Chapter 17

Identity and the Online Media Fan Community

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ABSTRACT

While new technology offers the promise of abstraction and automation, the Web offers an efficient, global method of communication between people, both as individuals and within and amongst groups. The recent prominence of the social web reflects and acknowledges an underlying facet of human nature – that humans like to interact and will use whatever is available to them to do so. But communication and interaction are about more than the exchange of information; they are about who we are. This chapter presents a case study in identity and trust within the online media fan (OMF) community.

INTRODUCTION

Media Fandom Online

In looking at identity and social interaction, this chapter will focus on the OMF community. The modern incarnation of media fandom traces its beginnings back to the 1960s (Coppa 2006) although it has roots in the science and speculative fiction community. The term ‘Media Fandom’ is a collective idiom for a multitude of fan communities that share social characteristics and value/behavior systems. Despite the name, these communities are not just made up of fans of television and/or film, although these are in the majority, but may also include those inspired by literary, game, graphic novel/manga, cartoon/anime and non-fictional sources. As well as discussion and analysis of the shared object of interest, fans may engage in creative activities including but not limited to writing (fiction, reviews, essays), art/image manipulation, video editing and setting up and

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maintaining online environments/archives. The output of these endeavours is then shared within the community. This leads to a secondary level of interaction in which the community members comment on, discuss, recommend and analyse the fan produced material (fanworks), and the culture surrounding these exchanges. While the majority of this activity takes place on and across the Internet, conventions, meet-ups and other shared offline activities are also common and predate the online element of this community.

Research into this community has developed into its own area of study within media and social studies. Jenkins identifies himself, (Jenkins, 1992), and Camille Bacon-Smith, (Bacon-Smith, 1992), as being part of the second generation of researchers in fan studies (Jenkins, 2006b, P. 11 – 12) characterized through their interaction with their chosen subjects rather than analysis through distant observation. It is hardly surprising that this generation is the first to be accepted by fans.

This work paved the way for further studies and a third generation of researchers such as Baym (1995, 2000); Hills (2002); Pugh (2005); Hellekson and Busse (2006), as well as creating the foundation of fan self-analysis, culminating in projects such as the Fanlore wiki2 and the Transformative Works and Cultures Journal which bridge academia and fandom. While the initial research in this field did not consider the online aspects of fandom, later work such as Baym (1995, 2000); Costello (1999); Cromer (2002); Bury (2005); Jenkins (2006a); Hellekson and Busse (2006) embraced the computer-mediated aspects of the community and concentrated on fandom as an online entity.

This community is offered as a case study since it represents a diverse and international network that predates the Internet but has transitioned to its current incarnation not just as users but also as transformers and trendsetters. In addition to allowing the opportunity to study a mature community structure within an online context, media fandom offers an interesting insight into emergent technology usage within a strongly female environment.

Researchers have noted differences in the way that the sexes interact and present themselves online (Herring, 2000; Byam, 2000). In the blogging world this often focuses on the lack of prominence given to female bloggers and the difference in the type of blogging being undertaken (Herring, 2004; Schler 2006; Pedersen, 2007). However these studies also raise issues such as anonymity, privacy and harassment that are strongly connected to the projection of self into an environment as a contributing factor in this differential. The OMF community can be placed firmly within this debated area and is, therefore, of significant interest. The level of female involvement has been noted in a significant proportion of the social studies done on media fans (Bacon-Smith, 1992, P.22; Jenkins, 1992, P. 1; Gillilan, 1998, P. 184 etc). Costello (1999) showed that female fans were more likely to be involved as active social participants including in information exchange and fan fiction and, in recent years, this has included the use of blogging or journalling sites. It is perhaps unsurprising that the only two large, female-dominated open source projects3 have either come out of this community (Archive of Our Own4) or have strong ties to it (Dreamwidth5). This chapter will analyse design decisions in both projects that relate to identity and access.

Given the above, I will use ‘she’ and ‘her’ as a convenience when referring to members of the community when no gender is otherwise specified. This is not intended to exclude or discredit the many members of the community who do not identify as female.

**Defining Ourselves, or Not: Identity within Community**

The recent years have seen a rise in the use of form-based identities (schraefel, 1999) through social networking profiles. Whether these are marketing led is open to debate but often these forms serve as a template that includes optionality in publication of material and free text areas for more self-expression. In many cases, especially