz] would want to participate in this' to 'I have something I want to send to Frank, what should I do'" (ibid.). In both these cases, Milinovich and Groves function as a connection to the producers where fans stand to gain something from the producers. As both are self-professed fans of the show, their interactions with fans on fan communities or at events and gatherings are as fellow fans as well as 'promoter' and 'moderator' with connections to the media producers of *The X-Files*.

Regardless of whether or not Milinovich and Groves are tools used by the corporate media industry as a way of extending the scope of control in managing their media content and its audiences as observed by scholars like Murray (2004), Scott (2008) and Caldwell (2008), a few things are clear. In collaborating with fans, certain groups or fan individuals will be prioritised by the producers – it is after all, an impossible feat for official media producers to reach and communicate individually with all fans across various platforms and communities where fans congregate. This creates a hierarchy whereby those with access will either already be in the industry (like Groves or Milinovich) or possess skills valuable to the industry. These fans' social status will not only be elevated in fandom, where they are treated like subcultural celebrities, but conflict with other fans will also arise due to the connections these fans maintain with media producers. In the next section, I will turn to look at how the

position of these fan journalists as subcultural celebrities, and their possession of the code of professionalism affect their relationship with other fans.

### *Fans as subcultural celebrities*

The figure of the celebrity, at least within the study of celebrity culture, has been dominated by the film star as scholars argue that the media formats of film and television produce different concepts of fame and celebrity: “Canonical conceptions of television fame...emphasise how the medium’s rhetoric of familiarity and intimacy, and the domestic context of its reception, mitigate against the paradoxical and enigmatic construction of the film star, instead creating the ‘personality effect’ (Ellis 1982, Langer 1981/1997)” (Bennett & Holmes, 2010, p. 66). Scholars like Marshall (1997) have observed that television produces celebrities that embody characteristics of the familiar, suggesting that the concept of television stardom is closely tied to a sense of intimacy the audience feels as they encounter the actor and the character he or she plays on a weekly or daily basis. As a result of this sense of familiarity and intimacy with the characters, fan audiences have been alleged to privilege the character over the actor (Pearson, 2004; Bird, 2003). The television celebrity is framed within the context of proximity and ordinariness in comparison to the ‘extraordinariness’ or larger-than-life representations of the Hollywood film star.

The (Hollywood) film star, on the other hand, is often presented and observed as a sign (Dyer, 1979), an image (Boorstin, 2006) or a brand name (Turner et al., 2000) created by an institution that encourages and depends on the voracious consumption of its audience. Celebrities are “marketing tools as well as sites where the agency of the audience is clearly evident; and they represent the achievement of individualism – the triumph of the human and the familiar – as well as its commodification and commercialisation” (Turner et al., 2000, p.



13). As brand names that are constantly in the public gaze, film stars represent ways in which the public negotiate patterns of behaviour, dress, and even lifestyles. The relationship between film celebrities and their fan audiences is constantly shaped by the tension of locating the authentic individual underneath the public persona.

For Joshua Gamson, “celebrity is a primary contemporary means to power, privilege, and mobility” (1994, p. 186). However, citing Alberoni, Turner et al. (2000) suggest that celebrities are in fact, essentially powerless despite their supposed elite position within society as their celebrity status is revocable by the public and the institutions that constructed them in the first place – the tabloid press, in particular, love to chart the rise and fall of celebrities, often being at the forefront of breaking news that would cause scandal for the targeted celebrity: “For Alberoni, stars are a modern phenomenon that has emerged from the developing complexity and social fluidity of modern society. They are an elite ‘whose institutional power is very limited or non-existent, but whose doings and way of life arouse a considerable and sometimes even maximum degree of interest’” (Marshall, 1997, p. 15). But what this also suggests is that celebrities possess more of a cultural power rather than a political one. Hollywood stars can, for instance, bring attention and raise awareness to causes they are passionate about (for example, U2’s Bono and the Red Campaign) but it is rare for them to be able to directly influence government policy based on the symbolic capital they have amassed through their celebrity status<sup>16</sup>.

The problem with viewing celebrity as a sign, an image or a brand name is that it confines the audience into the restrictive role of the consumer. Fan audiences are assumed to avidly consume the sign and the brand of the celebrity and the products these celebrities

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<sup>16</sup> This does not mean that these celebrities have not tried, as Bono had done. Others, like George Clooney have been reported to appeal to their governments for assistance with their supported causes. See, for example, the coverage of Clooney’s plea to US President Obama regarding the situation in Darfur at <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2009/feb/24/clooney-gets-white-house-promises-darfur>

produce and promote. If they are not conceived as indiscriminate consumers, then fans are imagined to be seeking “validation in imaginary relationships with the celebrity to whom they are attached in order to compensate for feelings of invalidation and incompleteness elsewhere in their lives” (Rojek, 2001, p. 52). Rojek identifies this as ‘para-social interaction’, a form of intimacy that is performed through the mass media rather than any direct, physical contact, where the interaction is with a representation of the person instead of any face-to-face meeting or contact. Holmes and Redmond (2006, p. 3) counter Rojek’s argument by stressing that the para-social relationship between the fan and the celebrity is important in analysing fame:

Stars and celebrities have often been perceived as performing a surrogate function, standing in for absent or non-existent friends and family (Schickel, 1985). ... In the modern world where real face-to-face intimacy, with people you know, has arguably decreased, fandom involves an ‘illusion of intimacy’ that aims to compensate for such loneliness (ibid.: 4). But the para-social relationship may also involve a much more productive or life-affirming connectivity. The fan/star/celebrity relationship may actually be one of the most intimate and far-reaching forms of sociability in the modern world.

Celebrity culture theorists such as Rojek tend to revert to a structuralist view of the audience, preferring to understand the celebrity-fan relationship as stemming from a feeling of inadequacy on the fans’ part; that fans actively seek a relationship with the celebrities, even if it is an imaginary, one-sided interaction, to fulfil a lack in their mundane lives: “Celebrities offer peculiarly powerful affirmations of belonging, recognition and meaning in the midst of the lives of their audiences, lives that may otherwise be poignantly experienced as under-performing, anti-climactic or sub-clinically depressing” (Rojek, 2001, p. 52). Interestingly enough, the positing of fans in such a pathological and powerless position

appears to contradict the idea that the celebrity's status and popularity are revocable by the public, and hence, are never permanent, as the celebrities are replaceable. "The celebrity's formative power rests with the people as an expression of popular culture and social will," Marshall (1997, p. 56) argues. But what this approach to viewing the fan-celebrity relationship also reveals is the restrictive nature of the way we think of and consider celebrities, and their relationship to fans. Hills (2006, p. 101) argues that:

'Mass recognition' is said to be concentrated on a symbolic elite of celebrities, who 'belong to a very restricted visibility class' (Holmes, 2005: 213), meaning that the media world is effectively divided into two groups: those who are visible in the media, and so possess high status, and those who are invisible, the far lower-status audience of fan-consumers. As David Holmes puts it, this 'boundary division... traps the star as much as the fan' (2005: 214) in alienated social interactions defined by the presence/absence of symbolic power.

By limiting the relationship of the celebrity and fans to a rigid binary of producer and consumer, we are also limiting the ways in which we can apply the concept of celebrity, especially considering the emergence of the Internet and its impact on social relationships and the construction of celebrity. Marshall (2006, p. 634) asserts that, "the symbiotic relationship between media and celebrity has been ruptured somewhat in the last decade through the development of new media". In an era of "DIY celebrity" (Bennett & Holmes, 2010, p. 76), our encounters with celebrities are increasingly occurring away from the primary texts of film and television and extending into self-publishing spaces of the Internet like blogs or YouTube, thus changing the contours of the concept of fame<sup>17</sup>: "The Internet

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<sup>17</sup> The Media Commons Project, In Media Res, recently dedicated a special collection of discussions into Fan/Celebrity Relationships, and some of the discussions have looked into this very context of fame, specifically the relationship between the celebrity – actor, blogger, gossipier or otherwise – and their fans. The

has offered a potentially liminal cultural space where the usual mechanisms of media-industry celebrity cultivation can be supplemented or even side-stepped, as in the generation of ‘net celebrities’ where cultural consumers turn producers by setting up their own commercial websites” (Hills, 2006, p. 102).

The traditional academic outlook on celebrity culture also confines the figure of the celebrity into very rigid categories defined by the media formats the celebrities appear in. Literature on celebrity culture generally assumes television as an inferior format, its celebrities lacking the aura that surrounds film stars, where personalities rather than celebrities are created. Due to television’s domestic nature, the character is often privileged over the actor by fan audiences. S. Elizabeth Bird (2003) situates fans into two distinct groups: those interested in the on-screen characters and those interested solely in the actors. However, Hills and Williams argue that to categorise fans in this “either/or way” (2005, p. 346) is too restrictive a view on fandom. In their exploration into the subcultural celebrity of James Marsters and the character that he famously portrayed from 1998 to 2004 across *Buffy, the Vampire Slayer* and its spin-off, *Angel*, Hills and Williams suggest that appreciating both the actor and the character define this particular subgroup of fandom and inform the way fans interpret the texts<sup>18</sup>.

Like Hills and Williams’s argument that an ‘either/or’ categorisation of fans is too restrictive, the same can be argued for the way celebrity culture situates celebrities into film stars or television personalities. It assumes that television (or other media forms like video games or books) does not get developed into film or vice versa, or that actors do not move

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discussions can be found here: <http://mediacommons.futureofthebook.org/imr/theme-week/2010/23/fancelebrity-relationships-june-14-18-2010> (accessed 18 June 2010).

<sup>18</sup> The recent popularity and general acceptance (among many different fandoms) of Real Person Fiction (RPF) suggest that this method of interpreting the text has also influenced what fans do with the text creatively, whereby personality traits of the characters actors famously portray are injected into their imagined personas. One could argue that fans who write RPF are interpreting both sets of persona the actor inhabits: the character and the public actor.

between the various forms. Film actors like Edward James Olmos, Mary McDonnell and Kiefer Sutherland have had starring roles in critically acclaimed television series like *Battlestar Galactica* and *24*<sup>19</sup> respectively, whereas actors like George Clooney and Will Smith have successfully transitioned from TV actors into film. The notion of ‘extraordinariness’ normally assigned to film stardom is also not limited to film celebrities, as Pearson (2004) argues. Looking at the career of Patrick Stewart post-*Star Trek*, Pearson concludes that the actor “functions as a figure of equivocal attraction for viewers both male and female – desirable but beyond the reach of the ordinary fan. ... Stewart is both conflated with his character and extraordinary” (2004, pp. 74-75), even if his ‘extraordinariness’ may well have something to do with his Englishness and Shakespearean background that *Star Trek* producers and Paramount Studios made use of in the show’s intertextual references and publicity material. “The film star’s aura of distance and distinction is breaking down,” argues Marshall (2006, p. 643) as celebrities – actors, directors, producers – move between film, television and other content produced within the context of convergence culture.

In this “culture of pervasive celebrity” (Bennett & Holmes, 2010, p. 77) where the tools of self-publicity are easily available to the general public, film stars now have to compete with other celebrities, some of whom are self-made on the Internet or participants of reality TV, to be seen and heard. While newer works on celebrity culture acknowledge the role new media plays in changing the structure of fame and the system of celebrity – Bennett and Holmes suggest that celebrity culture has much to learn from paying more attention to “specifications of television fame” (2010, p. 77), in particular its renewed emphasis on the concept of the ‘presentational self’ – the celebrity-fan/audience relationship is still based on the concept of “distance rather than contact, and mediation rather than reciprocal presence” (Hills, 2003, p. 60). The more intricate celebrity-fan relationship is still largely absent from

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<sup>19</sup> This is not just limited to cult TV, as Martin Sheen’s foray into television via *The West Wing* has been lauded by critics.

scholarship. This is also interesting, considering that Marshall (2006, p. 635) credits the “discourse of becoming and transformation” as one of the important aspects of celebrity culture. The “celebrities’ origins are from the populace” (ibid.) but it would seem that as soon as the transformation is achieved (the individual changes from a member of the audience/the populace into a celebrity) and economic capital is exchanged and accumulated, the relationship between the celebrity and the fan audience beyond that of producer and consumer is mostly ignored.

Matt Hills (2003) argues that the archetypal theorizations of celebrity culture from theorists such as Rojek (2001) do not allow for a more flexible framework for observing celebrity status, as one of the main assumption deems the celebrity to be ubiquitous, and any interaction with fans is framed within the context of distance and mediation. This “singular conceptual version of ‘celebrity’” (Hills, 2006, p. 102) does not adequately include cult TV celebrities, who rather than interact with their fans from a mediated distance, may consistently have personal contact with them, through conventions, signings and other personal appearances<sup>20</sup>. Hills classifies cult TV celebrities as subcultural celebrities: “mediated figures who are treated as famous only by and for their fan audience” (2003, p. 61). Cult TV actors like Leonard Nimoy and James Marsters are but two examples of subcultural celebrities, who may never achieve wider recognition beyond the iconic roles they both played in *Star Trek* and *Buffy, The Vampire Slayer* and *Angel*<sup>21</sup> but are deeply-loved and well-respected in their respective (and ‘adoptive’) fandoms.

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<sup>20</sup> Indeed, many fan-celebrity collaborations have emerged from such encounters. The fan who runs the fan community for *BSG* actor Aaron Douglas, for instance, started the community after meeting the actor at a fan convention: “I started this community after meeting Aaron Douglas at Dragon\*Con in...2006. This man LOVES the fans, and the fans love him back” (hijinx400). The co-maintainer of the fan community is also known among the fandom as a fan who met the actor at a fan convention in Australia, and eventually became personal friends with him. Douglas would frequently convey messages and his convention scheduling through the maintainers of the community to his fans in general.

<sup>21</sup> The recent casting of Nimoy in *Fringe* can be used as an example of subcultural casting here, with the news announcements making waves among niche press such as science fiction and cult TV magazines and websites.

Celebrity culture does not give much scope to the kinds of celebrity produced within fan cultures that incur “restricted celebrity status” (Hills, 2003, p. 61) either. Fan journalists – essentially Big Name Fans (BNFs) who have attained a certain degree of recognition in the fan community – find themselves in similar situations, even if they are only well-known within a very specific micro-community within fandom. Hills argues that the, “mechanisms of subcultural and niche mediation play a role in constructing and sustaining specific individuals as widely known within their subculture, where this recognition can – just like more generalised celebrity – be non-reciprocal, i.e. the subcultural celebrity is known to a far wider circle of fan-consumers than he or she in turn socially knows” (Hills, 2006, p. 104). Fan journalists consistently find themselves confronted by admirers of their contributions to the fandom, and with social networking, these encounters often extend beyond fan conventions or fan communities to the fan journalists’ personal Twitter and Facebook accounts. Essentially, fan journalists accrue their own fans (and sometimes, the opposite, where these fan journalists, or fan celebrities, find themselves faced with fans who are sceptical of their connection to the official media producers or actors).

Quijada revealed that *XF* fans have started following her updates on Twitter since her name became more synonymously attached to XFN and the site became popular: “I write on my blog on the site every now and then and keep an out-of-site blog that I know some of them have read and comment [sic]. Facebook is always a way that people follow me because they see the links I post from time to time about the site, so it’s natural that they eventually request to friend me [sic]” (2009, questionnaire interview). Fans have also approached XFN requesting to be introduced to the media producers and *XF* actors the fans have access to in the course of their coverage on the franchise. While Quijada reflected that these requests are a

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Likewise with the casting of Marsters in the *Battlestar Galactica* prequel, *Caprica*. Seeing as J.J. Abrams, creator and executive producer of *Fringe* remade *Star Trek*, and Jane Espenson, the current showrunner of *Caprica*, used to executive produce *Buffy*, the choice of casting may be obvious.

natural and frequent occurrence, they have had to turn fans away to protect the integrity of their own connections to the producers and celebrities:

Most of the time [it] is an aspect of confidentiality. Even for ourselves contact with XF alumni is controlled...[To] maintain a healthy relationship with these sources, you need to be very diplomatic, delicate and smart. There are times that we help out depending on the case to create links between these fans and the producers or cast, but it really depends on the case. We have helped very specific cases after we evaluate them and determine if it would influence our relationship with them in anyway, good or bad. (2009, questionnaire interview).

Quijada clarifies that XFN staff mostly evaluate requests that are related to charitable works or events that they feel the producers and cast would be interested in, and would generally benefit the *XF* franchise. Further evaluations will be based on who is doing the requesting, and whether these fans have already had a prior reputation in fandom, especially if the events are related to specific charitable organisations. Basically, the requests will be assessed based on the possession of fan social and symbolic capitals:

If we don't know them, it depends sometimes on the reason this person has to contact them. If the person has a proven experience of being a worker for the fandom...we don't have a problem sharing or trying to contact them in their name. We don't share information with strangers, over eager fans, people that have no motivation other than 'I just want an autograph or make sure he/she reads my mail. I want to send them flowers, etc.' (ibid.).

Marcel Damen's encounters with fans mostly occur during fan conventions (specifically *BSG*-centric ones), at which he is a frequent presence, usually as an invited guest of the convention organisers due to his work on GTV:



People who I don't know come up to me since they feel they know me (especially at these specific BSG cons...there are plenty who come across my website regularly). I now suddenly have people who are my new best friend because of what I do for fandom... They're interested in my stories and my relationship to the actors. (Damen, 2008, email correspondence).

In Damen's case, conventions provide the perfect setting where he can finally meet up with the show's actors he has been corresponding with via emails and phone calls previously. But he finds that his subcultural celebrity status among fans gets in the way of his exercising his role as a fan journalist as well as his socialising with the actors whom he has been in communication with. Damen recalls an incident with two fans of actress Michelle Forbes at a *BSG* convention in 2008. Having never met the actress despite running her fan club, the fans asked Damen for an introduction:

I did and that was it for Michelle. BUT I had an interview with Michelle on the con (they were of course interested in; they asked if they could join in, but I never do that...especially since they were of the fanatic kind and I knew I could not keep up being all professional with them around!), plus I had dinner with Michelle. They were interested to hear all about it, get the scoop on things and even wanted to know what Michelle EXACTLY had for dinner (2008, email correspondence).

Fans of Sherlock Holmes, whom Pearson investigated, drew similar boundaries between themselves as objective admirers or devotees of literature versus the commonly portrayed over the top hormone-induced behaviours of fans: "It's the perceived 'loony' or irrational nature of the fannish response that puts these Sherlockians off...Rationality is a key distinction between the Sherlockians and those whom they think of as fans" (2007, p. 106).

Maintaining professionalism and objectivity is key in continuing a relationship with the celebrities, as it is important that these fan journalists differentiate themselves from other fans who are perceived as being only after 'superficial' information, such as what their favourite celebrity had for dinner. Professionalism must be retained in order for these fan journalists to continue gaining access to subcultural celebrities. Information, too, becomes hierarchically valued whereby mundane information such as that commonly found in tabloids is deemed to be of less value compared to the preferred information pertaining to the actor's craft and his or her career, i.e. more serious issues.

In the chart of a fan's career, Crawford (2004, p. 46) suggests that devoted and professional fans tend to be elitist, in a sense that fans in this particular career path "often seek to assert their legitimacy and position (and distinguish themselves from other supporters) on the basis of their 'natural' understanding of the game, or superior knowledge and experience". Thornton affirmed this very notion of the 'natural' understanding of the game as "nothing depletes capital more than the sight of someone trying too hard" (1995, p. 12). The fans Damen encountered at the convention were trying too hard to form connections to him, just as the fans who requested to be connected to *XF* producers and actors only to get their mail read were revealing their inexperience at how these celebrity-fan connections work. In order to continue maintaining access to producers and celebrities, fan journalists have to instil a code of professionalism in their interactions with both fans and the media industry. This code of professionalism sets them apart from 'other' fans, as Damen and the XFN staff justify, but in doing so, they also begin to portray the fans they come into contact with as 'Others'.

In my email correspondence with Quijada, we touched on the notion of 'professional fans', which Quijada sees herself and the XFN staff and contributors as. By her definition, professional fans go beyond merely watching and enjoying the show: "we go past the natural

activities of being just a fan such as watching the episodes, scouting news about our idols and collecting, which I do, but we actually want to make something for the fandom, to keep it going...[for] other generations [of fans]" (Quijada, 2009, questionnaire interview). However, in doing so, in the attempts to leave a legacy for future generations of fans as Quijada claims, these fans constantly draw a line between themselves and their fan identities and other fans. In comparison with other fans, the 'professional fan':

[L]ooks past fangirling, past the emotion controlled fits and sees the big picture, where idols are looked different [sic], less admirable statues but more like admirable teachers...[they] join charities, learn about other lifestyles, and over all expose themselves to other realities other than day dream about the stories we're so fond of (ibid.).

Per Quijada's argument, only the fans who look beyond 'fangirling' and who possess the code of professional behaviour want to give something back, not just to fandom, but also to society in general. She highlights the formation of the charity organisation, IBG<sup>22</sup>, by four *XF* fans who were inspired by Gillian Anderson's philanthropic work as an example where "fans no longer are just passive recipients but actually people that give back" (2009, questionnaire interview). One could argue that this is also a form of gift exchange, as I have suggested in Chapter 2, that the exchange of gifts expresses and maintains social relationships. In this case, the fans' gift to fandom and society is through, for instance, the charity organisation or through something like XFN where the fan journalists are ensuring future generations of fans can continue to enjoy not only the works of the producers but also get to know them through the fan-conducted interviews. The notion of fan activism – of giving back – can be considered a form of gift-giving that will lead to the accumulation of status, reputation and authority within the community.

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<sup>22</sup> Although it has now changed its name to 'Inspire. Believe. Give', IBG (<http://www.ibgteam.org/>) used to stand for 'Inspired by Gillian'. From Anderson's supported charities, the non-profit has gone on to expand to help other small charities championed by former cast and crew members of *The X-Files*, often utilising fan activism and celebrity involvement in their fundraising drives.

At the same time, Quijada's statements present a binary of 'us' (so-called professional fans) and 'them' (the fangirls) where the other is presented as passive and daydreaming, unwilling to take up a worthy cause or to view the celebrities as normal people. Hills suggests that, "fan culture [internalises]...criticisms from without...[as] fans...distance themselves symbolically from pathologisations of fandom as 'sad' [and] infantile" (2010, p. 60)<sup>23</sup>. In doing so, fan journalists position themselves closer to the media producers and celebrities, as players who understand how the media industry works, and further, as gate-keepers to the celebrities. They possess the authority (at least in fandom) to decide who has access to the celebrities, and by extension, which cause is worthy of being brought to the attention of the producers. As Thornton argued, the "distinctions are never just assertions of equal difference, they usually entail some claim to authority and presume the inferiority of others" (1995, p. 10).

Having said that, as part-time collaborators with the media producers and actors, fan journalists are also expected to keep to the media industry's standards and codes of conduct in order to maintain that relationship – a relationship or collaboration that could very easily be awarded to other fans whom the producers deem more trustworthy should the possibility surface that the fan journalists do not maintain appealing modes of professionalism. As Tiffany Devol, Content Director and Public Relationships Officer for XFN explains:

We've had people outright ask us for contact information for Frank, Gillian among others. When we carefully and diplomatically refused at first it was heated but we just tried to say look. This is the way it is. These are real people, and I wouldn't want someone arbitrarily giving out my phone number, why would they want us to give out theirs? That's the problem with fandoms sometimes...they forget that people

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<sup>23</sup> Hills explains that within *Doctor Who* fandom, this is sometimes done in the form of 'fanwank', a continuity reference thrown in purely serving as a device to please the fans, but having little relevance or connection to the story. Fanwank serves as a "symbolic distancing projecting infantilism onto other(ed) sections of fandom" (Hills, 2010, p. 60).

like Gillian are regular people. We do want to do what we can, but at the same time we have to maintain a very careful balance that is critical if we are to continue toward a third film and getting FOX' ear [sic] (2009, questionnaire interview).

Damen agrees, reiterating that relationships with the celebrities are very fragile as it is often hard for the actors to “judge if I’m a sane, more professional fan or some fanatic that suddenly loves them since we’ve gone out for dinner and now thinks we’re dating...If I start sharing...details, I’d break the trust” (2008, email correspondence).

Fans often view these fan journalists not only as part of their fan communities, but also as a part of fandom which has achieved a connection with the producers and cast. “Fans...started inviting me in their...groups and made me an honourable member. Some would...invite me on their fan meetings as a special guest and offered to pay all my expenses as long as I would do some sort of Q&A about my experiences and meeting the stars – share anecdotes” (Damen, 2008, email correspondence). By extension, these fan subcultural celebrities become another avenue where fans can obtain privileged information about the media celebrities, and in the process, because of their socialisation with both the media celebrities and fans, they become celebritized.

While Tulloch and Jenkins (1995) refrained from using the word ‘celebrity’, their theorisation of executive fans can be argued to contain aspects of fan subcultural celebritydom as well. According to Tulloch and Jenkins, executive fans, “have *discursive* power in establishing ‘informed’ exegesis for their subculture of fans. Thus they establish and control an important reading formation” (1995, p. 150). If fans’ power had come from the possession of detailed knowledge of the show’s history and access to spoilers, which as Williams (2004) argued, is also another form of knowledge, the cultural and discursive power of the executive fans is also connected to the fans’ access to celebrities and the media producers. Andrea

MacDonald (1998) had acknowledged that access to insiders provided a level of hierarchy for fans which often resulted in expressions, mocked or otherwise, of jealousy from other fans. However, MacDonald did not go on to suggest how this might impact on fan culture in general, how fans obtain access, or whether these fans with insider access stand to gain anything from the fandom or from the media industry. Furthermore, MacDonald did not clarify if these fans were expected to hold to the industry's standards of professionalism in order to continue having this access.

In her observations on slash fan fiction authors who have turned pro, Constance Penley observed that there is an underlying tension "between the commitment to amateurism and the wish to perfect one's craft along more professional lines" (1997, p. 112). Many of the authors who have turned pro maintain a relationship with fandom because of the support authors receive from the community and the sense of loyalty they feel towards it, but the tension is further fuelled when these fans, in order to profit commercially, have to de-slash or heterosexualise their own stories. This is often seen as a form of betrayal by fans who remain within the fan fiction communities; a sign that authors have turned mainstream, and are no longer resistant to commercialisation.

On the other hand, in Bacon-Smith's observation, the role of the fan was absent as soon as fan authors turned pro and enter into a financially beneficial relationship with the media industry. In her treatise, Bacon-Smith suggested that those who become published science fiction authors possess the necessary cultural, and at times, social capital they have accumulated in fandom, but Bacon-Smith does not go on to indicate if this relationship with the fans continue on after the fan author has achieved success at converting their fan cultural production into economic gains, or if they maintain distance: "Those who succeed will, in most cases, come out of the pool of hopefuls who established themselves as avid readers of the genre by their teens. For that reason, most industry hopefuls are encouraged to attend the

conventions, where they make the social connections they will need to move into the business” (2000, p. 192). In a sense, this is no different from Marshall’s (2006) hypothesis of transformation in celebrity culture, where the status of celebrities is rarely inherited, but rather earned and accumulated from their humble beginnings among the populace.

Hills (2006) has commented how Russell T. Davies, having progressed from being a fan to an executive producer of the new *Doctor Who* series, maintains a distance from the fans even though other *Doctor Who* writers frequently respond to fan queries on the fan website, Outpost Gallifrey. Davies would reflect on his fandom in official subcultural media like the *Doctor Who Magazine*, Hills notes, but has thus far avoided making any direct contact with the fan community, unlike his peers. Hills suggested that:

subcultural celebrity reaches its apotheosis, it would seem, where it most clearly replicates the symbolic inequalities theorised in relation to ubiquitous celebrity. That is, while *Doctor Who* fan audience discussion, speculation and interpretation of ‘RTD’s’ work is rife, the man himself only enters into the subcultural arena of contemporary fandom under highly controlled and stage-managed conditions, thus preserving a sense that his ‘professional’ identity is set apart from the profane world of fandom (2006, p. 113).

Instead of playing a uniting role, where fans now have a connection or access to the very industry they have spent years coveting, fan producers like Davies draw a strict line between the roles they play as fans and as professional media producers. Hills concludes that, “these cultural identities can only co-exist somewhat uneasily and liminally, given the very different institutional ‘imagined subjectivities’ (Hills, 2002) and forms of expertise which mark out each subcultural world” (2006, p. 113). To be taken seriously as a media producer who has emerged from fandom, Davies would have to project himself as exhibiting the

professional traits of the industry, thereby distancing himself from the fandom and perhaps even positing fandom as an ‘other’, much like the slash authors Penley (1997) observed who had to mainstream their fictional works. As these fans become professionals, they are no longer merely subjected to the criticism of other fans, but would also have to subscribe to industry and commercial standards that may well be wary of fandom.

This is not limited to fan professionals like Russell T. Davies or fan fiction authors who have turned pro, as I have observed in this chapter. While fan journalists remain semi-professional and do not profit financially from the work they do for their fandoms<sup>24</sup>, they must maintain an accepted level of professionalism (particularly at the level accepted by celebrities and media producers) in order to continue receiving first hand news, to have access to media events or conventions, and to conduct interviews. In doing so, they must also draw a line between themselves (their professional conduct) and other fans, in the process creating an ‘us’ versus ‘them’ binary and positioning themselves as gatekeepers of the celebrities and media producers other fans wish to approach.

However, this does not mean that these fan journalists’ positions are accepted without challenge or suspicion. Fandom is in constant flux where relationships and allegiances shift, and fans can move from one community to another. In the next section, I will turn to look at the conflicts that occur in fandom between fan journalists and fans who frequent forums like Haven, who are often critical of so-called ‘insider news’.

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<sup>24</sup> This, of course, does not mean that they have no intentions of becoming industry professionals. While neither Devol nor Damen are working in the media industry (Devol is a Senior Project Manager and PR Director for a US government contractor and Damen is an architect), Quijada, a freelance film and TV producer in her native Venezuela is currently pursuing an MFA at the American Film Institute and intends to pursue a career in the industry.



### *Fan-tagonism: conflict within fandom*

MacDonald (1998) argued that fan insider access often results in expressions of jealousy – sometimes mocking, but perhaps other times, real – at the luck and opportunity fans have in meeting their favourite celebrities or the insider information they have managed to procure. In the previous section, I looked at how fan journalists are treated like subcultural celebrities by their fellow fans, and the relationship that is established between the fan journalists and the fans who befriend them, often as a way of gaining access to media producers and actors of cult TV shows, much like Frigyes Karinthy's notion of 'six degrees of separation'. These sometimes overzealous fan reactions have compelled fan subcultural celebrities to draw a line creating a binary of us (the objective semi-professional fan) and them (the emotional stereotypical fangirl/boy).

However, the relationship between various fan factions is often wrought with tension. Johnson (2007b) had applied the notion of fan-tagonism to examine the struggles between fan factions, challenging earlier assumptions that fan communities are a unified interpretive community (Jenkins, 1992; Bacon-Smith, 1992). In his exploration, Johnson examined how fans construct the aesthetic history of their favourite shows through the definition of golden ages and all time lows within the time frame of the show's life span – Tulloch and Jenkins acknowledged this as the fans' "power to gloss" (1995, p. 145). Johnson concluded that in their debates about a favourite season, character or shipper groups, what is clearly exhibited is a hierarchy of taste. But in terms of fan subcultural celebrities and their struggles with other fan factions, I want to suggest that what is distinguished in these distinctions is what MacDonald termed "hierarchy of access" (1998, p. 137).

For a lot of the fans, having access to insider information is also about being able to go back to the fan community and have the authority to say, for example, to other fans: 'I

have sources...' or 'I just spoke to/emailed [insert celebrity name] and he/she/their agent/personal assistant verified...'. While these sources are often not named by fans, friends of these fans often act as authenticators, confirming or denying their knowledge of access their friends have to the industry. This often results in conflict within fan communities, especially if the information obtained appears to be speculative or scandalous. Fans who are able to contribute to their respective fan communities with exclusive information that are eventually verified as authentic<sup>25</sup> stand to gain fan social and cultural capitals: the aforementioned hierarchy of access.

However, as I have mentioned before, there is a hierarchy of information as well, in the form of the kind of information that is passed on to the fan community. Both XFN and GTV pride themselves in their emphasis on 'serious news' about the franchises and the actors' and producers' careers beyond the TV shows that introduced their body of work to the fans. Perez claims:

We are a news site, not a fan board...And that makes us different... from the hundreds of sites out there, we are primarily news. We schedule interviews, send our correspondents to events, initiate worldwide campaigns (2009, questionnaire interview).

Likewise, Damen credited GTV's decision to feature serious interviews with the cast and crew of *BSG* as underpinning their success, building their reputation from just another *BSG* fan site to one where "sometimes agents email us since they think their client will benefit on interview on our website [sic]" (2008, email correspondence). The kinds of information relayed by both these sites are different from say, a fan on Haven who maintains that she has friends and reliable sources within the film and TV industry who work closely

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<sup>25</sup> Usually authenticated when the information is confirmed by the industry press. The more frequently the fan is able to provide authentic information that is later confirmed by the press, the more capital they stand to gain.

with David Duchovny, although she cannot divulge their real identities. Her sources frequently provide intimate news and information about Duchovny's private life, even though there was no way fans could authenticate her stories as these were never substantiated or denied in the tabloid press.

This fan's claims and commentaries were often met with scrutiny and suspicion<sup>26</sup>, as fans responded with: "You haven't offered one shred of evidence or one fact that supports what you are saying" (Tyfusion, 2009, forum discussion), while another remarked:

In a way, I actually kinda admire that kind of single-mindedness.  
There's a certain poetic art to it, like the folks who still believe that man didn't walk on the moon. But at least we're still not hearing about how your insiders tell you that XF2 is never, ever going to be made...(Chimerical, 2009, forum discussion).

Hills (2006, p. 110) argues that, "subcultural celebrity...is typically typographic rather than iconic, being primarily carried through name-recognition rather than through iconicity". This is not always true, as social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter, which allow their users to share photos and videos, are making it much easier for fan journalists to be more visible. The fan on Haven who claims to have sources in the film and TV industry is often met with disdain and scepticism, not just merely because fans view her contributions on the forum as trying to push a particular agenda that loyal Duchovny supporters read as being against the actor's personal life, but also that fans have to take the information she provided at 'text value'<sup>27</sup>. In comparison, Damen is a frequent attendee of fan conventions and the XFN members are present among various social networking sites making them familiar – and recognisable – faces to fans. By contrast, the Haven poster, despite her

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<sup>26</sup> This is particularly rife during the various press and tabloid coverage of Duchovny's sex addiction rehabilitation.

<sup>27</sup> This thread on Haven, in particular, <http://community.idealistshaven.com/forums/showthread.php?t=40006>, became a discussion/argument among fans on the validity of the fan's claims.

claims to have reliable sources, is comparatively more difficult for fans to authenticate. As members of fan forums are identified via their usernames rather than real names, there are no plausible avenues whereby fans are able to identify or authenticate the fan's information except through other fans' testimonials.

That is not to say that information that comes from supposedly legitimate sources (such as XFN or Big Light Social Network) goes unchallenged in fandom. Alison Groves (2008, email correspondence) believed that she had an easier time being accepted by *XF* fans as moderator of Big Light Social Network as "Frank [Spotnitz] may have mentioned my name once or twice...which helped solidify any issues folks might have had". However, as with most fan relationships, this can be a capricious affair. When Groves made a brief announcement on Big Light's discussion forum about the possibility of a cameo by "a certain well liked pair of FBI agents...in the season 2 opener of *Fringe*" (2009, forum discussion)<sup>28</sup>, several fans sought out, and later managed to confirm through the fan running Gillian Anderson's fansite that the actress had no knowledge of, or involvement with the announcement. Fans immediately assumed that it was a promotional scheme orchestrated by Fox to promote the second season premiere of the show and that Groves had betrayed the fans (and *XF*) by spreading the news and helping the studio use them to generate talk about *Fringe*<sup>29</sup>, a show most fans considered to be an inferior copy of the *XF*.

As one fan on Haven commented:

[W]ell if this was a rumour she heard...sorry but it's bad to post it like this with no backup. she the main mod on BL, so i hope she knows

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<sup>28</sup> The message, while cryptic, did not in any way suggest that Duchovny and Anderson would reprise their iconic roles to film a cameo. Fans, in particular those at Haven, read the news Groves posted and speculated that it was a filmed cameo appearance rather than a direct homage.

<sup>29</sup> Fan discussions and debates on the topic can be found at <http://community.idealistshaven.com/forums/showthread.php?t=38812> and <http://community.idealistshaven.com/forums/showthread.php?t=38811>.

what kind of effect a news like this has over the fandom – if it’s not true. Someone in her position when is opening a thread – esp. to post this kind of news – need to have the news triple checked [sic]. (Anelisse, 2009, forum discussion)

Similarly, when Milinovich first took the job as the fan promoter for the film in 2008, she faced animosity from fans who normally congregated on Haven. Milinovich reflected she expected the scepticism from fans as it is “the nature of the Internet that brings on a lot of negativity...Fans were trying to take a Scully-esque position but eventually they came across as being anti-Mulder instead” (2008, interview). To refute all the negative claims about her role and access, Milinovich eventually filmed herself opening the script of the film and put it up on YouTube<sup>30</sup>.

XFN experienced similar scepticism from fans on Haven<sup>31</sup>, with Quijada explaining that when the site first received recognition from FOX, “there was a lot of tension from a lot of fans that thought of a number of reasons why we had been recognized: being an undercover branch from fox, had paid for it, etc [sic]” (2009, questionnaire interview) suggesting that while scholars like Murray (2004), Cochran (2008), Johnson (2007a) and Hills (2003, 2010) have all looked at how fans have been co-opted into marketing a media product in collaboration with the producers, some fans remain resistant, embracing their anti-corporate identity. Devol (2009, questionnaire interview) added:

I think in the beginning people didn't trust us. There were accusations that we simply surfed Haven for all of our news which is untrue. Oftentimes we would post news simultaneously with Haven but 8 times

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<sup>30</sup> Milinovich shared a video of her unboxing the *XF* script here: <http://www.giagia.co.uk/2008/04/28/i-want-to-believe/> and later blogged about her experience with fans here: <http://www.giagia.co.uk/2008/04/30/x-files/> and here: <http://www.giagia.co.uk/2008/05/25/i-believe/>

<sup>31</sup> Milinovich had also worked closely with XFN during the initial stages of her promotional work. It was actually she who recommended that I contact XFN for a different perspective on their experience.

out of 10, it was pulled from our own sources or in open Internet searches. That being said, there are times where I have found something on Haven and searched online for a better angle in another publication. It was never our intention to steal anything but there were times we were perceived as doing so... There have been a few that get a bit jealous. I think realistically most people love what you do and there are a few who think that you do it to get attention. And maybe some people do.

Some of the scepticism that stemmed from the fans at Haven over XFN and Milinovich's role in promoting the film appears to suggest that the news had not come from a trusted source. Devol, for instance, while a member of Haven from the early days, had "stepped back from fandom for a bit" (2009, questionnaire interview) to be a mother. Even with her involvement in XFN now, she spends most of her time producing material for the news site, and interacting mostly with fans on XFN and Big Light. Milinovich, on the other hand, was never involved in online fandom despite having been a fan of *XF* for a long time. When she signed up to Haven, she "asked another friend who's a regular poster at Haven about the rivalries and the politics so I know what I'm getting myself into, and who to avoid" (Milinovich, 2008, interview). It can be argued that Haven members are practising what MacDonald identified as "hierarchy of venue" (1998, p. 138). If XFN members, Milinovich as well as Groves had been frequent posters at the forum, and more importantly, been part of the inner clique<sup>32</sup> and had risen to attain that level of access and status, their reception may have been different. Quijada reflects:

I think acceptance comes from legitimacy. That legitimacy, just like in governments, only comes from trust in the leaders, in our case, pro-

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<sup>32</sup> The inner clique of Haven consists of the moderators of the various folders the forum, along with their fervent supporters and friends. The moderators have often been accused of prioritising discussions that they favour, and closing ones that do not pander to their views of a particular issue. This has come up periodically in the anonymous discussions of the LiveJournal community, *fanfic\_hate*, which I discussed in Chapter 5.

viders of information...having a background does bring part of that legitimacy... In my case, I think I came from being an unknown fan to whatever I am today, I came directly to XFN and did not belong to any clique (2009, questionnaire interview).

What the statements of these fans show is that hierarchy is apparent within fandom, and the celebritization of these fans often manifests itself in a way where these fan journalists, in the absence of contact with media celebrities, become surrogates in the search for intimacy and authenticity. On the other hand, an underlying tension also exists between fans and fan celebrities. Fans like Damen created GTV because he was dissatisfied with how the other fan communities were managed by fans of the original *Battlestar Galactica* series, hoping to provide an alternative source of information: one that focused on in-depth interviews and a site that would not exclude the new version just because fans of the original version “feel the new BSG is GINO (Galactica in Name Only)” (Damen, 2008, email correspondence). But in doing so, he has alienated himself from a subgroup of the original series fans, while at the same time, becoming a subcultural celebrity when he attends fan conventions due to his close proximity to the celebrities.

Likewise, the XFN team’s oft-mentioned intention for the site was to provide a legitimate news source for the *XF* fandom. They see the site as a resource for future fans at a time when a lot of the older websites have started to disappear as fans lose interest, pass away or lose the financial capability to maintain the sites<sup>33</sup>. Some fans, however, either see XFN as attention seekers or as a way to approach the producers and cast of *XF* for a variety of (personal) reasons. Regardless, tension between fans will continue to exist in fandom. Fans will always challenge the established status quo as long as other fans are the ones deemed

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<sup>33</sup> Sometimes, it is also the Internet hosting company that has ceased operating, as with the recent case with Yahoo’s Geocities. As many fan fiction sites are actually hosted on Geocities (particular those from the early days of the show), fans have recently banded together to save all the fiction hosted on Geocities sites and place them on a central site that is different from the Gossamer Project.

popular and celebrated. What these tensions and conflicts demonstrate is that fandom is non-homogenous, and fans' love for the text separates them as much as it unifies them.

### *Conclusion*

In this chapter, I introduced the group of fans I dubbed 'fan journalists', exploring the role they play in their respective fandoms and their relationships with other fans as they are effectively treated like fan subcultural celebrities. These fan journalists frequently collaborate with media producers and celebrities, and are co-opted into the marketing strategies of film studios and television networks, often engaging in grassroots promotional events on behalf of the celebrities. While this can be viewed as exploitative, with celebrities making use of the free labour that is easily available to them, I argue that there is a trade off for these fan journalists in exchange for the access they acquire to the producers and actors. In collaborating with these celebrities, fans accumulate fan social and fan cultural capital, effectively building fan symbolic capital within fandom.

However, in maintaining access and collaborating with the celebrities, these fans must also possess the appropriate cultural capital in order to be co-opted into the game, or the *illusio* of fandom, as I argued in Chapter 2. One of the forms of cultural capital in this case is a code of professionalism, which fan journalists must instil, even when they are interacting as fans in fan communities. So a duality exists here where on one hand, fan journalists act as liaisons between the media industry/celebrities and fandom, but on the other hand, they act as gate-keepers to the celebrities. In doing so, they also internalise criticisms of fans that are normally imparted from those outside of fandom: pathologising other fans as emotional fangirls. Fan journalists like Quijada, for instance, draw a distinction between fans who prefer to engage in 'fangirly' antics of adulating a celebrity and those who choose to become



involved in 'fan activism' through their fandom. In their gate-keeping roles, XFN members make a distinction between fans who have taken to performing acts of charity through the name of fandom and those who are only interested in getting in touch with the producers/celebrities for personal gain. While I did not perform a more thorough investigation into this idea of fan activism, I maintain it remains an interesting concept to be expanded on in the near future, especially given how fans like Quijada contrast the notion of fan activism with the figure of the stereotypical 'fangirl'.

I also propose that while these fan journalists attain celebrity status accorded them by the very fans they pathologise, there are other fans who maintain their resistance to this state of affairs. As with other chapters, I return to the suggestion that fandom is wrought with tension, where fans' status quo is often challenged, as relationships and allegiances shift. So while these fans may become subcultural celebrities in the eyes of their fans, they are also met with cynicism and scepticism by certain factions of the fandom, exhibiting not just the dual nature of the fan but perhaps also the notion that we must not mould the fan into a rigid one-dimensional, non-contradictory character. As Hills astutely argues, "we cannot accuse fan-producers of being somehow self-contradictory, or displaying hypocrisy. Exhibiting self-discontinuity, dispersions of the subject represent shifts between different discourses; in specific contexts fan-producers draw strongly on fan discourse...and at other moments they draw centrally on production discourse" (2010, p. 78).

These explorations into fandom, looking at how boundaries are negotiated and determined in fan communities, suggest that fan communities are not as unified or nurturing as early fan studies suggest. Furthermore, the idea of the fan as a figure of resistance is challenged by the collaborations fans engage with the media industry, often in the name of providing access and inside information to fandom. Other possibilities for further explorations clearly remains unexplored by the scope of this dissertation. In the final chapter,

I will reflect on how the conclusions from this dissertation's explorations can further be developed in future for the advancement of this field of study.

## Chapter 8:

### Conclusion

Fandom is not a homogenous culture. Cultural studies' inclination to portray fandom as a form of resistance has often resulted in the suggestion that fandom appears to be consistent and stable. This is as troubling as most fan scholars' reluctance to acknowledge that fandom is hierarchised and often driven by conflict and struggles. As Jenkins astutely says of Bourdieu's theory on taste distinctions: "Taste is always in crisis; taste can never remain stable, because it is challenged by the existence of other tastes that often seem just as 'natural' to their proponents" (1992, p. 16). Indeed, the distinctions of taste seem to inform fandom in the way they define the boundaries of fan communities: "Fans discriminate fiercely: the boundaries between the community of fans and the rest of the world are just as strongly marked and patrolled" (Fiske, 1992, pp. 34-35). Fiske's declaration reflects what a lot of fan scholars assume about fandom – that fans discriminate on the basis of distinguishing between themselves and non-fans.

However, this discrimination is also very often internalised in the way fans distinguish between themselves and what they constitute as the fan 'Other' – as slash or non-slash author, as author or reader, as supporter or non-supporter of a particular pairing or character, as a fan or non-fan of an actor from a fan's favourite show, and the list goes on. Therefore, the notion of a whole and unified fandom with no apparent hierarchical divide is inaccurate here. As I exhibited in Chapter 4, fans develop very specific rules and regulations for their communities, and the failure to adhere to those rules – in a sense, the failure to conform – can result in the fan being discriminated against and marginalised. The *XF* fan fiction fandom, for instance, has very explicit

regulations on how fan fiction authors should conduct themselves. I gave the example of how the notion of fan etiquette is used in fandom to enforce a rule (in this case, self-promotion) when it is presented to subsequent fan generations as ‘fan lore’ that was drafted by the earliest group of fan fiction authors (often regarded as the best fan fiction authors of the fandom). So tension may emerge from the ways in which this rule is interpreted by various forum and mailing list moderators, for instance.

Community boundaries are also forcibly patrolled sometimes, with fans possessing what are deemed to be uninitiated and unsavoury points of view being shut out of communities by the majority. If they consist of a large enough group, these fans can go on to form their own micro-communities, like the slash fans in *XF* fandom and the Cordelia/Angel shippers in the *Buffy* and *Angel* fandoms I looked at in Chapter 4. But discrimination rarely stops when the minority group leaves, as fans will continue to position these fans as ‘Other’, initiating new members as soon as they join the community that slash or Cordelia/Angel shippers are wrong. That is not to say that once these micro-communities are formed that fans do not go on to replicate the kinds of attitude that drove them out of the previous communities in the first place. Fans continue to draw these boundaries and discriminate along other forms of distinction: how a character is analysed and portrayed in fan fiction, how well a fan writes, or even how a fan presents his/her arguments and ideas during fan discussions or debates. As Derek Johnson argues, “fan interpretation is constantly shifting, never unified or maintaining the same valences over time...This extended analysis of aesthetic debate is therefore representative not in the judgements it contains, but in the process by which those judgements were met. Consensus of interpretation legitimated some meta-textual constructions and evaluative discourse at the expense of marginalised others” (2007b, pp. 290-291).

I have also suggested that due to the tension that often precedes the fragmenting of a community, forms of fan cultural capital are non-transferable (and by extension, neither are fan social and fan symbolic capitals). A well-respected and celebrated author in the micro-community of Cordelia/Angel fans, for instance, will not be popular in a predominantly Buffy/Angel fan community, since the latter pairing is often assumed to be the fandom's one true pairing (certainly by the most vocal and passionate fans). The possession of the wrong kinds of fan cultural capital can also be harmful to a fan's social life, in other words. At the same time, the status of a fan subcultural celebrity, such as that of the fan fiction author, can be limited and bound to the confines of the specific micro-community (unless the fan author writes fiction that caters to the taste of the fandom's alleged majority).

This discrimination, I argue, carries into the place where fan fiction is posted, as I highlighted in Chapter 5. For a fandom with very specific elitist tendencies like *XF* fandom, for instance, admitting to posting one's fan fiction at FanFiction.net would be akin to be admitting that one writes Real Person Fiction (RPF) – a taboo for the fandom, specifically for long-standing fans who frequent forums like Haven and mailing list communities, even though the practice is widely accepted among other fandoms (cf. McGee, 2005; Busse, 2006). The discrimination this time, rather than a mere difference of opinion, is generational. The first generation fans remain loyal to mailing lists and forums, preferring these formats to that of LiveJournal, and preferring to manually format a story to be posted to Gossamer (*XF* fandom's central archive), than to post it with one-click ease on FF.net.

There is a hierarchy to this discrimination. Long-standing fans often argue that FF.net encourages younger authors to post a story quickly without first carefully planning the plot and direction of the story. As a result, many fan fiction on FF.net are

either unfinished or deemed badly written. For the first generation fans, this shows that the new writers are not dedicated enough, both to the craft of writing and to the show and its characters. FF.net fans also tend to cater to what they think their readers would like to read in their stories, all in a bid to generate more praise for their contribution – yet another taboo for the first generation fans, for whom demanding feedback is similar to asking outright for a reciprocity of one’s gift upon giving it to the receiver. Bourdieu suggests:

Those in dominant positions operate essentially defensive strategies, designed to perpetuate the status quo by maintaining themselves and the principles on which their dominance is based. The world is as it should be, since they are on top and clearly deserve to be there; excellence therefore consists in being what one is, with reserve and understatement, urbanely hinting at the immensity of one’s means by the economy of one’s means, refusing the assertive, attention-seeking strategies which expose the pretensions of the young pretenders (1993, p. 83).

LJ fans, on the other hand, are normally not interested in venturing outside of LJ itself, preferring to remain within the confines of the site, and effectively rejecting the offer to be part of the game, in a sense, since the first generation fans view those at LJ as a group they can recruit; a group worthy to carry on the established traditions of the fandom. But as one LJ fan rationalises: “[the fiction] is there. On the Internet. If you want to read it, come on over” (Fan F, 2008, questionnaire interview). First generation fans’ dislike of the LJ format perhaps reflects a fear that their beloved central fiction archive, painstakingly set up and maintained by volunteers, which essentially archives the fandom’s history, may be made redundant as more fans take to LJ.

Busse and Hellekson remark that LJ has splintered fandom, in more ways than mailing lists communities were ever splintered before: “Now a brand new show in its first season may easily have ten to fifteen fiction communities devoted to it, some of which may be set up before the show even airs. As a result it is easier to avoid stories, styles, or pairings that one does not like, but it is harder to get a comprehensive sense of fandom and harder still to build a truly inclusive sense of community” (2006, p. 15). This may also be due to the fact that some media producers have become more involved in the marketing of their products, often co-opting fans into the marketing strategies (based on their cultural and symbolic capitals, accumulated from other shows, for instance). LJ is also considerably more visible as a multi-fandom fan space, as Busse and Hellekson (2006) argue, and so it becomes easier to target these fans. It might also be that these newer fans are less concerned about being co-opted into marketing strategies as they do not appear to share the view of fandom-as-resistance.

I highlighted this in Chapter 6, by looking closely at how media producers who make use of blogs may have encouraged fans to generate talk among fan communities without having to pursue more formal marketing strategies. Some groups of fans will see the media producer blogging as an opportunity to initiate forms of contact, and I argued that media producers exploit the fans’ willingness and enthusiasm to connect by recruiting them to help market their product, thus maintaining their symbolic power. However, it is also condescending to assume that fans do not make use of this opportunity, as I turned my attention to a particular group of fans who have emerged from embracing this collaborative relationship with the media producers: the fan journalists, who have amassed a status among fandom for being fans who have worked with celebrities without themselves becoming fully

professionalised. These fans, in turn, become subcultural celebrities, viewed as fan representatives – an acknowledgement on the producers' part of fandom's contribution. Their rise in the ranks does not exclude them from conflict either, as I exhibited in Chapter 7, as questions of authenticity and reputation become important (both within fandom as well as in their interaction with the industry).

My observations are by no means representative of *XF* fandom in its entirety. Hills has criticised the fact that many previous works “have focused on single TV series, singular fan cultures, or singular media (‘TV fans’ versus ‘cinephiles’)” (2002, p. 2). I have attempted to make my observations on fan cultures across as many different spaces and texts as possible, in the hope that I will be able to present a richer and more complex version of fan culture. However, as I have observed in Chapter 3, the notion of proximity versus distance to the fan culture of a specific text can be problematic for the researcher. Being an active participant in the fan communities I was observing allowed me access to the fans and enabled me to observe the tensions and conflicts that occur in these fan communities without having to rely on reports from communities such as Fandom Wank. It provided very useful insight in developing the notion that fandom is not as homogenous as earlier studies made it out to be, and that the tensions are as much a part of fan culture as the idea that these fan communities are supportive, alternative social communities.

However, this association also prevented me from gaining access to other micro-communities, thus it is possible that my observations can be considered to be at least partially one-sided. For example, the absence of *XF* slash fans in the interviews I conducted as well as the lack of representation from Buffy/Angel shippers to counter the claims made by Angel/Cordelia fans is clear and there is no way of determining if



these fans feel equally marginalised by how they are portrayed by those whom I have had the chance to interview in this research.

One of the issues that has also emerged is the notion of the fan community itself. I have mentioned, at the end of Chapter 5, that the definition of community needs to be re-examined, as LJ and FF.net fans appear to have different concepts of, and approach to community in comparison to those active in mailing lists and forums. Given LJ's more personalised approach to fandom, this should be taken into consideration with regard to my argument on the role of the fan individual. As I have previously mentioned, the fan on LJ can be a member of a fan community but they do not necessarily participate in community debates and/or discussions. They can however, post an entry on their personal journal and link it from the community journal, thus inviting the discussion out of the conceptual communal space into the personal. This certainly needs further development, and something I have not had taken into consideration despite my arguing for a more reflexive typology to portray the fan individual as multi-faceted rather than merely being a part of the mass audience. My own observations, in this case, are still ingrained in the confines of traditional fan communal behaviours.

I also highlighted the lack of a focus on gender in Chapter 1, arguing that it is important that observations on fan culture are able to move beyond the contexts of gender, as feminist notions tend to portray fandom as a nurturing, collaborative and supportive space that often distracts from the tensions and conflicts between fans in determining the boundaries of community. The absence of this aspect will undeniably be viewed as a limitation in this dissertation, particularly since I am myself a female participant in fan communities that are predominantly female. While I acknowledge that it may be challenging to reconcile notions of the nurturing fan community and

one that is wrought with tension and conflict, I wish to reiterate my decision in abstaining from contextualising fan culture within the notions of gender: that it is imperative that fandom and fan cultural production be observed beyond the notions of femininity and gender. However, as I have argued in Chapter 1, I am not refuting the importance of this perspective and I believe, given a larger scope, that further investigation is warranted with the concerns of gender inserted into the issues I have highlighted in this dissertation. I am particularly interested in exploring further the notion of the nurturing fan community, one that has embraced gift culture and the view of fan relationships as presented by communities like Fandom Wank, for instance, that appear to challenge the picture of the nurturing, intimate fan community.

There are several directions in which this research can be further developed, particularly in regards to my observations on fan-producer collaborations and the development of fan celebrities. My email correspondence with Marcel Damen of Galactica.TV reveals that fan conventions, which have largely been overlooked since fans took to the Internet, are another space where fans contest the role of the fan celebrity through different forms of knowledge and cultural productions. Furthermore, convention attendees now extend their interaction to online communities as well, so it would be prudent to explore this in further detail rather than ignore the role of fan conventions in favour of more easily accessible online fan communities on LJ.

The collaborative relationship that has emerged between fans and producers can also be explored further. Firstly, rather than being mere co-marketers, fan scholars can consider if other forms of relationship between fans and media producers exist. In studying fans' attempts at collecting the clothes used on *Buffy* auctioned on eBay by the studio, Stenger observed that, "with each sale, the producers transferred legal

ownership of a piece of the show to a fan...As fan posts made clear, each prop served as a metonymy for the entire franchise, allowing the buyer to cross the line from viewer to part owner” (2006, p. 32). In Chapter 7, I have alluded to the changing markets of the media industry, where the advancement of technology is enabling independent filmmakers to look for alternative ways of funding their projects – through the social network of fans as well as through specific websites catered towards fundraising for small projects. This poses the question of ownership as Stenger (2006) raised above, as fans are not merely audiences in this case, but also play the role of investors. Caldwell highlights another issue: “In the world of industrially levelled distinctions, jobs, craft legitimacy, and careers are clearly always at stake” (2008, p. 330). This also raises the question of how, and if, media producers turn to fans in providing promotional support would affect the industry in a more profound way. More specifically for fans: if the fan journalists are able to convert their subcultural capital to economic capital, how is this going to affect their own standing in the industry? These are just some of the issues that can be expanded on and developed further. As the fan-producer collaborative relationship evolves, as it most probably will, the issue will become more complicated.

Ultimately, this research indicates that despite a recent, popular turn to multi-fandom spaces like LJ, which has been celebrated by academics like Busse (2006), fans have not abandoned older formats such as mailing lists and forums. The turn to LJ may represent a turning point in fandom, but newer shows like *Bones*, for example, have equally active fan forums<sup>1</sup>. Collaborations between fans and producers are becoming increasingly common, and it would be difficult for both fans and scholars alike to avoid the impact of this relationship. Having said that, fandom, as a field of

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<sup>1</sup> Despite the concentration of fan communities on LJ, the *Bones* fandom also has a very active fan forum at The Anti-Boneyard (<http://www.theaby.org>).

restricted production, is a constant site of struggle. Johnson reminds us that it is also important that external forces of this struggle be acknowledged: “[The] struggle to consensually legitimate competing knowledge claims about fans, cult texts, and their production – fan-tagonism – operates discursively to constitute hegemonies within factionalised fan communities. But internal constructions of communal interpretative consensus comprise just one front on which the war for hegemony is waged; we must also look outward since it is in the productive authority of external corporate institutions that the greatest power is mobilised” (2007b, p. 298). Bourdieu argues that, “the state of the power relations in this struggle depends on the overall degree of autonomy possessed by the field, that is, the extent to which it manages to impose its own norms and sanctions on the whole set of producers” (1993, p. 40).

As much as certain fans are striking up collaborative relationships with their favourite producers, there are those who remain faithful to the belief that fandom is an act of resistance, and should remain as such. While they may be ensconced in a seemingly unapproachable sector of fandom (such as forums and mailing list communities), we cannot, and should not disregard their struggles. Therefore, it is important that studies on fan culture do not just wholly embrace LJ as the new space for fannish activities and disregard other formats and spaces that fans still make use of when forming communities. Rather, what should be embraced is the notion that fandom is a complex network of cultural practices and norms, with their own internal criteria for assigning value to fan cultural productions and status to their members. To borrow Williamson’s summary: “some fans accept the ‘heteronomous’ values of culture and link cultural production and engagement to the profit motive. Others eschew these economic values and seek fandom-for-fandom’s sake, sharing the cultural values with the ‘autonomous pole’ of dominant culture, including the often

concomitant elitist distinctions” (2005, p. 184). An exploration into the notion of community and celebrity through the field of fan cultural production highlights the tensions and conflicts among fans as they struggle to impose their version of interpretation (of the text as well as community boundaries), while positioning fans as textual gifters rather than textual poachers liberates them from a socially subordinate position.

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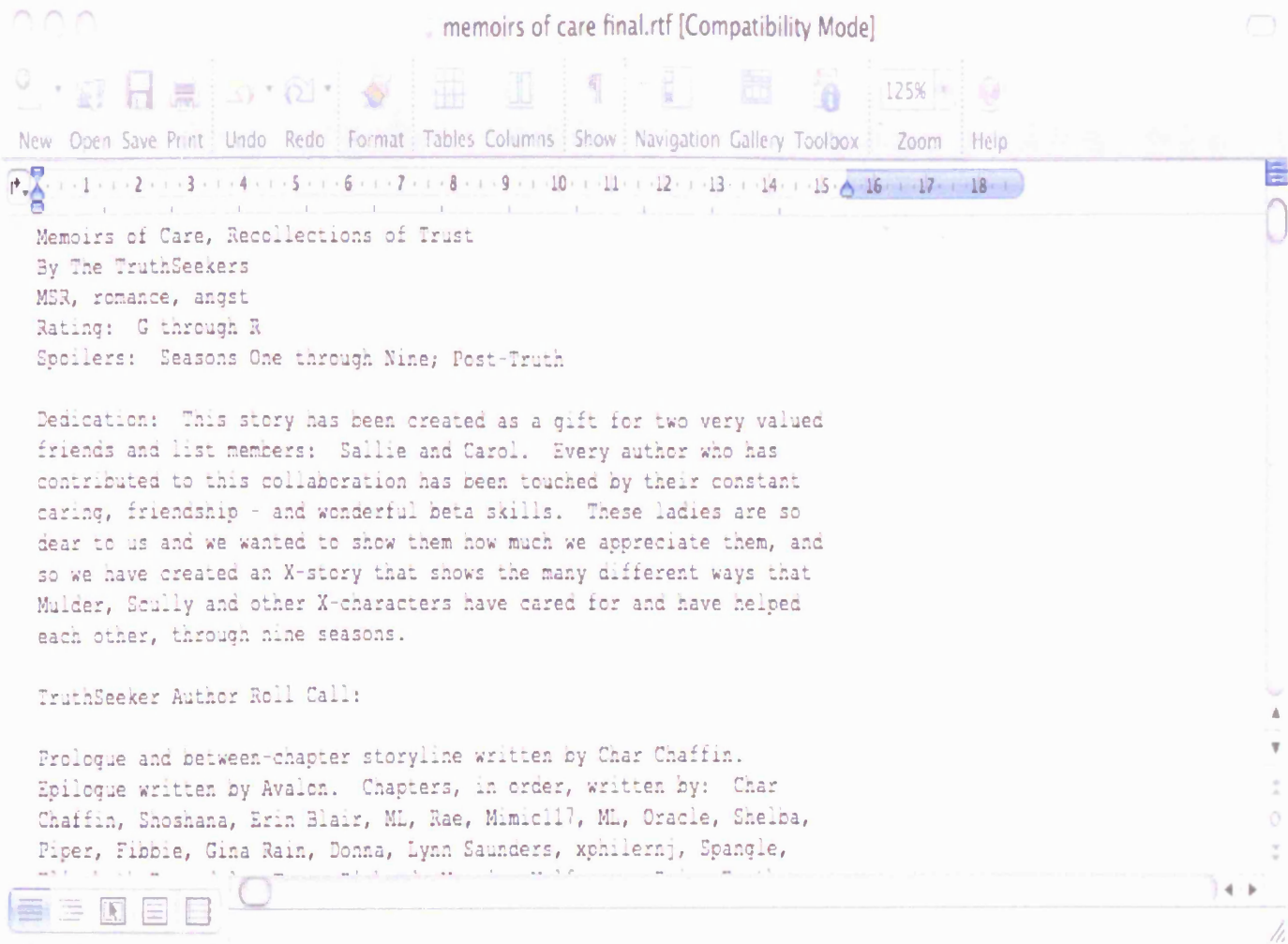
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## Appendix 2: IWTBXF list 'frequently asked question'

### **The IWTB list FAQ - otherwise known as the rules and guidelines**

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**There aren't many regulations because we consider subscribers to be mature adults who can conduct themselves accordingly. But we do have a few rules and present them here:**

**Because IWantToBelieve is open to all classifications of fan fic, including Slash and NC-17 ratings, membership is limited to those writers 18 years or older.**

**Members are free to post topics of interest relating to fan fic. For now, off topic posts are limited to the weekends (Friday through Sunday) with the exception of important announcements and requests for support. We ask all members to use their discretion when posting OT on days other than the weekends.**

**What is OT? To clarify, on topic for this list includes all things related to X-Files fanfic. This includes:**

**Discussion and reviews of XF episodes and the movie Discussion of XF characters, mytharc, locations, themes, etc.**

**XF fanfic written by IWTB members (if you wish to post a story by a nonmember, please be sure you have the author's permission in advance to post the story – a recommendation shout out with a link is fine)**

Source: IWTBXF (<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/IWTBXF/message/1>  
Accessed 18 August 2008)

## Appendix 3: Questionnaire

### Basic information:

Preferred name (please state if you wish to remain anonymous):

Email:

Age (or, if you prefer, age range, e.g. 20s, 30s, 40s, etc.):

Gender:

Occupation:

Highest level of education:

Nationality:

Can I contact you for further questions should the need arise? Y/N

1. Please state 5 TV shows that you currently watch.
2. What fan activities do you normally participate in (e.g. writing/reading fic, beta reading, fan discussions, fan conventions, etc.)?
3. How long have you been involved in fandom?
4. Which fandoms would you consider yourself a part of? Please include any you feel relevant, including ones you may have left.
5. How were you introduced to fandom (e.g. fanzines, fan conventions, Web search, etc.)?
6. Do you participate in a range of fan communities across several fandoms or are you generally active in one particular fandom. If so, please state which one(s).
7. What role do you think the Internet has played in fandom, in regards to your own experiences as a fan.
8. Do you think the Internet has made it easier to become a part of fandom?

### Fan communities

9. From which community did you obtain this questionnaire from, and how long have you been a member of this community?
10. How many fan communities do you consider yourself a member of? Please list them, regardless of the fandom (if you are members of more than 5 communities, please list the ones you are most active in).
11. What is it about these communities that make you feel like you are part of the fandom?
12. Have you ever been made to feel unwelcome or your opinions/voice unappreciated in any fan communities, whether in the past or within your current fan community? (Please note that you do not have to mention names if you don't wish to).
13. If you answered yes to Q12, has this experience change your view of fandom in any way?
14. Have you any experience where your association with a particular community has limited your participation in other communities within the fandom (e.g. the community you're a member of might support a non-canon or less popular character/ship).
15. Have you felt that your community is somewhat an 'outsider' or existing on the fringe of a particular fandom?

16. Have you ever been involved in any flame wars within fandom/fan communities? If so, can you please give details.
17. Do you have a LiveJournal account? If you do, do you participate in any of the fan communities there?
18. Do you think there are any differences between the fan communities in LJ and those based on web forums, Yahoo Groups or Usenet newsgroups?
19. If you answered yes to Q17, do you have a blog/journal anywhere else that enables you to participate in fan communities (e.g. JournalFen/Dreamwidth)?
20. Similarly, are these communities in any way different (in feel or participation among fans) to forums?
21. Do you think fan communities (whether in Yahoo or LJ) promotes tolerance among fans (in terms of discussion of more sensitive topics such as politics, sexuality and/or religion)?
22. Do you think fan communities in general encourage talk on relationships and emotions?

### Fan fiction

23. How did you discover fan fiction?
24. Do you consider fan fiction an important aspect of fandom and fan communities (especially reflecting on your own experience)?
25. What drew you into the world of fan fiction, whether as an author or reader?
26. Have you ever posted/read any fics at large archives like Fanfiction.net and Fanlib.com?
27. What are your views on authors who withhold chapters/threaten not to continue their stories if they do not receive enough reviews/hits on their stories in FF.net or Fanlib?
28. Some fan fiction communities have often stressed the importance of presenting accurate details, be it about the show or the subject matter of the fanfic. In your opinion, do you think this emphasis on the 'craft of writing' shifts the purpose and grassroots nature of fandom?
29. Some academics have suggested that fanfic is a form of 'poaching' (stealing characters and worlds for fans' own pleasure). Do you think this paints a negative association to fans and fandom?
30. In an essay (<http://www.trickster.org/symposium/symp41.htm>), fan author Rachael Sabotini equated fandom to a North American Indian 'potlatch', where all participants vie for status. Fan producers (fic authors, vid/icon-makers, etc.) in this 'fannish potlatch' is bestowed more status for the 'gifts' they contribute to fandom. In your opinion, is there any truth to this claim?
31. Do you think fan fiction can be considered as a gift presented to fan communities by its authors?

### Additional questions for LJ fans

1. When did you first get into *The X-Files*?
2. How long have you been involved in the fandom?
3. Is *XF* your first fandom?
4. How long have you been writing *XF* fanfic?
5. Are you involved with any other fan or fanfic communities outside of LJ (mailing lists, forums, etc.)? If you answered yes, can you please name them.

6. If you answered no to the previous question, are there any specific reasons why not?
7. Was there anything specific about fan practices within LJ that attracted you to it?
8. Do you keep separate journals for your fic and personal lives/identities? Why/why not?
9. Have you heard of Ephemeral, ATCX and/or Gossamer?
10. Have you, or are you planning to post your fics to Ephemeral or Gossamer? Why/why not?

#### Additional questions for FF.net fans

1. When did you first get into *The X-Files*?
2. Are you aware of other fan fiction communities beyond LJ and/or FF.net (e.g. Ephemeral, Gossamer, Haven, various Yahoo Groups, etc.)?
3. What was your primary decision in posting to FF.net rather than other XF-centred spaces like Ephemeral, Gossamer, the alt.tv.x-files.creative newsgroup, etc.?
4. Do you participate in any other *XF* fan communities such as Haven, XFU, LJ or any of the communities in Yahoo Groups? If you do, please state which ones and if not, please indicate why.
5. If XF isn't your primary fandom that you write fanfic for on FF.net, is your fandom's fanfic activities generally centred on FF.net? If not, where is it normally centred (LJ, forums, etc.)?
6. Have you considered posting your fics in other places besides from FF.net? Why/why not?
7. Are you generally happy with the feedback you receive from readers on FF.net?
8. How important is reader feedback (ratings, reviews) to you?
9. Would you, or have you considered not continuing your stories due to lack of reader feedback? Please elaborate why.
10. Have you encountered any discrimination from other fans based on where you post/publish your fics? If not, are you aware of any discrimination faced by other authors who frequent FF.net?

#### Additional questions for slash/erotica authors

1. In general, do you think erotica/slash fics are widely read by XF readers?
2. How has the reaction been to your fics so far, especially fics that deal with graphic sex and/or BDSM?
3. Have you ever been flamed by readers for your stories?
4. If so, was it over your interpretation of the characters, or the subject matter of the stories?
5. How did the idea for these fics come about?
6. Is there anything from the show that hints/suggests at the way you choose to view and represent the characters?
7. Do you think it is possible for you to express the ways you view the characters beyond the realm of fanfic? For example, in a discussion on characterisation on a forum or mailing list?

8. Do you think XF fanfic readers in particular are more demanding in terms of their definition of good fanfic?
9. Do you think XF authors in general pay a great deal of attention to detail?
10. Do you think too much attention is devoted to the pursuit of writing errorless stories?
11. Do you think this should be a trait to be encouraged for newer writers in the fandom?

## Appendix 4: Fan journalists

### Interview with Gia Milinovich

1. What was your role in IWTB?
2. There seems to be more online promotions for the film, and it seemed to be pretty fan-driven. Is this because of the kind of history XF has?
3. How is working on this film different from others?
4. You've been called a 'fan liaison' on Haven. How was your experience with X-Philes compared to your experience with fans of other films you've worked on (I'd assume Danny Boyle would have a fan base, and you mentioned working on Indy 4 as well)
5. Has your blog experienced a hike in visitors since the release of IWTB?
6. Have you made any connections with any of the fans you met during the promos?
7. Do you think the people who started to read your blog as a result of this experience will continue to read it in the future?
8. Back to the fan liaison role, do you think fans will now come to you with questions/requests, knowing you have access to Chris & Frank (even if they might be able to email Frank anyway)?
9. Did I get it wrong, or was there an implication earlier that some fans didn't believe you were working on the film (especially when you were unpacking the script)?
10. You're practically like a celebrity over at Haven and Big Light – were you always a part of Haven or other forums/communities?
11. Social networking sites like Big Light – do you think they are the way to go for future film promos? Especially if film already has an established audience.

### Fan journalists: XFN

1. How did the idea for XFN came about?
2. What was the journey like, getting XFN from being another XF site to the site that we all know and loved today?
3. Were fans receptive of the news you were able to report initially, or did it take some convincing?
4. Have you made any connections/become friends with any of the fans you've gotten to know since you started working on XFN?
5. Did you find that these fans have started reading your blog, or following you on Twitter?
6. Did you find that, ever since making the connections with a lot of the XF cast and crew, that fans generally approach you as a fellow fan, or as a staff of XFN, or someone who has access to the producers of XF?
7. Following on from the above question, have you been approached by any fans with specific questions/favours pertaining to the producers/cast?
8. Before XFN, were you involved in any XF fan forums/communities such as Haven? Are you involved in any now?