

The Boundaries of Fandom:

Academic and Real

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Abstract

The academic discipline of fan studies emerged in the 1990s from media studies. Because of its origins, it appears to focus on fans of media. The present study attempts to examine to what extent this is the case by analysing the contents of a comprehensive bibliography of the field. The analysis suggests that nearly a third of sources concern television, while other media-related topics such as film and music account for a significant additional proportion. The research reveals a number of areas that receive little attention, and may be ripe for further investigation.

1. Introduction

Fan studies is a new academic field. It dates from the early 1990s and its history is thus easily open to inspection. It has been detailed by the present author (2013) among others (see, for example, Hellekson, 2009). Its origins lie in the field of media studies—appropriately enough, of course, since many fans are fans of various forms of media, especially television. However, not all fans are necessarily media fans. While many researchers in the field have been scrupulous in declaring the type of fan they are writing about, there are also books and papers that purport to be about “fandom” but which, on closer inspection, are limited to the fans which have been identified within media studies.

This apparent myopia has also led to some unfortunate problems with nomenclature, not least the word “fandom” itself. The use of this term goes back at least to 1903 (Harper, 2001). The current Oxford English Dictionary offers a primary definition as “The state or condition of being a fan of someone or something” with a sub-definition “The fans of a particular person, team, fictional series, etc. regarded collectively

as a community or subculture.” (Oxford English Dictionary, 2018) The primary definition there has been adopted by a number of scholars of fan studies, such as Sandvoss (2005) and Duffett (2013). These scholars focus primarily on media fandom, a form of fandom which emerged in the 1960s.

However, there are earlier forms of fandom which adopt a different definition of fan. The Wiktionary online dictionary captures this better than Oxford. It lists three definitions:

1. The fans of a sport, activity, work, person etc., taken as a group.
2. The subculture of fans.
3. The state, quality, or condition of being a fan (fandom, 2018)

The first two definitions point to fandom as being a form of community, and that was how the word was adopted within science fiction fandom, as for example in a 1939 fanzine edited by noted SF author Ray Bradbury: “And I attribute Mr. Koot’s fate to nothing less than the schisms of fandom.” (Kuttner, 1939)

It appears that many scholars of media fandom

are unaware of this pre-existing usage of the term, presumably because of their lack of interest in the—primarily literary—science fiction fandom. As a result, many of their books and papers can be misunderstood because they have failed to define which meaning of fandom they are adopting. Take a sentence such as:

These things are worth mentioning, not because Till's entry into fandom sounds in any way suspicious, but rather to highlight that fandom itself is a more complicated phenomenon than we might think." (Duffett, 2013, p. 2)

Indeed. There is a problem here because "entry into fandom," evokes a place or community, and yet careful inspection of the rest of the book reveals that Duffett adopts the media studies "state of being a fan" definition.

The problem here, then, relates to boundaries: boundaries of the field, and boundaries of meaning. There is a danger that these boundaries remain invisible and unexamined, especially so if, as Hills argues, "... specific academic agendas have tended to dictate the conceptual shape of fandom within cultural studies." (Hills, 2002, p. 8).

Given this state of affairs it seems useful to examine the field of fan studies itself more systematically. Previous papers have touched on the scope of fandom, and what it means to be a fan. This paper, however, will examine the research which has been conducted, in an attempt to obtain a picture of fan studies as a field of study, as against a picture of fans and their activities. Obtaining a clearer idea of which areas have drawn the attention of scholars makes it easier to ascertain which areas have *not* drawn the attention of scholars.

2. Methodology

A field of study consists of the research published or presented by scholars active within

it. Therefore in the present study it was decided to represent the areas fan studies is concerned with by compiling a comprehensive bibliography of the field. Initially, it was hoped to use the existing fan studies bibliography by Oxford Bibliographies (Jenkins, 2012). Unfortunately, it emerged that none of the educational institutions with which the present author is affiliated provide access to Oxford Bibliographies. It was therefore necessary to look elsewhere.

Luckily, an excellent bibliography is made available by the Organization for Transformative Works, which also publishes the fan-related journal *Transformative Works and Cultures*. The bibliography uses the Zotero research system (Corporation for Digital Scholarship, and the Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media, n.d) and is maintained on behalf of the Organization for Transformative Works by Karen Hellekson and Nele Noppe (Hellekson & Noppe, 2018). This bibliography contained 2698 items as of September 2018, though this does include several duplicate entries.

Preparing the bibliography

For the purposes of the present research, it was necessary to process this bibliography in a number of ways. The first two involved adjusting the constituent sources by addition and subtraction. Firstly, any fan-related research of which I was aware, but which did not appear in the bibliography, was added to it. Inevitably, in a venture of this kind, there will be omissions, but it was important to reduce them where possible, and so the base bibliography was checked against my own existing bibliography, and any sources appearing in the latter only were added to the former.

Secondly, sources were removed from the bibliography where appropriate. Duplicates were deleted. Entries which were divided into multiple parts (such as successive blog entries specifically given the same title in multiple parts) were conflated into a single entry. Then, the

sources were examined more closely. The base bibliography was a bibliography of sources that were considered of use to the field of fan studies. The present study, however, is considering fan studies research itself. The bibliography therefore contained some foundational or related items that were judged not to be directly a part of fan studies research. For example, there were a large number of references concerned with copyright and derivative works. This is a topic of great interest to fan studies scholars, because fan fiction is often a derivative work, and is often affected by legal considerations. However, “derivative works” is not a topic exclusive to fan studies research, and so all entries on this subject that were judged to originate from outside the field, and which didn’t directly address fan activity, were excluded.

Even more contentiously, media studies texts which did not appear to be directly fan-related were excluded. This selection required some judgment. In simple terms, however, if the source primarily concerned a text itself, with no mention of fans, it was excluded. If the source concerned “audiences,” but did not deal with fans as a specific component of those audiences, it was excluded. Thus some seminal texts associated with fan studies, such as Hall’s “Encoding/Decoding” (1991) are excluded, as they are deemed to originate from outside the field, however valuable they may be to it. As well as the abovementioned copyright law and audience/reception studies work, exclusions included studies of participatory culture, gender/identity and pop artists, which are, of course, directly relevant, but which were excluded when they did not discuss fans.

There were some interesting discoveries in the course of this process, which are worth mentioning. For example, the base bibliography contained a large quantity of material on *hallyu* or Korean popular culture. Much of this was retained, because it was about fans, though more business-orientated studies, or those which addressed characteristics of *hallyu* rather than

fans of it, were excluded. For reasons explained below, the analysis presented in this paper will not separate out content related to *hallyu*. It may be useful and interesting for later research to analyse fan research from national, cultural and gender perspectives.

The principles described above were applied to all sources in the bibliography, though conservatively. There were cases in which texts were unavailable for inspection, and in these cases a decision had to be made from an abstract alone. Here, the text was excluded if the abstract could be reasonably unambiguously interpreted as not concerning fan studies. The presumption of relevance was here based on the fact that these texts had already been selected as being relevant to the field.

Analysing the bibliography

After the first two steps had produced a revised bibliography for the purposes of this study, its content needed to be analysed. In the Zotero system, each item can be marked for content with “tags” or keywords. The idea of using the existing tags in the base bibliography was initially considered. However a cursory inspection revealed that this would not be a useful approach. Around 800 tags were appended to the sources, and the tagging was not done systematically or consistently. Moreover, this tagging had been done with a different purpose to my analysis. 800 tags provided a fine-grained representation of the content of the sources, and would be useful for those using the bibliography in order to find sources on particular topics: for such purposes overlapping or “rephrased” tags would be valuable. On the other hand the present research was intended to take a wider overview based on much tighter constraints. Multiple tags with overlapping meanings would risk overstating the representation of some subjects. A process of “re-tagging” the sources was therefore initiated.

Although certain tags were clearly going to be necessary, I realised that I would have to

look to the sources themselves to determine tags. If I were to make up a set of tags myself, I would be imposing a rigid conception of the structure of fan studies even before I began the analysis. As the project already involves a large element of my judgment, I felt it best to minimize that by assigning tags—with a very few exceptions—based on what I found in the sources. The exceptions here referred to include what I would consider the “obvious” topics of fan studies. These include TV, Music, Film and Sport, which are widely understood to represent or include “fan objects”.

I therefore proceeded to work my way through the bibliography, tagging each source according to its primary content. A tag represented the focus of the source. A judgment had to be made as to what was focused on, and what was simply mentioned in passing. Merely raising a topic for the purposes of comparison or contrast was not deemed sufficient to justify a tag. The goal was to maintain a smaller number of tags; examples of how this was achieved will become evident below, where problems encountered and dealt with are considered.

Blindness to the author

As with all academic fields, fan studies has thrown up a number of famous names: scholars who have published key texts. These include Henry Jenkins, Camille Bacon-Smith, Matt Hills and Cornell Sandvoss. When one of these or other notable names appeared in the bibliography the temptation was simply to tag them with the author’s established interests.

It was evident, however, that this approach would misrepresent the researcher’s work. Although all four scholars named above are primarily interested in television, this does not mean that all of their work has concerned television. In particular, the latter two are prone to flights of theory, and in some cases these works contain so little in the way of concrete examples, that it was deemed insufficient to tag the source

as being directly related to a particular area, and instead the Meta tag was applied (see below).

The tags

During the process of analysing the sources, tags were added as necessary. Sometimes this involved renaming existing tags to accommodate a wider range of sources. At the end of the process 24 tags had been defined. These were: Anti-fans, Comics, Cosplay, Fan Art, Fan Fiction, Filk, Film, Food, Furrries, Games, Individuals, Literature, Meta, Music, Non-Fiction, Science Fiction, Sport, The Past, Theatre, Tourism, Toys and Crafts, TV, Vidding, Video Games.

One immediate reaction to these tags raises a possible contradiction: some of the tags categorise the “fan object”—such as TV, Music, Literature—while others categorise the “fan response”—such as Fan Fiction, Filk and Vidding. It might be argued that it is mistaken to set up an equivalence between the two. However, this only holds true if fandom is regarded as a one-dimensional activity, consisting of fan response to a fan object. The larger argument of this research is that fandom has a more complex dynamic in some cases, and that there can be a disconnect between the fan response and the fan object (even that the latter can be apparently absent: for example in the case of the Furrries or role-playing gamers). Furthermore, some tags are directly related to neither fan object nor fan behaviour, but to other aspects of the phenomenon—such as Anti-fans and Meta.

Nevertheless, in choosing tags some arbitrary decisions had to be made, and some of these will be detailed below. First of all, the fan response of “Fansubbing” was not included as a tag. Instead references to fansubbing were listed as Film or TV, on the grounds that although fansubbing is a distinct fan activity, it can only take place as a response to Film or TV. In comparison, the tag of Fan Fiction remained, because it can take place to a wide range of fan objects.

The “Meta” tag covers work concerned not so

much with fan behaviours or the texts in which they are interested, as the mechanics of fandom itself, and in particular, fans' self-awareness as fans. An example would be research concerning the histories of fandom maintained by fans. Articles on fan activism, or fanzines *per se*, for example, are also given this tag. Meta became a useful category in which to include work that was perhaps too abstruse or theoretical to find a convenient home elsewhere.

The "Theatre" tag includes musicals and opera. Originally a "Musicals" tag was employed, but on discovering a small number of entries related to non-musical theatre, the wider term was adopted. This principle, of aiming for wide coverage with a single term, also led to the "Cosplay" category being applied not only to the commonly understood elements of the term (mainly dressing as *manga* or *anime* characters), but to any fan-related dressing up, such as women dressing in "Goth" vampire-style clothing.

The "Non-fiction" tag marked sources examining cases of fans of documentaries, politics, the news etc. It could have been amalgamated with "The Past", which included fans of history, industrial archaeology and the like, but they were considered to be sufficiently different to be kept distinct, because some of the items in The Past were fictional (for example Disney's *Song of the South*).

A decision was made to categorise *manga* as Comics. As noted above, this elides the extent to which fan studies focuses on specific cultures. Having made this choice, *anime* were tagged as TV and/or Film.

In order to keep the number of tags down, another strategy was to represent certain topics as combinations of existing tags. This allowed for some flexibility. For example, sources concerned with *dojinshi* were tagged with both Comics and Fan Fiction. Moreover, as suggested above, sources concerned with Fan Fiction would also be tagged where specified with the text on which the Fan Fiction was based: TV, Film, Music or

whatever.

The above explanations should make it clear that difficulties were often encountered in categorising sources and topics. There were times when it seemed the obvious answer was to simply exclude a source, but in these cases an alternative solution was usually found. For example, writing on Akihabara, and *otaku* in general, can be ambiguous. Some of this is Meta, concerned with the image and identity of *otaku* (and the extent to which the term is denotatively and connotatively similar to *fan*). But other tags could be applied where appropriate, such as Comics, TV and Film, Toys and Crafts, and Video Games. In the case of Akihabara itself, Tourism was also deemed appropriate.

Finally, some notes on the meanings of specific tags: "Filk" is a fan activity involving performing music, often with new lyrics to established tunes. "Furries" are people who dress up in anthropomorphic animal costumes. "Games" are categorised distinct from "Video Games". The latter covers video and computer games, while the former refers to more traditional forms of boardgames, as well as wargames and role-playing games conducted face-to-face. "Individual" refers to cases of fans of a specific person. These of course may have other tags if, for example, the individual is a musician or an actor.

The tag "SF" covers sources dealing with science fiction fandom, which as the reference to a 1939 publication above shows, is one of the oldest forms of fandom (probably only sport fandom and matinee theatre fandom can claim an older pedigree). Although a large proportion of the TV and Film texts admired by fans are in the SF genre, and of course SF books count as Literature, these have been given separate tags. This is because the SF fan community that built up established its own practices and customs, and when media fandom started to emerge in the 1960s (for example, among fans of *Star Trek*) it followed a largely different path. This point will

be enlarged upon below.

Finally “Vidding” is also interpreted quite widely, as any form of video produced by fans.

The analysis

Once all of the sources in the revised bibliography had been tagged, all that was required was to examine the statistics presented by the Zotero software. Selecting all of the items in the bibliography revealed the number of sources. Then clicking on each tag in turn would produce a window listing all the sources with that tag. In this way the number of sources covering each topic could be ascertained.

Note that because it is possible for a single source to have multiple tags, the total number of tags exceeds the total number of sources.

3. Results

The revised bibliography contained a total of 1814 sources. The 24 tags were applied to the sources, and this resulted in a total of 2442 tags being applied. Thus, an average of approximately 1.35 tags were applied to each source. Obviously the minimum number of tags applied to a source was 1, while the maximum number of tags applied to a single source was 7. This case, along with the two instances of 6 tags being applied to a single source, was when the source in question was a book containing a number of sections written by different authors about different topics.

The results were as follows:

The single biggest entry was TV, indicating that close to 30% of the sources were concerned with TV fans. This was followed by Fan Fiction, and thence by Meta. The high result for the Meta category should not really be a surprise, as it demonstrates both the self-referentiality found in all research, and the tag’s use as an informal “other” category.

Figure 1 shows the results in order, in graph form.

One final caveat to the results, of course, is that in this analysis, each source is considered

Table 1. Tag incidence in revised bibliography

Tag	Number	% of total sources
Anti-fans	17	0.94
Comics	180	9.92
Cosplay	44	2.43
Fan art	30	1.65
Fan fiction	389	21.44
Filk	2	0.11
Film	219	12.07
Food	1	0.06
Furries	1	0.06
Games	21	1.16
Individual	19	1.05
Literature	91	5.02
Meta	245	13.51
Music	162	8.93
Non-fiction	4	0.22
SF	33	1.82
Sport	140	7.72
The Past	5	0.28
Theatre	10	0.55
Tourism	28	1.54
Toys & craft	21	1.16
TV	539	29.71
Vidding	168	9.26
Video games	73	4.02

“equal”. However it is evident that sources are read by wildly varying numbers of people. Thus in terms of the impact of research, the above graph may be inaccurate. There are three responses to this, however. The first is that the goal of the research was not to gauge impact, but the interests of researchers, as a means of describing what fan studies covers. The second response is that obtaining readership figures for each source in order to gauge its effect would be impossible and futile since it would also be necessary to determine the reader’s reaction to the source.

Finally, the third response is to observe that the best-selling and most oft-cited texts of fan studies are in fact those concerned with media fandom. Camille Bacon-Smith’s second published book based on research (she also writes fiction) concerned science fiction fandom (Bacon-Smith, 2000), but is very rarely cited in the field

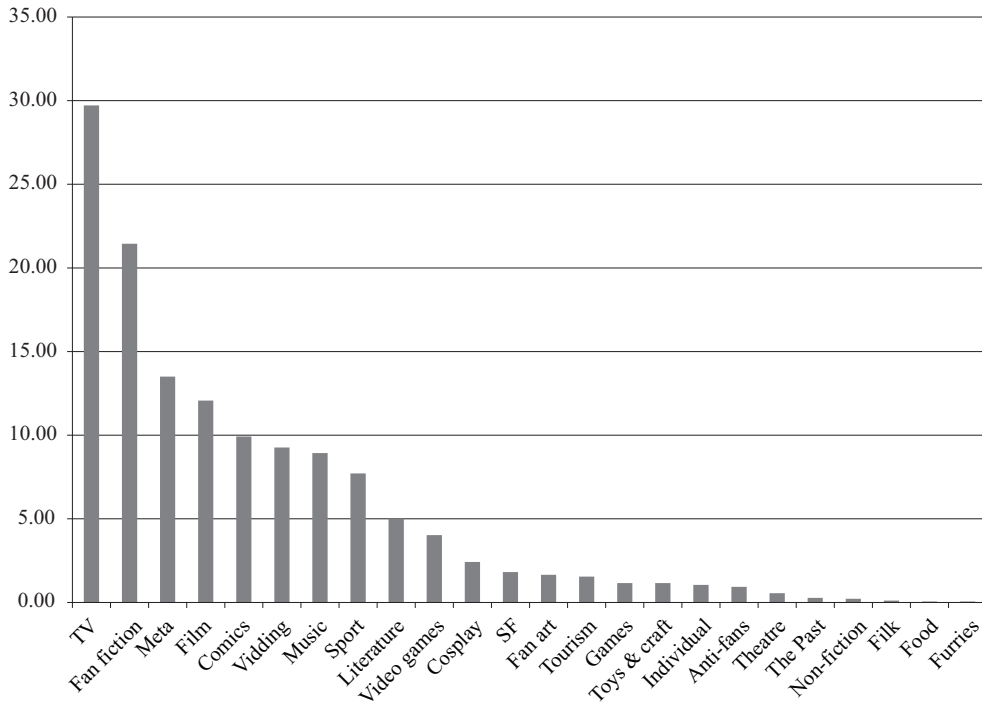


Figure 1. Percentage of revised bibliography sources concerned with specified topic

while her first book about *Star Trek* fandom (Bacon-Smith, 1992) is one of the foundational texts. The other leading texts, by Messrs Jenkins (1992), Hills (2002) and Sandvoss (2005) all largely concern themselves with television, with occasional diversions into film (and sport, in the case of Sandvoss).

4. Discussion

As noted earlier, fan studies emerged from media studies, in particular the audience or reception theory inspired by the Birmingham School, and the aforementioned Stuart Hall (1991). Like many fields of study, media studies defines the scope of its field in such a way as to maximise its reach; which is to say that *everything* can be considered a media text if necessary. This is a useful approach, but it can run into problems when it is used simultaneously with a layman’s understanding of “media”. The seminal fan studies texts published in the 1990s

which established the field (Bacon-Smith, 1992; Jenkins, 1992) were primarily concerned with the forms of science fiction fandom that had started in the 1960s following television shows, and which were labelled “media fandom” in the 1970s (Media Fandom, 2018).

The same Fanlore entry (Media Fandom, 2018) reveals how this terminology has since caused considerable confusion within fandom itself. In the 1970s, “media fandom” was understood to refer to the part of science fiction fandom concerned with TV and film. However, by the time fan studies emerged at the end of the century, the science fiction connection had been lost. In fact, the very idea that media fandom was once merely a part of science fiction fandom appears to be unknown to many current scholars of fan studies.

For the purposes of this research a relatively narrow definition of media fandom will be adopted. The tags Film, Music, Theatre, TV,

Vidding and Video Games will be considered to constitute media fandom. This definition is considerably wider than the 1970s understanding, however, when vidding was largely unknown, video games fandom barely existed, and music fandom was a wholly separate phenomenon.

The total number of sources tagged with tags associated with media fandom is 1003—rather more than a third of the total number of tags (because tags can overlap, we can say nothing about the number of sources; nevertheless we already know that TV alone accounts for 29.71% of sources). We should also note that of the remaining tags, many are associated with the media: these include Fan Art, Fan Fiction, Individuals and Vidding. Furthermore, my impression was that many of the sources tagged as Meta were written from a perspective that viewed fandom as consisting of media fandom.

Comics and Sport combined account for another 320 tags. These two topics are clearly associated with media fandom. Although Sport provided the “first fandom”, in the modern world it has become dominated by media presentations, and is widely taken up within media studies. Comics fandom on the other hand, though originally taking its cues—like most forms of fandom—from SF fandom (Pustz, 1999), has latterly aligned itself with media fandom. The history of the massively popular San Diego Comic-Con convention (San Diego Comic Convention, 2018), and the importance it now has in the promotional schedules of major movies and TV series is instructive.

At the other extreme of coverage, the three *fs* of Filk, Food and Furrries received very little attention, with the latter two being the topic of only one source each. Filk, it should be noted, is a fan activity mainly associated with science fiction fandom, which itself obtained only 33 tags, less than 2% of the total number of sources. While a large proportion of the TV, film, and comics sources fall within the science fiction genre, their fandom is unequivocally “media fandom”, the

spin-off faction of science fiction fandom which now dominates research.

The real boundaries of fandom

The purpose of this research was to offer a rough picture of the “shape” of fan studies: to try to ascertain where the academic boundaries and emphases lie. Such a picture should then be contrasted with the “real” shape of fandom(s). As yet, however, our picture of the true state of fandom(s) is anecdotal and impressionistic. How many furrries are there? How many people are involved in filk, compared to the number writing fan fiction?

Certainly, it does feel as if the fan studies emphasis on media fans corresponds to a genuine dominance; that is to say, there are indeed more media fans than other kinds of fan. It would be instructive to test this feeling, and more subtle parts of the results, against reality. The problem then, however, becomes one of the thorny issue of definitions which has reared its head in fan studies work, and on which this writer has previously written (Mason, 2018). It was relatively easy to determine which of the sources in the analysis in this paper concerned fan studies; determining the number of fans is far more difficult. Some fan scholars, especially of the media persuasion, define *fan* so loosely that anyone who watches a television programme regularly can be considered a fan. Others believe that being a fan requires slightly more investment. This would be an interesting, if challenging, topic for research in future.

For the moment, however, we can see that very little scholarship is being directed at some topics. Furrries, for example, have not set the field alight. We must also observe that the analysis only contains topics which have received coverage. It is possible, indeed likely, that there are relatively significant elements of fandom which have received no academic attention.

5. Conclusion

This research has revealed, in a very general sense, the emphases of fan studies. Even within these very broad categories, however, there are areas which receive more attention than others. Bogost (2010) dissects the “aca-fan” (an academic in the field who is also a fan) and quotes fan studies scholar Jason Mittell:

While media scholars do not solely write about what we like, the prevalence of books focused on “quality television” shows that appeal to academics like Buffy the Vampire Slayer, The Sopranos, and now Mad Men—especially when compared to the lack of similar volumes or essays about more lowbrow or mainstream programs—suggests that taste is often more of a motivating factor for our scholarship than we admit. We should own up to our own fannish (or anti-fannish) tendencies regarding our objects of study, not regarding fan practices as something wholly separate from our academic endeavors by acknowledging how taste structures what we choose to write about. (Mittell, qtd. in Bogost, 2010)

Mittell’s point can equally be applied to the emphasis on media itself.

As noted above, a comparison of the analysis in this paper with an examination of the scope of fan activity itself would reveal areas which are not being explored, partly because of the “taste structures” to which Mittell refers above, but also out of simple lack of awareness.

The purpose of this paper is not to criticise the attention being devoted to media fandom and its various manifestations. Rather, since media fandom is evidently being subjected to considerable academic scrutiny, it is to draw attention to other areas which are as yet relatively unexamined. These are areas which may reward further research, not least because they may

challenge some of the global assumptions about fans which derive from examining only the media.

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