Fandom

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Afterword
The Future of Fandom

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By now, reading mass media coverage as symptomatic of the cultural status of fandom has become a central genre in fan studies. Witness the introduction to this collection, which explores some of the contradictions in the ways the mainstream media covers fans—patronizing Harry Potter fans as "Potterheads" even as they court Yankees fans in their sports section.

Now it's my turn to look at another signpost. *Newsweek*'s April 3, 2006, issue (Levy & Stone 2006: 45–53) has a cover story on "Putting the 'We' in Web," which describes the convergence of factors that is leading to the success of a range of significant new companies, including Flickr, MySpace, Drabble, YouTube, Craigslist, eBay, del.icio.us, and Facebook, among others. Each of these companies is reaching critical mass by "harnessing collective intelligence," supporting User-Generated Content, and creating a new "architecture of participation," to use three concepts much beloved by the ever-present industry guru Tim O'Reilly (2005).

Newsweek reduces the phenomenon of "social media" or "web 2.0" to the phrase, "it's not an audience, it's a community," arguing that such services transform the relationship between media producers and consumers. As they explain, "MySpace, Flickr, and all the other newcomers aren't places to go, but things to do, ways to express yourself, means to connect with others and extend your own horizons" (Levy & Stone 2006: 53). The article comments extensively on the way average consumers of brands and branded entertainment are playing a more active role in shaping the flow of media throughout our culture, are drawn together by shared passions

and investment in specific media properties or platforms, and often create new context by appropriating, remixing, or modifying existing media content in clever and inventive ways.

Nowhere in the article do the authors ever use the term "fan."

Indeed, the whole discourse about "web 2.0" has been animated by a hunger to develop a new, more empowered, more socially connected, and more creative image of the consumer. Most of the key figures in the movement agree that the old-style consumer is dead, RIP. Here's cyber-columnist Clay Shirky on this point:

> The historic role of the consumer has been nothing more than a giant maw at the end of the mass media's long conveyer belt, the all-absorbing Yin to mass media's all-producing Yang. Mass media's role has been to package consumers and sell their attention to the advertisers, in bulk. The consumers' appointed role in this system gives them no way to communicate anything about themselves except their preference between Coke and Pepsi, Bounty and Brawny, Trix and Chex. They have no way to respond to the things they see on television or hear on the radio, and they have no access to any media on their own—media is something that is done to them, and consuming is how they register their response[. . . .] In the age of the internet, no one is a passive consumer anymore because everyone is a media outlet. (1999: n.p.)

Shirky, in effect, seems to be traversing the same terrain fan studies traveled several decades ago, reasserting the emergence of the active audience in response to the perceived passivity of mass media consumers. Of course, in this formulation, it is the technology that has liberated the consumer and not their own subcultural practices.

If everyone agrees that those people formerly known as consumers will gain a new role in this still-emerging digital culture, there's not much agreement about what to call that role. Some call such people "loyals," stressing the value of consumer commitment in an era of channel zapping; some are calling them "media-actives," suggesting that they are much more likely to demand the right to participate within the media franchise than previous generations; some are calling them "prosumers," suggesting that as consumers produce and circulate media, they are blurring the line between amateur and professional; some are calling them "inspirational consumers" or "connectors" or "influencers," suggesting that some people play a more active role than others in shaping media flows and creating new values.

Grant McCracken, the anthropologist and media consultant, calls such people multipliers:

> [T]he term multiplier may help marketers acknowledge more forthrightly that whether our work is a success is in fact out of our control. All we can do is to invite the multiplier to participate in the construction of the brand by putting it to work for their own purposes in their own world. When we called them "consumers" we could think of our creations as an end game and their responses as an end state. The term "multiplier" or something like it makes it clear that we depend on them to complete the work. (2005: n.p.)

When he's talking about consumers of manufactured products, management professor Eric Von Hippel (2005) talks about "lead users," that is, early adopters and early adapters of emerging technologies and services. Understand how these lead users retrofit your products to suit their needs and you understand important new directions for innovation. In a sense, fans can be seen as lead users of media content—consider for example the ways that the concept of the fan metatext (Jenkins 1992), linking together the back stories of series characters, prefigures our current era, when serialization has come to be the norm across all media properties.

Wired magazine editor Chris Anderson (2006) has offered a particular version of this argument about grassroots intermediaries creating value, what has come to be known as the "long tail." Anderson argues that investing in niche properties with small but committed consumer bases may make economic sense if you can lower costs of production and replace marketing costs by building a much stronger network with your desired consumers.

None of these commentators on the new economy are using the terms "fan," "fandom," or "fan culture," yet their models rest on the same social behaviors and emotional commitments that fan scholars have been researching over the past several decades. The new multipliers are simply a less geeky version of the fan—fans who don't wear rubber Spock ears, fans who didn't live in their parents' basement, fans who have got a life. In other words, they are fans that don't fit the stereotypes. These writers are predicting, and documenting, a world where what we are calling "fan culture" has a real economic and cultural impact; where fan tastes are ruling at the box office (witness all of the superhero and fantasy blockbusters of recent years); where fan tastes are dominating television (resulting in the kind of complexity that Steven Johnson celebrates in his new book, *Every-*

thing Bad Is Good for You [2005]); where fan practices are shaping the games industry (where today's modders quickly get recruited by the big companies). Indeed, many media analysts believe that these communities of prosumers, multipliers, loyals, influenciers, ahmm, *fans,* will play an even greater role in the future as people begin to explore the use of the video iPod as a distribution channel for media content and as people begin to talk about something fans have been promoting at least since the 1980s—subscription-based models for supporting the production and distribution of cult television series (Askwith 2005; Bowers 2006; Jenkins 2005b).

The commercial discourse represents only part of the picture. According to a 2005 study (Lenhardt & Madden 2005) conducted by the Pew Internet & American Life Project, more than half of all American teens—and 57 percent of teens who use the Internet—could be considered media creators. For the purpose of the study, a media creator was defined as someone who "created a blog or webpage, posted original artwork, photography, stories or videos online or remixed online content into their own new creations." Most have done two or more of these activities. Thirty-three percent of teens share what they create online with others. Nineteen percent remix content they found online (i.e. what we used to call poaching). Many of these young people are being drawn towards fan communities—not because of their passionate and affectionate relationship to media content but because those communities offer them the best network to get what they have made in front of a larger public. Educators are embracing these fan communities as sites of informal learning, as what James Gee (2004) is calling "affinity spaces."

A 2005 report on *The Future of Independent Media,* prepared by Andrew Blau (2005) for the Global Business Network, argued that this kind of grassroots creativity was an important engine of cultural transformation:

> The media landscape will be reshaped by the bottom-up energy of media created by amateurs and hobbyists as a matter of course. This bottom up energy will generate enormous creativity, but it will also tear apart some of the categories that organize the lives and work of media makers[. . . .] A new generation of media makers and viewers are [sic] emerging which could lead to a sea change in how media is made and consumed.

Blau's report celebrates a world where everyone has access to the means of creative expression and the networks supporting artistic distribution.

So, in a sense, my title is misleading. This isn't an essay about "the future of fandom." It's an essay that asserts that fandom represents the experimental prototype, the testing ground for the way media and culture industries are going to operate in the future. In the old days, the ideal consumer watched television, bought products, and didn't talk back. Today, the ideal consumer talks up the program and spreads word about the brand. The old ideal might have been the couch potato; the new ideal is almost certainly a fan.

I make a case for such a perspective in my new book, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (Jenkins 2006), which is in a loose sense a sequel to *Textual Poachers* (Jenkins 1992) in that it describes what has happened to participatory culture in the wake of a decade-plus of digital media, a world where it no longer makes sense to think of fans as "rogue readers" or "poachers," to use two oft-quoted formulations from that earlier book. Everyone's talking about consumers as active participants—we simply can't agree about the terms of our participation, which is why intellectual property is emerging as one of the key drivers of cultural and political policy at the present moment.

Again, let me say it, *fandom* is the future. I use the word "fandom" and not "fans" here for good reason. To me, it seems a little paradoxical that the rest of the people involved in this conversation are more and more focused on consumption as a social, networked, collaborative process ("harnessing collective intelligence," "the wisdom of crowds," and all of that), whereas so much of the recent work in fan studies has returned to a focus on the individual fan. Leave aside my concerns that a return to individual psychology runs the risk of reintroducing all of those pathological explanations that we fought so hard to dismantle. While sometimes a useful corrective to the tendency of earlier generations of fan scholars to focus on the more public and visible aspects of fan culture, this focus on the individual may throw out the baby with the bathwater. We now have tools for studying and concepts to talk about the social dimensions of fan culture, which is no longer the "weekend-only world" I described in *Textual Poachers* (Jenkins 1992), or even the kind of "just-in-time fandom" that Matt Hills (2002) wrote about—this kind of fandom is everywhere and all the time, a central part of the everyday lives of consumers operating within a networked society. Certainly, there are still people who only watch the show, but more and more of them are sneaking a peak at what they are saying about the show on *Television without Pity*, and once you are there, why not post a few comments. It's a slippery slope from there.

We should no longer be talking about fans as if they were somehow marginal to the ways the culture industries operate when these emerging forms of consumer power have been the number one topic of discussion at countless industry conferences over the past few years. We may want to think long and hard about what we feel about fans moving onto the center stage, but we should guard against our long-standing romance with our ghettoization. The old categories of resistance and cooptation seem quaint compared to the complex and uncharted terrain that we are now exploring. Increasingly, fan scholars have recognized that fan culture is born of a mixture of fascination and frustration, that appropriation involves both accepting certain core premises in the original work and reworking others to accommodate our own interests. We now need to accept that what we used to call cooptation also involves a complex set of negotiations during which the media industries have to change to accommodate the demands of consumers even as they seek to train consumers to behave in ways that are beneficial to their interests. Media companies act differently today because they have been shaped by the increased visibility of participatory culture: they are generating new kinds of content and forming new kinds of relationships with their consumers.

Media scholars have been understandably ambivalent about these shifts. There is a school of thought, for example, that links user-generated content with the downsizing of the creative economy, that sees these forms of commercially embraced grassroots expression primarily as a means of cutting costs by off-loading jobs onto consumers who now produce the content others are consuming and even create the networks through which that content is circulating. I certainly understand that perspective, especially when you consider that few of these media companies are passing the savings from this downsizing back to the consumer in terms of lower prices or fewer adverts. We should certainly avoid celebrating a process that commodifies fan cultural production and sells it back to us with a considerable markup. Yet, these same trends can also be understood in terms of making companies more responsive to their most committed consumers, as extending the influence that fans exert over the media they love, and fans as creating a context in which more people create and circulate media that more perfectly reflects their own world views. I can understand why we might now want to call this a democratization of culture—which is to read a social, cultural, and economic shift in overly political terms. But there is a new kind of cultural power emerging as fans bond together within larger knowledge communities, pool their informa-

tion, shape each other's opinions, and develop a greater self-consciousness about their shared agendas and common interests. We might think of these new knowledge communities as collective bargaining units for consumers. These groups can be used for viral marketing or to rally support behind an endangered series, but they can also turn against brands or production companies that act in ways that damage the fans' shared investment in the property (Kozinets 1999).

I bring all of this up because of a tendency (even in the best of us) to see fan studies as a somewhat specialized, narrowly defined body of research that operates on the fringes of contemporary media studies. We still seem to feel a need to justify our topics, explain how and why we are spending so much time looking at these geeks. Think of it as a kind of colonial cringe—if popular culture is a bad object compared to literary studies, then fan research is a bad object compared to communications studies. Elsewhere, these same core concepts (appropriation, participation, emotional investment, collective intelligence, virtual community) are seen as central to discussions of economics, art, law, politics, education, even religion. Fans may not need to move out of their parents' basements, but fan scholars might need to get out of their offices a little more, talk to the political economist across the hall, the marketing professor one floor down, or the law professor on the other side of campus. Suddenly, after decades of brushing past each other on the way to the faculty meeting, these folks are talking about and thinking about the same things we are—they are just using a different language to talk about them. Maybe we should be paying some attention.

Why should fan scholars be having their own separate little conversation rather than playing a much more vivid and active role in the larger discussion about the present moment of media transition and transformation? Why are graduate students still having to explain why they want to do their dissertations on fan culture, and why are junior faculty worried that their interests may not earn them tenure? Why do we still allow ourselves to be browbeaten by the folks with the red pens who have always claimed the right to police our culture? We fail if we simply circle around the same theories and the same debates, if we introduce no new concepts and few new arguments to the stew.

In such a context, it is so exciting to see this collection bring together important fan scholars, old and new, and push them to think deeply about what's really at stake in their research. The essays here raise a whole new range of issues, theoretical models, and methodological approaches that

might inform the study of fans and fandom. Perhaps most importantly, there has been a radical expansion of what we mean by fan culture—a movement to diversify the kinds of media content and fan activities we study (beyond the early focus on science fiction to include the full scope of the contemporary creative economy—sports, soap operas, the literary canon); a movement to expand the historical context of fan culture (to deal with fandom as a set of historically specific practices and cultural logics that have shifted profoundly over the past decade, let alone in the course of the past several centuries); and an expansion beyond American fans to understand fan culture as operating within a global context—and indeed, to understand fandom as a key driver opening Western markets to the circulation of Asian-made media products, for example. I am deeply excited by each of these moves to broaden the context and mission of fan studies and to thus complicate further our initial assumptions about what constitutes a fan.

And yet, at the end of the day, as fandom becomes such an elastic category, one starts to wonder—who isn't a fan? What doesn't constitute fan culture? Where does grassroots culture end and commercial culture begin? Where does niche media start to blend over into the mainstream? Or indeed, as some recent work in subculture studies suggests, might we have to face the reality that in an age where differences proliferate, where old gatekeepers wither, there may no longer be a "normal" way of consuming media. Maybe, as some subculture studies folks (Bennett & Kahn-Harris 2004) are arguing, there is no longer a centralized or dominant culture against which subcultures define themselves. Maybe there is no typical media consumer against which the cultural otherness of the fan can be located. Perhaps we are all fans or perhaps none of us is.

This would be consistent with the erasure of the term "fan" and the absence of the fan stereotype in recent media coverage like the *Newsweek* article (Levy & Stone 2006) with which this essay began. As fandom becomes part of the normal way that the creative industries operate, then fandom may cease to function as a meaningful category of cultural analysis.

Maybe in that sense, fandom has *no* future.