

# When Scholarship Obfuscates: Methodological Problems with Fan Studies

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## Abstract

Fields of study are based on more-or-less arbitrarily defined boundaries, and researchers should be aware of these boundaries and their limitations. The methodologies and rigor of fields of study should also be subject to critique if they are to retain academic relevance. Fan studies exhibits problems with the use of its key terminology, and its scope has also been artificially limited as a result of the preoccupations of the media scholars who were instrumental in its formation. This has led to potentially instructive aspects of the field being almost entirely excluded from consideration, which in turn has led to theory which fails to take account of distinctive characteristics of the excluded aspects. To challenge this vicious circle, more attention should be paid to these areas of fan activity which lie at a remove from the media-dominated mainstream.

Keywords: Fandom, fan, consumption, methodology

## Introduction

What concerns me here is the extent to which specific academic agendas have tended to dictate the conceptual shape of fandom within cultural studies. (Hills, 2002, p. 8)

Hills's concern about the "conceptual shape" of fan studies from 17 years ago succinctly expresses an issue to be addressed in the present paper. Any field of study is based on more-or-less arbitrarily defined boundaries. This is necessary for fields of study to exist at all. But the nature of these boundaries needs to be borne in mind, and their validity interrogated, to ensure that the field of study is not merely the covert expression of an academic agenda.

This paper will explore specific examples of problems with fan studies. One is the problem of terminology: a non-rigorous approach to core terms and language, which leads to confusion and undermines already opaque theory. Another example concerns the emphases of the discipline, which exclude or ignore significant elements, especially where these elements fail to conform to *a priori* definitions. This latter can be understood as the "conceptual shape" of fan studies, as noted by Hills above, and was the subject of a previous paper (Mason, 2019).

But if we ignore methodology ... then at some point we stop being able to see far or wide

enough. We risk taking for granted the way the discipline is organized, which raises concerns of single-sightedness and forecloses possibilities for the future of knowledge. (Evans & Stasi, 2014, p. 7)

Part of the methodology of fan studies entails deciding what constitutes the object of our analysis, and what terms we will use in our analysis to manipulate our understanding of that object.

### **Background to the Critique**

It is all too easy to undertake academic activity without at any point questioning the structure within which that activity is conducted. To give an example, it is commonplace to regard physics as a distinct discipline from chemistry. Yet a cursory acquaintance with quantum mechanics reveals that the boundaries between the two disciplines are ambiguous if, indeed they exist at all: and this is not a recent phenomenon (See, for example, Pauling & Wilson Jr, 1935). One reason it is easy to proceed without questioning such a state of affairs is that it is hard to see how such a situation could have an impact of any consequence on the research itself, or foreclose on the possibility of a phenomenon being given attention. The meaning and value of  $E = mc^2$  does not change if one is to assert that it is chemistry not physics. But is this always the case?

There are other ways in which the academic framework may affect academic activity. One is that of bias or suppression of findings for political reasons. A well-known example concerns the way in which the entire field of genetics was censored in Soviet Russia in favor of Lamarckian Inheritance, which better suited Stalin's political ideology (Soyfer, 2001). More controversially, it has been argued that the entire field of economics is warped by gender biases that, for example, exclude the impact of unpaid work, and of nature (Ferber & Nelson, 2003).

Attention has been drawn to socio-political biases by such events as the so-called Sokal Hoax (Sokal, 1996), and the Grievance Studies affair (Lindsay, Boghossian, & Pluckrose, 2018). In both these cases, alleged failings of academic forums in specific fields were exposed by successfully publishing satirical, nonsensical papers in them. The papers aped the socio-political biases their authors had identified in cultural studies.

Ironically, Sokal, in his deliberately parodic paper, suggests that "physical 'reality' ... is at bottom a social and linguistic construct." (Sokal, 1996) He gives this as an example of the kind of "nonsense" that postmodernists are writing, with the implication that it is inherently absurd, and goes on to write that no sane person could contend otherwise than that the properties of the real world are objective facts. Unfortunately all this demonstrates is that whatever his talents as a physicist, Sokal does not understand the field he is criticizing, nor fairly elementary epistemological concepts. While straw postmodernist men would have no

reason to deny that reality exists independent of humanity, they would also point out that our capacity to experience and conceptualize reality depends on the evidence of our senses, interpreted through our language. Hence “reality” (which is itself a linguistic formulation, which we might consider distinct from the unreachable objective non-linguistic reality Sokal thinks he is describing) is indeed, at bottom, a social and linguistic construct.

This alerts us to one problem involved in critiquing a field: the critic needs to be sufficiently acquainted with the field to avoid making mistakes such as the above. Naturally, someone who is acquainted with the field is likely to be someone working within the field, and this raises the problem of whether the critic is ready to bite the hand that feeds them.

In the rest of his paper, Sokal uses scientific terms in absurd ways according to what he perceives as the dogma of postmodernism. Yet even though he, a physicist, has apparently failed to comprehend postmodern concepts, he expects postmodern scholars (non-scientists) to be aware that the scientific concepts he—a recognized scientist—is describing are ridiculous. It seems that the socio-political biases Sokal identifies are not limited to his targets.

The Grievance Studies affair employs a more sophisticated technique, and involves the submission of multiple papers to multiple journals. Unfortunately, as with Sokal, even though the thrust of the hoax may have some merit, the waters are muddied by the nature of the hoaxes themselves, and the ways in which the reaction rapidly degenerated into name-calling and point-scoring. Although a number of academics welcome the intellectual failings exposed by the Grievance Studies affair, and some praise the spirited humor with which the hoax was conducted, Harvard biology professor Carl Bergstrom comments:

Attacking a field with satirical nonsense is ineffectual—and just plain lazy. If a field is intellectually vacuous, it is so because its central papers and most exciting conclusions are unjustified or even absurd. To effectively criticize a field, one must engage with its central tenets, its core assumptions, its accepted methods, and its primary conclusions. And then one must show where these are mistaken, incoherent, or preposterous. Sadly, the hoaxers chose a different path. They may have created a media splash, but their stunt is a hollow exercise in mean-spirited mockery rather than a substantive critique of the field. (Bergstrom, 2018)

Note that Bergstrom is not a post-modern scholar defending his field; he is a scientist. It is worth bearing these points in mind in considering other situations which might raise problems about the academic framework surrounding a discipline: perhaps situations which hybridize elements of the examples given above. If this paper is to engage with problems regarding fan studies, it must do so not by spoofing excesses, but by engaging with the core of the discipline, and with its leading proponents rather than outlying positions. In any case, the intent here is not to accuse the field of being intellectually vacuous; merely that it is guilty of the sins of omission and distortion.

Another important lesson to be learned from these two affairs is to consider the motivation of the actors. Both were hoaxes, and although such a deception can be a way of drawing attention to a state of affairs, it is hard to see how it might be regarded as a sincere and constructive form of criticism. It carries the risks that all attention-seeking gestures carry: that any serious content is overpowered by the force of attention.

Bergstrom, above, uses the word “attacking”, which implies a desire to harm or destroy, then switches to “criticize” and “critique” when presenting alternative, positive approaches. This paper will attempt to subject fan studies to critique, not from any desire to harm or delegitimize it, but rather the opposite: to suggest ways in which it can be more true to the name than it currently is.

### **The Nature of Fan Studies**

Previous papers have explored the dimensions of fan studies both conceptually and chronologically. It emerged from work on audiences conducted by media scholars (Hellekson, 2009; Mason, 2013). This is significant, because the initial focus casts a heavy shadow over the current discipline. There is no evidence that the original researchers intended to shackle fan studies with the concept of “fan as intense audience” for the simple reason that there was no discipline of fan studies at that stage. Thus Henry Jenkins (1992), though writing a book about fans of television series, gave a detailed history and explanation of fans which included other categories, and pointed out significant differences in characteristics. Camille Bacon-Smith, having dealt with the rather specific topic of female fans of *Star Trek* (*Enterprising Women: Television Fandom and the Creation of Popular Myth*, 1992), went on to explore the field of science fiction fandom (*Science Fiction Culture*, 2000), an area which has received scant attention since, and which will be the subject of future research by the present author.

Once these foundational texts had established fan studies, however, there came a second and then third wave, building on the work of the first (Gray, Sandvoss, & Harrington, 2007). Many of the second-wave of fan-scholars saw fandom as an “interpretive community,” and the third wave focused on the relationships between fans, and with the fan object. The third wave widened the definition of fandom, arguing that the Internet-enabled explosion of communication between audiences of a fan object constituted a massive expansion in fandom. The problem with this is that it is only true if one accepts that those “who merely love a show” (Gray, Sandvoss, & Harrington, 2007, p. 3) are fans. And this definition depends on an unchallenged acceptance of the notion that being a fan consists of being an enthusiastic member of an audience. In this way, after the initially rather tolerant view of the subject matter, subsequent researchers proved too timid to emerge from under a media mushroom, and perhaps too ready to uncritically accept limitations on the field presented to them by peers as *faits accomplis*.

We can gain a partial view of the development of fan studies by looking at some of the

books published in the field. Although the discipline of fan studies is understood to have started in 1992, this does not, of course, mean that writing on fans started then. Science fiction fandom had already spawned published works on fandom, such as Warner (1969) and Moskowitz (1974). Yet 1992 saw the publication not only of the abovementioned two books by Jenkins (1992) and Bacon-Smith (1992), but also a contributed volume edited by Lewis (1992). Interestingly, the latter included material about music, and even a chapter by Jenkins about filk (a science fiction fan activity involving music-making). Nevertheless, the overwhelming focus was on television, and especially *Star Trek*.

In the subsequent year a book on football fandom (Redhead, 1993) was published. It is rarely cited within fan studies. The book on science fiction fandom published the year after (Sanders, 1994) is now out of print. Books from 1995 (Harrington & Bielby; Tulloch & Jenkins, 1995) are still with us however, and, like a succession of books in the following years (Verba, 1996; Harris & Alexander, 1998; Baym, 2000; Lancaster, 2001), are predominantly concerned with television. Exceptions to this include Bacon-Smith's (2000) work on science fiction fandom—rarely cited, and itself probably the last major work to concern this topic—two books about comics (Pustz, 1999; Brown J. A., 2001) and one about football (Brown A., 2002).

Over subsequent years, the trend here steadily solidified, with an overwhelming majority of works concerning television and movies (See Mason, 2019, for more detail about this). Fan studies, it seemed, was actually *media* fan studies, but with the first word disingenuously omitted. Duffett bucked the trend with the subtitle of his 2013 work *Understanding Fandom: An Introduction to the Study of Media Fan Culture*. However, for the purposes of this paper, there are two key texts which need to be examined in more detail, published in 2002 (Hills) and 2005 (Sandvoss) respectively. Neither of these texts offers a subtitle which limits their magisterially global titles (*Fan Cultures* and *Fans*) to media studies. Before considering them in more detail, there is a more fundamental matter: the terminology in use.

## Fan Studies Terminology

### Fan

In the field of fan studies, difficulties arise from imprecise use of terminology. Naturally, the crucial piece of terminology for fan studies is *fan*, and here problems emerge right away. What is a fan? Matters were perhaps easier in the early days, when writers took an understanding of the word *fan* for granted, and didn't expend much effort in trying to define it rigorously. Problems arose when such definitions started to be made, and exposed boundary problems in considering the word "fandom" (see below).

On the one hand, as noted above, we encounter one definition which considers fans to be those "who merely love a show" (Gray, Sandvoss, & Harrington, 2007, p. 3). While this seems to be limiting fans to the media, it is also an extremely wide definition. It seems that

we are studying media consumption by those who have a high level of affect for their “show”. Is there any necessity, however, to establish a field of such research outside media studies? It seems that audience theory within media studies is fully equipped to deal with it. If this is all fan studies is, then it is an unnecessary category.

At the other extreme, we can define *fan* far more narrowly, in such a way that it excludes a large number of people who self-identify as fans. We can formulate a very tight definition of fan as someone who consumes a certain form of media in a certain way, and has certain responses to it. Such a definition excludes from the meaning of *fan* all those fans who are not media fans, as well as anyone who identifies as a fan despite not meeting the criteria.

What is the value in doing so? True, we may have established a rigorously-defined theoretical category. But what is the point of doing this when the category maps so poorly on to empirical reality? Fiske categorizes fans in terms of “the cultural tastes of subordinated formations of the people”, and defines them by their textual productivity (Fiske, 1992, p. 30). He goes on to argue that “Categories are produced by the analyst for analytical purposes and do not exist in the world being analyzed but they do have analytical value”. (Fiske, 1992, p. 37) This may well be true, but it does suggest a follow-up question that perhaps needs some attention, regarding the value of analysis derived from non-existent categories. To be fair, however, the categories Fiske is referring to are categories of fan productivity: semiotic, enunciative and textual (see Hills’s critique of these, later). Clearly, fans would not categorize their own activity in this way; in this sense Fiske’s argument seems to be that they are useful tools for the researcher to think about fan production. *Fan* and *fandom*, on the other hand, are words which are used by fans, and which are loaded with associative power. What is the analytical value of using these terms in ways that contradict their usage by fans?

A critique of Fiske’s writing does not constitute a critique of fan studies. Fiske is a media scholar who has been influential in spreading the idea of an active audience—an idea crucial to the development of media fan studies. Yet his writing about fans was done without the superstructure of fan studies material now available. The rough edges of his analysis can be forgiven as much as the lacunae in his fan knowledge (for example, on page 46, *Star Trek*’s starship *Enterprise* is weirdly prefixed by “SS”—which means steam ship—a term never used in *Star Trek*). However, it is not unreasonable to criticize those who took Fiske’s analysis of media audiences, including his use of the work of Bourdieu, and applied that as a limiting template for the study of all fans.

Sandvoss (2005) dismisses Fiske’s definition of fan for two compelling reasons: firstly it clearly does not describe all fans, and secondly it is a definition based on the very argument that Fiske goes on to develop. Sandvoss therefore wants “... a definition of fan practices that precedes normative evaluation.” (2005, p. 7) Sandvoss recognizes that fans should be defined in terms of their behavior in its own right, rather than any hypothesis regarding its meaning. Unfortunately, his next step in formulating a definition is “The clearest indicator of a particular emotional investment in a given popular text lies in its regular, repeated

consumption.” (2005, p.7) While this is a clever way to achieve what Sandvoss wants, it falls foul of the one of the problems Sandvoss identified with Fiske. It suggests that all fans are consumers of popular texts which constitute the object of their fan behavior. Sandvoss clearly believes this to be a reasonable assumption, and he gives examples from sport, music and movies in support of it. But as his explanation demonstrates, he has decided *a priori* that a fan is someone who is emotionally invested in a popular text. While this does describe many fans, Sandvoss has not proved that it describes all of them, he has merely defined it so. Sandvoss’s definition struggles to accommodate the fan experience of gamers, furies, and even some SF fans, whose fan experience can involve emotional investment in an activity rather than a text or texts. This issue of consumption will be returned to below.

### **Fandom**

Problems are compounded with the term *fandom*. The Oxford English Dictionaries provide us with a useful demonstration of the problem:

fandom. NOUN.

1 [mass noun] The state or condition of being a fan of someone or something.

1.1 [count noun] The fans of a particular person, team, fictional series, etc. regarded collectively as a community or subculture. (Oxford English Dictionary, 2018)

Both of these meanings are used in fan studies, and in many cases, writers fail to make clear which they mean. In some cases, both are used, or a writer who adopts one quotes someone else who adopts another, with no recognition of the drift in meaning.

Considering the fan studies books examined earlier, for example, the former definition (henceforth OED1) is to be found in Lewis (1992), Redhead (1993), Hills (2002), and Sandvoss (2005), although Hills does appear to be aware of the “fandom = community” meaning. In other words he is willfully using ambiguous terminology. The word *fandom* does not appear in the index to his book.

The latter definition (henceforth OED1.1) is used by Bacon-Smith (1992), Jenkins (1992), Harrington and Bielby (1995), Harris (Introduction, 1998), Pustz (1999) and Brown (2002).

Hills (2002) criticizes Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998): “It seems faintly unhelpful to produce a taxonomy in which the definition of ‘fan’ is at odds with the use of this term in almost all other literature in the field.” (Hills, 2002, p. ix) Nevertheless this doesn’t stop Hills using the term *fandom* with a definition at odds to much prior usage, and failing to remark on it. On the other hand, Hills usefully points out that the danger of fixating on definition is that it introduces an undeserved sense of certainty to terms and values that are contested. *Fandom*, as the above demonstrates, is clearly a contested term. Notably, within those groups of fans that see themselves as part of a community, the term is used in the OED1.1 sense. This difference in emphasis is pointed to by the definition of fandom in Fanlore, a fan-authored

wiki. It is unequivocal in its definition of fandom: "... a community of fans, participating in fanac and interacting in some way, whether through discussions or creative works." (Fanlore, 2018) The same source traces the first use of the term to 1896, and notes that it was used from the 1920s and 30s by science fiction fans.

Sandvoss (2005) basically *must* adopt the OED1 definition of fandom because his view is that of fandom as an identity, formed by the relationship between the fan and the fan object. His analysis of this, especially that drawing on psychoanalytic theory, is sophisticated and extensive. Unfortunately it is also based on the fan as an individual. The relationship is between the fan and the fan object, and relationships between fans are implied to be mere adjuncts to that central relationship. Yet it is hard to tell, because Sandvoss does not address at any length the issue of fan communities. It is not that he is unaware of them. Rather, he objects to what he sees as the argument by Fiske (1991; 1992), as well as Tulloch & Jenkins (1995), that fans are part of a community (indeed, he uses a quotation by the latter in which *fandom* is clearly used in the sense of OED1.1). He quite correctly points out that it is possible to be a fan without participating in a fan community, i.e. *fandom* in OED1.1. Unfortunately it seems that he takes from this that fan communities are of little theoretical or practical importance in fan studies. Just as the "fan" in fan studies seems to have been tacitly redefined as "media fan", Sandvoss seems to be going a step further and redefining it as "individual media fan".

How can we explain the cavalier attitude to terminology exposed here?

Media and cultural studies has characteristically been an 'outlaw', 'non' or 'anti-discipline', by its very nature willingly showing disdain for definitions and categories, emphasizing flexibility and fluidity with the aim of proceeding as a bricolage collective of methods, theories, ideas and concepts. (Evans & Stasi, 2014, p. 8)

This explains, for example, Hills's warning about the dangers of fixating on a definition. However, the correct response to this is not to brush any consideration of alternative meanings and disputed understandings under the carpet, but to acknowledge and confront them. To ignore the fact that *fandom* is used by many fans to refer to a community, to ignore the existence of such a community over the last century which has greatly influenced the ways in which fans in many fields behave, is to demonstrate either unforgivable ignorance, or bad faith.

### **The Fan as Consumer**

The term *consumption* is widely used in media studies, as well as other disciplines such as sociology. Its use can be criticized for omitting the element of consumption whereby the object of the verb consume is destroyed or transformed as a result of the consumption (As in, for example, "I consumed the meal" or "The building was consumed by flames"). However,



the term *consumer* has for many years been used to refer to people who buy products, and although in a capitalist economy, imperishable products nevertheless often wear out or are superseded, this is not any longer a crucial part of the term's connotation, so we must accept it. Within the media, the meaning is stretched even further: *consume* becomes a catch-all term to refer to *watching* a movie, *reading* a book, *listening* to a sound recording etc.

The term's use in fan studies is widespread. Henry Jenkins describes himself on his web site as someone who wants to "...open up a larger space to talk about the media that matters to us from a consumer's point of view." (Jenkins, Who the %&# is Henry Jenkins?, n.d.) As Evans & Stasi point out: "by talking of 'consumers', Jenkins problematically frames the aca-fan within the language of economic relations." (2014, p. 15) Conceivably we can defend Jenkins' use by pointing to Miller (1995), who notes both that a theory of consumption opposes established ideologies of economic theory and politics, and that consumption is in no way incompatible with or opposed to culture. Indeed:

While there have always been cultural movements and flows from one space to another, the intensity and ease of contemporary intersections of the global and the local have forced scholars to look closely at the myriad ways in which culture is consumed—used up, made sense of, embraced, and explored. (James & Szeman, 2010)

This sociological view of consumption seems to be providing four distinct meanings for the word, which makes one wonder how *consumption* can be understood to mean anything at all. Evans & Stasi's warning about the problematic nature of the word should perhaps be extended beyond its economic connotations to its connotations for virtually anything.

As we have already seen, Sandvoss demands that "consumption" be identified as a defining characteristic of the fan. In this he is supporting Hills, who declares: "I aim to place fan cultures squarely within the processes and mechanisms of consumer culture, given that fans are always already consumers." (Hills, 2002, p. 27). But what does it mean to say that fans are "always already" consumers? It sounds as if it is intended to be significant in some way. As we have seen, Sandvoss was suggesting that specific patterns of consumption were defining characteristics of fans. He has refined Hills's "always already" formulation (which is actually rather meaningless, given that just about all human beings are "always already" consumers) by specifying that "regular, repeated consumption" is the thing. But even Miller sounds a note of caution about this casual use of the term.

We are being encouraged to think of people who watch films or go to schools as "consumers" rather than audiences and students. As is often the case in such shifts in the language of legitimation, this represents a movement in ideology with specific political implications. (Miller, 1995, p. 16)

What are the implications of the use of *consumer* to replace *audience* in fan studies?

Hills writes: "I would suggest taking as broad a view of 'fandom' as possible, and

including any devoted media consumption as well as non-media-based passions, enthusiasms or hobbies which may have led to specialist media consumption.” (2002, p. 83) An admirable call for a broad outlook conceals something else: a denial of non-media fandom, the exercise of which is only significant insofar as it fuels media fandom.

In fact both Hills and Sandvoss argue that being a fan is effectively the expression of a form of consumption as identity. It is hard to deny that consumption can play a major part in being a fan. However, given the varying extent to which consumption is important to different kinds of self-declared fans, to use it as the defining marker of a fan is retroactively applying a subsequent argument (just as Sandvoss complained about Fiske, earlier). Much of the problem here seems to be a surprising level of discomfort with the idea that there are many ways to be a fan. Some fans are unbridled consumers; some fans are avowed anti-capitalists. In between these two extremes lie myriad positions fans take. The idea that fandom may contain “both *anti-commercial ideologies and commodity-completist practices*.” (Hills, 2002, p.28, italics his) is of no more significance than the rather obvious statement that this is also true of society as a whole. It only presents a contradiction for those whose whole understanding of fans rests on the assumption that they are engaged consumers.

Hills argues against a fan vs consumer dichotomy, but supplants it with the argument that fans *are* consumers, which he presents as if it is a non-mainstream proposition. While this may have been arguable when he wrote his book, it certainly is not the case in contemporary fan studies. However, both of these positions suffer from a monolithic view of fans, a view which at other points Hills goes to great length to avoid or explode. Some fans are willing consumers; some are anti-commercial; some fans exhibit both consumerist and anti-commercial attitudes and behavior. The only problem arises when the simplification of this position becomes the justification for a theory of fans.

Hills writes: “The attempt to extend ‘production’ to all fans culminates in John Fiske’s categories of ‘semiotic’ and ‘enunciative’ productivity in which reading a text and talking about it become cases of ‘productivity’.” (2002, p.30) But equally, the attempt to extend “consumption” to all fans culminates either in an inability to recognize as fans those whose fan activity does not revolve around consumption of a media text (role-players and Furies, for example), or the reverse procedure to John Fiske’s, in which *creating* a “text” becomes a form of “consumption”. This is not to argue that there is no consumption involved in the activities of Furies and role-players. It is simply that making consumption central to the experience of these fans is clearly mistaken, unless the word *consumption* is stripped of any distinctive meaning, instead denoting “using up, making sense of, embracing, or exploring”.

To write from experience: in my early days as a role-player I bought role-playing products, and read them so that I would be able to use them in my games. The products were, however, peripheral to the activity I was a fan of, which was the game itself. This peripheral nature is demonstrated by the fact that I abandoned such overt consumption after a few years of role-playing, relying instead purely on my own creations and those of the other fans I

gamed with. Was I Ouroboros, consuming my own tail? Or was I simply not a fan, excluded by my own rejection of commercial consumption?

Or did my consumption become focused solely on consumption of the game activity? Here we should remember Miller's, and Evans & Stasi's warnings about misusing the word. How is it useful to say that a player of a game is "consuming" the game activity? Or that someone attending a party is "consuming" the party? Or that someone on a train is "consuming" the journey?

This unshakeable belief in the centrality of consumption survives ideas that ought at least to throw up alternative ways of thinking about it. Hills (2002) uses the theory of Donald Winnicott to develop an understanding of fandom as a ludic activity: "...it is important to view fans as players in the sense that they become immersed in non-competitive and affective play." (p. 112) It might be interesting to consider the possibility that this ludic immersion, rather than consumption, might be a defining characteristic of fans, but the opportunity is squandered. Fans are consumers who may also play, rather than players who may also consume.

A ludic interpretation might go some way to explaining furies. Samuel Conway, chairman of the world's largest furry convention Anthrocon, is quoted in *The Guardian* newspaper as saying, "Furry fandom is unique among fan cultures in that we are not consumers, but rather creators" (Wall, 2016). Although Conway is an academic, he is an organic chemist, and so can be forgiven for a claim of "uniqueness." Nevertheless his central point is that furies are not defined by consumption.

## **Lack of Rigor**

Since 1992 fan studies has, of course, been subject to critique. Matt Hills, for example, is critical of the abovementioned Fiske, amongst many others, as is Cornel Sandvoss. Evans & Stasi (2014) offer a bracing commentary on the absence of methodology in the field. Here "the field" naturally refers to ~~media~~ fan studies. Interestingly, however, their critique shows awareness of its own narrow focus, while commenting on the breadth of fan studies as, in addition to media fans: "...music fans, sport fans, celebrity fans and fans of consumer items." (Evans & Stasi, 2014, p. 6)

Evans and Stasi (2014) critique the methodology of fan studies, decrying the superficiality of much ethnography. They argue that fan letters and interviews would not even be recognized as ethnography in disciplines such as anthropology, which regard themselves as more rigorous. This is one of the aspects that inspired me to critique fan studies. I came to fan studies by way of auto-ethnography (which Hills deals with) but found that my self-discoveries were nowhere echoed within fan studies research. I don't consider my experiences universal, but I do consider them as having existed, and having been shared by other fans. Interestingly, Hills recounts a similar feeling: when he read Jenkins, he suffered "...a

glimmer of dissatisfaction; the fans that Jenkins wrote about differed from my experiences of fandom.” There, at the start, he was face-to-face with an important fact about fandom: its chimeric, multi-faceted character. And yet his book presents a view of... media fans. He could see that Jenkins was describing something that differed from his own experience, but he could not, apparently, project this insight beyond the boundaries of media fandom.

Why, then, is fan studies so reluctant to engage with other forms of fandom? Why would a peer reviewer of an article for *Transformative Works and Studies* which argued that not every fandom revolved around consumption of a fan object be so adamant that there was no substance to these claims, and that they were nonsensical, when the editor with whom the author had corresponded had confirmed her own similar observations? Not exactly a Sokal hoax, but worth a pause for thought. At the time, as the author in question, I humbly put the rejection down to my failings to adequately engage with the methodology of fan studies, and it is only after subsequent years of continuing observation and research that I have come to the conclusion that there is a blind spot here, caused by the myopia of media fan studies. Evans and Stasi discuss the way that in cultural studies, subject positions have been decentralized and deconstructed in favor of a focus on ‘texts’. My rejected article attacked the notion that a fan was inextricably bound up with a text. I wrote of the fan as a “lived experience” rather than a “spectator” (Evans & Stasi, 2014, p. 12)

### Omissions

The problem of media fan studies has already been raised. There is an ambiguity around the term *fan studies* that is highly deceptive, even if not deliberately so. It is as if scientists in the field of chemistry had tacitly decided to virtually ignore inorganic chemistry; to use the term “chemistry” to refer exclusively to organic chemistry. There is no doubt that there has been an explosion of media fan activity since the opening up of the Internet, but for this to constitute an apparent justification for ignoring some of the most historically significant areas of fan activity is indefensible. Media fandom itself emerged from science fiction fandom. And the practices and terminology of science fiction fandom were adopted by a wide range of other fan areas, including comics (Pustz, 1999) and role-playing games.

The obvious retort to this is that researchers will research what they are interested in; there is no conspiracy preventing work on other areas. Equally obviously, this is true, as the existence of this very paper demonstrates. On the other hand, while it may not qualify as “conspiracy”, to pretend to comprehensive coverage of an area of interest without at least mentioning significant elements of that area is a doubtful practice. Implicitly, it suggests that the omitted elements do not, in fact, fall within the area of interest.

The omission of science fiction fandom is startling in the two books mentioned earlier as being significant developments in the field. Hills claims (2002, p. 188) that Chapter 5 of his book discusses science fiction fandom (in the context of the cult discourses which are the subject of that chapter). In fact, Chapter 5 contains stray references to *Star Trek* fans (i.e.

media fans: originally regarded as a part of science fiction fandom, but steadily moving towards a separate existence during the 1970s and 80s), but nothing about science fiction fandom. This alone seems enough to make one wonder if Hills even knows what science fiction fandom is. Worse still, he cites Bacon-Smith (*Science Fiction Culture*, 2000)—one of the very few published works on the subject within the field—but omits it from his list of references.

Unlike Hills, Sandvoss (2005) has several entries for science fiction in his index. Of the 11 listed, all concern either science fiction as a genre, or fans of science fiction media. One of these references suggests that “Slash writing has thus enabled female fans to break into the male domain of science fiction fandom and establish their own distinct space of reception, productivity and discussion.” (Sandvoss, 2005, p. 25) No evidence is provided for this assertion, nor is the “science fiction fandom” mentioned here defined, though context suggests it is *Star Trek* fandom rather than wider SF fandom. Perhaps, Sandvoss simply felt it important to mention the “fashionable” slash; “Slash has, perhaps, been disproportionately focused on by academic writers working on fandom, probably because it offers an example of ‘tactical’ fan reworking which can be fitted into a de Certeau-derived model.” (Hills, 2002, p. 102)

Tellingly, Bacon-Smith’s *Science Fiction Culture* does not appear in Sandvoss’s bibliography. In fact, there are no entries concerning science fiction other than film or TV media, save one. This sole exception is “Is there a text in this audience? Science fiction and interpretive schism” (Lindlof, Coyle, & Grodin, 1998), yet closer inspection of the source reveals that although two pages are spent describing the genre of science fiction literature, mention of science fiction fandom is limited to the following: “In addition, and more pertinent to this study, there exists a science fiction subculture that is visible through artwork, artifacts, conventions, fanzines, computer bulletin boards, and other manifestations.” (Lindlof, Coyle, & Grodin, 1998, p. 225), despite which the authors conclude: “It may not even be accurate to speak of science fiction readers as a community, or of science fiction as a genre.” (Lindlof, Coyle, & Grodin, 1998, p. 241) This may indeed be a fair point, if one recognizes that the authors have been surveying *readers* of science fiction (27 of them, with no rigor applied to their selection). In this chapter by Lindlof, Coyle and Grodin, the word “fan” is only used twice, in passing, leading to the conclusion that this is a piece of research in the field of reader response theory, not fan studies.

Neither Hills nor Sandvoss, therefore, shows any awareness of the influence, or even the existence, of science fiction fandom. And yet both write would-be authoritative texts on fans, with no hint in their titles of the myopia adopted in their preparation. At least, as mentioned earlier, Duffett (2013) had the good grace to append “Media Fan Culture” to the cover of his otherwise apparently comprehensive *Understanding Fandom*.

### **Knowledge and Authority**

Matt Hills devotes considerable effort to the issue of knowledge production. He quotes Green, Jenkins & Jenkins (1998), who argue that because fans themselves are involved in developing systems of knowledge, academics should be open to their insights, adopting what Hills describes as “hybridization” (Hills, 2002, p. 8). With regard to this hybridization, Hills points out that while much attention has been paid to the academic-fan (an academic who also identifies as a fan), little has been lavished on the fan-scholar (a fan who performs academic-like research). Yet while in the book Hills is at pains to interrogate binaries, this one appears to slip through the cracks. There are hardly two distinct identities to contrast here. The fan-scholar, for example, while they may not hold a position in an educational establishment, has certainly been educated, and this education may have been to a high level. The academic-fan, moreover, may have been a fan prior to becoming an academic (this is certainly the case with Hills). It is hardly unreasonable to suggest that being a fan(-scholar) may have provided motivation for someone to become an academic. Further muddying the waters is exactly what we mean in this context by “academic”. The implication of the debate is that an academic is someone who is researching fan-related subjects. Thus, a professor of physics who is also a fan would not be an academic-fan. What, then, of a professor of psychology? Or a professor of sociology? Or a professor of media studies? Would it depend on the extent to which fan-related topics appeared in their research? What *are* fan-related topics?

Perhaps Hills does not go quite far enough in his discussion of hybridization. Such hybridization is not a special case. It is the inevitable state of affairs, and all academic/fan/scholars are part of a continuum of experience.

In my own case, for example, I was a fan-scholar for many years. As a fanzine editor and subsequently a professional writer and editor in the games field, I explicitly adopted “academic” positions, which is to say that I undertook research, and wrote about theory. I may not have done so with the rigor of the academy, but it cannot be denied that the same is also true of many scholars ostensibly operating within the academy. This was an approach that was criticized by some other fans, but welcomed by others. Fandom was not homogeneous. Applying quasi-academic approaches was a particular means of solving particular problems.

The tension between the role of an academic as a generator of knowledge, and the role of a fan as a generator of knowledge also returns us to Evans & Stasi’s (2014) concerns about the nature of ethnography within the field, as well as Hills’s examination of auto-ethnography.

However, it is hard to escape the feeling that Hills’s ruminations on this topic are fatally flawed by his apparent ignorance of the work of the fan-scholars of science fiction fandom. Two of their publications have already been mentioned (Moskowitz, 1974; Sanders, 1994) and a brief search on the World Web Web reveals a host of other examples of science fiction fan productivity. The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction (SFE, 2011), for example, is exactly what the name says: a comprehensive encyclopedia of science fiction, with more than 17,600 entries. It is the work of a group of science fiction fans. Science fiction fandom has been a

community for nearly a century, with knowledge and practices passed on. In that time, it has included a very large number of academics in a range of disciplines. How can Hills's interesting discussion of the tension between the fan's own account of fandom, and the 'imagined subjectivity' of the academic's account, be taken seriously when it is based on a distinction which may be false?

## Conclusion

Fan studies is a relatively recent, multi-disciplinary field. Many of the problems explored in this paper may derive from the fact that it is multi-disciplinary, yet overwhelmingly dominated by a single discipline (media studies) and a single object of enquiry (media fans). While it may be natural for academics to feel somewhat constrained by the field they are working in, it is unlikely that a solution to this discomfort will derive from setting up a new, even more constrained field.

The meaning of *fan* is wider than that adopted by many researchers within fan studies. The meaning of *fandom* is contested, and yet these contested meanings are used within fan studies without comment or even, in some cases, any sign of awareness of alternatives. The concept of *consumption* is applied as if it can supply a simple means of defining fans, and yet this is only possible when a wide range of people who self-describe as fans is excluded. The longest-running, most influential fan community is virtually excluded from consideration by fan studies.

None of these issues is insurmountable. All academic inquiry is inherently incomplete and imperfect. The purpose of the above critique has not been to attack the worth of the field, in the vein of Alan Sokal and the instigators of the Grievance Studies Hoax. Instead it has been to identify unnecessarily arbitrary boundaries which can be pushed out in order to obtain a wider view, to clarify terminology that is being used in narrow, limiting ways, and to point out potentially fruitful further avenues for research.

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