Kristina Busse (Online and Offline Fan Communities Roundtable at Flow conference 2008)

I want us to own the goddamned servers":
The Organization for Transformative Works and the Contemporary Status of Fan Culture

Trying to cleanly separate on and offline fannish activities is complicated if not impossible. Fan organizations, zines, and conventions are often organized via online communities, and even if developed offline they have powerful online presences. Fans who meet in real life may invite one another into online spaces and online friends arrange to meet in person. As the accessibility of online fan culture allows participation to diversify—most particularly in respect to age, socio-economic status, and location—it can facilitate the diversity of offline fan culture as well. Economic and geographic restraints make it impossible for many fans to travel easily, but even here personal interaction such as phone conversations and sending fan material can supplement online friendships. Postcard exchanges, sharing fan material, or simply sending presents, all establish offline traces of online friendships.

 Both online and offline, fan culture is defined by its simultaneous welcoming and refusal of the corporate: working against and around corporate media's controlling desires, fan cultures make space for alternative practices both within and outside for-profit spaces. I want to look at the particular case of the fannish advocacy group the Organization for Transformative Works (OTW) to demonstrate the complex ways fans occupy corporate and noncommercial, on and offline spaces. I choose OTW not only because it's a project I know well and that is dear to my heart but also because it illustrates the two central concerns of fannish engagement and corporate interference.

Web sites, archives, and social networking sites are all fannish spaces that ultimately make money for someone other than fannish content providers. Last spring, a group of media fans began to use the networks they had developed in online spaces like mailing lists, forums, and social networking sites like LiveJournal to plan a multifandom hosting service for fan works that would counter both commercial incursions into fannish spaces and address fans' reliance on platforms and sites that profit from fans even if they are not targeted towards them. Moreover, the project gained momentum shortly thereafter when LiveJournal deleted a variety of journals, showing clearly that unless fans owned the servers, they could be TOSed at will. They intended to create a permanent archiving tool on servers owned and operated by fans for fans with love.

Within weeks, several fans had gathered—in person and virtually—to create the legal structure for a corporate entity to become a nonprofit and file for 501c(3) tax-exempt status. Shortly after establishing a board, they began gathering volunteers to create various projects, including a development team to write code for a user-friendly archive that would scale to the expected demands, an academic peer-reviewed journal, and a wiki. While the archive had been the focusing point for most fans, the organization created surrounding projects that would help contextualize and explain fan works in order to represent this particular slice of media fandom to the public.

From its inception, the OTW has existed both online and offline: its initial idea was developed and debated among LiveJournal users using fan pseudonyms, but its incorporation had to be done by lawyers using real names and addresses; the various committees meet weekly in chat

rooms, but the first fundraising party was at a board member's home; information about the archive, wiki and journal is primarily to be found online, but in the past year several of the members have been interviewed and asked to speak in various outlets.

Like fan friendships and communities, the OTW's activities move fluidly among digital and physical environments. These extend beyond the strictly fannish sphere: shortly after its inception OTW was approached by MIT Media lab to make a video for schools explaining vidding. While most of the planning occurred online, the actual filming, of course, had to be done offline—cameras were sent across the world, and volunteers taped vidders and vidding fans for this educational video at conferences and cons they attended. In fact, the creators screened the finished product for the first time a few weeks ago at the fan-run convention VividCon.

   Just as fan activities move seamlessly between online and offline environments, fans occupation of commercial and noncommercial spaces is better described as a contiguous spectrum than the opposition it might seem to be. Some fans remain within the structures and spaces provided by the media industries, using network websites and affiliated boards. Other fans create their own spaces, be they fan-organized conventions, OTW's fan-run (and written) archive, or the fan-friendly forthcoming blogging site Dreamwidth.

Most fan activities, however, are situated somewhere in between. In the context of contemporary convergence, fans may use commercial fan spaces provided by the corporate structures, which are becoming ever more savvy and fan friendly; if the commercial impetus of the site does not fit their form of fandom, fans often teach other fans how to navigate and circumvent the commercial spaces that often allowed them to meet in the first place. In that sense, fans' cultural practices have changed less than the huge media transformations of the past decades might suggest: be they online, offline, or both, fan cultures thrive with and against corporate encouragements and restraints.