



# 12

## Harry Potter and the Fandom Menace

Stephen Brown

### This just in

The world wide web went critical in July 2006, as did Ye Olde mainstream media. Harry Potter, rumour had it, was being killed off, getting the chop, hanging up his Quidditch kit, going the way of all fictional flesh (Yeoman, 2006). According to J.K. Rowling, the boy wizard was unlikely to survive the final volume of her seven-book series, the first six of which had kept the world enthralled for the best part of a decade (Brown, 2005).

JKR announced Harry's impending fate on *Richard and Judy*, a book-led British television programme that has done more for the publishing industry than just about everyone bar Gutenberg and Oprah (Brown, 2006a). Cue pandemonium, blogageddon, Myspace meltdown. 'I feel as if I'm about to go to the funeral of a friend,' confessed Mary Catherine. 'I won't be able to get threw [sic] it,' said Clemence713. RavenclawWit wailed that Rowling's unspeakable behaviour was 'crossing the line from realism to outright cruelty'. Meanwhile, JohnB maintained that JKR was nothing less than 'a sadistic enchantress' (Yeoman, 2006, p. 8).

When the digital dust had settled, however, and the Harry Potterites had recovered their composure, such as it was, the real reason for the shocking, headline-grabbing revelation became clear. The paperback edition of the sixth

book, *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, was being published. Available in all good bookstores near you! For the attractively modest price of £7.99!! Buy one for all your friends!!!

It thus seems that far from being a sadistic enchantress, J.K. Rowling is a fantastic salesperson. Far from crossing the line from realism to outright cruelty, she was keeping a weather eye out for the bottom line. Get threw that, sucka. On your way to the funeral . . .

### Authorpreneurship

To be sure, J.K. Rowling is nothing if not canny. Although she has repeatedly denounced the malefic machinations of Machiavellian marketing types – and once confessed that Harry Potter Happy Meals were the stuff of nightmares – the brute reality is that Rowling epitomizes the **'rebel sell'**. As Heath and Potter (2006) rightly observe, **anti-marketing is an effective marketing strategy. Using hostility to selling as a selling platform is a long-established sales tactic**, one that's been employed by copious conveniently counter-cultural CEOs – Anita Roddick, Steve Jobs, Ben & Jerry, Richard Branson and so on – to say nothing of rock stars, movie makers and arts industry denizens generally (see Frank, 1997; Holt, 2002, 2004).

Rowling, if truth be told, is nothing less than an authorpreneur (Brown, 2006b). That is to say, a writer with a very strong sense of what the market wants, how the market works and where the market's going. One only has to read the Harry Potter books, which are chock-a-block with brand name products, magical shopping malls, enchanting sales brochures and celebrity wizard endorsements, to see that JKR is very marketing savvy. She knows what her brand stands for, is cognizant of the most effective marketing strategies and has a fair idea of where she fits into the great marketing scheme of things. Rowling, admittedly, hasn't been trained as a marketer. Like Larry Ellison, Michael O'Leary, Donald Trump, Damien Hirst and what have you, she doesn't require formal qualifications to confirm her commercial credentials. Her sales figures speak volumes, literally. Rowling, furthermore, is only the latest in a long line of authorpreneurs – Charles Dickens, Mark Twain, L. Frank Baum, Edgar Rice Burroughs, Norman Mailer et al. – all of whom had an uncanny ability to sell themselves to the reading public. Few, however, have sold themselves as well as Harry Potter's handler.

### Back story

The legend of J.K. Rowling has been worn smooth by countless retellings (e.g., Beahm, 2004; Kirk, 2003; Smith, 2001). Stranded on a delayed train to London, the penniless single mother had a vision – a vision involving an orphaned wizard with nasty stepparents, a magically mysterious school of witchcraft, and the eternal battle between good and evil. Harry Potter strolled into her life fully formed, and by the time she got to King's Cross, the settings, the protagonists,

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the plots and the entire seven-book series were firmly established in the aspiring author's mind (Rowling, 1997, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2003, 2005).

Turning this celestial vision into literary reality was rather less straightforward and, in keeping with the traditional 'struggling author' template, Rowling battled long and hard to bring her ambition to fruition. Suffering the privations of single motherhood and life on the dole while living in a freezing Edinburgh flat, she scribbled on napkins in a local coffee shop, typed the manuscript herself, received rejection after rejection from narrow-minded publishers who considered boarding school stories about trainee wizards hopelessly antiquated, and eventually got lucky with Bloomsbury. But not before her commissioning editor uttered the immortal line of hack-Hollywood dialogue, 'You'll never make money from children's literature, Jo!'

The first book, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, was released in June 1997. Only 2,000 hardback copies were published and there was little or no promotional support, much less media attention. But the public loved it. Word got round and sales took off. The second volume built on the buzz surrounding the first and by the time the third volume came out in 1999, a full-scale kiddie craze was unfolding. Came 2000, and the release of the fourth book, *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, Harry Potter had the whole world in his hands. His grip tightened the following year, when the first live-action, big-budget, CGI-a-go-go movie was unleashed. The multiplexes imploded. A brand was born.

In the five years since 2001, Potterphilia has subsided somewhat. Instead of being a year-round, 24/7 phenomenon, as it was at the turn of the millennium, the hysteria is now largely confined to new book or movie releases. These days, Harry Potter is just another media franchise similar to *Star Wars*, *X-Men* or *Pirates of the Caribbean*, albeit a massive media franchise. Thus far, more than 300 million copies of the first six books have been sold, making Harry Potter the third biggest bestseller of all time after *The Bible* and *The Thoughts of Chairman Mao* (Brown, 2005). They have been translated into 120 different languages, including Icelandic, Serbo-Croat, Swahili and Ancient Greek. Four live-action movies have been made – the fifth is in production and scheduled for release on 13 July 2007 – and to date these have grossed \$3.5 billion at the global box office. More than 400 items of tie-in merchandise, most notably DVDs, computer games, action figures and Potter-themed apparel, are currently available and, all told, it is estimated that the brand is worth \$1 billion per annum, or thereabouts (*Sunday Times*, 2006).

Impressive as this is, it remains to be seen whether Pottermania will outlive its source material. The series is set to end in 2007, with the publication of the seventh and final volume, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*. However, the continuing movie franchise, Rowling's stated desire to write a *Rough Guide to Planet Potter* and, possibly, all sorts of spin-off serials featuring secondary characters (e.g., *Ron Weasley and the Spiders From Mars*, *Gilderoy Lockhart and the Love Potion Faux Pas*, *Hermione Granger's Guide to GCSE Revision*) are sufficient to ensure that the boy wizard will be around for some time to come, even as his original aficionados marry, mate and make their children read the books that rocked the world in the good-old days of the late-twentieth century.

## Real story

The fundamental problem with the foregoing summary of Harry Potterism is that, although it conforms to the familiar fairy-story, rags-to-riches and-they-all-lived-happily-ever-after narrative template, it also occludes some of the hard facts about the franchise. As Rowling frequently makes clear, the much-recycled, PR-friendly, Caledonian-Cinderella story of the single mother struggling in an Edinburgh garret is not entirely true, though she was quite prepared to perpetuate it in the early days, before superstardom beckoned. Likewise, the legend that HP was an authentic, word-of-mouth phenomenon, an artefact of kiddie conversations, playgroup chit-chat, interparental interchange and unmediated, unmarketed, smells-like-teen-spirit *enthusiasm*, doesn't withstand close scrutiny.

The occurrence that really set the Rowling ball rolling was the sale of the American publishing rights for \$105,000, a record sum for children's literature (Nel, 2001). This deal was done less than one month after the UK publication of the first Potter novel – before the schoolyard groundswell had time to build – and it triggered a great deal of US media interest in the no-name Limey author who'd won the literary lottery. Inevitably, this transatlantic buzz stimulated UK media interest and once Rowling's rags-to-riches story found its way into the papers, the Harry Potter craze really started in earnest.

Another factor that affected the early up-take – and again confounds the 'authenticity' thesis – was the influence of schoolteachers (Borah, 2002). One of the major ways in which 'word got out' about Harry was via the classroom. The first edition of the first book was published with the school library market in mind and what few promotional activities there were, were targeted at educators. The books were read aloud in class, kids were encouraged to write essays on the apprentice mage, or paint pictures, or make magic wands, or write fan letters to the author. Two anthologies of 'first generation' fan letters have been published (Adler, 2001; Moore, 1999), many of which allude tangentially to teachers' mediating role in the book buzzing process. It thus seems that teacher power was as important as pester power in the initial phase of the brand levitation process.

Much-recycled though it is, the grass roots, fan-led legend doesn't hold water. Harry Potter has always been beholden to marketing. Nowhere is this better illustrated than in the carefully orchestrated promotional activities that accompany the launch of each new title. As Brown (2005) explains, this begins with a countdown, where the days left to publication are ostentatiously deducted on dedicated websites and in window displays. Hints are then dropped about the storyline, character development and – hold the front page! – impending deaths. An unfortunate 'accident' usually occurs with a couple of weeks to go, when pre-release copies of the strictly embargoed novel are stolen, hijacked, discovered in dumpsters or go on sale in unnamed Wal-Marts in deepest West Virginia. Finally, the big day arrives: bookshops are opened at 1 min after midnight; theme parties in apt locations, such as King's Cross railway station, are thrown; and, most importantly, copious TV

coverage of the multitudes.

The key point arrived. It is the second novel, increased in imitation of the boy sorcerer and although have never fallen traditional cinema's approximately \$50 million. J.K. Rowling's generous at work

## The triwizard

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coverage of the unfolding first day frenzy is broadcast to the book-buying multitudes.

The key point about these OTT behaviours is not that they are crass or contrived. It is that they commenced way back in 1998 with the launch of the second novel, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*. What's more, they have increased in intensity with each subsequent release and the steady accumulation of the boy wizard's audience. Each book has sold more than its predecessor and although the movies' worldwide grosses have fluctuated slightly, they have never fallen below \$790 million, which represents a huge hit by conventional cinema standards, even when the massive marketing costs (of approximately \$50 million per movie) are taken into account. In such circumstances, J.K. Rowling's anti-marketing outbursts seem, well, dubious at best and disingenuous at worst.

### The triwizard iTribes

Now, none of this means that HP fandom is irredeemably inauthentic, much less a massive marketing imposture. There's no doubt that the boy wizard's aficionados are unfailingly fanatical, as the movie and book launch brouhahas bear witness. The teenage mage may owe more than many imagine to promotional log-rolling, kite-flying and pork-barrelling, but there's no denying that the HP tribe is enormous, enthusiastic and evangelical. Like most contemporary brand communities, moreover, it owes much to the world wide web (Kozinets, 1999, 2001). Indeed, there is an oft-repeated fable that Potter's sudden Stateside success was largely attributable to a little boy whose father worked for AOL at a time when AOL was middle America's ISP of choice and on-line was taking off, big time (Whited, 2002). At his son's insistence, the AOL executive set up a dedicated Harry Potter chatroom on the ISP homepage ... and the rest is history.

Similar to the freezing-garret fairy-story, this origin myth may or may not be true, but it can't be denied that the Internet is integral to HP fandom. The instantiations of this fandom come in many shapes and forms, however. These include copious tribute websites; innumerable on-line encyclopaedias; manifold role-playing games; any amount of fan art, including images aplenty of Draco Malfoy in bondage gear (see below), to say nothing of video mash-ups, Potter podcasts, photo galleries, discussion groups, trivia quizzes, interview archives and, inevitably, a smattering of virtual retail stores selling all manner of magical memorabilia – wands, broomsticks and wizarding outfits in S, M, L, XL and XXL (Waugh, 2005).

Perhaps the most remarkable manifestation of this cybertribalism is fanfiction (Lanier and Schau, 2006). These are stories written by fans using the Harry Potter characters, which are then posted on the web, where they are reviewed and discussed by the community at large. The sheer scale of the fanfic phenomenon is staggering. According to fanfiction.net, the principal clearing house for amateur literary endeavours, some 258,760 Harry Potter sequels

are available on-line. This is an immense figure by any reckoning, but it is especially impressive when set against the stories generated by analogous literary figures. Fanfiction.net lists 72 sequels to *Inkheart*, 1,848 additions to the *Artemis Fowl* series, 587 extrapolations of *His Dark Materials* and even *Lord of the Rings*, with 38,165 posted parsings, doesn't come close to the Potter stockpile.

Fairly typical of the breed is *Harry Potter and the Ancient Runes*, by Raven Gryffendor. As yet unfinished, it contains 28 chapters, the first of which begins:

It was a hot, sticky day in Little Whining, Surrey. The weather had been extremely pleasant since the beginning of summer. People could be seen in the streets talking away happily to each other, people in town centers could be seen shopping until they dropped and children could be heard playing endlessly until the break of dawn. Privet Drive was known for its loud, boisterous residents but it was far too hot for people to get all worked up and bothered today. Everyone had retreated to the safety of their homes, where there was less chance of them getting to dehydrated or sunburned. Well, everyone except a skinny teenage boy who thought it much safer to be outside, out of the way of his Aunt and Uncle. This way he didn't have to deal with them any more than he had to.

The accompanying reviews, unfortunately, have not been kind. 'This sucks!!' says Bob. 'I don't know if I like this story,' proffers Anonymous. 'I hate to be the reviewer that gives the bad review, but I am,' announces another Anonymous. So much for fanfic community spirit.

Its alleged faults notwithstanding, *Ancient Runes* is a fairly innocuous contribution to the Harry Potter canon. Others are much more ambitious. With the Harry Potter characters and Hogwarts setting as a starting point, these launch off in all sorts of creative directions. Some 'crossover' into other forms of fanfic – written by *Star Wars* or *Dr Who* or *Star Trek* or *Sherlock Holmes* enthusiasts, for example – where they date, mate and spawn many and varied literary miscegenations. This is a wonderland where Chewbacca and Hagrid finally meet and greet, where Yoda recognizes Dudley Dursley as his long lost son, where Albus Dumbledore is outed as a Time Lord, where Beam me up Scabbers is the order of the day and where Sherlock meets Hermione and seizes his opportunity to milk the line, 'Elementary my dear Watson'. It's also a wonderland where Harry Potter gets up to the sorts of things that aren't really suitable for adult audiences, let alone adolescents. Known as 'slash' fiction, this puts the perv into Impervious, the dung into Mudungus, the butt into Butterbeer, the arse into Parselmouth, the homo into Alohomora and does things with Engorgement Charms that you don't want to know about (Brown, 2005).

So outrageous has some Potterporn become, that a rating system, akin to the parental advisory guidelines in movies and music, has recently been introduced. Prompted by an inflammatory article in *The Scotsman*, which highlighted the adult – often flagrantly gay – character of some HP fanfic, the classification comprises six categories, ranging from K (suitable for most ages), through T (13 and older), to MA (mature adults only).

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This fanfic corpus, in turn, has generated a secondary literature of its own. Apart from the inevitable academic interest and of course the ever-present MSTings – reviews in the jocular style of *Mystery Science Theater* – several celebrity fanfic authors now exist. The most high-profile of these is Cassandra Claire, who famously portrayed Harry's Hogwarts nemesis Draco Malfoy in leather bondage pants, an outlandish outfit he doesn't actually wear in the canonical works but is now widely considered his signature ensemble (Waugh, 2005). Hence the fetishistic fan art referred to earlier.

### Get a life

When the HP iTribe is not penning pornographic paeans to Malfoy's chaps, or getting hot and bothered about the latest 'shipping' debate ('ships' are fantasy romantic relationships among the canonical characters), they're wrapped up in related RL activities. Live action role-playing games, or LARPs, are especially popular, not least among university students. The first wave of Harry Potter fans – the kids who were 11 when the first book about an 11-year-old boy wizard was published – are now at college and they've taken their wands, broomsticks, quidditch kits and gold lamé wizarding outfits with them. The games, which usually involve recreating scenes from the books according to complex Dragons and Dungeons-style rules, are played out across university campuses and analogous educational institutions worldwide, though they are particularly popular in Finland and Japan, where there's a long tradition of 'cosplay' (Anonymous, 2006).

Alongside LARPs, Harry Potter is the subject of numerous conventions, such as Nimbus 2003 in Orlando, Nimbus 2005 in Salem, Accio 2005 in Reading and Lumos 2006 in Las Vegas. These provide an opportunity for HP devotees to get together, tell stories, cast spells, exchange experiences, debate the books, buy or barter memorabilia, swan around in their expensively acquired outfits and, not least, listen to learned papers on profound Potteresque subjects like 'It's Not Easy Being Hermione', 'Muggles and Mental Health' and 'Love Potion # 9: Vice, Volition and Voldemort'. Don't ask.

Another thing aficionados often do, perhaps unsurprisingly since the Weird Sisters feature in the books and Franz Ferdinand played at the Hogwarts Yule Ball in the fourth movie, is groove to the latest musical sensation, a genre popularly known as 'wizard rock'. That is, nearly nü-metal bands who compose songs and release albums predicated on the Harry Potter phenomenon (Rose, 2005). The first such combo, Harry and the Potters, was formed in Boston in 2002. A duo, they play in costume (punkified school uniform), in character (Harry Year Four, Harry Year Seven) and in libraries, bookstores, pizza parlours and donut emporia up and down America's east coast (their tour bus is a silver minivan known as the Pottermobile). With three albums under their belt – a self-titled debut, *Voldemort Can't Stop the Rock* and *Harry and the Potters and the Power of Love* – their 30-song repertoire includes such instant classics as 'Wizard Chess', 'Save Ginny Weasley', 'Stick it to Dolores' and the spellbinding 'SPEW'. Almost inevitably, however, the wizard rock genre is

getting increasingly competitive thanks to the arrival of rival bands like The Whomping Willows, Dobby and the House Elves, the Moaning Myrtles and, naturally, Draco and the Malfoys. No sign thus far of The Rowling Stones.

Be that as it may, the most obvious RL form of HP fandom, a theme park, remains unrealized. Given the size of the Harry Potter market, given bookstores' penchant for Potteresque theming – Ottakers even changed its name to Pottakers for the release of *Half-Blood Prince* – and given Rowling's own recreation of the Hogwartscape for her Edinburgh Castle bash (see below), a fully fledged theme park seems like the next natural step. However, the idea has never got beyond the discussion/speculation/cashflow calculation stage, primarily because the HP franchise-owner, Warner Bros, doesn't operate theme parks. There's a constantly circulating rumour, nevertheless, that Disney and Warner Bros are on the point of doing a deal, whereby Hogwarts would be integrated into the Magic Kingdom's ineffable attractions. It won't be too long, presumably, before Harryheads are happily cavorting on animatronic Ford Anglias, knock-em-dead Knight Rides, Forbidden Forest Adventures, Quidditch Pitch Battles, Firebolt Roller Coasters and Shrieking Shack Splash Downs. It doesn't take too much imagination, what's more, to work out the retail mix of the accompanying Potter Plaza, Hogsmeade Mall, or whatever they decide to call it (Table 12.1).

**Table 12.1** The shopping mall that must not be named (likely tenant mix)

<b>Housefurnishings</b>	<b>Sports, pets, etc.</b>
Pottery Barn	Floo Locker
Erised Mirror Workshop	Seekers Sneakers
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Dobbytat	Skeeters Beetles
	Humphrey's Boggarts
<b>Apparel</b>	St Brutus Sports Centre & Fitness Suite
Worm Tailoring	
Madame Maxine's Outsize Outfitters	<b>Food court</b>
Hext	Dunkin Dursleys
Crookshanks Shoes	The Leaky McBurger
Bagman's Hold-alls	Bludger King
T.K. Maxine	Pomfrey's Pomme Frites
	Happy Death Eater
<b>Speciality goods</b>	Snapple Soft Drinks
Hermione's Secret	
Abercrombie & Filch	<b>Services</b>
Quirrell's Quills	Umbridge Orthodontics
Shrieking Radio Shack	Weasleys Weezing Wizards
Burns & Nobbles	Hagrid's Hair Care
	Volde Mortgages
<b>Convenience goods</b>	Portkey Cutting
Bertie Botts Grotto	
Martin Miggs Magazines	<b>Department stores</b>
Ollivanders Provender	Muggle Mart
Beauxbatons Bread & Pastries	Dementors Depot
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Clearly, the iTribe attracted to Harry Potter is nothing if not adhesive. The bond between author and audience is somewhat stickier, however. Uneasy is perhaps the best word to describe it. On the one hand, the HP brand community is an integral part of the Pottermarketing process, insofar as fans' willingness to stand outside bookstores at midnight, while television station reporters record their pieces to camera, is central to the publishers' pre-launch PR operation. It is the fans, furthermore, who provide the incredible, gee-whiz, hold-the-front-page sales figures that are integral to the accompanying press coverage – books sold, copies printed, first day receipts, etc. – and building the marketing momentum that's necessary nowadays in the cultural industries. They also organize and attend the tie-in parties, vote for Rowling in book-of-the-year awards, and basically do everything above and beyond the call of brand fan duty (Brown, 2005).

On the other hand, Harry's fans are often treated diffidently, not to say shabbily (Blake, 2002). The basic customer-centric values of mainstream marketing practice are not adhered to by Potter's handlers. Denial marketing rather than demand-responsive marketing is widely practised. As Dening (2001) notes, the fans are tantalized, teased and tormented during the pre-launch hoopla. More seriously, HP's legal representatives have been quick to quash any infringement of copyright law. School plays based on the boy wizard are forbidden. Tribute websites have received threatening cease-and-desist letters. Legitimate schools of witchcraft have been shut down by order of Warner Bros. Books about the phenomenon have been removed from sale at the request of my learned friends. And, incredibly, injunctions have even been served on Canadian school-kids who bought *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* from a local supermarket, which sold them ahead of time. Although the kids acted in good faith, they were barred from reading their own book prior to its official release date.

Interestingly, the edgy relationship between author and enthusiast features prominently in the books themselves. One of the most striking aspects of the Harry Potter novels is the frequency with which fans form part of the narrative. Less than three pages into the first book, the boy wizard's fame is being discussed. An otherwise unremarkable 11-year-old who lives with his unpleasant step-parents in quotidian suburbia, Harry is actually a superstar of the wizarding community and blessed with magical abilities beyond number. He is stared at, pointed out and feted by (some of) his new-found magical acquaintances. Come the second book, he has stalkers, autograph hunters, love struck admirers, celebrity role models and more. By the fourth and fifth books, however, the once-admired teenage thaumaturge has fallen from favour, stands accused of rampant egomania and is in serious danger of losing the plot. Even his best friends turn against him. Happily, the sixth book not only restores the reputation of the 'chosen one' but also puts the kid back in the picture. Sadly, he is surrounded by hangers on, false friends, jealous rivals and sycophants with an eye for a quick buck or several:

'Harry Potter, I am simply delighted!' said Worple, peering short-sightedly up into Harry's face. 'I was saying to Professor Slughorn

only the other day, *Where is the biography of Harry Potter for which we have all been waiting?*

'Er,' said Harry, 'were you?'

'Just as modest as Horace described!' said Worples. 'But seriously –' his manner changed; it became suddenly businesslike, 'I would be delighted to write it myself – people are craving to know more about you, dear boy, craving! If you were prepared to grant me a few interviews, say in four- or five-hour sessions, why, we could have the book finished within months. And all with very little effort on your part, I assure you. . .'

(Rowling, 2005, pp. 295–296)

Presumably, these characterizations of celebrity are reflections of Rowling's personal experiences, as are the innumerable references to amoral journalists, press intrusion, foul weather friends, life in the gilded goldfish bowl, threatening letters from illiterate cranks and, in an intriguing aside in the middle of the fifth book, the fundamental difference between long-term fans and bandwagon fans:

'Is that a Tornados badge?' Ron demanded suddenly, pointing to the front of Cho's robes, where a sky-blue badge emblazoned with a double gold 'T' was pinned. 'You don't support them, do you?'

'Yeah, I do,' said Cho.

'Have you always supported them, or just since they started winning the league?' said Ron, in what Harry considered an unnecessarily accusatory tone of voice.

'I've supported them since I was six,' said Cho coolly. 'Anyway . . . see you Harry.'

She walked away. Hermione waited until Cho was halfway across the courtyard before rounding on Ron.

'You are so tactless!'

'What? I only asked her if –'

'Couldn't you tell she wanted to talk to Harry on her own?'

'So? She could've done. I wasn't stopping –'

'Why on earth were you attacking her about her Quidditch team?'

'Attacking? I wasn't attacking her, I was only –'

'Who cares if she supports the Tornados?'

'Oh, come on, half the people you see wearing those badges only bought them last season –'

'But what does it *matter*?'

'It means they're not *réal* fans, they're just jumping on the bandwagon –'

(Rowling, 2005, p. 208)

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Regardless of the veracity of these representations or indeed the validity of Rowling's fan typology, JKR's relationship with her audience has changed through time. Broadly speaking, three phases of development can be discerned: *enthusiasm*, *exasperation* and *exploitation*. Prior to 2000, when Harry Potter fandom was still comparatively low-key, Jo was ready, willing and able to interact with her admirers. She was happy to participate in the personal appearances, media relations, meet-greet-and-autographs side of the writing business. So much so, that the end papers of the second novel are filled with reproductions of fan letters from satisfied customers:

Dear J.K. Rowling

I really enjoyed your book Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone. I know it all off by heart as I am reading it for the fourth time. Could you please tell me when the next Harry Potter book is coming out as I so want to read it.

(Daniel Hougham)

Dear Ms. Rowling

My name is Fiona Chadwick and I am nine years old. I really like the book Harry Potter. My class and I are reading it as a novel. I think all the class are enjoying it to but the only thing wrong with it is that you can't put it down.

(Rowling, 1998, npn)

The turning point, however, was the release of the fourth volume in July 2000, when Rowling's UK publishers organized a launch event at King's Cross Station. The media gathered en masse in the station forecourt, several children were hurt in the crush and the subsequent press coverage was uniformly negative (the book was duly dubbed 'Harry Potter and the Goblet of Hype'). Similar scenes were re-enacted in America and media intrusion rapidly reached intolerable levels, especially when details of JKR's failed marriage, strained familial relationships and alleged plagiarism of the work of another author, were splashed across the world's trash-talking tabloids (Smith, 2001). It was during this period that heavy-handed attempts were made to shut down Potter tribute websites, high walls were built around her home in Edinburgh, much to neighbours' annoyance, restraining orders were placed upon several mid-life-stricken stalkers and the author was battling with Warner Bros to ensure that the movie adaptations stayed true to the books. It is little wonder that the fifth book's portrayal of fandom – and the vicissitudes of celebrity – is unremittingly negative. Whatever else it is, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* is an angry, exasperated book, arguably the least successful in the series (as JKR acknowledges).

In recent years, Rowling has moved beyond exasperation to what can best be described as exploitation. That is to say, she has learned to use her fan mandate. The launch of the fifth book, for instance, involved only one personal appearance, when JKR read extracts to 4,000 carefully selected Pottermaniacs

in the Albert Hall. There were no prying press questions to answer, nor was she subject to the quixotic demands of obnoxious PR-types. To the contrary, she had turned the tables on the tittle-tattlers and, paradoxically, her refusal to play the promotional game – by communing instead with true fans – generated even greater media coverage than before. Way to go, Jo.

An even more effective strategy was employed when the sixth book release rolled round. This time, the official launch took place in the splendour of Edinburgh Castle, where Rowling's one and only appearance was in front of 40 hand-picked fans, who were there as representatives of the world's press. Carefully vetted newspapers had earlier organized tie-in competitions to select their 'official' cub reporters, whose copy was filed in the immediate aftermath of an audience with the queen of teen fiction. The event was duly covered by numerous television stations, the resplendent castle was exuberantly set-dressed for the night and the friends and family of the chosen few sat in the esplanade's serried bleachers, cheering everyone as they arrived.

Rowling's authorpreneurial exploitation of her fan mandate doesn't stop with biennial book launches. Her extensive charity work, most notably for single parents and MS sufferers, is guaranteed front-page, feature-article coverage as well as the undivided attention of decision-takers. When Joanne complained about the plight of caged schoolchildren in Eastern Europe (Rowling, 2006), steps were quickly taken to stop the barbaric practice. She is courted by politicians, what's more, not least the prime minister in waiting, Gordon Brown, though he let himself down badly with his single televised question 'where does Harry get his money from?' Evidently, he'd never read the novels, but given that Rowling's fanbase are likely first-time voters come the next general election, the wannabe PM wasn't going to let ignorance stop him currying favour with a key constituency. Indeed, had he perused Rowling's tongue-in-cheek treatment of the British prime minister in the very novel he was endorsing, Brown might have concluded that discretion was the better part of Voldemort (Rowling, 2005).

Another important aspect – perhaps the most important aspect – of the on-going relationship between HP's creator and HP cognoscenti is the R&D function that the fans increasingly perform. After six sizeable volumes, the Hogwartscape is so extensive that it's hard to keep track of who's who and what's what. More than 200 characters are in play and the list of places, spells and named magical activities is legion. However, in a superhuman act of wikiwizardry, [www.the-leaky-cauldron.org](http://www.the-leaky-cauldron.org) keeps tabs on the ever-expanding cast list. Rowling herself uses this unofficial site to avoid slip-ups and also monitors the manifold HP theories, plot suggestions and inter-fan altercations on the web. Jo does so, reportedly, to reassure herself that no one has yet worked out how the series will end, though she has also expressed reservations about some of the racier fanfic and admits to being astonished by the shipping debates. JKR has even confessed to making anonymous postings on 'what'll happen to Harry?' discussions at Mugglenet.com. Apparently, her 'theories' about the boy wizard's fate were dismissed by wiser heads among the fanbase!

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## When good fans go bad

Amusing as it is to think of Rowling being rebuffed by rabid admirers, there is a dark side to this author-audience entanglement. Akin to her fictional hero's baneful bond with Lord Voldemort, the creator's creations have been affected by the fandom menace. The author's original plan for the seven-book series has been blown off course by her readership in general and the demands of the movie franchise in particular. There's no doubt, for example, that the shipping debates, especially those concerning the Harry/Ginny and Ron/Hermione entanglements, were incorporated into *Half-Blood Prince*. The denouement of the fifth book, furthermore, was transparently beholden to Hollywood, in as much as the climactic shootout in the Ministry of Magic read more like a GCI shopping list than a novel. The characters too seem to have taken on more and more of the idiosyncrasies of the actors who play them in the movies, though there's clearly a chicken-and-egg element to this. Most remarkably of all, the ending of the seventh book – the much-vaunted climax of the entire series, which was famously written at the very outset – has also been changed (Yeoman, 2006). As the first draft is unlikely ever to be made available, it is impossible to calculate the extent of this change. However, it's undeniable that the basic attributes of the Harry Potter product have been adjusted in light of customer response.

Viewed from a conventional marketing perspective, Rowling's behaviour is eminently sensible, exemplary even (Pralhad and Ramaswamy, 2000; Vargo and Lusch, 2004). She's moving from an entrepreneurial to a marketing mindset. The brand is being co-created with the assistance of enthusiastic consumers. The producer is responding to the consumer and the consumer is contributing to the production. At long last, the postmodern marketing millennium has arrived! Prosumers rule! Power to the paypal!

It's always hard to argue with sales figures, particularly when the sales figures stem from what is widely believed to be best marketing practice. It goes without saying that Rowling's embrace of the Potter iTribe has paid dividends where many maintain it really matters: the bottom line. It's undeniable that the sales of each successive volume have steadily increased, despite occasional lamentations about overexposure, and when the seventh customer-co-created book is unleashed, all previous records will doubtless disintegrate. Yet, it is also arguable that consumer input has adversely affected the Harry Potter series. Fans' insatiable desire for more stuff has convinced the author that bigger is better and the volumes since *Azkaban* have expanded alarmingly. The British edition of *Goblet of Fire* clocked in at 636 pages and *Order of the Phoenix* exceeded 700, which JKR has since admitted was way too much. As a consequence, *Half-Blood Prince* was somewhat slimmer, though at 607 pages it's not exactly a novella.

Set against the increase in the quantity of Rowling's words, there has been a significant decrease in their quality. There is a widespread sense that the incredible invention of the first three books has been lost and that, for all their bulk, the later episodes are a pale shadow of the earlier volumes. Most

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mainstream marketers, admittedly, will maintain that the customer is always right, that the sales figures speak for themselves, that the public gets what the public wants. This may be so, but it's also true to say that the customer is always right wing – conservative, reactionary, stuck-in-the-mud – that sales figures don't always speak the truth and that the public shouldn't always get what the public wants (Brown, 2004). This is especially so when we are talking about fandom, rabid fandom most of all. Whatever else they are, fans are notoriously conservative. They resist change. They inhibit innovation. They want more of the same. They not only venerate the object of their desire, they entomb it in aspic forever and ever, amen (Hills, 2002; Jenkins, 1992; Lewis, 1992).

Fans, furthermore, are atypical. True, they talk an awful lot; they really, really love the product; and they are nothing if not proactively evangelistic. But they are also self-selected. They are not representative, not even remotely. Their enthusiastically put views are hopelessly distorted, albeit hopelessly distorted in a direction marketers find congenial. Isn't it great to gather eager followers? Isn't it wonderful to co-create with our oh-so-articulate customers, as the marketing textbooks recommend? Aren't we the bees' knees of branding? The answer, in a nutshell, is NO.

Yes, Blanchard and Bowles (1998) urge us to attract raving fans. However, it's important to recognize that raving fans are just that. Raving. And their ravings should be treated with considerable caution and not a little scepticism. It is madness to cede control to enthusiastic amateurs, no matter how creative they appear to be, how keen they are to help, or how seductive their whispered sweet nothings. In saying that, I'm not suggesting that fans, enthusiasts, aficionados, cognoscenti or whatever we want to call them should be ignored. Far from it. Fandom is a good thing, by and large, as are happy-clappy, tell-the-world customers. But, just as fans shouldn't be ignored, they shouldn't be idolized either, much less worshipped or adored.

None of this means that we should revert to the passive, quiescent, stimulus-response model of consumers that once held sway within marketing thought. Nor is it a return to the 'cultural dupes' scenario beloved by crumbly cultural theorists of the Marxism-maketh-Man contingent. There's no question that today's consumers are wise to marketers' wiles and that they are ready, willing and able to engage with marketers as well-informed equals (Brown, 2004). The so-called 'troublesome consumer' is not a myth and today's marketers have to take this into account. Consumers may be increasingly fan-like in their relationship with the marketing system – the brandscape is littered with closely knit communities (Kozinets, 1999; Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001) – but fans aren't passive dupes either. To the contrary, the fan culture literature shows that they are unfailingly fractious, strongly opinionated and, not least, extremely proprietorial (Hills, 2002). They have invested time, energy and financial resources. They have earned the right to be heard. They refuse to remain silent. They understandably expect their voices to be attended to.

This is certainly true of the Harry Potter brand community. Although it has given J.K. Rowling a powerful mandate to air her views on matters political

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and although politicians listen respectfully to the concerns of the iGeneration's Bob Geldof, Harry Potter's fanbase hasn't written Rowling a blank check. Her room for manoeuvre is really rather limited, as fans' willingness to criticize her contributions to the canon attest. The movies too are roundly condemned if they make an obvious mistake, as in the case of an erroneous inscription on a Goblet tombstone, which had world wide wizards up in arms. Likewise, a boycott of tie-in merchandise was mooted when many feared JKR was selling out to crass commercial interests. Warner's heavy-handed attempts to shut down tribute websites were met with considerable resistance and eventually circumvented. The fanfic community had to be pleaded with before its voluntary code of practice was introduced and Potterporn was confined to the top cybershelf. When Rowling mounted her anti-marketing hobby-horse by condemning advertisers' use of ultra-thin models, the readership was quick to condemn Jo's representations of obesity. Fat characters in the Harry Potter novels are unfailingly portrayed in an extremely negative light, Dudley Dursley especially. Mote and beam, JKR! Likewise, when Rowling urged her readers to support their local bookshop, rather than price-cutting chain stores and supermarkets, which are doing untold damage to the trade, many noted that the Harry Potter books are one of the supermarket chains' biggest loss-leaders and market share-grabbers. Put your own house in order, Jo!

When JKR oversteps the mark, in other words, the HP community clips her wings. Hegel's master-slave relationship is alive, well and teaching at Hogwarts. So powerful indeed has the slave become that it's calling the shots in the seventh and final volume. As previously noted, the original ending has already been changed and no one will be surprised if Draco Malfoy's wearing leather chaps when the series reaches its climax. Much as the fans adore Joanne Rowling, woe-betide her if she fails to meet audience expectations for the grand finale. The iTribes may not be revolting but they're definitely getting restless.

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