

# 1

# THE ETHICS OF STUDYING ONLINE FANDOM

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## **Introduction: Fans First**

Like many acafans of my generation, I came to fandom studies by being a fan first, and that model has remained my central ethical guideline. I engage with fandom as a participant–observer, who reveals her academic and fan status, and I share my academic writing in stages with not only my fannish friends but also anyone I reference or cite. If there is any conflict between the academic and the fannish self, the simple plan goes — the academic has to give way. In fact, when Karen Hellekson and I founded the first fan studies journal, *Transformative Works and Cultures* (TWC) in 2007, we established an editorial attribution policy that emphasized fannish community standards over traditional humanities conventions. In the submission policies, we “strongly recommend ... that permission be obtained from the creator for any fan work or blog post cited in a submitted article” and encourage authors not to use direct URLs for fan blog sites. Two years later, we expanded and explained our decision in “Fan Privacy and TWC’s Editorial Philosophy” (Hellekson and Busse 2009), which laid the groundwork for our “Identity, Ethics, and Fan Privacy” (Busse and Hellekson 2012). The reasons for this were manifold, but foremost it was TWC’s affiliation with the fan advocacy nonprofit Organization for Transformative Works and our own identification as fans.

And yet there have been times when my clear moral imperative of “fans first” did not fully cover the intricacies of a given situation. After all, even with underlying guidelines of always placing other fans and fandom spaces first, our roles as fans, academics, teachers, and political and social beings, may interfere with and affect one another in ways that might not be immediately obvious. So, while the perceived objective neutrality of outside observers has clearly been shown to be erroneous (Clifford and Marcus 1986; Gertz 1988), being an academic insider creates its own difficulties — from our access and the way fans may engage with us, to specific text choices and the frameworks we chose to analyze them. We may use pseudonyms and attempt to fully occupy different subject positions, but it behooves us as scholar fans and fan scholars to remain aware of all our various identities and how they may affect our fan engagement. Likewise, a decade later, I am not certain any more that our policy of encouraging, if not mandating, permission should be upheld, or whether an even more flexible set of recommendations might be needed.

In the following, I look at the ethical dilemmas ethnographic researchers face and how these debates translate into online fan studies research. My brief overview and discussion of human subject research illustrates how utilitarian approaches often harm the already most vulnerable, which indicates the superiority of clear rules like the ones endeavored by Internal

Review Boards (IRBs). Nevertheless, such strict rules ultimately fail to fully account for the complexities of online interactions and the long-term involved role of participant observers that fan studies researchers occupy. Using case studies and personal experiences, I suggest that even personal imperatives can become detrimental when a strict set of rules fails in specific situations. The Association of Internet Researchers' (AoIR) ongoing concern about online ethical engagements offers a framework in which fan researchers can and should negotiate their own positions with their subjects, friends, and fellow fans. Shifting focus from universal rules to the particular situations of fan scholars and their interactions and relationships, this nod toward virtue ethics thus acknowledges the complexities and expanse that compound contemporary online fan studies research.

### **Overview: Ethical concerns in online fan studies**

Whereas most earlier ethics guidelines remained restricted to anthropology and sociology, the Internet and its textual quality of social interactions and communications forced humanities scholars to confront ethical concerns (Thomas 1996; Ess 2002; Lotz and Ross 2004; McKee and Porter 2009; Whiteman 2012). AoIR's 2012 ethical guidelines point out how researchers have to take into account their own particular research situations and establish their own guidelines. Many of the rules governing IRBs do not apply to the online environment, which makes it all the more important to adapt the rules accordingly. Valuing flexibility over universality, the AoIR describes how "ethical decision-making interweaves one's fundamental world view (ontology, epistemology, values, etc.), one's academic and political environment (purposes), one's defining disciplinary assumptions, and one's methodological stances" (2012: 3). Fan studies scholars likewise draw from various disciplines, occupy a range of research positions, and employ diverse methodologies, all of which affect how they can successfully yet conscientiously study and engage fandom.

#### ***Potential Harm***

Any discussion of ethical research must address the most infamous failures: medical research, such as the Nazi atrocities that initiated the Nuremberg Code and the Tuskegee syphilis experiments; social research, such as Stanley Milgram's 1963 obedience study (Herrera 2013), Laud Humphreys's 1970 tearoom trade research (Babbie 2004) and Philip Zimbardo's 1971 Stanford prison experiment (Zimbardo, Maslach, and Haney 2000); and, online research, such as Marty Rimm's 1995 cyberporn findings (Lee 2000) and the 2014 Facebook emotional contagion experiment (Hunter and Evans 2016). All these experiments caused bodily or emotional harm through the researchers' deceptive and manipulative behavior and the human subjects' lack of autonomy and consent.

While anything less than these notorious failures may feel safe, fan studies research bears its own potential exposure and jeopardy; like many other anthropological inquiries into subcultures and online communities, it must negotiate specific relationships, community norms, and disciplinary expectations. Fans have long feared legal and moral persecution: they often operate in a legal grey zone when they manipulate and transform copyrighted material owned mostly by big studios, and they often push the boundaries of local morality that frowns upon explicit sexuality, especially its non-normative versions. As a result, drawing attention to a vidding community in an academic essay may expose all its members to greater risk. Meanwhile, citing a fan story and directly linking to its author's site may expose that fan to unwanted scrutiny — they may have revealing details in other posts on their

blog that they don't expect more than a handful of people to read, or their wallet name may be attached to their web site. While a cease and desist letter or a DMCA notification or a reprimand from one's boss may not be major issues, it is nevertheless harm that would not have occurred otherwise, and it behooves researchers to do their best to avoid putting any fan into such a position.

### *Informed Consent*

One way to solve this issue is to require informed (and continuous) consent from all participants, but there are multiple types of scenarios where that is difficult. Online research often deals with anonymous or pseudonymous subjects, where consent cannot be verified. Historical research may not be able to track down current identities, which complicates consent. Finally, there is a place for covert research in cases where consent may not be possible yet the research is valuable and important (van Amstel 2013; Spicker 2011). Foregrounding an awareness of not abusing one's role as authority figure nor purposefully manipulating the subjects, informed consent needs to establish a modifiable ethical framework that challenges the less flexible IRB guidelines (Haggert 2004). Here more than anywhere, it is important to not follow a utilitarian ethics where the good of the many outweighs the good of the few, but "balance the rights of subjects (as authors, as research participants, as people) with the social benefits of research" (AoIR 2012: 5). This advice constitutes a basic mandate to remain considerate of the harm research can cause, and this potential harm applies both to the communities in general and to individual subjects.

### *Text or People*

In qualitative online research, there are two specific concerns that complicate the ability to establish and evaluate potential harm an ethnographic researcher has to confront: one is the question whether online evidence ought to be viewed as a textual document or as an utterance by the person who wrote it; the other is the question whether a given online space, especially on social media sites, is public or private. Given that much of online interaction (at least before Tumblr) was textual and the focus of much of fan studies was on fan fiction, acafans were confronted with two opposing academic research models: whereas psychology and sociology would demand that studying online fandom be regarded as human subject research, language and art studies would instead see all openly accessible publications as texts. Shorthanded as "text or people," this debate remains central in terms of what ethical approach researchers should take (Whiteman 2012: 81–115). If online texts are testimonies of human research subjects, researchers need IRB permissions with informed consent, and even pseudonyms should be redacted. If online texts are artistic artifacts, however, researchers must properly cite them and acknowledge authorship.

Fan scholarship cannot easily separate the two, however: journals on LiveJournal, Dreamwidth, or Tumblr, often mix political and cultural commentary, episode reviews, fan works and personal narratives, which makes it difficult to determine when a researcher is dealing with a fan work or an intimate personal account. Whereas a story can easily be seen as an artistic creation whose author must be named (thus contradicting the sociological approach of offering researcher-chosen pseudonyms or offering quotes without authorial attribution), a personal anecdote might easily demand the inverse (thus contradicting a literary approach in which all text must be properly attributed). Not naming the fan of a text they authored may devalue the work and the person in ways that can be as unethical as exposing

them and their community can be. In fact, the same journal entry may contain the public and the private: the fan work that must be cited and the personal information that must be protected.

### ***Public versus Private***

Accordingly, scholars studying online fan communities are often confronted with a model of semi-public spaces and expectations of privacy that are unlike many other online public blogs and forums (Whiteman 2012: 47–80). As AoIR explains, “Individual and cultural definitions and expectations of privacy are ambiguous, contested, and changing. People may operate in public spaces but maintain strong perceptions or expectations of privacy” (2012: 7). As we describe in “Identity, Ethics, and Fan Privacy” (Busse and Hellekson 2012), there are a complex set of circumstances as to why many online fan fiction communities have established expectations of privacy unlike those in regular publishing. In particular, we use the concept of “layered publics” to discuss the way fans often understand a shared fan space to be private even when it is accessible and thus public.

Fandom spaces have mostly thrived on limited access and clear community rules: from the pages of zines and con spaces, to mailing lists with list moms, interaction has often been controlled and self-policed. Unlike large areas of the Internet that publish with the intent to reach the widest audience possible, many, if not most, fans go to great lengths to control access. Many mailing lists are access restricted, archives often use spider and robot blocks, LiveJournal offers a complex system of controlling access, and fans gratefully employ all these features in varying degrees. Even as fan fiction has mainstreamed, fans often continue to want to limit and control access, both to secure the ability to delete their work if desired or necessary and, possibly, to retain its contextual framing within a fannish community (Busse 2017).

Moreover, across many fan fiction fandoms, the unspoken yet carefully policed rule has remained that fans can safely assume that their fannish pseudonyms remain separate from their wallet name. Even as fandom as a whole has become more public, privacy of personally identifying markers remains a central part of the fannish ethos. Where even a decade ago, fans still passionately debated the dangers of sharing their fan works openly, these discussions have all but become meaningless with central archives like AO3 and the shift to Tumblr as a popular fannish media platform. And yet, even on Tumblr, fans have created specific rules that indicate to their community that a certain post should be understood as private and not be re-blogged. Thus, fan scholars need to remain ever vigilant as they draw attention to particular fan works, especially when these exist in spaces (such as blogging platforms and social networking sites) where fans have an expectation of privacy due to the semi-public nature of their blogs and the mixing of public and personal material.

### **Caveat: Complicating Ethical Imperatives**

The “fans first” position is one I’ve held for over 15 years, and it has mostly served me well. Yet, as fandom mainstreams and fannish platforms change, I contemplate my role as fan and academic, as canon creator and historian. Specifically, I return yet again to the ethics of how to study and publicly discuss fans, fan works, and fan communities. There are practical and theoretical reasons why a policy of always getting permission can be difficult. Moreover, with our role as embedded observer and our dual identification as fan and academic, it is important to confront the drawbacks of potential bias and conflict of interest. Confronting these questions is important to our research and, as a result, vital to the proper representation of our communities.

*Access and Permission*

Absence of proof is not proof of absence, and fan studies research that relies on textual evidence (as opposed to interviews or surveys) faces ephemeral interfaces and disappearing sites. Domains expire, stories get removed and blogs deleted, and vids and other fan works are taken down for supposed DCMA infringement. Furthermore, the pseudonymous nature of fandom often means that fans change their names and cannot always be tracked even if they remain in fandom. A hard permission rule effectively limits discussions and may exclude older fandoms, ideas, and discussions. 20-year-old mailing list posts and personal emails from the 1990s may long have been deleted or lost from one computer to another. LiveJournal posts get locked, accounts deleted and, with them, not only do fannish artifacts disappear but entire conversations and debates surrounding them. Even current conversations can be difficult to track and cite. Many blogging platforms with their expansive forking structures are anti-archival as are Tumblr and Twitter with their purposefully ephemeral interfaces.

To give just one example: for more than a decade, Fandom Wank functioned as archive and fannish commentary for disagreements and infighting in media fandom (Hellekson 2010; Lothian 2012). It was first founded on LiveJournal in 2002 and, after its deletion and several intermediary sites, found its home on the fannish LiveJournal fork, JournalFen. As of 2016, its site, as well as the one hosting the Fandom Wank wiki, have been down; years of detailed accounts of fannish wank have mostly disappeared. Even if a fan researcher had saved some of these discussions and descriptions, it might be nearly impossible to get permission. In fact, permission involving older stories or conversations can be quite difficult to obtain: fans leave fandom or pass away; they change pseudonyms or email addresses; or they merely don't answer emails or asks. In fact, as fandom continues to mainstream, its sense of subcultural identity with its mandate for secrecy changes. Some of the older fannish norms do not apply any longer — if they ever did.

Even where fans can be reached, the exchange in question may have been emotionally draining; in fact, looking back, some may want to forget or may even feel deeply embarrassed by their positions. The question for us as fan scholars then becomes whether we should simply ignore any potentially contentious topics and should limit our discussion to the quotes and references we can obtain. Or should the desire to establish a proper account of fandom and fannish history overrule an individual fan's privacy choices. For example, I recently wrote about the debates abbreviated as Haiti!Fail that were in response to an actor slash story set in the immediate aftermath of the devastating 2010 Haiti earthquake. Not only did the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Haitians become the backdrop for the fictional love affair of two white Americans, but the story was published mere months after the disaster and illustrated with photo manipulations that included actual images from the earthquake aftermath. Comments by hundreds of fans over dozens of journals took the story and its author to task for its ignorant premise and racist representation, its offensive setting and dehumanizing characterizations and its linguistic and metaphorical stereotyping. The author took down her journal and erased her online identity. Even if Haiti!Fail were not worth discussing in its own right, it was part of a changing attitude toward issues of race and ethnicity within media fandom and, as such, part of an important fannish event. Yet, even if I could track down the author, I doubt I would receive an answer, let alone permission.

Access and full immersion, moreover, create an entirely different sort of conundrum I've often thought of as the "fannish uncertainty principle": the more embedded fans are within a given fan community and are privy to its potential secrets, the less likely they are to want to write about it and to divulge those secrets, entwined as they are in personal interactions.

Being immersed in the inner workings of a group may give a scholar some of the personal motivations about why certain events happen in specific ways; at the same time, community loyalty or personal friendship ties may encourage the scholar to not share those insights. Many a canon debate or aesthetics disagreement or ethical kerfuffle may cover (or at least become entangled with) a cheated lover, roommate trouble, or financial disagreement. As amazingly supportive as fandom can be, both as an abstract creative community and as a personal emotional and intellectual support group, it also contains all the petty, mean, even vicious ways in which fans — like all humans — can interact. It is difficult for researchers both to separate out the personal from the fannish and to remain aware of their own personal feelings.

### *Personal Bias*

Even when we consciously monitor our feelings about fannish topics and our relationships with other fans, it is important to acknowledge the personal bias and involvement as fans and how that affects our choices, and opinions. Given that access and permission are often difficult to obtain, it is all too easy to stick close to home, cite one's friends and acquaintances, and trust their sources, quotes, and recollections. Moreover, it is difficult to fully address how to use material that we have helped create. Of course, within autoethnographic reading it is possible to directly address this issue and theorize one's own subject position and fannish creation (Willis 2006; Farley 2013). In other cases, however, it is difficult to separate fannish and academic selves. I use quotes from discussions in which I participated because I know they exist, but I can't be sure what aspects of a discussion might have been triggered by my own comments. Likewise, I don't know if a specific story is the perfect example for one of my ideas, because it indeed was written in response to my own comments.

In a field like fandom studies the sheer wealth of material, the speed and ephemerality of information and the seeming endless number of fannish online spaces alone mean that any research is limited by definition to what the author knows, has access to and, frankly, is interested in. If we had world enough and time, we might be able to do comprehensive research on one archive, one fandom, one genre, but even then, at the very moment we concluded the study, dozens if not hundreds of new stories would be there the very next day. Choice and selection matters deeply, however. There is a tendency among acafans to showcase the richness and creativity of fandom by presenting the interesting and creative while sidestepping many of the more problematic issues and infighting. Moreover, as acafans we sometimes lean toward specific texts, not only because they may be popular and appealing to our academic value system, but also because we tend to be immersed in a community that is predisposed to academic discourses. This may limit the choices from which we draw, even when we discuss the fan works and fannish events with a clear eye to our personal biases.

### *Conflict of Interest*

Likewise, performing my writing process in public can create dilemmas. Keeping the essays visible to all fans cited and giving them veto rights makes the work more collaborative and open. And yet, given the value fans place on participating in fannish conversation, I double my academic work with fannish contributions. There has been more than one backlash to not only the outside observer fan but also, specifically, the acafan. The criticism is twofold: acafans can oppress other fans by using their educational privilege and rhetorical abilities, and acafans deploy their fannish networks and friends to further their academic publications. While

acafans do not profit financially, we do improve our scholarly reputation which, in turn, may affect employment and promotion. This does not mean necessarily that we are exploiting fandom and should stop researching it. It does mean, however, that we should not dismiss fannish discomfort and remain aware of potential privileges and rewards.

Ultimately, every acafan has to balance costs and benefits, but it is important not to ignore personal fannish and academic gains. In *Fangasm* (2013), Kathy Larsen and Lynn Zubernis recollect their interactions with other academics, fans and “The Powers That Be” (TPTB). In particular, they describe how their particular position gained them status with both the production team (as scholars) and in fandom (as people with access) even as they discuss with brutal honesty what it cost them: “the fence we were straddling between being fangirls like our friends and trying to do research (which, let’s face it, was about being an insider as much as writing a book) led yet to more problems” (2013: 111–12). Their personal account reveals the sometimes not so noble motivations (in and out of fandom) all of us have at times, as well as the costs Larsen and Zubernis suffer, including the loss of marriage, fannish friends and a book deal with TPTB.

Meanwhile, other fan studies scholars have likewise advocated an approach that does not treat fannish utterances (or, even more problematic, only some fannish utterances) as in need of special protection. Instead they consider all public utterances as texts and therefore citable, the way journalists and most users treat the Internet. Anne Jamison (2015), for example, argues that “fannish practice/tradition doesn’t dictate [her] pedagogy.” She points out, however, how her selections try to minimize risk, readily admitting that “[t]here are many competing ethical and professional obligations.” Francesca Musiani (2011) likewise addresses various theoretical concerns, namely that it places fan research apart from other forms of ethnography, giving the fan community undue power compared to other researched communities and restraining necessary analysis and potential criticism. Moreover, in so doing, it reshapes the researcher/research subject boundaries and singles out fan communities. As the AoIR guidelines illustrate, protecting communities is not restricted to fan studies, but it is worth acknowledging the complex situation fan researchers find themselves as they negotiate texts and people in semipublic spaces, and as they must confront their own biases.

### **Conclusion: Collectivity and Comprehensiveness**

In the end, all of these theoretical concerns are ever present to fan researchers as they balance responsibility both to the fans and to the scholarship, to the community and some arbitrary sense of truth. I continue to revisit them as my positions as fan and as researcher change, and as the fields of online fandom and fan research grow and transform. Natasha Whiteman calls for a “localised production of ethical stances” (2012: 139), and this seems to be a better approach than trying to establish and impose universal guidelines even just for ourselves. Ideally, I want to correspond with all my sources and get explicit permissions for everything I discuss and cite, but as I’ve shown, there are both theoretical and practical concerns. I want to be an advocate for fandom and showcase its aesthetic achievements, but given that the subdiscipline is more than two decades old, it is more than time to add more critical voices, to look at the good and the bad.

Like feminist and queer studies, fan studies often makes the personal political and academic. Using personal narratives and experiences to argue theoretical points, it often acknowledges if not celebrates the fact that scientific objectivity can only ever be a falsehood, that any observation, description, and theory always carries the imprint of the researchers themselves. So, it may be that the solution is a form of self-awareness and autoethnography (Hills 2002;

Monaco 2010; Driscoll and Gregg 2010), and I tried to model such an approach in this article. Or possibly the solution for fan studies scholarship must be envisioned not as an individual but a collective one: just like fan fiction at its best is deeply intertextual not only with the source text but with other stories and meta conversations, fan studies is a collective endeavor, where every article and book is but one part, where all of us create a growing body of research together (Hellekson and Busse 2006). Our different methodological and disciplinary roots, our different ethical approaches and degrees of embeddedness are not a drawback but rather a strength. Drawing from scholars with different interests and biases allows us to look at the same event from varying perspectives, to illuminate strange texts and small fandoms and to collectively contribute to a theory (and ethics) of fan studies.

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