Fandom
Entry for the *International Encyclopedia of Media Effects*

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Words: 6044

Abstract
This entry presents an overview of the development and current state of fan studies, exploring the "reverse image" of media effects. The field of fan studies offers the ultimate rebuttal of the traditional media effects-model, by stressing the independence, agency and power of media consumers vis-à-vis media producers. After providing a short historiography of the discipline, this entry dives deeper into three themes that have been central to discussions within fan studies since its early beginnings: fan fiction, fan communities, and places of fandom.

Keywords
Fandom, appropriation, fiction, community, place

Introduction[1]
At least since the Beatlemania of the 1960s, fans have been characterized as extremely devoted followers with an obsessive attachment to media stars or texts, stressing the fanatical part in the term's etymology. The alleged irrationality of fandom, fuelled by incidents like the murder of John Lennon at the hands of a fan in 1980, has strengthened the conception of fandom as a pathology and the idea that popular culture is inherently bad and or/treacherous. If indeed the media "affect" society, the effects can be studied in its purest form by observing fans.

As the internet rose to prominence, however, fans came to be increasingly celebrated. Fan cultures flourished in cyberspace and many fans were self-taught early adapters. With the arrival of social network sites, most notably Facebook, "fans" became a holy grail for businesses, political parties and other organizations previously conceptualized outside the domain of popular culture. Just like companies increasingly invite their consumers to 'like them' on Facebook, Barack Obama's presidential campaign made intensively use of the social media to rally and canalize support. In these diverse sectors of society, fans have become active consumers, if not "prosumers", pioneering the complex media realities of (post-) modern life through their fandom.

Indeed an entire academic discipline has been established, entitled "fan studies", devoted to studying the activities and characteristics of fans in all detail. Fans do not passively consume, so runs the argument, but actively *appropriate* media culture. In that sense, the field of fan studies offers the ultimate rebuttal of the

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[1] Parts of this and the next section have been published before in Zwaan, Duits & Reijnders (2014).

traditional media effects-model, by stressing the relative independence, agency and power of media consumers vis-à-vis media producers. This idea has been further investigated and observed among other, less engaged parts of media audiences. Indeed, many concepts derived from early fan studies, such as transmedial storytelling and co-creation, are now the standard fare in journalism and marketing text books.

This entry presents an overview of the development and current state of fan studies, exploring the "reverse image" of media effects. It starts with a short historiography of the discipline, showing how both fan studies and the fan have transformed over time. Thereafter it dives deeper into three themes that have been central to discussions within fan studies since its early beginnings: the creation of fan fiction, fan communities, and places of fandom. As will be shown while deliberating these themes, both the overtly negative and positive stereotypes of the fan do not correspond with the multifaceted reality of fandom in today's mediatized society.

Fan studies then and now

Henry Jenkins was one of the first scholars to counter the stereotypical portrayal of the obsessed fan. His *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (1992) set the tone for fan studies to come. Jenkins adapts Michel de Certeau's model of poaching to show that fans pro-actively construct and produce an alternative culture. This notion of "appropriation" became a recurring theme in early works on fandom, arguing that such acts of interpretation offered people the opportunity to dodge dominant culture and create a temporary haven for popular resistance. The meaning of a cultural artefact is not solely determined by the intentions of the producer or by the textual features of the artefact, but originates in part from the interpretation of the product by its consumers. One can diverge if not escape from hegemonic ideology by appropriating alternative meanings from media texts. As such, fandom offers an act of resistance: a way of going against the grain and creating space for one's own identity within the constraints and power relations of everyday life (see also Fiske 1989).

Jenkins recalls that when *Textual Poachers* was published in 1992, it "described a moment when fans were marginal to the operations of our culture, ridiculed in the media, shrouded with social stigma, pushed underground by legal threats, and often depicted as brainless and inarticulate" (Jenkins 2006a: 1). It was through his book and a number of other "early" studies on fans (e.g. Bacon-Smith 1992 and Fiske 1992), that fans as a special audience cluster were noticed and valued.

Based upon mostly ethnographic fieldwork, audience resistance became a central concept that revealed a more complex relationship between fans and popular culture. These studies formed a political project: "a statement against the double standards of cultural judgment and the bourgeois fear of popular culture; a statement in favour of fan sensibilities which gave a voice to otherwise marginalized social groups" (Sandvoss 2005: 3). Perhaps unsurprisingly, Jenkins and others self-identified as fans as well. They were thus already familiar with contemporary fan cultures, such as science fiction and football fans, and their practices, such as fanzines and fan fiction.

In the 1980s, media scholars started conceptualizing media users as active rather than passive. This notion of the active, producing audience became widely

accepted within media and communication studies in the 1990s. This was partly due to the development of the rapid growth of the internet. The internet allowed communities to form regardless of its members' physical location, thus allowing like-minded fans to connect. Geek culture, which borrows heavily from genres favoured by fans like science fiction and fantasy, colonized the internet. Participation and participatory culture became the buzzwords of Web 2.0, a term used to summarize the cumulative changes in the ways the internet is developed and used. As a result, many of the negative connotations of fans were lost in favour of the ideologies of web 2.0, which argue that the internet speaks to people's inherent desire to participate.

Henry Jenkins continued his role as trailblazer of fan studies with *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (2006b). This book describes fan cultures at this particular moment in time when fans were discovered and celebrated by media producers. According to Jenkins, the introduction and distribution of new technologies enabled "consumers to archive, annotate, appropriate, and recirculate media content. Powerful institutions and practices (…) are being redefined by a growing recognition of what is to be gained through fostering (…) participatory cultures" (Jenkins 2006a: 1).

As the internet, most noticeably through the development of mobile technologies, has become omnipresent to the everyday life of almost everyone – from unborn babies to the homeless – it appears that in 2015, everyone is a fan. Much more so than in 2006, the average audience member is connected though networks and "digital" is now taken for granted. Co-creation, fan funding and the rise of the prosumer have continued to blur the lines between production and consumption and the relationships between consumers and producers of cultural products are far more complex than ever before.

"Participation culture" is no longer a niche phenomenon, but has become the new normative standard. Usage of the word fan has become ubiquitous and it is now applied to a range of audience positions, from frequent watchers (due to television broadcasters' promotional strategies) to returning customers (due to Facebook terminology). As a result, fandom became an acceptable and respectable practice. Everyone now appears to be a fan of something. Concurrently, understandings of active audiences resulting from early research on fans have spread to mainstream media and communication studies. Fans can thus be positioned as the vanguard of media advances.

Fan communities
Many, though notably not all fans, have a particular willingness, and sometimes, eagerness, to share their experiences and interpretations of media texts with likeminded people. In doing so, fans become part of, and interact in, a fan community. As Sandvoss and Kearns (2014: 91) put it: "The academic analysis of fans has frequently foregrounded two dimensions: creativity and collectivity. These characteristics of fandom in turn appear to set the practices of fans apart from other less productive and tightly knit audience groups". It is thus both the creativity, like fan fiction described above, as well as a sense of belonging to a group, that fan communities have in common.

The ways in which the sense of community is created, in particular in online environments, is well described by Ruth Deller: "This can occur through establishing group conventions and norms, creating a sense of 'place', communication about personal issues within groups, members communicating outside of the fan environment and members offering one another assistance" (2014, p. 239). By creating spaces, either physical ones ranging from small scale private screening parties of films where groups of friends dress up to large scale fan conventions or online through setting up websites or Facebook pages, fans meet other fans, share fan art and fan fiction, and engage in all types of fan activities ranging from collecting to cosplay ("costume play," in which the fan dresses up as a character from a media text). All of these activities have a twofold goal: celebrating the object of fandom and creating a sense of belonging to a group of likeminded people.

Already in the early academic work on fans, Jenkins (1992a: 210-211) notes that fandom itself can be understood as a constituting a "particular interpretative community" in which "fan club meetings, newsletters, and letterzines, provide a space where textual interpretations get negotiated". Upon the emergence of the Internet, fans were one of the first groups to go online and set up their own virtual spaces. They were among the pioneering groups of users to start discussion fora and thus the first online fan communities. With the further development and emergence of new technologies fan activities and fan communities have diversified into mailing lists, newsgroups, fan websites, social network pages, video channels, blogs, reviewing sites and other, often very diverse platforms for fan fiction. All of these can be considered online fan communities in which fans of specific media texts or media personalities engage and share experiences, knowledge, creativity and emotions with one another.

However, as Sandvoss and Kearns (2014) also note, even though these fan communities exist and can in some cases become very important to fans' individual identities, it is most definitely not the case that all fans partake in fan communities. Sandvoss and Kearns acknowledge that a large segment of media users, who do identify with their fan objects and may thus be classified as fans, lack the sense, or even the desire, to belong to a fan community.

Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998: 138-139) offer a typology in which this distinction regarding the degree of connectivity with other audiences can be recognized. Within their typology, they distinguish between "fans", described as "individuals who are not yet in contact with other people who share their attachments"; "cultists", who have an even deeper attachment to their fan object, but are also involved in fan networks; and finally "enthusiasts", who are very productive and whose fandom is based more "around activities rather than media or stars". According to this typology, it is mainly the "cultists" and "enthusiasts" that are engaged in fan communities. Sandvoss and Kearns (2014) note that this typology allows for the distribution of fan productivity. At the base there is a large group of uninvolved "ordinary fans"; then there is a group of fans who are engaged with fan communities, but can be seen as "lurkers" (users who only read and do not post or share); then a group that only responds but is not very much involved in fan productivity; and finally the small "fan elite" that is very active in fan production. This elite creates the bulk of fan fiction, videos, remixes, blogs, fanzines and are actively

involved in offline activities such as organizing fan meetings, cosplay, going to fan conventions and so on. The distinction between lurkers, reactors and elite shows that not all fans are equally engaged in fan communities, although they usually do feel strongly connected to their fan communities as this is where they can celebrate and even "live" their fandom.

As spaces where fans engage in new social relationships, these fan communities often comprise the free exchange of ' gifts' . Usually one does not have to pay to watch a fan video, or read a piece of fan fiction. As mentioned above, recent shifts in this model causes fear among community members of being prosecuted for copyright infringement by media companies. In some cases, fans take on roles of distributors and translators for types of popular culture that are not available to audiences in official ways. For instance, Lee (2014) describes communities of Manga and Anime fans outside of Japan, in which "scanlators" scan and translate the original Japanese Manga and share the translated versions, and "fan subbers" provide subtitles in many different languages for the original anime. Much like the often cited "textual poaching" that Jenkins (1992) theorized, being part of a fan community and engaging in fan creativity and the related fan gift economy involves a struggle for meaning with media producers. In the eyes of many fans, media conglomerates do not have the best intentions for their fan objects (see for instance Proctor, 2013 on *Star Wars* fans responses to the news that Lucasfilm had been sold to Disney, or the reactions of Minecraft community members after the purchase of the popular game by Microsoft). This fan resistance can take place very actively and wilfully, but often it is a form of fan creativity without conscious intentions of resistance.

Fan fiction
One of the defining characteristics of fan culture is the activity of writing fan fiction, "stories authored by fans that create additional content through the incorporation of characters, plots and/or settings from a source text" (The Janissary Collective 2014: 79). Fan fiction comes in endless varieties: it may make protagonists out of secondary characters, it may create alternative universes, it may loosely borrow from original plotlines. Fan fiction flourishes in the digital age and there are now thousands of sites dedicated to writing and sharing fan fiction, from short snippets shared between friends to massive archives where fans can upload and read stories about nearly any text. Self-publishing possibilities like e-books and print-on-demand have made it easier to distribute these writings outside fan circles and to monetize them. Notable here is the enormous success of *Fifty Shades of Grey*, which started out as fan fiction based on the *Twilight* novels (Jones 2014). Note that writing is only one form of fan creation. Fan productivity also manifests itself in video/film making, musical and lyrical production, and the creation of costumes and props (The Janissary Collective 2014).

Of course creating new texts by building on existing texts is not a new phenomenon. From the start of the Western literary tradition, storytellers have borrowed plots and characters well-known to their audiences, shuffled them and passed them on in different forms. Henry Jenkins (2000) draws a direct line between Homer's Odyssey and contemporary fan practices. Homer also used plots, characters

and story lines that were already well-known to his audiences. Fans writing their own fiction is, according to Jenkins, part of a basic human drive towards storytelling and a manifestation of our cultural tradition that has always been a practice of sharing. This – in today's terms – remixing of existing works is one of the most visible fan practices and, as such, has received considerable scholarly attention.

In its practice of taking an existing text and adding to it, fan fiction allows the author to fantasize new and different developments that have particular meaning to him/her. Much fan fiction involves *shipping*, short for relationshipping, where authors write romantic storylines for the protagonists. As such, fan fiction also offers tremendous opportunity to counter marginalization in contemporary popular culture. The importance of romantic fantasy becomes clear in the three main genres of fan fiction: *gen*, *het* and *slash*. *Gen* means a general story without imposed romantic relationships; *het* refers to heterosexual (made-up) relationships; and *slash* has same-sex relationships, usually invented by the fan author based on a perceived homo-erotic subtext. Within these divisions, numerous subgenres exist, such as *mpreg* (where a male character gets pregnant), *episode fix*, and *PWP* (*porn without plot*) (Busse & Hellekson 2006).

Slash in particular presents a way to fill a cultural lack (Fiske 1992), in this case to question heteronormativity. Slash fiction can be seen as subtle resistance to mainstream popular culture, where marginalized parts of audiences can create queer spaces. Likewise, fan fiction offers girls the possibilities to critically respond to maledominated texts and to insert fierce female heroes. Writing fan fiction is then both an act of critical reading and of identity play. The subversive power of these kinds of fan practices, combined with the pleasures that can be gained from these activities, encourage fans to unite.

Crucial to understanding fan fiction is the difference between canon and *fanon*. Busse and Hellekson define canon as "the events presented in the media source that provide the universe, setting and characters" (2006: 9). These media sources can be film, television series, novels etc. Fanon is the creation by fans of details, plot lines and characters unsupported by the original texts. Canon is often difficult to establish: what should be included in the "official" narrative of extensive franchises like *Lord of the Rings* or the Marvel comics is subject of fierce debate, even leading to so-called canon wars (see Proctor 2013). At the heart of such debates are issues of continuity and coherence, such as do the events make sense in the timeline and are character developments in line with established character traits? Even within official canon, these matters can be extremely troubling to fans. For instance, in the recent film *Star Trek Into Darkness* (2013), director J.J. Abrams created an alternate timeline for a franchise that already knows an extended universe, thus upsetting many fans.

Fanon may consciously contradict canon, Busse and Hellekson (2006) argue, but knowledge of canon is nonetheless essential to fan fiction creators. Their texts are judged on how well their interpretation stays true to this canon while being recognizable as fanon. The separation is not always absolute, and occasionally fanon makes it into canon. This is called *ascended fanon*: when a media producer uses fannish ideas, jokes or other contributions in canonic texts.

Despite its lineage in the Greek literary tradition, fan fiction nowadays is troubled by the potential of struggle with large media corporations. In their eyes, these fan writers are copyright infringers. To media corporations media texts are franchises that should be licensed. In critiquing the legal power displays of the likes of Disney, Fox and Viacom, Jenkins holds that:

> "media companies are expanding their legal control over intellectual property as far and as wide as possible, strip-mining our culture in the process. They have made inventive uses of trademark law to secure exclusive rights to everything from Spock's pointy ears to Superman's cape, pushed policies that erode the remaining protections for fair use, and lobbied for an expansion of the duration of their copyright protection and thus prevented works from falling into the public domain until they've been drained of value. In the end, we all suffer a diminished right to quote and critique core cultural materials" (2000: 104).

That is not to say that Jenkins does not want companies to profit from their productions. Instead, he argues that the need to protect original authors has been overshadowed by financial interests. Before the internet age, fan fiction was an amateur endeavour under the corporate radar. This can no longer be upheld now, as Jenkins observes, the web has become a public arena for grassroots storytelling. The explicitly non-commercial ethos and presentation of fan fiction has kept it from heavy prosecution by media corporations, who are unwilling to risk the "bad press" of "attacking" the fan base as long as fans are describing their works as "non-official" and are not making money from them. However, as fan fiction becomes more popular and prominent, tensions regarding its commercial value have arisen.

An example of this tension can be found in the *Fifty Shades* series, which, as mentioned, started as *Twilight* "alternate-universe" fan fiction but was published to massive success after the author changed the names of the lead characters. Bethan Jones' (2014) writing about *Fifty Shades of Grey* explains the tensions between capitalist consumerism and fandom through the framework of the fannish gift economy (see section Fan Communities below). Although *Fifty Shades* author E.L. James was active in the fan community, she did not write "for" that fandom, but for profit. Despite her receiving feedback from her fellow *Twilight* fans, she took sole credit. Jones thus points to complicated exploitative power relations, where the loss of distinction between producers and consumers also have consequences for fan productions within fan communities. The free labour of fan fiction can quickly become a commercial enterprise, with either traditional media conglomerates profiting from these writings or smart fans who use the fannish gift economy for their own benefit. This is further complicated by fans becoming media professionals, or professionals self-identifying as fans (see Hills 2002).

Places of fandom

Although the Internet and networked communication have made fan communities and texts increasingly virtual, or at least virtually accessible, the physical world continues to be an integral part of fandom. This leads us to the third and final theme of fan culture discussed in this entry: places of fandom. In general, fan places can be divided into two categories: those created by local fan activity, and those created by media producers as a result of what has been filmed, created, or set in a particular location. In both cases, it is the fan that ultimately gives meaning to a location.

Of the fan-created places, the fan convention is the most emblematic. Fan conventions, usually held in the nondescript settings of hotels or convention centres, are places where fans gather to discuss, celebrate, and otherwise share and display their fandom. Conventions were among the first "modern" fan practices, with small events for science-fiction fans taking place in the late 1930s and the first World Science Fiction Convention, now called Worldcon, taking place in 1939 and continuing to the present day. Conventions can be dedicated to a single fan text (such as the *Star Wars Fan Conferences*); they can focus on a single media genre (such as science fiction or anime); they may showcase one type of fan practice (such as filking conventions); they may be international mega-events (like the San Diego Comic-Con); but they all share one common characteristic, which is offering a place for like-minded fans to meet and exchange.

Through much of the history of organized fandom, the convention occupied a central role – it was where "fans can interact with their favorite writers (or in media fandom, the stars and creative personnel behind their favorite media texts), get to know other fans who share a common interest, and exchange ideas and showcase their own creative productions" (Jenkins 1992b: 217, see also Bacon-Smith, 1992). At conventions, fans interact with other fans, learn about new potential objects of fandom, exchange or purchase fan works and memorabilia, and be part of a broader community.

While much of the fandom practices that were once maintained at conventions have now moved online – such as the exchange of fan works and getting to know other fans –, the convention still holds an important role for fandom. Performative fanworks, such as cosplay or filking (musical performances about fan-related subjects) require the presence of other fans. Cosplay in particular has become an increasingly prominent contemporary fan practice in both Western and Eastern fan cultures. Through competitions where fans showcase their costuming abilities and perform small skits as characters for prizes and acclaim, "masquerade" parties, and generally walking around in costume in the company of appreciative other fans who "get it", the convention provides the focal point of cosplay as practice. The fan convention thus provides a physical space devoted to fandom that encourages its performative aspects in ways that might not be found outside of it, either in non-fan-oriented spaces or virtual ones.

This is not to say that performances are the only reason for fan conventions in the digital age. As they have been throughout their history, conventions also offer a chance to interact with media producers in person and to learn about aspects of the object of fandom that they might not otherwise know about. For example, research has shown that meet-and-greets with beloved celebrities are highly valued by their fans, because they fulfil certain needs that are directly related to the physical,

embodied character of these events (Reijnders, Spijkers, Roeland & Boross 2014). Most importantly, though, conventions offer a physical site for connecting with the greater fan community. Conventions physicalize the relationship that fans have with both their favourite texts and with the wider fan community, making it "real" in a way that has considerable emotional strength.

This can also be said of places that are important to fans as a result of media production. Film sites, famous recording studios, author's homes, book settings, and other places of that nature have all become focal points for fans. They are meaningful because of what happens or has happened there, either in "real life" (such as visitors going to see where *The Lord of the Rings* films were shot in New Zealand) or through fiction (such as visitors paying tribute to the "birthplace" of Captain Kirk). These places are "created" through their use by media producers, but as with the convention centres and hotels that become sites of fan gatherings, it is the fans that give these places meaning.

Often, this is through travel, a so-called "fan pilgrimage". Fans travel to the places made special through film production, which then establishes a physical connection to their object of fandom. This form of tourism, particularly when connected to film and television, has grown in popularity of late, and production sites of a variety of media outlets have become successful tourist attractions. Fans might be interested in different aspects of the production site – technical aspects like how a certain scene was made, or what an author saw from her window; what a fictional location might look like beyond the screen of the TV – but actually visiting the site raises the text from mediated to sensory experience. It anchors the object of fandom to the physical reality of the fan. This anchoring also allows for a play between fantasy and reality, not only through the physical experience of place, but also through providing a way to imagine the object of fandom in greater detail, making it seem more vibrant and "real" to the fan. When visiting such places, fans put themselves "literally in the place of the fan text and thus creating a relationship between the object of fandom and self that goes beyond mere consumption and fantasy" (Sandvoss 2005, 61). The physical thus adds a realness to the fan experience.

The importance of what happened (or continues to happen) at a production-created locality can lead to a strong attachment to the place - a topophilic connection to the location. An example of this can be found in sports fandom, especially fandom of team sports. Devoted fans have a strong attachment to their home ground, signified by the use of the term "home" to describe it – it is their place, one that they love (Bale 2000).

As with fan-created places, performative fan practices are often part of the relevance of these sites. Important or memorable scenes are re-enacted at filming sites (sometimes even in costume), while sports fans sing, create displays, and dress up at their teams' games. These sort of performances create an embodied memory within the fan, a way to interact with the site and claim it as their own. Through the meanings that fans attach to these places, and the memories and histories that fans have of them and what happened there, they become, to some extent, sacred. They represent the object of fandom in a tangible and often monumental way. Visiting these places

therefore confirms the importance of them to the individual fan as well as the fan community.

As the above examples illustrate, the physical, embodied aspects of fandom need to be considered when discussing the phenomenon of fan culture. Even – or maybe especially - in a digital age, place matters. Or as one might argue: place has become even more important, as a counterweight to the current mediatization of many (fan) cultural processes in our current society.

Conclusion

This entry has argued that fandom and fan practices can be seen as a "reverse image" of the traditional notion of media effects. The study of fans and fandom has shown that media audiences are often *active* in their use of media texts and products – they select, consume and appropriate media texts to their own ends, re-interpreting them through their own needs and desires, and as such creatively transform them into new (media) forms. Through the creation of fan works, the building of community, and the use of places, fans turn media worlds into something of their own.

As fan practices have become more visible, both to academics and to the media industry, the perception of fans has shifted. From "obsessive consumers" who needed to "get a life", fans are now seen as "media pioneers" with considerable power. The media industry is looking for ways to incorporate fan practices into their wider strategies, not only because fan support adds value and visibility to media texts, but also to keep these viewers engaged as paying consumers. Fan spaces like the San Diego Comic-Con have not only become integral to the promotion of major films and television series, but are also locations where further profit can be made.

Yet, as fan practices grow in prominence, new tensions arise. Fans might feel that the corporations that own their favourite characters and worlds mistreat them; media producers might dislike fans' more radical appropriations. While media corporations were willing to overlook smaller-scale, grassroots fan production, as long as they remained in a non-commercial "gift economy", the example of the *Fifty Shades* franchise shows that there is potentially a good deal of monetary value in these fan works. Fans and fan practices are therefore operating at a crossroads of media "effects": on one side, eager consumers of popular culture, on the other, active and frequently resistant producers of meaning. Understanding this sometimes contradictory nature of fan practice offers a key to understanding our contemporary media environment in general.

SEE ALSO
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