

## IDENTITY, ETHICS, AND FAN PRIVACY

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### The worst fannish sin

As scholars trained in the humanities, our training taught us to focus on close readings and sourcing the work of others. To those of us who do not work with human subjects, the way academics in the social sciences and in medicine do, the text is all. Proper citation ensures that others can find the text. When working with texts freely available on the Internet, it may never occur to a humanities scholar that anything other than pointing to the source might be required. After all, it's available for all to access; surely if the author did not want us to read it, she would not have posted it. A perusal of style guides geared to the humanities—the *MLA Handbook*, the *Chicago Manual of Style*—provides examples of styling URLs, but the style guides say nothing about the limitations of citing URLs. To a humanities scholar, the notion that something is published and freely available means that permission to critically discuss the work is implicit. A scholar researching the work of, say, Margaret Atwood would not write Atwood and ask whether it was acceptable for her to work on Atwood's texts; the very idea is ludicrous. So why would working with a piece of fan fiction be any different?

In this essay, we seek to explain why fans and fan artworks ought to be treated differently than the traditional academic model for freely accessible texts. Most importantly, fans perceive the space where they create their artworks as closed, a topic we will examine in much more detail below. Unlike, say, Margaret Atwood, the fan did not submit her work to the public via a traditional publication venue meant for broad dissemination, such as a publisher or a newspaper; she submitted the work to her fannish circle. Also relevant is the nature of the fan work. Fans' prose and images may be sexually explicit; some depict characters in situations or poses that might disturb or offend readers; and many rely on copyrighted or trademarked characters, the legal status of which is unclear to many fans, who are keen to avoid the interest of the property's owners and the cease-and-desist letters that may follow. Some have not shared

their fannish interests with their families, much less their employers, and they wish to avoid their fan artworks popping up on Google searches of their names.

When writing about fans and their creations, it is not ethical to ignore fans' expectations of privacy—an expectation that is absent in the traditional publishing model. Fans ought to be treated differently because real harm, such as loss of livelihood, could come to them if the researcher is not careful. Fans have repeatedly described incidents where their work and personal relationships were negatively affected by an outing, especially fans who work with children and write sexually explicit fiction. A cardinal fannish sin is to publicly link a real-life name with a pseudonymous identity—a point that ethical researchers must keep in mind. Of course, none of these issues is singular to fans; online bloggers detailing sexual BDSM exploits, for example, likewise often use pseudonyms and are careful to divorce their real-life names from their online identities, but we are concerned with fans here.

When working with artworks written and created by media fans, such as fan fiction, fan videos, and fan art, many fans find unacceptable the notion that their works may be freely perused by outsiders. Fan publications, be they in hard-copy fanzines, in online fan fiction archives, or in blogs, are perceived as existing in a closed, private space even though they may be publicly available. In the fan world, the text-author dichotomy upon which humanities scholarship rests does not exist. This is so for complex reasons: the context of the shared space, the desire some fans have to separate their real-life self from their fan self, the fear of unwanted attention, the danger of inadvertently outing a fan by providing information that would permit a writing pseudonym to be linked to a real-life identity, the desire to retain total control over an artwork. This desire, which on its face appears to contradict the fannish practice of reworking so central to fan transformative activity, springs from a fan's desire to control the artwork's spread: it is one thing to have a story rewritten in a remix challenge, and quite another to have fan fiction posted without permission to a fan fic archive, or have laboriously crafted manipulated images taken and used, without credit, as avatar artwork or Web page banner images—modes of copying that do not involve transformation but plagiarism. As in the academic world, fan practice requires crediting, but the two modes of expression exist in different registers.

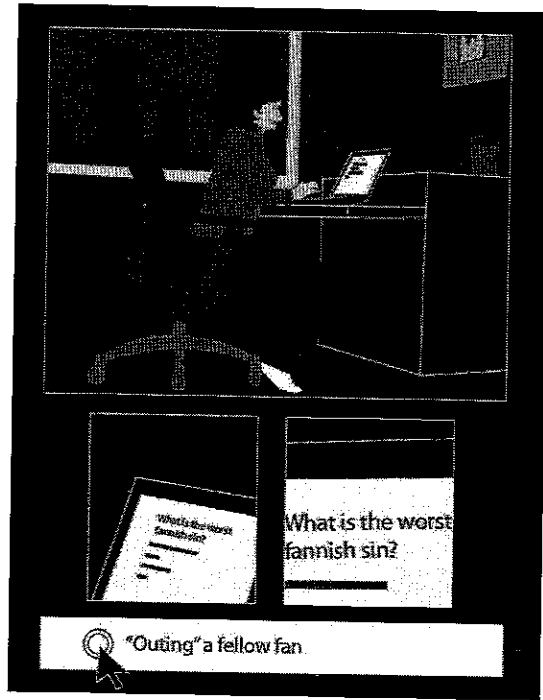


Figure 1. The second panel of "Good Fourth Walls Make Good Neighbors," *Supernatural* fan comic by Counteragent (LiveJournal.com community Supernaturalart, January 9, 2010). Used with permission.

A 2009 *Supernatural* fan comic illustrates one of the dangers of collapsing fannish and real-life identities, emphasizing one of the reasons academic scholars must be especially conscientious: Counteragent's "Good Fourth Walls Make Good Neighbors" comments on several *Supernatural* episodes that present fan activities to the audience and participate in ensuing debates within fandom (Figure 1). In the first few panels, a young mother fills out a journal poll, indicating that "outing a fellow fan" is "the worst fannish sin." In the following images, she convinces her husband to watch the *Supernatural* season premiere with her, and the panels include screenshots of the show itself, which features an incest story about the two principal characters written by a fan. The husband's response is angry as he realizes what fans—including, apparently, his wife—are doing and writing. The last image has her typing a good-bye message to her online friends as the baby cries.

Counteragent originally posted the comic elsewhere, where all the comments are housed. When we asked her whether we could link to her artwork, Counteragent requested that we link to the community repost. By contacting the artist directly, we were able to get her consent to duplicate the artwork and take into account her specific linking and citation requests.

Discussions surrounding this comic were heated and multifaceted, in part because the show's producers used the fan fiction genre of slash, or homoerotic fiction, for humor and shock value, and in part because of the depictions of fans as obsessed. Responses to Counteragent's work were divided between those who saw the work as accusing *Supernatural*'s producer, Erik Kripke, of outing fans and those who did not. Tied in with these arguments is a practical debate among fans about how visible fandom is (and ought to be) as well as a theoretical one about what aspects of fandom, in fact, ought to be hidden from mundane (or relative's) eyes. Although many fans believe that they ought not hide and that fictional (homo)erotic fantasies ought not be shameful, most are well aware that exposing fannish activities in real-world situations can be a difficult situation for some fans; it may negatively affect their family or work life. Counteragent's comic shows the real-world repercussions of such an outing: a fan's forced withdrawal from a community important to her.

### We give credit; we work for free; we respect pseudonymity

Fear of unwilling exposure and its repercussions are the sorts of concerns that touch on ethics in qualitative online research within the humanities when researching and citing online fan works (Capurro and Pingel 2002; Elgesem 2002; Hamilton 1999). In our role as researchers and editors, we have had to confront issues of citing, naming, and referencing pseudonymous fans and their writings, and we have had to develop a workable policy for others. We address the particular negotiations necessary to remain a participating member within a subculture while simultaneously researching and writing academically about these communities. Yet we also need to acknowledge the inherent dangers of being part of the community analyzed and the biases this may create in terms of objectivity and selection of analyzed works. Given the range of positions among and within different fan communities and different disciplines' diverse methodologies and conduct of research, there can be no hard-and-fast rule. We thus suggest a policy that remains open enough to accommodate different scenarios while protecting fannish

spaces and individual fans—as well as a researcher's code of ethics and academic rigor.

Consideration of fan privacy has remained one of the central tenets of what might loosely be called a fannish code of conduct. Although these are mostly unspoken rules, handed down to new fans and often learned via fannish osmosis or by seeing a clear closing of ranks when these rules are violated, one fan articulates the three most important ones, including respecting fan identities:

But every once in a while...someone takes an action that goes Too Far, even for the most unflappable fans. The unforgiveable act usually involves one of three things: (1) Privacy; (2) Credit; or (3) Profit. If a fan violates another fan's privacy (posting private email without permission, hacking email, posting real name or contact information, contacting an employer, contacting an ISP to get them in trouble for copyright violations), steals another's credit (plagiarism or clip-theft or failing to credit an icon), or tries to profit directly off fan activity (selling fic on Amazon, asking for money so she can stay home and write)—these are the things that violate the terms of the fannish social contract. We give credit; we work for free; we respect pseudonymity. (Cofax7, LiveJournal.com [LJ], July 23, 2008)

Most online media fans who share creative works online protect their privacy via pseudonyms. They expect that the shared online spaces are at least partially protected. Even though these Web sites are openly accessible, a strong internal ethos of protecting fannish spaces presents specific ethical issues for researchers. Fans' norms, values, and expectations of privacy must be considered (Nissenbaum 2009). As Elizabeth H. Bassett and Kate O'Riordan (2002) note,

The Internet is not only a text-based medium made up of communities, newsgroups and email lists. It is also a medium of publication, and significantly one where users can take control of the means of production, create their own cultural artifacts and intervene in the production of existing ones. The Internet can thus be perceived as a form of cultural production, in a similar framework to that of the print media, broadcast television and radio.

Negotiating expectations of privacy in the context of cultural production with academic demands of citeability is a central ethical concern for acafans, a project made difficult because cultural production and publication have the public, not the private, at their center. We use danah boyd's (2005) notion of layered publics to describe this perceived understanding of semiprivacy and the difficulties this can cause for

researchers. These concerns are complicated by two issues: fan texts are artistic and/or intellectual documents whose authors deserve to be credited: they are what Amy Bruckman (2002) calls amateur artists. Yet there are often excellent reasons to protect fan identities in ways similar to sociological human subject research that can expose its informant. Thus, academics employed by institutions often have to follow specific legal guidelines, generally laid out by an institutional review board (IRB), that circumscribe ethical research behavior. These rules are sometimes applied rigorously in ways that are not always right for the project; for example, researchers wishing to perform face-to-face interviews may have to comply with inappropriate requirements meant to control experiments on human subjects created for medical or behavioral science research, such as providing all questions in advance or destroying data when done (Walther 2002; FGCU IRB Policy n.d.).

Related to this is the fact that very early in media fandom, many fans published under their legal names, before the adoption of pseudonyms became commonplace. The full names of many fans thus appear in print on the covers of fanzines, in their tables of contents, and in ads circulated to market the zines. These fans, who wrote from the 1960s onward, likewise deserve privacy, whether they are deceased, have left fandom, or have remained active members. Many older fans may not be vetting their identities and policing their online traces the way more current fans do. They wrote under their legal names with an expectation of privacy—and of course they could hardly have predicted that fanzines would be collected in libraries, or digitized and spread worldwide. They wrote for fanzine editors who were fellow fans and friends, and they wrote for publications with small print runs marketed to a small, targeted audience. Fanzines were never meant to move mainstream; they were a mode of transmission of fannish stories and art, not a formal publication, a point emphasized by most fanzine editors, who usually sold the zines for the cost of materials to avoid any hint that money was being made. This lack of profit motive remains a central fannish tenet, linked to fans' fears of copyright holders cracking down on their activities.

Many fans have extensive private zine collections, and several libraries, including those of the University of Iowa and the University of California—Riverside, hold impressive fanzine collections seeded by the donation of a private fan-held collection. As analysis of fan artworks moves mainstream, scholars working with private or library collections—and the library archivists themselves—have an ethical obligation to protect the privacy of the writers. For example, from the point of view of the fan, it would not be a good idea to scan the documents and put them online in

their entirety, or create publicly searchable databases of tables of contents that list fans' full names. Yet these notions of fan privacy may not necessarily occur to librarians, curators, and archivists. All of these concerns are equally valid for any digitization of previously seemingly private material with limited circulation. This ethical imperative for fan studies may be a model for other creative amateur writing and the potential need to protect the authors.

It cannot be denied that these treasure troves of fan artworks are culturally important. In the case of old fanzines in particular, it may not be possible to contact the author and obtain permission to discuss her artwork—yet scholarly work of early fan fiction is clearly of great interest. How can academic rigor be reconciled with fan privacy in these difficult cases? As Sharon Polancic Boehlefeld (1996) reminds us, central tenets of online human-subjects research include “doing good,” “avoid[ing] harm to others,” and “respect[ing] the privacy of others.” To these may be added “protect[ing] the subjects from harm as a result of the research fieldwork and the research practices” and “not unnecessarily perturb[ing] the phenomena studied” (Allen 1996, 175), as well as ensuring that the work performed is consensual (Herring 1996). In short, the fans must come first.

### Fans first!

When we decided several years ago to co-edit *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet* (2006), an anthology by and for acafans and fan scholars, our short and easy ethical imperative in regard to citing, discussing, and linking fan textual artifacts (stories, but also meta discussions) was simple: fans first. In our own work, we have always been careful to inform the fans whose work we were discussing, to request permission before linking, to share our academic work with our fan friends when possible, and we expected to extend this ethos to our collection. But within this fairly well-defined and narrow selection of topics and methodologies, we realized that not only was our approach not necessarily generally accepted, but it was also often unfeasible or even methodologically problematic. Thus when founding the peer-reviewed Open Access online-only academic fan studies journal *Transformative Works and Cultures* (TWC), we had to expand on these guidelines to create ones that did not violate our own and our communities' standards, yet were open enough so that they did not interfere with the expectations of other communities or disciplines.

Our initial approach was simple: indicating on TWC's Web site that we expected informed consent to be obtained (Frankel and Siang 1999)

and linking to the Association of Internet Research's guide to ethical decision making and research (Ess and AoIR Ethics Working Committee 2002). However, considering our own position and the fact that the journal's sponsor was a fan advocacy group, the Organization for Transformative Works (OTW), we also added another section, entitled “Protection of Fan Sources,” where we strongly recommended that researchers obtain permission for linking and citing their sources. We also encouraged a citation format for citing LJ (and similar blog-based journaling sites) that would provide sufficient citational references without directly linking:

TWC prefers that the direct URL to a page not be provided. Instead, submissions should use the following format: blog source (LiveJournal, Dreamwidth), user or community name, and date of post. This provides correct sourcing information while permitting fans a modicum of privacy. (TWC Editor n.d.)

This policy results in texts without hotlinks, so people reading the academic article cannot directly click through to the original document. Instead, they must perform a search or visit the blog and figure out how to find the appropriate date. This inconvenience means that readers have to be interested enough to do a little work to find the text. Still, it reduces the amount of traffic sent directly to a blogger's personal site, and that is the point. This policy also has a metaphorical aspect: it signals to the fan that her space is worthy of protection, however small—and perhaps, in this era of search, ultimately meaningless. We have explained our rationale for this requirement in more detail elsewhere (Hellekson and Busse 2009), and indeed, to our knowledge, TWC remains unique in academic journal publishing in that it points out to the authors who publish in the journal that fans should be approached, the research project explained, and, if possible, permission obtained. This ensures the fans' autonomy and power to control their artwork. For example, in our experience, one common request that fans make of researchers is to cite a particular version of a fan artwork—a piece of fiction at an archive, perhaps, rather than at the writer's blog.

Below, we explain the public-private and author-text splits in terms of fandom, describe the document we created in response to fan objections of scholarly citation of their artworks and our justifications for it, and address the various objections that we think the document fails to address. We also address the debates within scholarship on how to properly protect sources and how this affects citation policies.

### Layered publics and expectations of privacy

Even as fandom is becoming more public, as more people are aware of and even comfortable with fans writing their versions of characters and stories, many fans desire to continue creating in obscurity or to keep their fannish and other lives separate. Many fans labor in a space they perceive as closed, with little idea of how many lurkers are reading but not engaging (King 1996; Lotz and Ross 2004). Fans use pseudonyms that often cannot be traced to legal names, although, as several authors have pointed out, thoughtless provision in a public forum of details of one's city and profession may make it possible to infer identity (Donath and boyd 2004; Kraut et al. 2004; Zimmer 2010). Fans also lock blog entries to specific groups of readers and disable Internet search hits. In fact, fans use these network technologies to limit access, and this discontinuity of interconnection is an element that confuses Internet scholars new to working with fans. The use of these strategies—a "management of boundaries between different spheres of action and degrees of disclosure within those spheres" (Palen and Dourish 2003, 3)—indicates that many fans prefer their spaces to remain out of the public eye.

When fans choose to not engage these available privacy tools, the fact that anybody can access and view online pages "can give rise to the *assumption* that all texts are created in a public domain or public sphere" (Berry 2004, 323). Yet plenty of fans who post publicly still expect certain forms of privacy: they consider themselves part of a closed subculture that has traditionally existed under the radar and whose members have followed specific privacy rules. It is often difficult for an outside observer to understand these seemingly unrealistic expectations, but fans are certainly not members of the only subculture that exists in semipublic spaces and nevertheless expects outside observers to respectfully and conscientiously abide by their internal rules.

In fact, beyond the Tuskegee syphilis experiments and Milgram's obedience study, one of the most often cited study illustrating unethical research behavior that had the potential to harm the human research subject is Laud Humphreys's Tearoom Trade study, where he observed and studied openly homosexual bathroom encounters, identifying some of the research subject through their license plates and conducting follow-up research interviews in their homes (Neuman 1997; for more diverse opinions, see the special issue on Humphreys's Tearoom Trade study in *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy* 2004). And if we were to believe that careless research is a sin of the past, the recent *A Billion Wicked Thoughts: What the World's Largest Experiment Reveals*

*about Human Desire* (2011) presents itself as scientific research by two cognitive neuroscientists, yet both of them worked without IRB oversight or any equivalent code of conduct. As a result, authors Ogi Ogas and Sai Gaddam created a methodologically flawed questionnaire, changed their questions midstudy, and finally aborted their research in the face of vehement fan community responses (Pepperell 2009; Fanlore, "Surveyfail" n.d.). Nevertheless, they continued to use their deceptively and faultily gathered material to support an argument that clearly had been developed before the facts, and with a book contract in hand.

Even when it is difficult for outside observers to distinguish between what Dennis Waskul (1996) identifies as publicly accessible versus publicly distributed, we argue that it is the responsibility of the embedded researcher to ascertain these differences and err on the side of caution. As danah boyd (2010) notes, "because access controls [as on LJ] are so common, we've lost track of the fact that accessibility and privacy are not the same thing." The blog structure makes it unlikely that any random Internet user will stumble on a particular post unless given the direct URL. Blocking search engines prevents these posts from being archived and from showing up via keyword searches. By not permitting search engines to index their sites and by expecting only a small number of readers, many LJ bloggers consider their journals semipublic: their writing is fully accessible, but because the author has gated it, and because she mostly interacts with a relatively small group of in-the-know friends, it seems to her to be in a private and protected space. Many fans thus do not lock content down, yet they expect their readership to remain small and restricted to their fan community.

Unlike their predecessors, the archives and mailing lists of the 1990s, fannish blogs freely connect fan works, meta commentary, and an individual's personal life. Thus, when a researcher sends someone to a fan's site to source a fan artwork, anyone who follows the link may also come across deeply personal information. With enough clues dropped, and with publicly available information, such as listings of LJ friends on user profiles, it may be possible to infer identity because "a public display of [social networking] connections is an implicit verification of identity" (Donath and boyd 2004, 73).

Related to an expectation of privacy is the expectation that fan pseudonyms and real-life names not be publicly linked—that fannish cardinal sin. The common use of legal names in early media fandom has been replaced with pseudonyms. Pseuds, which are usually meaningful to the fan, also have the benefit of masking behavior that employers or family might find objectionable. As Constance Penley (1992, 494) notes,

“fans use pseudonyms not just for the joyful and imaginative expression of alternative and shifting identities. They also have something to hide: It’s one thing for your co-workers, domestic partners, or children to know you’re a ‘Trekkie,’ it’s another to know you’re a producer of pornography with gay overtones.” These pseudonyms and the fan’s related online persona and identity are carefully cultivated and should not be mistaken for anonymous postings: they become the fan’s alter ego, a site of status and reputation (Fanlore, “Pseudonym” n.d.). The pseud cannot be dismissed as unimportant or meaningless, or as a simple way to deflect unwanted attention: many fans have an extensive body of work associated with the pseud, as well as social interactions that rely on the deep connections cultivated with fellow fans.

For a researcher, the issues that these practices raise have ethical implications. Scholarly work will draw attention to sites whose owners prefer them to be less than public, whether these expectations are realistic or not. Moreover, in so doing, citation may incidentally allow readers to connect fannish pseudonyms to real-life names. Fans may inadvertently leave breadcrumbs in their online traces—a stray comment about a job, a remark about where they live—that may permit their identity to be inferred. These important aspects of journal spaces thus complicate the ethics of providing direct URLs.

If scholars aren’t careful, they may decontextualize what many fans consider a dialogue, an “ongoing conversation that spans over various posts and comments (and often even a variety of blogs)” (Busse 2009). By drawing attention to one aspect of the conversation, scholars may misrepresent the blog’s tone and framing. By this, we do not mean purposeful misrepresentation of a quotation within its context; rather, we mean the larger tone of a blog, or of a conversation. We do not expect a Woolf scholar to read Woolf’s letters and diaries when analyzing her novels, yet bloggers don’t write for posterity; they communicate, often directly, with a specific audience that has more than likely read the online equivalent of those letters and diaries. Blogs are communicative spaces where writers participate in lengthy, ongoing conversations with a specific assumed awareness of the writers’ position and tone. An offhand dismissal or ironic comment may easily be misunderstood unless the researcher reads all the blogs—not just that of the writer under consideration, but also those of her friends. Furthermore, the expectation of fan privacy presents distinct problems for researchers. Although the texts being addressed can be considered openly accessible, public material, fans may not agree, and fans’ assumptions are crucial here. Finally, preventing potential outings is a central fannish goal and should be accommodated as much as possible

by researchers. All of these are ethical concerns linked to direct citations and linking that responsible scholars need to take into consideration.

### Representations or people?

Media fandom studies has historically been the realm of ethnographic research on the one hand and literary textual analysis on the other. In the age of the Internet, however, the two modes merge as personal interactions are both textually rendered and publicly accessible. Moreover, as qualitative fan studies has become primarily situated within the disciplines of television, media, and communications studies, the ethical position of the researcher and the status of electronic texts have become central. Michelle White lays out the distinction between expectations of citation and needs in different disciplines, bemoaning the fact that most Internet research guidelines have been dominated nearly exclusively by approaches that regard textual material as people—that is, human subject research guidelines apply. Drawing from a humanities perspective (as we did at the beginning of this essay), she suggests that instead, Internet texts be considered as textual documents that should be studied via close textual analysis, arguing that it is important to “interrogate the ways that Internet material becomes people” and the dangers such limited representations may ensue: “[T]he specific ways that some Internet representations support racist conceptions and the tendency in popular and academic literature, Internet material, and guidelines for Internet research ethics to turn these representations into viable people can support the most limited views of different individuals” (White 2002).

In fan studies, this dilemma remains ever present. As we pointed out above, the merging of fan works, general analyses, and personal information, often within one post, makes it difficult to draw clear lines between literary and sociological text, between material that fits into the humanities and the social sciences, between representations and people. Authors should be cited for their works, so an exclusive human research subject approach that double-blinds or anonymizes sources is not a viable solution for many fan studies scholars (Barchard and Williams 2008). Respecting a user’s or group’s perceived privacy should not prevent authors from receiving credit for their creative work or theoretical insights. An approach that juxtaposes authentic research subjects and disinterested researchers is condescending. In fandom, for example, many fans theoretically address and discuss their own subject positions (Monaco 2010), and they use a myriad of theoretical approaches to analyze their and other’s work as well as the site of fannish engagement (their TV show or

film). To not attribute these ideas is unethical and perpetuates an uncomfortable power hierarchy between academia and its subjects. In turn, however, an approach that regards all journal material merely as textual representation is equally problematic. Although there is a strong theoretical justification for reading all pseudonymous journal entries as performative and thus not subject to social science IRB rules (Berry 2004; Bruckman 2002), the danger to individuals simply remains too great. As Jim Thomas (1996, 197) notes, when performing research, "the Golden Rule remains a solid principle, and it can be practiced by three general guidelines: (1) Never deceive subjects; (2) never knowingly put subjects at risk; and (3) maximize public and private good while minimizing harm."

Many essays in the fan studies corpus written by acafans lay out the subject position of the writer, often indicating that the writers themselves are fans, but just as often seeking to justify studying fans in the first place. Often this impulse grows out of the now-outmoded notion that researchers must be disinterested observers, so as to better engage with the text or research subject. This stance, common in the humanities, is luckily growing more rare across all disciplines, spearheaded by those fields most often confronted with these concerns, such as anthropology and ethnography. Following ethnography's awareness of the authorial position (Clifford and Marcus 1986) with its turn toward language (Gertz 1988), we do not believe that it is possible to be a neutral outside observer; the observer will always affect the observed. In fact, even online lurkers "may be perceived as intruders and may damage the communities" (Eysenbach and Till 2001). But the fraught subject-position analyses crafted by acafans do make an important point: there are definite drawbacks to researching one's own community, even as the acafan's own interest generates the passion to perform the work in the first place.

### First do no harm

Because it is not really possible to separate the researcher from the subject of study, we advocate discourse and dialogue between the two parties. Fans, like members of many other groups, may like the sense that they are somehow different and apart from everyone else, with that difference celebrated by the creation of the fannish structure itself. But fan artworks have gone mainstream; even popular TV shows like *Supernatural* and *Glee*, with a wink and a nudge, talk about writing fan fiction and posting it online. Failing to discuss them altogether to preserve the sanctity of an online space is no longer an option. While there is a vocal faction of fans who thrive in their subcultural status and for whom some of the

appeal of fandom its countercultural aspect, industrial fan interpellation is continuing, if not increasing. We agree with the OTW's position that fans can gain something by at least partially controlling the continued mainstreaming ourselves, whether that be by constructing a collective wiki or writing for a fan studies journal such as TWC, both projects that remain aware of the ethical dilemmas that may be specific to and magnified by fandom.

It is not possible to avoid academic work on fandom, but it is possible to influence and direct it. As fans, we prefer to control and possibly direct this mainstreaming, as well as the messages that circulate about us. The best way to help fan communities be treated respectfully, and to protect individual fans by making fandom seem less frighteningly obsessive or kooky, is to provide resources that writers—be they academics, fellow fans, or journalists—can use to create sound, respectful, non-titillating scholarship. We advocate consulting fans and taking their input seriously. We think that fans can better understand nuances and underlying assumptions, can better explain fan communities of which they are themselves a part, and can thus write better academic works about fandom. Further, fandom is hardly a monolithic creation: every fandom has different rules and expectations, some of which touch on privacy. It is important to learn what these are and how to negotiate them, so that fans and their communities can be treated respectfully. This aspect of research is just as important as knowing the ethical, citation, and human-subjects standards in one's own field, be it English, sociology, or media studies.

TWC uses a method of full disclosure: as long as we obtain permission from all participants, and as long as everyone gets to see a draft of the work before it is published, the potentially initial private quality of data and information might be less of a concern. However, full disclosure increases the problems of implicit or explicit bias. If fans get to see an essay ahead of time, will they give permission if it puts them in a negative light? If we know that our friends will see the essay, will we select material that makes the community look good—politically enlightened, intellectual, self-reflexive? Will we select the very aspects of fan culture that we know academics will value most? Does the fan fully understand the consequences of consent (Reid 1996)? And of course giving a fan the power to veto an essay may mean that if she exercises it, perfectly valid scholarly effort has just gone to waste, and an important study may never see print—which is why we advocate approaching fans early on in a project, to gauge whether it would be so disruptive of a fan community that it would not be a good time to continue the work. Further, approaching a fan or fan community can have repercussions: in addition to



behind-the-scenes angsty and agitating, swaths of text that the researcher hoped to have access to may be locked down in a bid to shut down the project.

Yet even this solution may not be practical in all cases. What about items posted on a site such as Post Secret (<http://www.postsecret.com/>), or one of its fan iterations, where, by its very nature, all artwork is posted anonymously? What about writers and artists whose work appeared the aforementioned hard-copy fanzines in the 1960s and 1970s, where so much time has passed that tracking someone down to request permission is impractical, perhaps even impossible? What about fans who post in public forums, such as Television Without Pity (<http://www.televisionwithoutpity.com/>), that have a much different sort of community, with different, more open expectations of privacy? In these cases, a requirement for obtaining permission may be waived; indeed, Charles Ess (2002) notes that informed consent from subjects may be waived if the research focuses on easily accessible content and identity is not revealed, or, if identity can be inferred, it would not cause risk to the subject. Of course, much depends on the nature of the research: a survey that hundreds of people have responded to is different from analysis of a single piece of fan fiction.

The objections to singling out fans by granting them specific controls are many: beyond the practical understanding of public online statement that should indeed be quotable and the difficulties of negotiating social science and humanities approaches, the positioning of the acafan herself is the biggest hurdle. Indeed, it is this tenuous identity, both more and less than its parts, that remains the biggest ethical challenge in fan studies. Even as we see ourselves as fans first, we occupy a position of power, both in being able to influence public perception and in being able to select which semiprivate utterances suddenly gain more attention. In so doing, we can only continue to rethink potential effects and present our own positions as honestly and accurately as possible. It is crucial that researchers and fans—and fans acting as researchers—first do no harm.

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## DISCOVERING THE AUTHENTIC SEXUAL SELF: THE ROLE OF FANDOM IN THE TRANSFORMATION OF FANS' SEXUAL ATTITUDES

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Online sexual activity (OSA) is of immense interest to psychologists and sex researchers today, particularly as it affects the sexual function, dysfunction, and satisfaction of individuals and their partners. OSA as a construct includes any sexually-related behavior that is pursued through an Internet connection, and might include activities that are recreational, educational, or commercial, among others (Cooper & Griffin-Shelley, 2002). Early theoretical work by Cooper (1998) focused on "the Triple A Engine" as a driving force behind the growing popularity of internet-facilitated sexual behaviors. The Triple A Engine theory posits that access, affordability, and anonymity serve as the three primary factors that drive increasing OSA. In other words, sexual information is readily available and easy to access, it is usually available at no cost or low cost, and a person's ability to remain anonymous while engaging in online sexual behaviors increases his or her sense of sexual freedom and willingness to experiment. These factors have been used to explain the occurrence of both negative and positive patterns of OSA, though the bulk of research in the area of psychology today focuses on negative behavioral consequences of online sexual activity. For example, several studies have focused on patterns of problematic or "compulsive" internet use related to OSA (Cooper, Delmonico, Griffin-Shelley & Mathy, 2004; Young, 2008; Meerkerk, van den Eijnden, & Garrettsen, 2006), as well as the role that OSA plays in increasing risky sexual behaviors offline (Carroll et al., 2008; Chiasson et al., 2007). The bulk of this research focuses on male Internet users and does little in the way of examining the positive correlates of OSA.<sup>1</sup>

Although much of the research in this area focuses on the relationship between engaging in OSA and risky behaviors, some scholars have considered the opportunities presented by the ready availability of sexual