The Thinking Fan's Rock Band: R.E.M. fandom and negotiations of normativity in Murmurs.com

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Abstract

This thesis analyses how normative behaviour is negotiated within Murmurs, an online community for fans of rock band R.E.M. Undertaken as a cyber-ethnography, I examine the manner in which normative identity is constructed in Murmurs through masculinised Liberal intelligentsia "central values" of the R.E.M. fan's subcultural homology, such as tolerance, good will and equality, the rejection of which works to define the Other in the community. I demonstrate how the object of fandom as the "thinking fan's rock band" works to reflect and reinforce these "central values" and the processes through which they are explicitly enforced by the community hierarchy through strategies of power. My findings therefore show that normative behaviour in Murmurs is not a given, but requires continuous maintenance and governance. In conjunction with compliance to the homologous values, I identify in Murmurs how normativity can be achieved by strict adherence to four other key practices: reading in the "right way," assuming the correct gendered discourse, participating in the exchange of knowledge with other fans and maintaining a focus on the object of fandom.

To analyse the processes of negotiation further, and in an effort to redress the inadequacies in the field of literature surrounding online communities and fan cultural norms regarding oppositional intra-communal fan identities, I examine through case studies the activities of three non-normative groups within Murmurs (Trobes, Droolers and Pointless Posters), determining how the community negotiates different types of fan behaviour that are seemingly a threat to normative conduct. However, quite notably, my analysis is conducted from a unique "insider" position in that, in addition to being an ethnographic researcher in the virtual field, I am both an R.E.M. fan and member of Murmurs' subcultural police, an official role which involves my active participation in the enforcement and governance of this non-normative Other in Murmurs. By doing this, I challenge the assumed existence of a consistently singular, or cohesive, identity in an online fan community. My conclusion in the thesis therefore rests upon a recommendation that future studies in this field should move away from assumptions of singularity and instead attempt to understand oppositional fan identities by examining the power relations surrounding them, and the processes through which fans negotiate normative identity within a community.

Chapter One. Introduction

Begin the Begin: the Maps and Legends of R.E.M. and Murmurs

> The one thing that R.E.M. can offer is music that you can dance to if you want, you can ignore it, you can use it like furniture, but there's also something there that you can listen to and say "this is intelligent" or at least "this is not stupid"
> (R.E.M. lead vocalist Michael Stipe on Italian Television 1989. Bowler and Dray 1995: 3).

Murmurs is the largest and most productive online community for fans of American rock band R.E.M. The band was formed in the town of Athens in the American state of Georgia in April 1980 and has frequently been acknowledged as a politically and environmentally aware intellectual or "thinking" band (Fricke 1985, Gray 1992, Lappin 1995, Frank 1995: 264, LePage 1996, Hogan 1997: 5, Crampton 1998, Tyler 2004: 213, Rosen 2005: 7, Jovanovic 2006: 8-9), a notion that was also complimented by their early success on American college radio (Pareles 1986, Mokrzycki 1991, Greer 1992, Graff 1995). R.E.M. maintained a distinctly artistic approach in the early half of their career; refusing to produce commercially acceptable music videos and compromise their beliefs to secure a chart hit (Sullivan 1995: xxi). However, in 1991 the band finally succumbed to music industry convention and created their first "lip-synched" video, for the song *Losing My Religion*, a compromise which granted them their first world-wide hit and ensured the mainstream success that had previously eluded them (Fletcher 1993: 3). Most notably, it was during this time that my interest towards the band began; a fascination that soon developed into a fandom that has evolved over the years. For instance, I have amassed a large collection of CDs, DVDs, and videos on the band and since 2001 attended countless live concerts and events throughout Europe on each R.E.M. tour.

Despite their popularity, R.E.M. continues to maintain an artistic and intellectual edge: they remain one of the very few musical acts throughout their career not to allow their songs to be employed in commercial advertising. For instance, Robert Sloane views the band as continually and currently being "artist-intellectual, offering meaningful texts that reflect thoughtfully on the context of their production and reception alike" (Sloane, 2003:88). Murmurs has been frequently acknowledged by fans, and also the band themselves, as the definitive dwelling place for those interested in R.E.M. related news and discussion of these "meaningful texts." The website,

taking its name from the first R.E.M. album, entitled *Murmur*, began life in April 1996 as a basic R.E.M. news page created by Ethan Kaplan and continued in this format for a number of years. The addition in September 1998 of a bulletin board style discussion forum called "We Talk" soon attracted a large number of fans who wished to discuss the band and their then newly released album, entitled *Up*: "We Talk seemed to fill a niche in the R.E.M. fan web space and quickly took off as a huge community. Undergoing various versions.... We Talk entered the new millennium so big in fact that the server could not cope with the traffic" (Kaplan 2001: np).

By 2001 and coinciding with the move to a larger forum web space that could cope with the demand, the number of registered users had grown to just over one thousand and these generated 3,690 threads and 41,893 posts. By March 2004 however, the membership level had increased to 13,717 members with 64,290 threads and over one million posts[1]. This dramatic increase in activity displays the growing popularity of the site which has developed in unison with the release of five R.E.M. albums since 2001, two of which most notably being highly publicised "Best Of" collections, and also an extensive tour schedule. Alongside this, the relationship between Murmurs and R.E.M. also developed into one of mutual interest and respect[2]:

> Murmurs.com and R.E.M. maintain close contact and mutual cooperation. While Murmurs.com is completely separate legally, financially and logistically from R.E.M., there exists a tacit level of cooperation between the two entities that serve mutually to provide R.E.M. fans with the best experience they can have in relation to being fans of the band. Ethan is in constant contact with the band's management in order to ensure that what Murmurs provides keeps to their standards and that they are informed of the goings on within the fan community. (2006, Murmurs.com front page).

Although Murmurs is an online community aimed at R.E.M. fans, it is not strictly confined to R.E.M. discussion, but rather allows and directs users to engage in intellectual conversation concerning an array of subjects. As stated in the opening page of Murmurs - "Murmurs.com is centred around R.E.M., but is not R.E.M. centric." This is evident in the community index page, where access can be granted to five different sections that each house a number of forums. These

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[1] By 2006 the membership levels increased to 15,000, with "2 to 5 thousand people coming to the site daily" (2006, Murmurs.com front page).

[2] The relationship between the band and Murmurs progressed to such an extent that the official R.E.M. website, REMHQ, has mirrored a number of reports and articles written by Murmurs members in their news section. The band have also granted the community a number of exclusive interviews and even confessed within one to pursuing the discussion forums to gain an insight into what songs to include in the Best Of collection. None of the band members however have actively posted on the forums.

include the Lobby, R.E.M., Community Center, Outward and Inward. The Lobby features the initial entrance for new community members, the Introduce Yourself forum, plus a section for personal and community announcements, such as Birthday celebrations and social events. R.E.M. focuses on all band related discussions and activities. Within this section, members can discuss topics relating to their favourite band members, comment on the latest band related news, review any R.E.M. concerts they attended and even trade live recordings. The Community Center acts as a virtual city hall for the community. This section accommodates a number of forums concerning life and the Murmurs community in general. Members can discuss random life issues in the These Elvis Poses and Chit-Chat forums or sit back and muse in the tranquil settings of The Green Light Room. Also in this section, members can arrange face to face meetings with other Murmurs members living in their area, arrange meetings before R.E.M. concerts[3], or post about any other community related events.

The last two sections of Murmurs are comprised of non R.E.M., community related discussion forums. Firstly, the Outward section features forums concerning music (non R.E.M. related only), film, news and politics, literature, television, computers and science and sports and outdoors. Secondly, the Inward section allows the discussion of gastronomique, love and life, art, education and philosophy. In addition to these discussion forums, there is a Chat Room which allows for non archived[4], "real time" conversation between members, plus a section for members to write their own blogs that can be read by the community[5].

My introduction to Murmurs occurred in early 2000. I chose to participate in this site, in preference to the other major online community for fans of the band, myREM.com. The website, launched in 2000, employs a similar structure to Murmurs in attempting to encourage

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[3] In terms of R.E.M. fandom offline, the only major organised opportunities for fans to meet are by Murmurs members at R.E.M. concerts. Before some shows a meeting place is designated and members will arrange to contact each other. These meetings are made easier by the R.E.M. fan club offering early entry wristbands to fan club members for shows, which allow entry to the venue ten minutes earlier than the rest of the audience and a separate queuing area.

[4] All discussions post 2001 on Murmurs except any chat room activity are archived. Some members in the past have posted chat room discussions within threads, though they are not routinely saved. Discussions prior to May 2001 on the previous web board incarnation of Murmurs were unfortunately lost in the Murmurs server crash of 1999.

[5] Journals within Murmurs were introduced in October 2002 and soon proved popular within the community. Members could leave comments on entries, post photos and keep up to date with their friend's activities. With the redesign of the website in 2005 they were re-launched as blogs and given a more prominent position on the Murmurs home page.

intellectualism from its members, with the use of forums for "thought provoking topics", news and current events, R.E.M song interpretations, and poetry and prose. Indeed, upon joining each member is informed that they are expected to "behave in a way that's conductive to the diversity, intelligence and respectfulness of the community" and "make a sincere effort to contribute their thoughts on interesting subjects in a meaningful and respectful manner.[6]" In this sense, myREM attempts to encourage from its members similar norms and standards as Murmurs. However, the community has not received the same popularity as Murmurs amongst fans, perhaps through its lack of association or co-operation with the band – a disclaimer at the bottom of each page on the website reminds users that "the contents of this website are neither endorsed nor approved by R.E.M. Athens LLC, the band, their agents, or their management, collectively known as 'R.E.M.'" As a consequence of this and the lower membership rate, the website is not updated as frequently as Murmurs, which therefore offers a more "connected" experience of R.E.M. fandom to members, in terms of providing more comprehensive and up-to-date news and information, access to a larger volume of fans and official approval from the band themselves.

After lurking and observing Murmurs for a number of months, I gained membership and started contributing to the community. In August 2001 I was invited to be part of the Murmurs administrative Crew, achieving this position after actively posting for approximately one year. During the course of study for my Master's Degree thesis in 2002, my interest in Murmurs developed to the extent that I decided to focus upon authenticity and status within the community. However, this analysis raised a number of issues which demanded further investigation and inspired the undertaking of this thesis. The most prominent of these, and that which held the most intrigue for me, centered on the notion of common interest in the object of fandom producing community cohesion and soon became the initial driving force for this thesis. However, in the early stages of research, this developed into a more focused exploration of community cohesion, seeking to determine how Murmurs negotiates and directs members towards normative behaviour, which involves compliance to the ideal and accepted standards and principles of the community. For example, it can be seen from the community structure that members are presented with, and guided towards, the intellectual normative standards that Murmurs aspires to in order to complement R.E.M.'s image as a "thinking fan's" rock band.

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[6] http://www.myrem.com/register.php?

However, the central focus of this thesis is not to assume that normative behaviour is uniformly adopted in the community, but to analyse closely the manner in which this normative identity is constructed in Murmurs, and to determine how different types of fan behaviour that appear to be a threat to normative conduct are negotiated. This leads me to now examine how literature concerning online communities and fan cultural norms has overlooked oppositional intra-communal identities in favour of a cohesive and singular fan identity.

What's the Frequency?: negotiating normativity in online fan communities

The assumed existence of a consistently singular, or normative, fan identity within online fan communities has often been a central tenet within academic literature concerning online fan cultural norms (Licklider 1968, Fernback 1997: 41, Wertheim 1999: 30, Boiko 2002: 15, Gurak 2004: 27), with little regard given to the existence of, or power relations surrounding, intra-communal oppositional identities. For instance, these themes are scarcely accounted for in Benedict Anderson's model of "imagined communities" whereby "the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (1991: 6). As I argue in Chapter Two, this theory has been widely applied to understand online communities, yet fails to account for communal relationships, and more specifically within this, oppositional fan identities, which constitute types of difference rather than the imagined sameness projected by Anderson's model (Gardner 2000: 10, Rosman 2003: 19, Moores 2005: 165, Nasser 2005: 12). As Stratton and Ang explain:

> the diverse local cultures whose differences are suppressed in the creation of a
> national imagined community are left out of Anderson's consideration, along with the
> requirements of a national ideology and...the use of force by the state to ensure its
> continued existence and to deny the cultural divisions which...have been and remain a
> disruptive and excessive feature in any national imagined community" (1998: 140).

In short, the non-normative Other is not accounted for which, I will argue, is a serious oversight when examining an online group's cultural identity, as "it is only through relation to the Other, the relation to what it is not, to precisely what it lacks, to what has been called its constitutive outside that the 'positive' meaning of any term – and thus its 'identity' – can be constructed" (Hall 1996: 4-5. See also Derrida 1976 and 1984, Friedman 1998: 153, Nasser 2005). As Kevin

Robins urges with his suggestion of looking "beyond" these imagined communities: "we must insist that identities suppose the existence of the other in order to exist and to develop" (2003: 244).

In this sense, the central aim of this thesis will be to rectify this inadequacy by offering an original and more developed insight into the negotiation of fan cultural norms than previously offered in academic literature, focusing on the expressions of power that can arise in an online fan community through negotiation of the Other and maintenance of normative cultural identity. This will be achieved by determining in Murmurs:

- The manner in which normative fan identity is constructed in the community.
- The practices through which normative behaviour is achieved.
- The extent to which normative behaviour is a given.
- How different types of fan behaviour that appear to be a threat to normative conduct are policed and governed.
- The power relations that occur between normative and non-normative members.

In order to understand this construction of normative cultural identity in the Murmurs community, throughout this thesis I will draw upon Paul Willis's (1978) adaptation of Claude Lévi-Strauss's (1966) theory of homology, which he applied to the subcultures of hippies and motor-bike boys. The term describes the "symbolic fit between the values and lifestyles of a group, its subjective experience and the musical forms it uses to express or reinforce its focal concerns" (Hebdige 1979: 113), a process "in which they could see their central values held and reflected" (Hall 1976: 56). By applying this understanding of communal identity to Murmurs, I will show how masculinised Liberal intelligentsia homologous "central values" are an integral part of the construction and reinforcement of normative fan identity, and how their rejection works to define the Other in the community. I will argue throughout this study that it is only through this consideration of the "central values" of the R.E.M fan's subcultural homology that the practices that must be engaged in by Murmurs members to ensure normative behaviour can be understood and identified.

In this respect, I will approach Murmurs in this thesis as a subculture. The notion of subculture "at its base is concerned with agency and action belonging to a subset or social group that is distinct from but related to the dominant culture" (Blackman 2005: 2. See also Willis 1978, Cohen 1972, Hebdige 1979, Redhead 1997, Gelder 2007). As Cornel Sandvoss observes: "most

- maybe all – of those who participate in subcultures which evolve around a given media text or genre conform to the patterns of regular and emotionally committed consumption by which...fandom [can be defined]" (2005: 9). As a theoretical model, it is useful to "[focus] on the existence of groups with different patterns of behaviour and alternative values from the mainstream who pursue and act out their own cultural solutions" (Blackman 2005: 2) and to examine "issues of power and struggle" (Longhurst et al 2007: 237). As such, issues of "multiple and intersecting dimensions of power and privilege" (Proweller 1998: 62) can be found within the definition and maintenance of these homologous "central values" by the community, whereby the Murmurs hierarchy and normative fans use their subcultural power (Karn 2007: 48) to attempt to instigate normalisation or segregation in order to ensure the protection of these values and normative conduct (Bauman 1993:163, McLaughlin *et al.* 1995 and 1997: 164, Watson 1997, Tepper 1997: 40, Lévi-Strauss 1997, Munro 2002: 131-132). I will therefore identify the strategies employed by these members within Murmurs in order to mark and police the Other in the community and their "contravention of...ordered relations" (Douglas 1966: 44), in an effort to restore order and maintain normative cultural identity. However, my intention in this thesis is to show that while normative cultural identity is created and reaffirmed through interactions with the Other (Derrida 1976 and 1984, Dollimore 1986, Hall 1996, Tepper 1997: 44, Nasser 2005, Campbell 2006: 272), the opposite can also occur, with the Other gaining a powerful affirmation of its own identity that can be used to resist attempts at normalisation (Okley 1983: 34, Bird 2003: 68, Kohn 2003: 91, Carter 2005: 53) and "even challenge the very power structures which had produced and marginalised it" (Dollimore 1986: 522). This prospect has often been overlooked within online fan studies which has most prominently regarded the non-normative as deviant and has failed to fully ascertain the reasons for this type of behaviour, or how these oppositional practices can be used to challenge normative subcultural power. Consequently, this thesis offers a novel revision of these assumptions and inadequacies by presenting an understanding of the non-normative fan position within Murmurs, and the methods with which fans respond to and/or resist community norms. I shall now move on to discuss the cyber-ethnographic method that will be employed during the study, focusing on my unique position as "insider" within the field.

This is My World: my unique position

In this section I now want to look at how this study will be undertaken in the form of a cyber-ethnography, from the standpoint of a most unique position from which I will be studying the Other within the community, in that, in addition to being an ethnographic researcher in the virtual field, I am both an R.E.M. fan and member of Murmurs' subcultural police.

It is envisaged that due to my insider status within the community, this position will assist me in attracting a large volume of respondents, provide access to members (Lipson 1984 and 2001), deliver high levels of trust from fellow fans and community members (Jenkins 1992: 6, Maters 1998: 78, Vickers 2001: 41, Lipson 2001: 108, Gerrish 2003: 83), feedback from participants and also allow me to access the administrative areas of the forum that remain off-limits to the rest of the community.

However, alongside these beneficial aspects, there are a number of methodological issues surrounding this position that will require consideration (and are discussed more specifically in Chapters Three and Eight). These include:

- The power struggles that may occur between my roles as cyber-ethnographer, member of the Murmurs administrative crew and R.E.M. fan.
- The assumptions I may take into the field due to my insider knowledge.
- The problems of representing participants that I possess long standing friendships with.
- The problems that may occur surrounding my identification with the Murmurs administration team.
- How material appearing in the private, administrative areas of the community should be treated, and whether it should be included in the study.

As I stated earlier in this chapter, my exposure to R.E.M.'s music began in the early 1990's, with the release of their *Out of Time* album and over the years this interest developed into a fandom that consequently secures my position as a scholar-fan (Hills 2002: 2. See also Jenkins 1992, Middleton 2000: 108, Bird 2003: 120-121, Williamson 2005, Brooker 2005: Echard 2005: 3-4). Simon Frith does not view a "clear binary division between fans and academics" (1992: 183), yet does point out the "very complicated relationship between work and pleasure" that can occur (1992: 184), a tension actually experienced by Laurie Schulze who became "worried that [her]

job as an academic cultural critic disqualified [her] from real fandom," and would consequently result in neither the fans or academics viewing her as "one of their own" (1999: 37). Alexander Doty also recounts similar problematic attempts to achieve a satisfactory "balance" between "scholar and fan in [his] writing" (2000: 13). However, Matthew J. Pustz questions whether there is any "objective insider or outsider view of comic culture," concluding that the best solution is to welcome these tensions, by "being in between-being a fan-scholar with an understanding of the worlds both within [the fan] culture and outside of it" (1999: 202). Adler and Adler regard this prospect of being both a member of the field under study and a researcher as a "bifurcation of self," exemplifying the "ultimate existential dual role," though they do go on to show how some researchers "can sustain both roles comfortably" (1987: 73).

However, my position may involve the production of further tensions, not only between the fan culture and my role as cyber-ethnographer, but also with regard to my duties as a member of the Murmurs administrative crew, which makes me an agent of subcultural policing in the community. In this official capacity, I am expected to continuously participate in, and express a commitment towards, the enforcement and governance of normative behaviour in Murmurs. In this sense, studying the Other, in the form of resistant, non-normative fans from the authoritarian vantage point of the community hierarchy will prove challenging. James Marquart, who, when assuming the role of a prison guard to undertake an ethnographic study of prison inmates, found that "the most difficult problem...was role conflict" between his duty in "[remaining] a uniformed sociologist" and his "deep involvement in the guard world" (1986: 388). Being expected to "think, act and talk like a guard" (1986: 388) meant that he had to "maintain several escape routes" in order to "safeguard [his] greater commitment to [the] academic role" (Adler and Adler 1987: 51). For example, in terms of violations of prison rules, because he had "developed a good relationship with [the] inmate informants who provided him with information of [these] activities" he made an ethical decision to keep them "confidential in order to preserve the reciprocal, trusting relationship" (Pogrebin 2003: 362). Although I am not drawing a comparison between members of Murmurs and prison inmates, Marquart's situation does highlight the problematic consideration I will encounter with regard to sensitive material posted within the Crew member forums and determining whether this should be included within the study. Likewise, I will also have to consider, if, during the undertaking of participant

observation, I am required in my official role as crew member to take direct action upon the non-normative members, and whether this may compromise my position as researcher, or even involve me being Othered by the communal Other.

My position may also involve a struggle to suppress assumptions that are taken into the field (Markham 1998: 62) by my "insider" roles: a possible "indulgent" (Hine 200: 56) or "taken for granted" (Bird 2003: 121) approach to R.E.M. due to my fandom, an inability to "suspend...preconceptions" (Holt and Sparkes 2001: 242) about non-normative members due to my crew status, or even a desire to focus on "statements and behaviour [from participants] that appear to fit into pre-existent theoretical frameworks (Hills 2005: 808). My long standing friendship with some participants may also uncover methodological challenges in this manner, most specifically concerning accuracy and representation (Bell and Valentine 1995: 26, Campbell 2004: 39). Thus, although my position in the research process is unique and should provide fresh insight into online fan cultural norms, this uniqueness may also prove challenging in terms of remaining loyal to the demands of all three of my roles, each of which have strong implications on this work. As Hine recommends: "the researcher needs to apply an ethnographic sensitivity to the recognition of potential ethical problems and the development of solutions that are appropriate in context" (2000: 24).

Having discussed my unique position and described the methodological challenges this may provide, I shall now move on to outline the structure of the thesis, presenting each chapter and the questions and themes raised within.

All of This Is Coming Your Way: thesis structure

In this introductory chapter, I have presented the aim of this thesis, which is to produce an original understanding of how normative and non-normative fan identities are negotiated within the Murmurs community.

In Chapter Two I move on to review the central arguments inherent within literature relating to online communities and fan cultural norms, most specifically focusing on how they account for,

or marginalise conflict in relation to non-normative fan identity. This is undertaken by addressing the following questions:

1. What assumptions concerning singular fan identity are evident?
2. How and why has oppositional fan identity been marginalised?
3. How has the implementation and adaptation of community norms and values been approached?
4. How can normativity be navigated in an online community?
5. How has power and normative cultural identity been theorised?

By critically analysing these approaches, I challenge the notion of commonality of interest being consistently singular in an online fan community, and further highlight how academic studies have offered limited accounts of challenges to conformity, precisely with regard to oppositional identities within a fan community, and resistance to attempts at normalisation. I also question assumptions concerning the processes through which fans engage in non-normative behaviour, and expose the lack of focus on power relations that can arise through negotiation of the Other and maintenance of normative cultural identity. I propose that, as a way forward, these assumptions should be revised in accordance with an attempt to understand the non-normative fan position, and the methods with which fans respond to and/or resist community norms.

Chapter Three moves on to outline the methods through which I have collected and analysed data in an effort to explore the communal life within Murmurs. My enquiry, taking the form of a cyber-ethnography (Hine 2000, McLelland 2002, Sharp and Earle 2003, Gatson and Zweerink 2004a and 2004b, Campbell 2004) sources the collection of data from an offline pilot survey study and online participant observation, case studies, questionnaires and interviews, and textual analysis.

However, the chapter also raises a number of methodological and ethical issues that arise and are not accounted for when traditional ethnography is transferred and applied to a virtual setting. These include:

1. How to approach the online field. Should an online community be regarded as a public or private space?
2. How to cope with the "wealth of textual data" (Hills 2002: 174) found online.

3. When or whether to employ face-to-face interaction.
4. The manner in which textual analysis should be used for examining the online field.
5. How the ethnographic researcher should maintain ethics and confidentiality.

Being a member of the Murmurs administrative crew, and therefore an agent of subcultural policing, places me in a unique position to study, not only normative fans, but also "the Other" within the community, in the form of oppositional, non-normative fans. The addition of my R.E.M. fandom therefore means I will be conducting the ethnography from within the fan community. After examining different ethnographic approaches, I argue that the combination of distance and knowledge recommended by Giddens (1984: 4) is the most suitable method to be used for this study, in consideration of my unique position.

Chapters Four, Five, Six and Seven comprise the main body of this thesis, by featuring case studies that focus on specific behaviour or situations in the community surrounding fan cultural norms. In order to gain an insight into the non-normative fan position in Murmurs, Chapter Four examines through a case study how normative fan identity within the community is constructed and enforced. Focusing on, and defining, the "central values" (Willis 1978) of the R.E.M fans' subcultural homology, I show how the object of fandom can be viewed as reflecting these values, and determine the processes through which they are explicitly communicated to community members through the Code of Conduct and Rules and Regulations. Drawing on Henry Jenkins's application of de Certeau's "strategy" and "tactics" to fandom (1992), I question whether normative behaviour in Murmurs is a given, and the extent to which it has to be governed through strategies of power employed by the community's hierarchy.

In the next three chapters, the three case studies that examine non-normative fan activity within Murmurs that reject the "central values" of the subcultural homology are introduced and examined. Although there was potential to undertake a case study on non-normative, Republican supporters in Murmurs, I decided instead to concentrate on three groups that were engaged in more direct relations of power and subordination with the Murmurs hierarchy due to their breach of fan communal norms. These groups, I interpreted, were more actively and directly targeted for methods of normalisation, due to their engagement in feminised discourses of "stupidity" and "silliness." Also, the Republicans, because of their use of masculine discourse and involvement

in public debate with the Murmurs' intelligentsia, were deemed as less threatening to the fan culture's homologous "central values."

Of the three non-normative groups under study, the Triskaidekaphobics (Trobes), a social sub-group within Murmurs, are examined first, in Chapter Five, due to their closest proximity to the normative appreciation of R.E.M.'s music as art. This is achieved by their attempts to recapture the pleasurable pre-Internet experience of listening to and purchasing a new album as a singular event. Their temporary activity is driven by a nostalgic aim to recapture the experience of purchasing a new release by R.E.M. without any prior knowledge of its contents, other than that which has been officially released. In other words, they reject the rapid information flow and new processes of musical distribution that the Internet can provide. However, as I show, this appreciation is undertaken in a way that ultimately makes them non-normative, with their spoiler evading activities affecting the exchange of knowledge between fans, their accumulation of fan cultural capital and thereby resulting in their precise cultural distinctiveness from the rest of the Murmurs community.

Chapter Six examines Droolers, another group who, through their social engagement, are also distinct from the rest of the Murmurs community, but unlike Trobes, maintain a permanent distinction from fan-cultural norms. The activity of drooling most specifically occurs in the People Forums in Murmurs, which function to cater for discussion on topics associated with R.E.M. band members, who each have their own designated sub-forum. It is my interpretation that Droolers adopt a culturally feminised approach in these forums, encompassing extreme levels of adoration and desire alongside a focus on issues surrounding the band member's personal life and physical attributes. I demonstrate how the approach fails to correspond with what Murmurs constitutes as the "right way" to read as a fan, which involves knowing "expectations and conventions of [a] fan community" (Jenkins 1992:88). However, I also argue against Jenkins by questioning to what degree these non-normative members are always "responsive" to the demands of fandom (1992: 88). Drawing on the work of Mary Douglas, I show how Droolers are subsequently approached by normative fans as an unclean "matter out of place" ([1966] 2002: 44) that is working to pollute the community, being characterised as

obsessed "others" (Jenson 1992), and eventually segregated into what Michel Foucault terms a heterotopia of deviance (1986).

In Chapter Seven I present the final case study of this thesis, which focuses on a group of members that have been termed by the Murmurs community as Pointless Posters. In contrast to Droolers and Trobes who negotiate fandom, Pointless Posters instead de-emphasise their fandom through the rejection of R.E.M. related discussion and related topics in favour of feminised off-topic, general and personal life conversations referred to by normative community members as "small talk." Showing how these members justify their behaviour, I also question R.E.M.'s position as the common text once this de-emphasis occurs. Pointless Posters can be viewed as being rejected into a heterotopia of deviance. However, I show that their treatment within this confined space, rather than instigating normalisation, worked to actively encourage their sense of self-importance, ensuring the continuation of this non-normative behaviour.

Lastly, Chapter Eight provides a comprehensive summary which draws together and critically examines the key arguments and themes covered in this thesis. Presenting the main findings of this study, I offer a reflection on my approach and unique position, the method used and its implications. I finally then offer a suggestion of areas for future research surrounding online fan cultural norms, concluding with my strong recommendation that future studies in this area should attempt to understand the importance of, and power relations surrounding, oppositional fan identities, and the manner with which fans negotiate community norms.

Chapter Two. Literature Review

This chapter examines the central themes and arguments embedded within literature relating to online communities and fan cultural norms. I will assess the development of these themes in terms of how they account for, or marginalise, conflict in relation to non-normative fan identity. By analysing these approaches, I will challenge the notion of commonality of interest being consistently singular in an online fan community, and argue that academic studies have offered limited accounts of challenges to conformity, precisely with regard to oppositional identities within a fan community, and resistance to attempts at normalisation. I shall also question assumptions concerning the processes through which fans engage in non-normative behaviour, and assess the relations of power that can arise through negotiation of the Other and maintenance of normative cultural identity. I propose that, as a way forward, these assumptions should be revised in accordance with an attempt to understand the non-normative fan position, and the methods with which fans respond to and/or resist community norms.

Imagining the oppositional?: assumptions of singular fan identity

In this section I want to explore and question why the assumed existence of a singular identity within fan communities has often been a central tenet within academic literature. To expose the neglect of the Other, of oppositional identities, I will draw on Benedict Anderson's theory of "imagined communities," and expose the limitations his projection of a normative "imagined" community has on understanding online fan communities. Studies concerning communal life online have tended to concentrate mainly on the similarities and differences between online and face-to-face communities, making comparisons between the social activities conducted therein to determine how "real" an online community is, and whether it fulfils the relevant requirements to be described as a "community" (Jones 1997, Rheingold 1992, Graham 1999, Foster 1997, Gattiker 2001, Primuth 1998)[7]. While some studies have concluded that collective interactions online do fulfil the requirements of being viewed as a community (Fernback 1999), others have questioned this, on the basis that "something is either a real community or it isn't. Virtual communities aren't" (Snyder 1996)[8]. These considerations are accounted for, and expanded,

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[7] See Galston 2004.
[8] Kumiko Aoki (1994) also views not one absolute separation between on and offline communities, but rather three

within Benedict Anderson's views on the essence of community, which he proposes is based around the imagination of a shared culture and activities. He suggests that "communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined" (1991: 6)[9]. Anderson argues that nations can be viewed as "imagined communities" due to the precise shared focus around, and belief invested in, customs and routines or other shared symbolic items: "the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (1991: 6). To illustrate this, he uses the example of the newspaper reader[10], who, "observing exact replicas of his own paper being consumed by his subway, barbershop, or residential neighbours, is continually reassured that the imagined world is visibly rooted in everyday life" (1991: 35-36)[11]. This perspective has been applied in an effort to understand the concept and workings of an online community as a space that is defined by the collective imagination of the membership (Rheingold 1993, Jones 1997: 17, Jordan 1999, Fernback 1999, Lévy 1997, Tepper 1997: 47, Mallapragada 2000, Bell 2001, Mitra 2001, Jancovich 2002, Lysloff 2003: 40-41, Gajjala 2004).

Steven Jones also supports Anderson's approach and believes that communications online not only formulate and develop social relations, but are also "commented on and imaginatively

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degrees of difference that depend on the community in question. He contends that online communities can be grouped according to the following: those that completely overlap with offline communities, those that overlap to some degree, and those that are entirely separated.

However, debates concerning whether a community is "real" or not have been regarded by some as an insufficient tool to explore the emergence and development of online interactions. Mark Poster views the Internet as offering "the possibility of new kinds of interactivity" where "the idea of an opposition of real and unreal community is not adequate to specify the differences between modes of bonding, serving instead to obscure the manner of the historical construction of forms of community" (1995: 620). This perspective is supported by Nessim Watson, who questions the distinctions made between "real" and "virtual" communities and contests a situation where individuals offline consider online communities as virtual, but the participants in these communities view them as "very real" (1997: 29). For Watson, communities both online and offline share common characteristics such as processes of communication, social goals and shared relationships and therefore should be approached in the same manner. This perception is also supported by Rene Lysloff, who advocates an appreciation of the value and meaning of online social relationships to members, rather than deliberations of whether they actually exist: "discussions of whether communities do or do not exist on the Internet, or of whether they are real or virtual, should be focused instead on the nature and quality of the relationships among members" (2003: 56). Instead he suggests that "we should perhaps ask what these social networks *do* and *mean* for their members."

[9] For more on Anderson's concept, see Cambell and Adria 2007: 3-4,

[10] However, as argued by Stratton, this example is problematic as "newspapers are not interactive. Their production of a national imagined community takes place through the construction of a mass silenced audience" (1997: 263).

[11] Other examples include the Christian Church (Gorringe 1996: 263), Disc Jockeys (Longhurst 2007: 203), the media (Cormack 2007: 54), radio (Kimani 2007: 107)

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constructed by symbolic processes initiated and maintained by individuals and groups" (1995: 16). Therefore, it can be seen that these "symbolic processes" could be formulated around a common interest or object of fandom, working to produce and maintain communal norms. In this respect, although applied in an offline context, Cornel Sandvoss argues that fan communities can be imagined in terms of both content and structure: "football fans are part of an imagined community, whose borders as much as content are imagined by every individual member" (2003: 92)[12]. Nancy Baym identifies this imagining happening online as "shaped by a range of pre-existing structures, including external contexts, temporal structure, system infrastructure, group purposes and participant characteristics" (1998b: 38).

A different approach is taken by Matt Hills, who questions whether Anderson's concept can, in fact, be satisfactorily applied to fans online. He suggests that online fandom should not be viewed as "imagined communities", but instead as "communities of imagination" (2001: 147 and 2002: 180). For Hills, the crucial difference between these two approaches rests on the distinction that "fans care intensely about their objects of fandom," (2001: 148), share a "common respect" (2002: 180), and form "a community which...constitutes itself precisely through a common affective engagement" (2001: 154), a proposition which is not accounted for in Anderson's model.[13] He further clarifies this distinction by arguing that "unlike imagined communities, which can function...for as long as their routinised repetitions ground their narratives of commonality, the community of imagination constantly threatens to fragment." The constancy of the "imagined community" is therefore set against the fragility of the "community of imagination" which does not "afford the same protective weight...because this is a community based on the assumption that its respondents can experience a *common affective tie and not merely a common and therefore immediately visible instance of media consumption*" (2002: 180). This is exemplified in a study of a *Xena: Warrior Princess* online community by Leena Saarinen, who found that the death of the fictional object of fandom disrupted the shared "vision" of the community. Therefore the fragility of the community was exposed: "the shared object of admiration can become a significant factor in the community's identity, and it can serve

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[12] Andrews also perceives Manchester United fans in this manner (2004: 186), as does Garry Crawford with sports fans "who believe they posses a shared sense of identity" (2004: 53).

[13] See also Bielby and Harrington 2005 and Shaun Moores 2005: 168. Garry Robson also takes a similar approach, by stressing that Millwall football fandom was of a "depth too great to be contained by [Anderson's] notions..." (2004: 7).

as a symbol or a code for its members. If something happens to that symbol the rhetorical vision may be shattered" (2002: 59). In this sense, affective engagement can be seen as a vital part of the imagining of a community.

Rhiannon Bury distinguishes between Anderson's "imagined community" and what she prefers to term an "interactive community." For her, Anderson's model is too focused "on a nation in which members share a set of identifications but do not necessarily interact with one another...or do not...desire to do so" (2005: 14). Bury's assumption that fans desire to interact "as a group," presumes a uniformity of interaction. Building on this, I will suggest that another problematic aspect of applying Anderson's concept to online fan communities is its inability to account for community relationships, and more specifically within this, oppositional fan identities, which constitute types of difference, rather than what Anderson projects, which is imagined sameness. These types of difference and their impact on normative fan identity will form a major focus of the case studies in Chapters Five, Six and Seven. As Rosman suggests, "the homogenous temporality of the imagined community does not allow for the possibility of imagining differences within that same community" (2003: 19).This failure to "imagine" oppositional values or identities that can exist within a community, and which may be disruptive, means overlooking central processes of communal interactions, as observed by Hodge and Kress:

> Social relations...in social formations are constituted by relations of power (order and
> subordination) and solidarity (cohesion and antagonism), with these dimensions
> typically both complementary and opposed. As a result, every social group is
> characterized by processes of conflict and struggle, and by mechanisms for resolution
> and mediation, between different social categories based on class, race, gender, age
> and other aspects of group formation (1988: 266).

Anderson himself acknowledges that, "regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep horizontal comradeship" (1991: 7). However, this comradeship is normative, and does not account for non-normative or oppositional members within the "imagined community." As Shaun Moores observes: "imagining the nation is a necessarily problematic act to begin with, because it requires numerous social inequalities and cultural differences within any 'national community' to be negotiated" (2005: 165). However, in Anderson's theory, the Other is not accounted for: "the diverse local cultures whose differences are suppressed in the creation of a national imagined community are left out of

Anderson's consideration..." alongside "the use of force by the state to ensure its continued existence and to deny the cultural divisions which...have been and remain a disruptive and excessive feature in any national imagined community" (Stratton and Ang 1998: 140).[14] Therefore, when applied to fandom, the non-normative individual and associated behaviour is marginalized within the "imagined community." Henry and Tator show a similar occurrence at the national level, within the Canadian media who "so often construct a discursive sketch of Canadian society that silences, erases, and marginalizes a significant proportion of this country's population." As such, "the press often cannot imagine non-dominant peoples as part of the 'imagined community' of Canada" (2002: 226). Building on this perspective, I now want to discuss how academics have moved on from arguments of imagined fan communities, to focus on how individuals actively locate "like-minded" citizens, and will show how this has resulted in oppositional identities in common interest communities being marginalized.

The search for "people like us": pursuing commonality online

> It would be a mistake to argue that social groups are homogenous. Individual differences within any group are essential to ensure its very survival. Groups require a variety of roles to be fulfilled, and creative solutions to problems confronting the group are needed. Without the individual differences that allow for a diversity of skills, no group would survive (Taylor 2002: 10).

My main consideration in this section is to show how this prospect of oppositional identities has been marginalised with regard to common interest communities, in favour of simplistic presumptions of instant access and compatibility through likeminded-ness. Howard Rheingold suggests that friendships online can be created and developed through a shared "topic" with which individuals can quickly locate others with common interests: "we can go directly to the place where our favourite subjects are being discussed, then get acquainted with those who share our passions, or who use words in a way we find attractive. In this sense, the topic is the address" (1992: 423). He stresses the importance of social relationships as an essential part of community life and suggests it is this engagement people seek at the outset: "I can attest that I and thousands of other cybernauts know that what we are looking for, and finding in some surprising ways, is not just information but instant access to ongoing relationships with a large number of other

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[14] As Nasser also suggests, Anderson "has not addressed the relationship between self and Other" (2005: 12).

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people" (1993: 61). Mclaughlin *et al.* also take a similar approach to Rheingold, assuming immediately achievable online relationships through a common interest:

> The global reach of the Internet not only facilitates communication among members of existing distributed groups and teams but, perhaps more important, provides a medium for the formation and cultivation of new relationships by providing virtually instantaneous access to thousands of potential contacts who have compatible interests and sphere of expertise (1995:91).

However, I would argue that in order to achieve "instant access" to ongoing relationships, a user would first have to be accepted into the community by following a process of behaviour that is recognised by other members as normative. As McLaughlin *et al.* later admit, "in some groups, participation alone does not grant community membership" (1995: 102). Therefore, it is questionable whether a member who engages in non-normative behaviour would be permitted to forge ongoing friendships with anyone who "shares their passions." In this respect, it is debatable how instantly accessible relationships within a common interest based online community actually are.

Again, Steven Jones maintains that motivation for joining online communities is based on a realisation that there are potentially other people out there who we may have a commonality with: "we are struck, as we use the Internet, by the sense that there are others out there *like us*" (1997: 17). Lévy expands on this theory by maintaining that the prospect of there being similar people to us "out there" who we share a commonality with is a strong motivational force for seeking social interaction online:

> It is reasonable to claim...that such virtual communities bring about a true actualization (in the sense of effectively putting people in contact) of human groups, groups that were merely potential before the arrival of cyberspace...Along with the cyberculture arises the desire to construct a social bond that is based not on territorial or institutional affiliations, or relationships of power, but on common interests, games, shared knowledge, cooperative apprenticeship, open processes of collaboration (2001:110).

Gauntlett also endorses the suitability of the Internet to unite "like-minded people" together to form communities. He suggests that individuals with specialised interests could previously "only feed their interest through one-way communication processes such as reading a magazine or

newsletter about it" (2000: 14). I would challenge this notion of a "one-way" process, due to the creative aspects of fandom that can be readily found in activities such as the production of fanzines and organised conventions (see Jenkins 1992a, 1992b, and Brower 1992). However, it is possible to accept the premise that individuals with specific interests can be brought into contact with each other in a more convenient way than before. It was predicted by Licklider in 1968 that communities online in the future would be communities "not of common location, but of *common interest*" (1968: 38). This consideration is supported by Howard Rheingold, who not only acknowledges common interest communities online, but also suggests that for an online community to function in a successful manner, it "has to have an affinity – the answer to the question: What would draw these people together?" (2000: 173). Wellman and Gulia, in their assessment of the importance of social networks within the online sphere, also focus on the significance of people drawn to a community through a common interest, but suggest it could satisfy a deeper need than an offline community[15]:

> People's allegiance to the Net's communities of interest may be more powerful than
> their allegiance to their neighbourhood communities because those involved in the
> same virtual community may share more interests than those who live on the same
> block (1999:185).

For Wellman and Guila, an online community formed on common interest may inspire greater loyalty and stronger bonds among its members due to its foundations being based on shared interests, which may not be discovered in a local neighbourhood. Asim Ali also highlights the importance of ties in a community network and suggests that these connections can possess greater strength online because they connect people on the basis of common interest in a powerful way that cannot always be found in an offline situation: "it's a way of meeting people with common interests in an otherwise fragmented society in which geography, occupation, and even family ties can't necessarily keep people connected" (1999: np). The perception that individuals can access others with similar interests in a virtual setting, which cannot always be easily-achieved offline, where friendships are seemed to be forged more strongly, is shared by Howard Rheingold, who views online communities as offering a new kind of social space:

> You can't just pick up the phone and ask to be connected with someone who wants

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[15] See also Galston 2004: 62-63.

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to talk about Islamic art....you can, however, join a computer conference on any of these topics....You will find that your chances of making friends are magnified by orders of magnitude over the old methods of finding a peer group (1992: 423).

Rheingold views interest based communities as providing greater opportunities to expand social networks and create friendships than offline situations, due to the potential to access a large volume of individuals with common interests. However, I will question this, as although instant contact can be made to other individuals in order to discuss like-minded topics, acceptance and reciprocal exchange is not ensured and is dependent on a number of other factors, such as normative behaviour, the acquisition of status and maintenance of "authenticity" within the community.

Wellman and Gulia further consolidate the importance of common interests as a means of building friendships, but give less prominence to the development of relationships through social networks, by concluding that relationships online are "based more on shared interests and less on shared social characteristics" (1999:186). This overriding belief that shared interests will automatically ensure social compatibility does not take into account individual differences and receptiveness to adopting normative conduct within a community. This critique can also be levelled at Licklider, who perceived that friendships in an online community would be selected and developed in accordance with common interest and objectives. He argues that these chosen relationships would ensure community members share a contented environment: "life will be happier for the online individual because the people with whom one interacts most strongly will be selected more by commonality of interest and goals than by accidents of proximity" (1968:40). This limited viewpoint however does not account for non-normative expressions and attitudes towards the common interest, or object of fandom, that may result in a disruption of "happiness". I will argue and show throughout my three case studies (see Chapters Five, Six and Seven) that although a fan community may be based around interest in a common subject, such as R.E.M., there are a multitude of different approaches adopted by community members that do not conform to normative practices of fan identity. In this respect, to select individuals purely based on their interest in R.E.M. will not always be a sufficient basis for building a successful, or even "happy," series of communal relationships. This prediction that the online individual will have a contented life is underlined by Ana Marie Cox, in her online debate with Stacy Horn for

Hotwired Magazine[16]. While it is not questioned that some form of happiness can exist in online communities, Cox does dispute whether it is in the interest and well being of the community for it to be aspirationally pursued:

> While I'd never argue about the relative "happiness" of online groups versus the gang at the corner bar, I do question the idea that increased happiness is, in fact, a worthwhile goal for a community. Gathering together on the basis of interests seems to me the worst kind of closed mindedness, a sure path to contentedness and stasis. Such coalitions will never have the vitality and accidental genius engendered by the random collision of souls at the corner bar (1996: np).

For Cox, social networks based on common interests are considered to be inferior to those generated through offline chance encounters. Implicit within this statement is the belief that oppositional identities cannot be found within online common interest based communities, only in offline settings. This is underscored by describing online communities as "groups," whereas offline gatherings, incorporating "colliding" individuals are "gangs." Her assertion that random encounters are not common practice online and are the superior method with which to bring stimulus to social gatherings can also be challenged when applied to the Murmurs community. Due to its wide selection of forums and interest topics that function in addition to the main common subject, Murmurs allows for both pre-selected and random interactions based on the discovery of additional shared interests within the community, and members may consider both methods to be effective in generating community discussions. Her assumptions that common interest communities are singular and contented leads Cox to classify them as places to engage in narrow thought. Cox's view on the limitations of community discussions is partly endorsed by D. Kent Pingel who, in a 2005 article by Angie Latif concerning the launch of the social networking website meetup.com, also expresses concerns that communities based on common interest possess a membership too reliant on similarity of perspectives :

> I think there could be a tendency to have too much 'like thinking' in some groups.... I have seen 'I love President Bush' groups and 'I hate Bush' groups, for example. To me, that would be too much homogenous perspective - a place to go and preach to the choir, depending on which flavor you choose. On the contrary, a more broad, common interest, like travel, will bring together many viewpoints, temperaments and interests (Latif, 2005: np)

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[16] Galston also questions Licklider's argument, stating that the "underlying hypothesis that "accidents of proximity are...a source of unhappiness seems incomplete at best" (2004: 62).

Pingel's argument concerning a lack of diversity amongst online interest groups, which is also shared by Lea and Spears (1992) and Wellman and Guila (1999: 186), must be questioned. His comment that groups formed around a specific interest will have too narrowed a focus fails to account for the different attitudes and individual differences that can be discovered within a given online community. As Aristarkhova confirms, "such theories that conceive of communities as being essentially based on unity are problematic because the very concept of unity implies "sameness"-whether assumed or sought after- and "sameness" itself is more of a theoretical construct than an empirical fact" (2005: 161). This is evident in the way fandom can be expressed differently by individuals and groups within the same forum. Therefore, an "I love President Bush group" may not contain the absolute consistency that is implied by Pingel, but could in fact feature a range of different expressions and attitudes adopted by members that counteract accusations of homogeneity. Wilcox expands on Pingel's argument by suggesting that groups based on common interest may have insufficient appeal to ensure continued interactions:

> Just because you are talking about the same things doesn't necessarily mean you have enough common interest to keep you interested in the group...Maybe the community of interest model isn't the most helpful when, inevitably, everyone is looking for something different yet may get benefit from occasional interactions (Wilcox, 2005: np).

Wilcox rejects the "community of interest model" as being an insufficient base on which to found a community, due to a perceived difference that can be found within the concerns of members. However, I would question to what extent communities based on common interest talk about "the same things." I will show that within Murmurs the discussion forums provide interactions that are filled with more expansive ideas and approaches to debate than those allowed by Wilcox. Sardar and Ravelz, in their work *Cyberfutures*, also question the role of commonality of interest in an online community. For them, communities are shaped not by shared interest in a subject, but by shared goals and common affiliations, defined by space and time:

> Communities are shaped by a sense of belonging to a place, a geographical location, by shared values, by common struggles, by tradition and history of a location - not by joining a group of people with common interests. On this logic, the accountants of the world will instantly by transformed into a community the moment they start a newsgroup (Sardar and Ravelz, 1996:29).

This viewpoint suggests that individuals gathered together based on a common interest do not qualify to be described as a community due to their non-association with specific values and beliefs necessary to drive a community. This is to discount the possibility of commonality of interest being more than just a term to indicate the reasons for a member's involvement in the community. By referring to the instant transformation of "accountants of the world" into a community on the immediate creation of a newsgroup, they overlook the need for repeated interaction over time, which can be viewed as a requirement for communities to develop. This oversight therefore highlights an erroneous aspect of their argument, as their logic could also be applied to an offline community in the same manner. In addition, their example is problematic as accountants are a professional group, and I would question how this social organisation significantly differs from other common interest based communities.

Snyder, in his critique of whether a common interest based community qualifies as such to be described as community, concludes that they should be more accurately approached as "fan clubs", because "a community is more than a bunch of people distributed in all 24 time zones, sitting in their dens and pounding away on keyboards about the latest news in alt.music.indigo-girls..." (1996: 92). He expands this notion by stressing that:

> a community is people who have greater things in common than a fascination with a
> narrowly defined topic. In a real community, people are forced by geographic
> circumstance to deal with a broad spectrum of issues. What are we doing about
> schools? Crime? Traffic control? In virtual communities, exactly the opposite is true.
> The narrowest possible issue is the defining vector for the community, be it a mailing
> list, newsgroup, or whatever (1996:92).

According to this perspective, commonality between members ends with their appreciation of the subject of interest, which is "a microscopic tunnel...the only allowed discussion topic" that ensures off-topic discussion receives "strong reproach from any self-appointed Net police" (1996: 92). This viewpoint fails to appreciate the wide scope of discussion possible within online groups and the different shared interests that can function in tandem with the main common interest. Online communities can also incorporate a "broad spectrum of issues" that members are forced to deal with through their community affiliation. These may not include some of the issues described by Snyder, but can encompass other pertinent concerns to do with the wellbeing

of the community, such as non-normative behaviour, conflict and the implementation of social control. This will be explored further in Chapter Seven, where I will show that within Murmurs, off-topic discussion is not only encouraged, but formulates the basis of some of the most popular forums in terms of postings. It will therefore be necessary to inquire if, within Murmurs, there is a normative and narrow "defining vector" for the community surrounding the object of fandom, and if so, how this affects community discussions and interactions. Jan Fernback, with her perception that interest based online communities are closed, inward looking areas, makes similar assumptions to Snyder:

> Communities of interest are closed places – they can become self-seeking, atomised, even solipsistic communities that lack a social role in the larger collectivity. Members don't necessarily have a sense of belonging to anything larger than the community itself, which adheres to an agenda shaped by the content of a discussion group. Roots in a virtual community are shallow at best; with a small investment of time and frequency of "virtual" interaction, members can establish themselves forcefully within the community (1997:41).

Fernback reduces the significance of social interaction within the community to a level which functions and holds importance only within the confines of the group. Her assertion that members can quickly and easily become immersed in the community again fails to account for any challenges to normative behaviour occurring. Laura Gurak takes Fernback's argument further by offering a caution for communities of interest where, in her view, members seem to interact only with others like themselves. However, her belief that the development online of "highly specific communities" results in a situation where members are "less likely to be exposed to the possibly alternative points of view of people less similar to themselves" (2004: 27) is a simplistic assumption. Although it is possible to acknowledge that an online community can result in the unification of people with strong similarities, I will argue that many different points of view can indeed be discovered in an interest based online community. As I stated earlier in this chapter, although there may be a prevailing common interest in a community, the manner in which members express and interpret their particular interests in the common subject, and in alignment with this, how they respond to normative conduct, can differ greatly. This is taken into consideration and supported by Stacy Horn in *Cyberville- Clicks,Culture and the creation of an online town* (1998), where she recounts the creation and development of her Manhattan based online community, ECHO. Horn takes a different view to Licklider and Cox by

acknowledging the possibility for unrest in online communities, and questions whether it is possible to find a community online that is filled only with people that share a common interest:

> For a community to work, you have to accept imperfection...Contrary to frequent reports, describing cyberspace as communities of common interest, any one place in cyberspace is not filled with only the people you like or who share your interests. Where ever there are people there's going to be conflict. And people who don't like you. You have to overlook some of everyone's shortcomings, or rather, you can't get so bent out of shape about them or the community won't hold together (1998:117).

Horn's statement that any gathering of people online will inevitably result in some degree of conflict shows an awareness that common interest communities can encompass a range of oppositional identities. However, her suggestion that tolerance should be shown towards non-normative behaviour in order to successfully maintain a community underestimates the power and influence of normative fan identity on communal relations. This leads me to examine the processes through which norms are developed, what they mean to the community, and how they are observed or resisted by members.

Community norms and values: implementation and adaptation

The development of social norms in a community has been a concern for academics, most specifically with regard to its definition[17] and distinction from social rules. In this respect, Burnett and Bonnici stress that rules differ from norms in that they are "more formalized through codification and are prescriptive and controllable" (2003: 334). They can in effect be used to control or punish deviant behaviour. The purpose of norms, on the other hand, has been seen "to give individuals a sense of balance, a way to gauge what is normal in a specific context at a specific time. [They] point the way to acceptable standards and codes of behavior" (Burnett *et al.* 2001: 537). Social norms therefore can "guide social interaction and may be linked to a sense of collective identity[18]" (Kimoto 1998: 97).

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[17] See Gibbs 1965 for an outline of different definitions and types of norms.
[18] When norms infuse with a collective identity, Kimoto argues that "there may be symbols that mark that identity and practices that distinguish members from nonmembers" (1998: 99-100).

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Nancy Baym suggests that within an online community the norms that develop are "directly related to the purposes of the group. It is to meet the needs of the community...that standards of behavior and methods of sanctioning inappropriate behaviour develop" (1998b: 61)[19]. Additionally, online communities may import these normative values from their offline counterparts, or develop their own by determining "what is acceptable and what is not" (Jacko 2003: 603). The establishment of norms has been deemed as vital in order to achieve social stability[20]: "communities, as organized sets of relationships, need mechanisms for limiting the potential for destructive activities on the part of...members" (Sypher and Collins 2001: 194). Likewise, Howard Rheingold viewed the introduction of norms as an essential safeguard, not only for the prevention of "destructive activities," but also to preserve free speech in an online community: "the only alternative to imposing potentially dangerous restrictions on freedom of expression is to develop norms, folklore, ways of acceptable behavior that are widely modelled, taught, and valued, that can give the citizens of cyberspace clear ideas of what they can and cannot do with the medium..." (1993: 54).

Nessim Watson, in his case study of the online community for fans of the band Phish, discovered a certain normative conduct that members were encouraged to uphold. Even though the forum did not appear to impose restrictions, "certain fan values regarding respect for the band and appropriate behaviour both on the Net and at shows [were] not considered to be debatable" (1997: 113). In some communities, membership is dependent on displaying these fan values. Crabbe et al. found that "gaining entry to the interpretive community of football fans is a matter of being able to articulate and master the implicit cultural codes that police the boundaries of acceptance" (2001: 77). Thus, members "may adapt their behavior to what they perceive as the normative standards of the community" (Sherman 2001: 59).[21] But how do fans in an online community acquire these values? A process of socialisation into a community, which should allow and assist individuals to acknowledge and accept the norms and standards, has been viewed as essential by sociologist Robert Merton, as "only through continued socialization in the

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[19] As Burnett and Bonnici state, "these norms are not defined by outside factors; rather, they emerge directly from the activities, motives, and goals of the group itself" (2003: 334).

[20] Burnett and Bonnici conclude that "social norms provide much of the "glue" that keeps social groups cohesive" (2003: 349).

[21] For example, normative behaviour for English football fans has been identified as "gathering in large groups, drinking heavily and acting boisterously" (Stott 2003: 5),

life of a group can one become fully aware of...the fine-grained meanings of behavior, feelings and values; only so can one decipher the unwritten grammar of conduct..." (1973: 106). Within his exploration of role articulation (1957 and 1968a, see also Genov 2004 and Coser 1990), he identifies three types of conformity that can take place within this process: *attitudinal*, where members not only adopt the norms, but actually have a belief in them; *behavioral*, where individuals, regardless of belief, adjust their behaviour in alignment with the norms and values; and *doctrinal*, where the values and beliefs are conveyed to others (1959). The socialization process therefore should ensure at least one of these practices of behaviour is adopted. However, Burnett and Bonnici highlight the limitations of Merton's argument when applied to text based computer-mediated communication, as "attitudes, which result from the internalization of norms, are...not directly observable in the exchange of texts but can only be inferred through an analysis of such textual behaviours" (2003: 336). They propose that instead, norms in a community should be viewed as either explicit, such as those in formal documents, or implicit, which may not be formalised, but are recognised as necessary to uphold within group interactions.

Sarah Thornton also emphasises that regular participation over time provides members with an awareness of the various norms and values that are accepted and promoted within a specific culture:

> Club cultures are *taste cultures*. Club crowds generally congregate on the basis of their shared taste in music, their consumption of common media and, most importantly, their preference for people with similar tastes to themselves. Taking part in club cultures builds, in turn, further affinities, socialising participants into a knowledge of (and frequently a belief in) the likes and dislikes, meanings and values of the culture (2001:3).

Alongside her contention that socialisation based on shared taste leads to assimilation into the norms and values of a culture, Thornton acknowledges that awareness of expected conduct does not always result in conformity. As such, members can still persist in activities that are in direct contradiction to the preferred mode of behaviour, which therefore can label them as Other. Laura Gurak fails to consider this in her assertion that in shared interest based online communities, a "community ethos" is learnt through negative reaction to non-normative behaviour: "people come to acquire [it] by inhabiting the space and learning its unique communication characteristics... outsiders are regularly "flamed" until they have come to understand and

assimilate the community ethos..." (1999: 247). This situation, according to Gurak, persists until normalisation occurs. However, I will show that within Murmurs, there are three groups which could be viewed as working without compliance to the accepted ethos of the community: Trobes, Droolers and Pointless Posters. I will examine their relationship to normative community members, both internally and externally to their respective forums, in order to stress how they are marginalized or relegated within the community. I will also show that certain groups of members may understand the community ethos, and be flamed, or alerted by others to change their behaviour, yet still choose to follow a line of conduct that is in direct opposition to the accepted norms and values of the community. Gurak however fails to consider this or to determine the place and position occupied within the community by certain individuals or groups who do not fully "assimilate the community ethos."

Theodore D. Kemper, in his study of reference groups, maintains that within a community there exist normative collectives who provide a "guide to action" through the explicit promotion of norms and values to which the individual is expected to comply, either willingly or unwillingly. However, his assertion indicates that even when non-normative behaviour occurs, the power of communal norms is not reduced: "the individual acts in reference to norms and values [the community] has promulgated and which, in some way, it has brought to his attention. Either conformity or spiteful deviance is the mark of the influence of the normative group" (1986: 32).

Another method of learning community norms is suggested by Burnett and Bonnici, who identify how communities can engage in "metadiscussions," which involve debate surrounding group norms and conduct (see also Wallace 1999). It is considered that this discourse diverts attention away from the shared interest "into long, often detailed, and sometimes seemingly interminable tangents devoted to the dynamics of interaction itself, and to the intricacies of propriety and acceptable behavior" (2003: 342). As I will show in Chapters Five, Six and Seven, metadiscussions occur surrounding the actions of all three non-normative groups, most specifically through discourses of order and rationality. This is especially evident with the activities of Droolers where metadiscussions result in the creation of a heterotopia of deviance for offending members. Although these discussions can be interpreted by some members as a diversion from the main focus of the community, they are construed as "the primary mechanism

through which groups can interrogate the boundaries of what is acceptable, can construct norms through channels other than the formalized structure of the FAQ, and can enforce a certain degree of compliance to those norms" (Burnett and Bonnici 2003: 342). Within them, participants can choose, or possibly be persuaded, to alter their behaviour, or continue their non-normative actions. In this sense, metadiscussions provide a group "a space within which to debate the meaning and implications of norms that may otherwise remain unstated and unexplored" (2003: 342). However, as Burnett and Bonnici highlight, these discussions, rather than being formalised externally, can remain implicit in the memory and history of the group, and would thereby be unapparent to newbies until assimilation into the community occurs. For those members who do acquire a certain degree of knowledge of, and compliance to, normative behaviour, social standing in the community and subcultural power may be enhanced. Elfreda Chatman describes such individuals as "insiders," competent individuals, whose power resides in the notion that "they—more than other members of their world—have a comprehensive command of its norms, secrets, and ways of judging what is important against that which is trivial or even useless" (1999: 212).

However, on occasion, an individual or group may neglect to comply with the norms of a community, and instead engage in non-normative behaviour: "individual members of groups will vary both in the extent of their identification with the group and in the degree to which their behaviour is based on the group's cultural norms; some may be willing to adopt some of the cultural practises of the majority, while others refuse to do so" (Blackledge 2000: 12). This refusal may be purposeful in the sense that norms are learnt yet not followed, or may occur through a failure to understand community values. In an effort to clarify this further, I shall now turn to discuss the practices and activities with which members must engage in order to assume normative behaviour in an online fan community.

Navigating normativity in a fan community
In what follows, I will argue that in an online fan community, normativity can be achieved through compliance with five key practices. These include, reading in the "right way," assuming the correct gendered discourse, participating in the exchange of knowledge with other fans,

maintaining a focus on the object of fandom and complying with the subcultural homology in operation. However, I will show that within each method there are limitations surrounding the understanding and explanation of disruptions and oppositions to norms. In order to understand this more fully, I shall now discuss each in turn.

The first behavioural form involves reading in the accepted manner or "right way" of the community. In *Bond and Beyond* Tony Bennett and Janet Woollacott present a theory of reading formations where a "given body of texts" order inter-textual relations in such a way "that [the] reading is always-already cued in specific directions that are not given by those 'text themselves' as entities" (1987: 64). Therefore, meaning is not intrinsic in a text, but is dependent on the reader's interpretation in accordance with other texts. Matt Hills applies this to cult TV fandom[22], highlighting how different groups of fans can respond to a text in terms of these "inter-texts". For example, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* may be read by one group of fans in conjunction with different "vampire fictions," while another group may draw on "secondary texts" concerning one of the actors, and read the show as a "star vehicle" for them (2005a: 193). However, Bennett and Woollacott make clear that there exists a "superintendence of reading" that presides over these interpretations (1987: 65), a prospect that falls in line with what Henry Jenkins terms the "right way" of reading as a fan. Jenkins suggests that there are correct ways of reading a fan text, and that fans are "responsive" to "expectations about what narratives are 'appropriate' for fannish interest, what interpretations are 'legitimate'" (1992: 88). He supports this view by declaring that interactions with normative fan readers "further shape fans' perceptions toward close conformity to the community's own reading..." Although it can be determined that within Murmurs there is a "right way" of reading and responding to the object of fandom, in Chapter Six I question Jenkins's claim concerning fans' engagement in this process. I will propose that not all fans in a community demonstrate a responsive nature to its reading conventions, and in doing so, display readings of the fan text that are not "legitimate" and which fail to conform to the community's normative practices. This prospect is not adequately taken into consideration by Jenkins. Even so, there is a "right way" of reading in a fan community which dictates how members should approach the object of fandom, and within this, what form of gendered discourse is deemed normative, which brings me to discuss the second key practice.

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[22] See Tulloch and Jenkins (1994: 127-128) for further information on reading formation and fans.

The process of gender identity has been interpreted by Judith Butler as a performative act, in the sense that it is "always a doing"[23]. As she explains, this act is "produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence" (1990: 33). As also noted by Deborah Cameron: "gender has constantly to be reaffirmed and publicly displayed by repeatedly performing particular acts in accordance with the cultural norms (themselves historically and socially constructed, and consequently variable) which define 'masculinity' and 'femininity'" (1997: 49). Butler concludes that "there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender" (1999: 33) as it always involves active production: "identity is the effect of performance and not vice versa" (Bell 1999: 3). However, Salih questioned this by asking "how can there be a performance without a performer, an act without an actor?" before going on to conclude that "Butler is not claiming that gender is a performance, and she [does distinguish] between performance and performativity" (2002: 63). Butler herself expressed concerns that her theory would result in the reading of gender as "simply a self-invention" (1999: xxv). For Hall, the emphasis on the reproduction of gender norms was also problematic: "there is no agency in the sense of a voluntarist subject, as actors are little more ventriloquists, iterating the gendered acts that have come before them" (2001: 182). In this sense, "the performative is always a citation, always a reiteration" (Hills 2002: 158, see also Biddick 1998: 46).

Within a fan sub-culture or community, normative discourse is gendered, and therefore involves a performative reaffirmation of masculinised or feminised norms. As Butler argues: "identifying with a gender under contemporary regimes of power involves identifying with a set of norms that are and are not realizable" (1993: 126). Feminine readings are regarded as revolving around the personal and collaborative (Baym 2000: 138-139, Herring 1996: 137), whereas masculine styles instead are perceived to maintain a focus on the confrontational and demonstrative (Bird 2003: 66). Normative members of a community should therefore adopt and "perform" the correct type of discourse in order to maintain conformity to the normative cultural identity. Communities reliant on masculine discourse and readings to shape interactions can include those regarding cult texts (Hollows 2003, Read 2003), football (Redhead 1997), country music (McCusker and

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[23] Butler also develops this theory in *Bodies that Matter* (1993) and *Excitable Speech* (1997). Shaun Moores also discusses performativity and gender in a similar manner (2005: 158-160). See also Longhurst 2007, Bury 2005, Bradley 2007 and Barker 2002: 43.

Pecknold 2004), and rock music, which is deemed as "primarily a guy thing" (Knowles 2003: 209)[24]. As Mimi Schippers argues: "it is far more acceptable and common in rock music for individual women to embrace the masculine position than for men to occupy the feminine" (2002: 28). As such, masculinity very often has such a strong influence over music fandom that it serves to act as an indicator of authenticity: "the real fan is necessarily masculine in its difference from the feminine groupie or teenybopper who is more interested in developing real or imagined sexual/romantic relationships with the musicians" (Schippers 2002: 27)[25]. In this respect, I will show in Chapters Six and Seven, how in my interpretation, Murmurs, as a rock music fan community, enforces and constructs a masculinised approach as normative and therefore as holding greater subcultural power.

However, in communities such as those for fans of soap operas (Allen 1995, Spence 2005, Baym 2000) and serialised dramas (Thomas 2002), feminised discourse is instead welcomed and encouraged as the norm. In these cases, it is the masculine view that is rejected and deemed non-normative. Elizabeth Bird, in her ethnography of the *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman* discussion list showed how the community made a conscious effort to engage in feminised readings and discourse (2003: 66). Even male members in the minority, "soon learn to adapt their communication style to fit the predominant mode" or otherwise they would "drift away, as many have done" (2003: 67). However, I will argue that it is not always a case of "drifting away," but sometimes being *forced* away. Andrea Macdonald's study of *Quantum Leap* fans highlights the exclusionary repercussions that can occur towards members that fail to adopt the normative gendered discourse of a community. In this instance, a group of members within the masculinised fan community of the TV show, who showed preference for feminised readings, were forced to create their own online space in which they could discuss issues pertaining to the show and actors that were not welcomed in the main discussion list:

> [Normative fans] did not like the women talking about Scott Bakula's cute butt, or the
> long discussions of the characters' relationships. The frequent anecdotes and stories
> that the women drew from their own lives also annoyed many of the male members of
> the email list (1998:148).

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[24] See Coates (1998) for an outline how female fans from the Rocklist discussion group were rejected. Matthew Bannister (2006) also presents an important account of masculinity within 1980's indie guitar rock.
[25] Frith and McRibbie also highlight the distinction between masculine rock with feminised teenybop (1978).

Susan Clerc also discovered a similar occurrence between *Star Trek*, *X-Files* and *Babylon 5* fans, where "estrogen brigades" were formed by members to discuss feminised issues in isolation from the main masculinised fan community to which they belonged (1996:43 and 2000:223-224; see also Bury 2005 for a study of the David Duchovny Estrogen Brigade). This withdrawal from the wider fan community by these fans in favour of conforming to more specific or subordinated communal norms further supports my criticism of Jenkins's proposition that fans are inherently responsive to fan-cultural norms in terms of producing normative readings. I will now move on to think about the third key behavioural form, which involves fan knowledge.

The acquisition and exchange[26] of knowledge surrounding the object of fandom has been deemed an important feature of normative fan behaviour (Jenkins 1992: 7, Kibby 2000: 96, Hills 2002: 46)[27] and also an integral part of fan cultural capital. As Fiske states, "in fandom as in the official culture, the accumulation of knowledge is fundamental to the accumulation of cultural capital" (1992: 42. See also Fiske 1991: 220, Hunt 2003 and Hobson 1989)[28]. The acquisition of knowledge then "equals prestige, reputation, power. Knowledge gains currency through its circulation on the net, and so there is a compulsion to be the first to circulate new information and to be among the first to possess it" (Jenkins 2006: 125). In this respect, Nancy Baym observes how soap opera fans are encouraged to interpret the fan text based on their "knowledge of the shows' histories...of the genre's conventions, and personal knowledge of the social and emotional world" (2000: 70)[29], which then consolidates their membership and social standing within the fan community.

Meaghan Morris also stresses the importance of knowledge within *Star Trek* fandom: "to be involved...one must have a full working knowledge of what is called "the canon universe," that

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[26] As Lévy states: "the implicit morality of the virtual community is generally one of reciprocity. If we learn something by reading the messages exchanged, we are also expected to provide information whenever it could be of use to someone else" (2001: 108-109).

[27] Lyn Thomas also touches upon the "positive encouragement" of detailed knowledge exchange by *Inspector Morse* fans (2002: 87-88).

[28] See also Ali for more on Fiske's argument (2005: 62),and Ganz-Blattler for an outline how television fans can be "knowledge brokers" (1999: np).

[29] See also Jenkins (2006: 126) for an outline how *Twin Peaks* fans drew on their knowledge of David Lynch as an author for speculations about plot developments.

is, the 78 TV episodes...the five[30] films, and to some extent the *Star Trek* universe as it has been expanded" (1992: 489). Nessim Watson expands on this by concluding that "displayed [fan] knowledge" is "one of the shared markers of community belonging" (1997: 108)[31]. Likewise, Eva Kingsepp views fan knowledge as "a tool of social distinction as it helps to distinguish those who possess it from those who do not, those who belong to the community from those who are outside" (2006: 227), as does Nathan Hunt who argues that it is "used to establish who is an insider and to declare others to be outsiders who do not have the right to participate within fandom" (2003: 186).

However, the above studies fail to consider the following two significant non-normative occurrences: 1) a dis-engagement from exposure and exchange of fan knowledge and 2) the acquisition and attempted exchange of the *wrong* type of fan knowledge. The implications and occurrence of both events in a fan community are not accounted for. I will argue in Chapters Five and Six that when either situation arises, an imbalance of knowledge occurs, due to a disruption in its exchange between members. Both are resistant to normative fan identity. However, if fan knowledge is an indicator of community inclusion and belonging, as suggested by Watson and Kingsepp, then groups that temporarily suspend their exposure to it no longer properly "belong." I will show in Chapter Five that upon rejecting fan knowledge, these groups can indeed assume a precise subcultural distinctiveness from the rest of the fan community, yet remain members, a prospect overlooked by Kingsepp, who assumes this situation occurs only to demarcate community members from "outsiders." Likewise, the attempted exchange of non-normative types of knowledge is not given consideration. As I will show in Chapter Six, members that challenge the norms of a community may continue to pursue fan knowledge, yet do so in a manner that acquires the "wrong" type of knowledge, which cannot be exchanged with normative fans. Pierre Lévy in his concept of the "cosmopedia" proposed a utopian vision of a "knowledge space" that generates a "collective intelligence[32]" that is "universally distributed" (1997: 13). The premise for this proposal "is based largely on the possibilities made accessible to us through computer technology for the representation and management of knowledge..." (1997:

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[30] To update this, there has now been ten *Star Trek* films released up until 2008.
[31] Garry Crawford also describes the feelings of "belonging and safety" that fan knowledge delivers supporters at a football match (2004: 85).
[32] For more on "collective intelligence" and the problems that can arise within it, see Lévy (2001: 111-112), and for an outline see Jenkins and Thorburn (2004: 6) and Robins and Webster (1999: 221-227).

216). The cosmopedia would work to "make available to the collective intellect all of the pertinent knowledge available to it at a given moment" and also function "as a site of collective discussion, negotiation, and development..." (*1997*.: 217). Henry Jenkins later applied this to online fan communities, suggesting that the meanings exchanged and produced within by fans constitute actual representations of Lévy's "cosmopedia" (2002: 158 and 2006: 137)[33]. However, as I will show in Chapter Five, this approach does not account for members who challenge normativity in a fan community, and engage in a withdrawal from exchanging and accessing knowledge concerning the object of fandom. We are not informed how and if these fans fit within the "cosmopedia," and how a "collective intelligence" can be maintained between normative and non-normative members, nor are we told how fans that self-impose an absence from fan knowledge become immersed in this "collective intelligence."

Focus on the object of fandom within community discussions is the fourth key behavioural form. Susan Clerc suggests that to converse with other fans about the object of fandom is "the most primal instinct a fan has" (2001: 216). Thus, in this sense, to maintain a focus on the object of fandom within a fan community is complying with normative behaviour. Other studies have made similar claims about the strong influence of the object of fandom on communal discussions (Anger 1999:132, Gatson and Zweerink 2002: 243). Francesca Prandstaller, in her ethnographic study of U2 Guitarist Adam Clayton's online fan club, takes a similar approach and perceives a fan community to be based on, and enhanced by, knowledge of and discussion about the object of fandom:

> The use of the Web as a meeting place for fans allows the rapid creation of a sense of community while talking about the common subject of interest... Moreover, the Web enhances the social potential of fandom because it allows the creation of a safe space where fans, in conversation with other fans, avoid the anxiety of face-to-face conversations and express themselves freely (2003:24).

However, I would question the extent to which fans can actually express themselves freely when discussing the object of fandom without attracting criticism. I will show in Chapters Six and Seven that when a fan expresses a non-normative attitude or "reading" that works in direct contrast to those accepted by the rest of the fan community, "safety" on the basis of shared

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[33] See also Osgerby (2004: 212) for an outline on Jenkins's application of the concept.

fandom is not always felt or guaranteed. It will be apparent that to "express themselves freely" fans can engage in the contravention of normative values, and as such, can attract repercussions from those upholding normative fan identity. Thus, in the absence of face to face communication, there is still the possibility for anxiety to be found within text based conversations, most specifically around pressure to comply with community norms. This is supported by Steven Brint who argues that, when compared to activity based groups, community "belief-based groups generally exert a stronger pressure on members to conform to prescribed norms and values" (2001: 11). In this sense, a common interest based community would not offer a realm of safety as suggested by Prandstaller, but could instead administer an increased pressure on members to tailor their interactions surrounding the object of fandom in accordance with the normative practices of the community.

The pursuit of a uniform focus on the object of fandom is also considered by Margaret Wertheim, who maintains that fans experience not only a common habitation, but also a collective approach to the communal world around them: "[a] feature that binds together any human community is the fact that a group of people "inhabit" a common "world" – that is, they share a common vision of reality, or a common "worldview" (1999: 300). Bob Boiko also stresses the influence of the object of fandom in a fan community in that it not only acts as a binding force for members, but also operates as the foundation for the whole community:

> The common interest domain is the boundary around the community. It is the realm of
> content and interaction. It is the basis of a community. For all of the members, there is a
> reason why they would come together. Specifically, the domain is a statement of
> purpose for the community...The common interest domain defines what members will
> become affiliated to and on what subject they want knowledge (2002: 15).

These viewpoints raise a number of central issues that demand clarification. I show within the three case studies that in an online fan community, despite Wertheim and Boiko's claims to the contrary, focus on the object of fandom does not always work to consolidate members in a collective manner. Instead, it can serve to create divisions between groups and individuals. I will show how these divisions occur, what forms they take, how they develop, and how power is distributed between them. In terms of affiliation within the community, I will identify the extent to which members feel affinities with the common interest as suggested by Boiko, and assess

other factors that may take precedence, or work in conjunction to continue community membership. In addition, in Chapter Seven, I will expose the simplicity of Boiko's argument, by showing that the object of fandom does not always function as the main subject of which members "want knowledge." As I will stress, there are, for some members, non-normative concerns that dominate discussions and community interests.

In contrast to Boiko's assertion that interest in the object of fandom produces a singular and cohesive community, Nancy Baym, in her study of the soap opera fan community r.a.t.s., acknowledges the possibility and importance for communities to discuss an array of subjects in addition to, or in place of, the object of fandom. For this particular community, a specific focus on discussion of soap operas alone had a negative affect. She observes that "talking only about soaps impedes the group's ability to become a bunch of friends" (2000:130), something that falls in accordance with her conclusion in an earlier study that the object of fandom alone is "not enough to generate a sense of community" (1998:38). Kirsten Pullen takes a similar view and observes that within online fan communities there is no apparent "single, unified fan position or practice" (2000:60), whilst Camille Bacon Smith also attests that different groups can form within fan communities, based on sub-interests to the main object of fandom (1992: 25). Again, Anada Mitra, in her examination of Indian sub-groups within the discussion newsgroup soc.culture discovered that members struggled to agree on the national image of India that should be endorsed and accepted as normative by the community. While attempts from members to "negotiate the diasporic identity" worked to bind the community, discussions relating to India created divisions:

> ...there is a strong segmenting force that constantly tests the glue that holds the community together – its place of origin. The centrifugal forces generated by the variety of discourses that image India always expose the differences between the members of the community and can often lead to the disruption of the community (Mitra, 1997:73).

It can be seen from this particular observation that the common interest is perceived to continually test the community's structure, rather than maintain a cohesive community. Mitra observes the creation of a number of sub-groups, or "tribes" within the community, who demand their personal spatial domain apart from the main membership of the community. Thus, the main

attraction that brought the members together is simultaneously the reason for segmentation and conflict. These findings were endorsed by Debbie Cassetta in her study of *Xena: Warrior Princess* fans. Within this study, it was discovered that fandom of Xena consists of not one collective approach, but "a myriad of competing interests and factions" which "often collide head on." She viewed this as indicative of a situation where even a small group of fans in a community will have different opinions: "ask five people in the Xenaverse what they think, and you will likely get eleven different answers [sic]" (2000: np). When these differences arise it is very possible that, "the groups splitter [sic] into narrower interests, pushing some participants from public debates into smaller and more private mailing lists" (Jenkins, 2002). Nessim Watson also discovered a level of division between fans of the band Phish, where discussions occurred within the community for a "netsplit" of the newsgroup for those who had different discussion interests, most particularly between members who were active in the popular fan activity of recording concerts, and those who were interested in accessing news and information (1997: 115).

Pullen suggests that though a multitude of fans may encompass many differences, they can be strongly held together by a loyalty to "the ideals expressed by their favourite television show" (2000: 53). Matt Hills also views online fan communities as domains where the importance of, and interest in, the object of fandom is "taken for granted as being of shared significance" (2001: 148). This observation is shared by Zweerink and Gatson in their study of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* online community "The Bronze." They discovered that although their fandom brought members to the website, the focus did not always need to be placed on the show as interest and fandom towards it was presumed: "more and more of their conversation is about themselves as a community per se, not as a community of Buffy fans – that aspect is almost taken for granted at this point" (2002: 248). As such, it is the "community that sprang up around the site" that is identified as "what hooked them" in ensuring their membership to "The Bronze," rather than the object of fandom (2002: 242). This indicates that changes and adaptations of community interest can often occur, involving a shift from attention on the object of fandom that may have acted as initial stimulus, to a more widespread focus that encompasses a multitude of shared interests and discussion topics: "It appears that online communities can and do form around a single issue or topic. Relations then widen to include other interests and discussions. Harry Potter could form

one element within an offline community but would not be the basis for its formation" (Longmate and Baber 2002: np)[34]. However, I will question what happens when "relations widen" beyond the initial common stimulus, and if these "other interests" can exist in harmony with the rest of the community, even if they breach its central values. I will show in Chapter Seven that it is possible for the object of fandom to retain prominence in the community and yet not be at the forefront of all discussions. My argument is based on the proposition that interest in the object of fandom is *assumed*, and does not therefore require to be at the forefront of all discussions to maintain its position within the community. This notion therefore is counter to McLaughlin *et al.*'s assertion that "any impediment to discussion of the community's topic... [is a threat] to the community itself" (1995: 106).

This "shared significance" approach must consider what happens when, within this, there can be conflicting ideas between individuals and groups concerning aspects of the fan object that are worthy of discussion and attention. The opposing viewpoints observed by Baym and Prandstaller upon studying two different online fan communities can be accepted, as it is plausible that not all communities are alike in their behaviour and interactions. However, it is also possible to discover distinct differences between online communities based on the same object of fandom. Longmate and Baber, in their study of two online communities for fans of Harry Potter, found that although both communities were based around the same text, they displayed differences in relationships and social networks between members, community guidelines and discussion topics. They concluded that the differences in group ethos apparent between the two displayed the "power of members to shape and adapt the community to meet their own needs" (2002: np).

However, when members of *one* community have different needs, there will be a different outcome. As I will go on to argue in Chapters Six and Seven, further communal sub-divisions can occur, as outlined by Macdonald and Clerc. However, as I will show, when this situation arises, normative fans hold greater subcultural power, and can use this influence over non-normative members to "shape and adapt" the community in accordance with their "needs."

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[34] See also Mclaughlin *et al.* (1997: 166) who describe how, for some members of the Tele-Garden community, "it was the people and community they found there that made them stay, long after the novelty of the robot's magic had worn off."

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This leads me to discuss the fifth behavioural form, Claude Lévi-Strauss's concept of homology within *The Savage Mind* (1966)[35], which Paul Willis adapted and applied to the sub-cultures of hippies and motor-bike boys in *Profane Culture* (1978). His study sought to determine "how far, in their structure and content, particular items parallel and reflect the structure, style typical concerns, attitudes, and feelings of the social group" (1978: 191). Within this analysis, he emphasised how members can understand their wider community through this "symbolic fit between the values and lifestyles of a group, its subjective experience and the musical forms it uses to express or reinforce its focal concerns" (Hebdige 1979: 113). As such, the homology involves the "central values" of the sub-culture being "held and reflected" (Hall 1976: 56) by members: "for instance, it was the homology between an alternative value system... hallucinogenic drugs and acid rock which made the hippie culture cohere as a 'whole way of life' for individual hippies" (Hebdige 1979: 113). However, items that contradict these "central values" may be rejected by the subculture. For example, Willis described how the motor-bike boys refused to wear protective garments, such as gloves and helmets which would have changed "the experience and the image of motor-cycling, which would have been muffled or blocked" (1978: 55). In this instance, items that breached the "central values" of the subcultural homology were rejected and removed. Therefore, as I will show in Chapter Six, to comply with these values is vital to the maintenance of normativity, and I will argue that it is because of non-conformity to the R.E.M. fan's subcultural homology that Droolers were rejected and relegated. In this respect, I now want to examine how normative fans can use their subcultural power in response to non-normative behaviour from the fan Other that breaches the "central values" of the subculture or community, in an effort to both protect and enhance their normative fan cultural identity.

Negotiating the Other: theorising power and normative cultural identity

In this section, I will explore issues of power within the definition and maintenance of normative cultural identity. Cultural identity has been defined as "identification with and perceived acceptance into a group that has shared systems of symbols and meanings as well as norms/rules for conduct" (Collier and Thomas 1988: 113). Whilst this description is suitable for a general

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[35] For an outline of Strauss's concept, see Smaje 2000.

understanding of cultural identity, I want to look specifically at how normative cultural identity in an online fan community comes into being through its interactions with the Other, and how, through expressions of power, it is reaffirmed, and protected from the Other. Stuart Hall argues that cultural identities are "the points of identification, the unstable points...or suture, which are made within the discourses of history and culture. Not an essence, but a positioning" (1990: 226). It is within the "play of specific modalities of power" that these identities emerge, indicating that they "are more the product of the marking of difference and exclusion, than they are the sign of an identical, naturally-constituted unity[36]" (1996: 4). He maintains that the oppositional is vital in defining and shaping a group's cultural identity, as it is "constructed through, not outside, difference. This entails that it is only through the relation to the Other, the relation to what it is not, to precisely what it lacks, to what has been called its constitutive outside that the 'positive' meaning of any term – and thus its 'identity' – can be constructed" (1996: 4-5. See also 1991: 21, Derrida 1976 and 1984, Tepper 1997: 44, Nasser 2005)[37]. It can been seen then that it is through collisions of oppositional norms, that cultural identity is established: "it is an objective mirage that arises out of the relationship between at least two groups...it is the objectification of everything alien and strange about the contact group..." (Jameson 1995: 628). This viewpoint is supported by Edgerton who not only regards the defining concept of the Other as an essential means to identify normative cultural identity, but also as "a crucial one for understanding the construction of sense of place. Creation of a notion of what constitutes them and us, the meaning derived from difference, of who, therefore, is other...are often critical elements of a sense of place" (1996: 134). Perceived Others are considered a necessary requirement for the dominant fraction within the community to achieve a sense of unity: "for a variety of complex reasons society needs its deviants; in some cases for example a dominant culture needs its inferiors, its others, in order to consolidate itself" (1996: 34). Therefore, the Others offer a simultaneous combination of both prospective unity and ruin: "the subaltern is seen as the necessary and constitutive other of the dominant position, who at the same time threatens the very possibility of the unity of the dominant position" (Grossberg 1993: 97). In this view, the norms of any given community are also validated by the marking of the

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[36] For a discussion of this approach to cultural identity as a historically learnt unity, see Grossberg 1996.

[37] As stated by Campbell, "for identity to seem unique it must be considered to possess distinct properties, but such properties only become distinguishing when they are contrasted with another identity (if only through inference) that is made to stand as a (negative) opposite" (2006: 272. see also 2006: 286).

non-normative: "often overlapping with such consolidation is a process of displacement: the demonised abnormal other whose alienness reinforces through contrast the rightness of normality..." (Dollimore 1986: 522). This corresponds to Michel Foucault's contention that individual's compliance or resistance to normative cultural identity can be used as a method of categorisation: "this form of power applies itself to immediate everyday life which categorises the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognise and which others have to recognise in him" (1972: 212). Thus "identity production pivots on exclusions and borders where relations between Self and Other are elaborated across multiple and intersecting dimensions of power and privilege" (Proweller 1998: 62). As Campbell elaborates, these relations can either produce a "demonization" of the Other whereby "the self" is contrasted in a positive light, or a "promotion of the unique self" which makes the Other negative (2006: 273). Nessim Watson, in his study of Phish.net, concludes that this situation ensures that the community exists "even more clearly...when it is under attack and forced to define itself against other groups...a core of set values, norms, and practices exist[s] with enough vigour to warrant a nationalist feeling of protectionism among its members..." (1997: 114). This powerful offer of a reinforced cultural identity from interaction with the Other can even be pursued and welcomed within a community. Michele Tepper, in her study of the Usenet newsgroup alt.folklore.urban, discovered that "trolling is accepted and reinforced... because it serves the dual purpose of enforcing community standards and of increasing community cohesion by providing a game that all those who know the rules can play against those who do not... [it also works as] a method of subcultural boundary demarcation" (1997: 40). Members in the community who did not show an awareness of this practice and attempted instead to correct "trolls," displayed in their actions an "inferior command of the codes of the local subculture" (1997: 41).

In *Tristes Tropiques* (1997) Claude Lévi-Strauss argues that within primitive societies there have been two strategies for managing Others in an effort to protect normative cultural identity (see Munro 2002: 131-132, Rosen-Zvi 2004, Rapport and Overing 2000: 14-16, Young 1999: 56-57). The first, the anthropoemic, is interpreted by Zygmunt Bauman (1993: 163)[38] as "exclusivist"

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[38] For a further exploration of Bauman's application of Lévi-Strauss's strategies, see Blackshaw 2005: 106-107, Blackshaw and Crabbe 2004: 56, and Parker 131-132.

and involves the vomit-like rejection of the "carriers of danger" from the boundaries of a society to a place "where they can be safely incarcerated without hope of escaping." The second, the anthropophagic, takes a different approach from the former in the sense that it is "inclusivist" and attempts to suspend and normalise otherness rather than instigate forceful exclusion: "they eat up, devour and digest...such strangers as master powerful, mysterious forces, perhaps hoping in this way to avail themselves of those forces, absorb them, make them their own" (1993: 163). Bauman argues that Lévi-Strauss fails to consider that both strategies are evident as expressions of power in contemporary societies as they are "applied in parallel, in each society and on every level of social organization....they are included in the toolbag of every domination" (1993: 163)[39] In this sense, the essence of domination and "control over social spacing" is having the ability to "alternate phagic and emic strategies and to decide when one or the other [is] to be put in operation" (Bauman 1995: 180-181). However, he does suggest that singularly, they do not have the same effect, as it is only in tandem that "they polarize the strangers and attempt to clear up the most vexing and disturbing middle-ground between the neighbourhood and alienness poles" (1993: 163.). David Cooper cites the mentally ill as an example of how both strategies can work in different settings: "the person who is 'vomited' out of his family, out of society, is 'swallowed up' by the hospital" and then normalised in the sense that they are "digested and metabolized out of existence as an identifiable person" (1967: 31). These spatial strategies "produce an in-between category, neither one nor the other, neither filth nor purity which is not rejected yet is not acceptable either. The abject irritates the system until it can be recategorized, the boundaries re-drawn, and the horrid abomination either reconstructed or rejected fully" (Linstead 2000: 66)[40]. This is achieved by offering "to the strangers for whom they define the life condition and its choices...a genuine 'either/or': conform or be damned[41]" (Bauman 1993: 163). As D.B.Willis suggests, when both strategies fail, "destroying the strange and the stranger

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[39] These strategies have also been applied in terms of how the "Black Other" is approached by society (Blackshaw 2003: 83), the relationship between translation and censorship (Cronin 2003: 95-96), schools (Morley and Rassool 1999: 64), migrant seekers and refugees (Spencer and Wollman 2002), organ transplants (Stanford 2003: 186).
[40] See also Linstead and Brewis (2000: 25-26). Bauman a community's approach to the abject as "proteophobia," which "refers to the apprehension aroused by the presence of multiform, allotropic phenomena which stubbornly elide assignment and sap the familiar classificatory grids" (1995: 181). It involves "the dislike of situations in which one feels lost, confused, disempowered" (1995: 181). For more on this, and further applications of Bauman's theory, see Bauman 1993 and 1998, Back and Ware 2002: 84, Clammer 1998: 150, Cheyette 2003: 49, Sherwood 2000: 73, Levine 2003: 8, Clarke 2003, Linstead 2000: 66, Bassi 2004: 212, Goss 2005: 70, and Freedman 2000: 31.
[41] As Diken and Laustsen state however, "the question never raised by either strategy is *for*, what we can do for the stranger" (2005: 186).

physically is the final option" (2006: 67). However, in light of this proposed stark choice, in Chapter Seven, I will question the extent to which, when such strategies are pursued within online fan communities, resistance to normative cultural identity results in symbolic annihilation. This prospect is outlined by Judith Okely, in her study of traveller-gypsies, where she discovered that "the 'culture contact' between Gypsies and non-Gypsies did not operate as if the allegedly untouched and isolated Gypsy group was helplessly changed by the dominant culture." Therefore, normalisation did not always occur in accordance with attempts by normative groups to achieve this change. Instead, the non-normative gypsy group maintained strength through the construction of meanings and symbols to support the continuation of its own cultural identity: "even a subordinate group must make sense of its position and use symbols which are meaningful. Such symbols can be rationalisations of subordination, or they may be a potential source of power and inspiration for overcoming oppression" (1983: 34). As such, "a sense of being under threat or marginalized in some way can be a powerful force in building a sense of community" (Bird 2003: 68). As I will show in Chapter Seven, non-normative fans can not only resist attempts at normalisation, but can also gain strength through the perceived differences between themselves and normative fans. In this sense, I will argue that while normative cultural identity is created and reaffirmed through interactions with the Other, the opposite can also occur, with the Other gaining affirmation of its own identity, as a result of its marked differences from the normative. Dollimore views the attempted social control of homosexuals to produce the same results, with it being "a control that could never be complete; once identified thus homosexuality begins to speak on its own behalf, to forge its own identity and culture, often in the self same terms by which it had been produced and marginalised, and eventually to challenge the very power structures which had produced and marginalised it" (1986: 522). A similar approach to the maintenance and protection of a subordinate cultural identity was observed in the activities of African students who chose to resist normative patterns of educational progression: "resistance to "acting white" for many African American students is about maintaining cultural identity, not about embracing or rejecting the dominant standards of achievement... "acting white" and its attributes are suffused with cultural power and resistance to [it] refers to their refusal to adhere to the cultural default setting in U.S. society, to what is seen as normative" (Carter 2005: 53). In this sense, D.B. Willis resists both of Lévi-Strauss's strategies, insisting instead on a different way that the Other should be approached within a community. He suggests

that "rather than seeing strangers and the strange as anomalies to be rectified or as temporary, we [should] put them on an equal footing as engaged participants in the making of new cultures together" (2006: 67-68). With this in mind, I shall now explore in more detail how normative cultural identity is maintained in online fan communities.

Watson observed that "posts...which breach the values of fandom upon which the community is based are often either personally flamed or publicly ignored...or both...with an urge to explicate and protect the older values of the Phish.net community" (1997: 113).[42] To take this further, I shall now explore, in turn, three measures which have been employed as methods to mark and police the fan Other in an effort to reaffirm and maintain normative cultural identity. These include characterisation, discourses of pollution, and relegation to heterotopia.

The first measure, the characterisation of fans, has been previously explored by Joli Jenson, who writes that within literature on fandom the fan is "consistently characterized as a potential fanatic" in the form of both the "obsessed individual and the hysterical crowd" (1992: 9)[43]. She claims that "there is very little literature that explores fandom as a normal, everyday cultural or social phenomenon." Instead, "the fan is seen as being irrational [and] out of control..." (1992: 13)[44], or even, as observed by Grossberg, depicted as "cultural dopes[45]" (1992: 52). Jenson maintains that when this characterisation occurs, fans can be viewed as "disreputable, even dangerous 'others'" (1992: 9). Daniel Cavicchi also recognises this tendency to equate fandom with "dangerous kinds of social deviance." He describes how fans can be approached as "pathological...nymphomaniacal groupies...or mentally ill loners who stalk and sometimes murder their idols..." (1998: 6). However, this approach is not only limited to literature *about* fans, but can also infiltrate fandom itself: Lyn Thomas cites the name of the *Archers* radio serial

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[42] For more on how newsgroups attempt to maintain the correct conduct through reproach see McLaughlin *et al.* (1995). In a later work they also highlight how "remedial sequences" in the Tele-Garden online community "served not only to clarify the values of the members with respect to appropriate limitations on the medium, but also to place the values of loyalty and friendship squarely at the heart of the Garden community" (1997: 164).

[43] For example, see Kustritz (2003: 375) for a further outline and also Moran (2000: 149) for an example how this form of characterization appears in the work of author Don DeLillo.

[44] However, this characterization is not always an accurate description of fan behaviour. As observed by William Kelly, fans of Japanese pop band Alfee, although described as "huge fanatics," had a tendency to "generally follow rather than transgress social norms of decorum...their supposedly deviant behaviour [being] quite conservative " (2004: 62).

[45] See Brower (1992: 163) who describes how fans have been characterised as "foolishly obsessed, lacking education and critical distance".

fan club "*Archers* Addicts" as evidence of the negative image of the obsessed fan that can also be applied to and within fan communities themselves (2002: 104). In addition, the object of fandom itself can also engage in these negative characterisations: Georganne Scheiner recounts how actress Deanna Durbin "negatively stigmatized" her own fans (1998: 88). Barker however disputes Jenson's claims, arguing that there are "many contexts in which 'fans' are treated as anything other than a homogenous group" (1993: 670) and cites football fandom with its division between hooligans and "genuine fans" as an example. Garry Crawford has similarly argued that "academic consideration of sport fans has tended to focus largely upon extreme forms of fan culture, such as 'football hooliganism,' at the expense of more 'ordinary' forms of support" (2004: 49).

Carlton Brick takes Jenson's argument further by suggesting that a change of perception has occurred where "the contemporary construction of fandom within socio-political discourse recasts notions of deviancy that are far more wide-ranging and inclusive than before" (2000: 170). This is apparent within football fandom, he argues, where images of deviance have developed in accordance with a "fear about the capacity of individuals to interact and function with civility." This situation ensures "what were once considered 'elitist fears' or 'elitist stereotypes' have become appropriated and generalized within the new cultures of fandom."

A shortcoming of this literature on fan characterisation has been a failure to acknowledge that not only can this characterisation be found in literature on fandom and within fan communities themselves, but it can also arise *between* fans to signify the Other. Instead, there are evident assumptions that this "othering" behaviour occurs strictly between fans and non-fan audience members, without any consideration that it can happen between fans themselves, or without further investigation of how this characterisation affects relationships in a fan community. For example, this is apparent within Casey et. al.'s suggestion that "in focussing on those individuals or groups whose practices we, the 'non-fan' or 'ordinary' audience member, consider peculiar, we construct our own position as 'normal' set squarely against the activities of the fan as deviant and dangerous 'other.'" Therefore, fandom is characterised by normative audience members as non-normative and therefore distinct from their position: "despite the fact that we may enjoy the same texts, 'they' are somehow different to 'us' and we are content to keep the boundaries

between us clearly demarcated" (2002: 90). However, in Chapter Six, which provides a case study of Droolers, I will show that normative fans can use their subcultural power to characterise non-normative fans as deviant and create a distinction between "us" and "them," in an effort to "clearly demarcate" boundaries and achieve normalisation. In addition, my analysis will compensate for the shortfall in attention to the effects that fan characterisation may have on the interaction between individuals and groups within fan communities.

The second measure of maintaining normative cultural identity is through discourses of pollution, which, as I argue in Chapter Six, can be applied to an online fan community. As I will show, this powerful act used by normative fans to stigmatise non-normative individuals or groups as the Other can often serve to attract attention, not only to their non-normative state, but also to their position as elements that are polluting the community and normative cultural identity. Mary Douglas in *Purity and Danger* introduced her concept of dirt being "matter out of place," which, in an effort to maintain order, must be removed, due to it being a "contravention of...ordered relations" (1966: 44). This situation can lend itself to the exclusion of offending groups or members deemed as polluting, and thereby categorized as "dirt," and can occur within any system: "each order has its own disorders; each model of purity has its own dirt that needs to be swept away" (Bauman 1997: 11). This is apparent in the case of Droolers whereby the "sweeping away" confers power to the normative to take action against the offending impurity: "the attribution of blame to 'others'...mirrors power relationships, those more powerful able more successfully to denigrate those less so. Blaming 'them' reasserts the power of 'us'" (Karn 2007: 48). This situation has also been observed with regard to AIDS sufferers (Gibbons 2005: 84, Adelman and Frey 1996: 16), bodily fluids (Longhurst 2001, Kennedy 2007: 7, Squire 2003), and beggars, criminals and lunatics (Tarlow 2007). Jane Helleiner argues that these discourses of pollution have been "associated not only with marginalized groups and travellers and 'Gypsies' but with the social geography of class and racism more generally" (2003: 53). To support this, she cites an example of gypsies being targeted as a potential "epidemic" if they were not removed from an area. In an earlier study, Judith Okely also found that gypsies "were under constant pressure from the dominant society to become assimilated." However, she discovered that, to maintain their difference, the gypsies themselves constructed around non-gypsies "pollution beliefs which both express and reinforce an ethnic boundary" (1983: 77). This action

made non-gypsies instead the polluters. This act of boundary creation, although self-imposed, can be interpreted as an initiation of a heterotopic space, which is the third measure I wish to discuss.

The concept, first introduced by Michel Foucault in the preface to his work *The Order of Things* (1966) and developed further in *Of Other Spaces* (1986), describes "counter-sites" where "all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted" (1986: 24)[46]. These alternative spaces can be used to accommodate within the main community or culture what are regarded as non-normative or polluting bodies: "the heterotopia has the power of juxtaposing in a single real place different spaces and locations that are incompatible with each other" (1986: 25). Therefore, they are "places of Otherness" that set up "unsettling juxtapositions of incommensurate 'objects' that challenge the way we represent and especially the way our representations are ordered" (Hetherington 1996: 158, see also 1997: viii and Newland 2008). Each heterotopia "is a complete place unto itself, located in a specific region of space to which it gives meaning..." a space to which heterotopias "orient themselves towards and draw their significance from their relation to" (Bubandt 1997: 153).

Foucault informs us that there are two main categories of heterotopia. The first, he termed "crisis" heterotopias, which can include sections of society that have been segregated from social interaction, such as the elderly, adolescents and pregnant women. The second category features heterotopias of deviation, which are places for "individuals whose behavior is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm" (1986: 24), encompassing places such prisons, psychiatric hospitals and rest homes. In this sense, the non-normative individual is removed from "normal social space" (Tonkiss 2005: 133)[47]. Therefore, the heterotopic process "enables us to look upon the multiple forms of deviant and transgressive behaviours and politics...as valid and potentially meaningful reassertions to some kind of right to shape parts of the [community] in a different

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[46] See also Foucault (1982a: 376).
[47] Lefebvre (1970) suggested however another way of approaching heterotopias. Instead of basing them on Foucault's notion of "time and space," he instead preferred to root "them through political and historical deviance from social norms" (Smith 2003: xii). Lefebvre, in his theory of representational spaces, later criticised Foucault for not explaining "what space it is that he is referring to" (1974: 163) or how this space is "able to bridge a theoretical (epistemological) realm with a material one" (Smethurst 2000: 42). However, as Hetherington points out, representational spaces fail to fully satisfy "issues of ordering and control" that are apparent in Foucault's analysis (1998: 131).

image" (Harvey 2000: 184)[48]. As Soja asserts, although Foucault's heterotopias can be "frustratingly incomplete, inconsistent, incoherent...[and] narrowly focused on peculiar microgeographies," they are at the same time "marvellous incunabula of another fruitful journey into Thirdspace[49], into the spaces that difference make, into the geohistories of otherness" (1996: 162). In Chapters Six and Seven I will therefore apply the classification of a heterotopic site of deviance to groups within the Murmurs fan community that have been relegated to a space marked by boundaries. I will show how this confinement was used as a method of enforcement in an effort to preserve normative fan cultural identity and segregate the Other.

As outlined by Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* (1977), the process of making a heterotopic area can been viewed as offering the ability to secure a transformation of "otherness" into normative behaviour through the power of social control[50] (see also Connor 1989: 9). Chaplin identifies this process as thus: firstly the Other space is discovered, then it is "identified, mapped or marked in some way". This development has the initial effect of "calling attention to its otherness," and then working to bring "its otherness under control" (Chaplin 2003: 344). Eventually all trace of Otherness is diminished or erased "by rendering its otherness similar to what is already known" (Chaplin 2003: 344). However, as I will show in Chapter Seven, this transformation cannot always be secured. As Margaret Kohn argues: "the heterotopia is not just a space of otherness but the basis (or at least the inspiration) for struggle against existing forms of domination" (2003: 91), a prospect which has resonance with Judith Okely's account of the symbol-making employed by gypsies to defy oppression. Harvey also identifies heterotopias as spaces where "difference, alterity and "the other" might flourish" (2001: 280)[51]. Therefore, I propose to challenge the argument put forward by Chaplin (2003) that the heterotopia will always produce normalisation, instead suggesting that it can conversely work to consolidate and strengthen non-normative fan practices.

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[48] However, Harvey does also criticise Foucault's classification of heterotopias for presuming that "whatever happens in such spaces of 'Otherness' is of interest and even in some sense 'acceptable,' or 'appropriate'" (2000: 185). To support this, he uses examples of militia camps, Disneylands and concentration camps, which can be seen as heterotopic spaces, yet may be "closed," "sinister" or "threatening."

[49] For more on "Thirdspace" see Soja 1996, Mitchell 2001: 63.

[50] In this work, Foucault uses Bentham's Panopticon prison as an example of disciplinary power through surveillance.

[51] See also Harvey 2000: 184.

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In this chapter I have provided an overview of academic research surrounding online communities and fan cultural norms. I have shown how this literature has failed to adequately explore challenges to normative behaviour that can be found within online fan communities and neglected to develop the further insight necessary to determine how this behaviour influences and affects the fan community. Non-normative fan identity has mainly been construed as deviant, with little attempt to fathom the reasons for this conduct, and how the belief systems upheld by non-normative fans can be used to resist attempts at normalisation. Furthermore, I have shown that insufficient attention has been paid to how, and the methods through which, normative fans can use their subcultural power to attempt to instigate either normalisation, or more severely, segregation through confinement. This chapter has attempted to redress the balance by addressing normative *and* non-normative fan behaviour, and identifying the clashes and responses from, and between, both groups. This will be developed further in Chapters Five, Six and Seven, which use case studies to focus on three non-normative groups within the Murmurs community: Trobes, Droolers and Pointless Posters and how they are negotiated by normative fan identity.

I will now move on to discuss the method of cyber-ethnography that will be employed within this thesis, arguing that there are a number of methodological issues that arise and are not accounted for when traditional ethnography is transferred and applied to a virtual setting. I will also analyse the unique position from which I study "the Other" within the Murmurs community, being a member of the administrative crew and also a fan of R.E.M., thereby conducting the ethnography from a specific position of power within the fan community.

Chapter Three. Methodology

In this chapter I will present the methods through which I have collected and analysed data in an effort to explore communal life within Murmurs.com. My enquiry, taking the form of a cyber-ethnography, is intended to produce an understanding of how normative and non-normative fan identities are negotiated within the community.

However, I will argue that there are a number of methodological issues that arise and are not accounted for when traditional ethnography is transferred and applied to a virtual setting, such as how to approach and become immersed within the field, how to cope with large amounts of data, and when or whether to employ face-to-face interaction.

As a member of the Murmurs administrative crew, and therefore an agent of subcultural policing, I am in a unique position to study "the Other" within the community, in the form of resistant, non-normative fans. In addition, I am also an R.E.M. fan and will therefore be conducting the ethnography from within the fan community. By examining different ethnographic approaches, I argue that the combination of distance and knowledge recommended by Giddens (1984: 4) is the most suitable method to be used for this study, in consideration of my position as an ethnographic insider.

Within the cyber-ethnography the collection of data is sourced from participant observation, case studies, questionnaires and interviews, and textual analysis. I will introduce and justify the use of each method of analysis, determining their appropriateness for application to an online setting.

Ethnography online: exploring the cyber field

Ethnography, the "practice of representing the cultures of others" (Johnson 1986: 604), is particularly useful for studying and examining groups of individuals in a natural setting[52]. The process has been described by Clifford Geertz in *The Interpretation of Cultures* as being able to secure a "thick description" of the research field (1973: 5)[53]. The term, initially used by Gilbert

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[52] Examples of ethnographic studies include Hebdige 1979, Willis 1977, Radway 1984, Brown 1990 and 1994, and Hobson 1990.

[53] The term was also used by Greenblatt in conjunction with literary criticism (1980).

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Ryle[54] (1966 and 1968), involves going "beyond basic assumptions and attempts to see both a broad and detailed picture of the community explored" (Babin and Harrison 1999: 254). Geertz maintains that to achieve this, the ethnographer will encounter "a multiplicity of complex conceptual structures, many of them superimposed upon or knotted into one another" which are "strange, irregular, and inexplicit." The researcher must then "contrive somehow first to grasp, and then to render" (1973: 10) these structures. Therefore, "thick description" has been understood as being based on interpretation (Purbrick 2007: 157); as showing that "there is rather less observation and considerably more explication than anthropologists generally admit to" (Gallagher and Greenblatt 2000: 23)[55]. This approach has been used and viewed as a central value of ethnography (Thomas 1997: np) and as "the impetus and justification for small, interpretive studies that are engaged in a search for specific meanings rather than large scale patterns" (Purbrick 2007: 157). It can be seen however that although ethnography was previously used by anthropologists in a holistic manner to study cultures and large groups, in recent years it has been modified and diversified to become suitable for examining small sub-groups and clusters, and more specifically, those in a virtual setting:

> The emphasis on holistic description has given way to more focused and bounded
> studies of particular topics of interest....The upshot of these developments has been
> a wide diversity of approaches to ethnography, although these share a fundamental
> commitment to developing a deep understanding through participation and
> observation (Hine 2000:41).

Wimmer and Dominick also acknowledge the tendency for recent applications of ethnography to be "less interested in describing the way of life of an entire culture" and instead placing a focus on "analyzing smaller units" (2006: 141). This ability to monitor small units within one larger group through ethnography is extremely effective when applied to the exploration of an online community, a factor which encouraged my decision to undertake this study in the form of a cyber-ethnography. For example, sub-groups within Murmurs can be examined closely through the ethnographic approach. This will be vital in my attempt to understand how normative and oppositional fan identities interact within the community.

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[54] For more on Ryle's use of the term, see Coffield and MacDonald 1991.
[55] However, Murdock argues that ethnographic techniques "can offer a solid basis for creative interpretation but...cannot provide thick descriptions" because they fail to offer "a rounded account of the ways that people's utterances, expressions and self-presentations are shaped and altered by the multiple social contexts they have to navigate the course of their daily lives" (1997: 184-185).

Ethnography has been used quite commonly as a method to study fans in their own setting (Crabbe, Solomos and Back 2001, Jenkins 1992 and 2006, Cavicchi 1999, Stacey 1994, Harrington and Bielby 1995, Hills 2005b, Gatson and Zweerink 2004a and 2004b). However, Cornel Sandvoss questions the degree to which ethnography is useful in fan studies. He maintains that to "meaningfully theorize fandom across various genres," a prospect that validates the "analytic value" of the term, there needs to be a reduction in the studies of individual fan communities and cultures and instead a focus placed on "the common themes, motivations and implications of the interaction between fans and their object of fandom" (2005: 04) as a whole. On the other hand, as Matt Hills suggests, it is important that fandom should not be viewed as a "neutral 'expression' or a singular 'referent'; [as] its status and its performance shift across cultural sites" (2002: xiii). As Baym similarly acknowledges in her study of the r.a.t.s. community, "this study...makes no claim to represent all soap fan communities, let alone all audience communities. It does, however, provide us with a sustained look into how the social dimensions take over from the textual ones as an audience becomes a community" (2000: 19). Likewise, without presupposing that my study of Murmurs is indicative of all music fan communities, this cyber-ethnography is intended to offer an insight into how the negotiation of normative and non-normative fan identities can shape and maintain a specific fan community.

A large number of studies have been conducted which explore online communities through ethnography (see Baym 1998a and 2000, Markham 1998, Hine 2000, Gatson and Zweerink 2004a and 2004b, McLelland 2002, Campbell 2004, Sharp and Earle 2003, Bernardi 1998, Correll 1995, Hakken 1999, Fox and Roberts 1999, Kanayama 2003, Lysloff 2003, Kendall 2002, Bird 2003, Skinner 2008, Ward 1999, Gatson 2007, Alexander 2007). As Jenkins suggests, ethnography can be used online "to observe a self-defined and ongoing interpretive community as it conducts its normal practices of forming, evaluating, and debating interpretations" (2006: 118). However I will argue that there remains a number of methodological issues that arise and are not accounted for when traditional ethnography is transferred and applied to a virtual field. Christine Hine raises some of these questions that remain unanswered by traditional ethnographic methods: "how can you live in an online setting? Do you have to be logged on 24 hours a day, or can you visit the setting at periodic intervals? Can you analyse newsgroup

archives without participating and call that ethnography?" (2000: 21. See also 2005 and 2008)[56]. This would suggest that to apply traditional forms of ethnography without modification to the virtual is not entirely satisfactory. This is also evident within the amount of information produced by the new technology that is available to the cyber-ethnographer. Texts online that form the field under research can often result in an "embarrassment of riches" (Jenkins 2006: 117) that is not accounted for within traditional ethnography. It is not a lack of material that may create difficulties for the cyber-ethnographer, but rather, an abundance of texts that need to be filtered: "the problem working with the net becomes not how to attract sufficient responses to allow for adequate analysis but how to select and process materials from the endless flow of information and commentary" (Jenkins 2006: 117). Nancy Baym also confessed that having "way too much data" became problematic within her study, and to "narrow the data down in a way that retained the coherence both of the group and of the discussion" proved challenging (2000: 26)[57]. This challenge is appreciated by Matt Hills, who suggests that the overload of information "cannot be transformed into an unproblematic wealth of textual data without this very 'embarrassment' being thought through" (Hills 2002: 174). He proposes that this situation dictates that the arrival of cyber-ethnography should "force a reconsideration of ethnographic practices" (2002: 173). In other words, the notion and application of cyber-ethnography should be modified in order to incorporate this rich textual abundance, a factor which is not accounted for in traditional ethnographic techniques. I will also argue, in support of this observation, and as suggested by Rice and Williams, that "new media need to be included in traditional communication research, but we need to look at those traditional theories untraditionally" (1984: 80)[58].

Another prospect to consider is to what degree face-to-face interaction is an essential requirement of cyber-ethnography. It has been used as a method of verifying and supporting online findings, as done by Turkle (1995) and Kendall (2002), or, as suggested by Fornäs et al. "in order to contextualize [the] online texts and thereby understand them even better than other

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[56] See also Beaulieu (2004) for an examination of the new issues raised by conducting ethnography in an online field.
[57] Rhiannon Bury also stated that she had amassed so much data that "it was impossible to go through the sets in their entirety with a fine-toothed comb, even with qualitative software" (2005: 27). See also Lindlof and Shatzer (1998).
[58] For more on this, see Jones (1999: x).

participants do" (2002: 38)[59]. However, Hine argues "many inhabitants of cyberspace...have never met face-to-face and have no intention of doing so." She considers that the introduction of face-to-face meetings "would place the ethnographer in an asymmetric position, using more varied and different means of communication to understand informants than are used by informants themselves" (2000: 48)[60]. Taylor also rejects the use of offline verification, by making "a conscious decision to directly orient to the bodies and selves...found [in the online field]" (1999: 437). In this cyber-ethnography, I will follow Christine Hine (2000: 65 and 2008: 17), Heath et al. (1999) and Miller and Slater's (2000: 21-22) approach[61], considering all forms of interaction within the field of study to be legitimate and useful, therefore incorporating both on and offline research[62].

I will now move on to consider my unique ethnographic position within the research field as an insider, fan and agent of subcultural policing that works to enforce and govern normative behaviour. I will argue that an ethnographic combination of critical distance and insider knowledge is the most suitable approach to be used for this study.

Researching Murmurs from the inside: my unique ethnographic position

An initial methodological problem I encountered when preparing to begin the cyber-ethnography was how to understand and approach my unique position as both insider within the field and fan of the object under study. I have been a participating member of the Murmurs online community for the last seven years and during this time period I have progressed from being an occasional participant to a fully active and well known member of the hosting team and administrative crew. In addition to this, I have been a fan of R.E.M. since 1991 and would therefore be conducting the cyber-ethnography from within the fan community. It can be seen that my position of familiarity as an "insider" within the field of study may offer more potential in terms of access to members, trust from fellow fans[63], a possible increase in volume of respondents, feedback from other users and access to the administrative areas of the forum. However, although I am an insider, it is

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[59] See also Miller and Slater (2000) who approach online research in the same manner.
[60] For more on this, see Bell (2001: 197).
[61] David Hakken (1999) also approaches the field in a similar manner.
[62] Press and Livingstone also present a discussion of off and online research within cyber-ethnography (2006).
[63] See Jenkins (1992: 6).

important to note that my enquiry will incorporate an examination of "the Other" in the community, a prospect that may, because of my involvement in the enforcement of the normative (the "Self" in the community), affect access to, and feedback from participants.

Taking this into account, an important methodological consideration was to determine the most suitable ethnographic position that should be adopted, and how my own position as an insider fitted within this. For example, there is the objective stance of a non member or "outsider" (Bacon-Smith 1992[64], Bury 2005, Thornton [1995] 2001, Gray 2005, Richman 2007), the full inhabitation method supported by Taylor (1999: 448)[65], or a mixture of "critical distance" and "mutual knowledge" as suggested by Giddens (1984: 4 and used by Tulloch and Jenkins 1995: 23). For this study I have chosen to employ the combination of distance and knowledge suggested by Giddens (1984), which is supported by Hine's recommendation of combining closeness and detachment to the field setting (2000: 5). Because of my long term participation and position in the community, I possess detailed knowledge of the structure and development of communal norms and values. There is however a possibility that, due to my unique ethnographic position in terms of responsibility for normative enforcement and therefore subcultural dominance within the community, alongside my efforts to maintain "critical distance," I could be othered by the communal "Other." For example, as a host and crew member within Murmurs I may be required to perform actions against non-normative fans in the community that directly conflict with my role as cyber-ethnographer. If this problematic situation occurs, I may experience difficulties in securing trust and co-operation from these non-normative members. As Foster advises: "the researcher's aim must be to balance the insider and outsider roles and combine the advantages of both...being at one with the group and yet remaining apart, being a 'friend' yet remaining a 'stranger'..." (1996: 77)[66]. However, this will not be easy to achieve, especially if my position as an agent of normative enforcement within the community upsets the

[64] For more on Bacon-Smith's position as an "outsider," see Hills 2002: 68-69, Merrick 1997: 56-57. Pálsson 42, describes the position of "detached observer" as "not only arrogant and irresponsible, but also unrealistic" (1995: 42).

[65] Gajjala (2004) also describes the "insider" position she adopted during her cyber-ethnography of women's discussion group, SAW. However, the members of the group rejected her attempts to position them as an ethnographic subject, which in turn affected her role within the community. As Gajjala states: "it was only when I announced my researcher role and the SAWnettors began to consider the implications of being written about that I became somewhat of an "outsider"" (1999: 30-31).

[66] For information about insider/outsider myths see Styles (1979).

balance in favour of me being a "stranger" to non-normative fans, rather than a "friend". Problems can also remain for the ethnographic insider in terms of maintaining sufficient distance from the field[67], but still a kind of involvement: "while the ethnographer outsider has the problem of making the strange seem familiar, the ethnographic insider has the task of making the familiar seem strange in order to maintain analytical distance" (Holt and Sparkes 2001: 242)[68].

However, this "critical distance" position is not without its own criticisms and problems. Henry Jenkins makes a point of cautioning ethnographers to refrain from maintaining too much distance from their subjects, as it does not encourage communication through mutual understanding (1992: 6). Camille Bacon-Smith also describes the struggles of power that occur when conducting ethnography from the distance of an outsider: "a community gives certain signals when an outsider approaches the heart of its culture. In the beginning the heart is hidden - often in plain sight-passed over, casually dismissed by those in the know" (1992: 224 and 226). It is not until immersion in the community occurs and the "heart" of the field is revealed that these power tensions can be softened to some degree, as "in the process of learning how to participate in the host society, the stranger gradually acquires an inside knowledge of it, which supplants his or her previous 'external' knowledge" (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995: 8). However, I will argue that power struggles can still persist for the ethnographic insider. In my position as an insider within the field, power struggles can be encountered between my perceived duties as cyber-ethnographer, member of the Murmurs administrative crew, and as an R.E.M. fan. My attempts to remain loyal to all three will prove extremely difficult, and it may be impossible, ultimately, to always "balance" the different demands and performances of identity required by each. For example, as an agent of subcultural policing in the community I am expected to constantly regulate normative behaviour. However, when studying non-normative groups in the community for this cyber-ethnography I will have to ensure that my behaviour does not compromise either role.

There is also a danger of the ethnographer getting too close to the field, which "may lead them to concentrate on one particular subgroup or setting, which may influence his or her relationship

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[67] Loland (2000) describes her decision to distance herself from her insider position in her study in order to secure a more objective view.
[68] See also Weston (1991: 14), Gratton and Jones (2004: 180) and Krane and Baird (2005: 7).

with, and access to, other subgroups or settings" (Foster 1996: 77). In this sense, the ethnographer may end up "going native" within the field (Finnegan 1989: 343). When this process occurs researchers may "adopt the values and perspectives of the people they study, and identify with them so much that they are unable to sustain their previous identity as researchers" (Holloway 1997: 79)[69]." In line with this, Gatson and Zweerink (2004b: 15-16) question the affects of their position as native fans in their field of study[70]. David Sholle argues that to remedy these occurrences, the fan ethnographer must observe a level of distance from the field as "there is a danger of taking up the standpoint of a fan and thus confusing one's own stance with that of the subject being studied" (Sholle 1991: 84). However, Henry Jenkins underlines the complexities of ethnographic positioning by arguing that this "danger" suggested by Sholle is not alleviated by the traditional objective standpoint. He cites past studies that show a limited view of fandom as examples of this: "the most distanced perspective did not insure a better understanding of the complexity of [fandom] so much as it enabled scholars to talk about a group presumed incapable of responding to their representation" (1992: 6).

In addition, it is important to recognise assumptions that can be taken into the field of study by the ethnographic insider. For example, familiarity with the subject matter and setting could play an influential part in the analysis: "in researching settings that are more familiar, it can be much more difficult to suspend one's preconceptions, whether these derive from social science or from everyday knowledge" (Holt and Sparkes 2001: 242). I shall therefore be cautious that my position as an agent of subcultural policing does not lead to problematic assumptions concerning non-normative fans being taken into the analysis.

Matt Hills observes that the interaction between the researcher and the researched can "be considered as an interplay between desire and surprise..." (2005b: 808). As such, it is this desire that can work to shape anticipated research results as "the researcher may still hear what he or she wants to, may focus on statements and behaviour that appear to fit into preexistent theoretical frameworks, and may use such statements to support theoretical certainties..." (2005b: 808). In line with this, Markham (1998: 62) confesses how she initially "tried to fit [the participant's]

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[69] See Miller 1952: 98 and Hammersley and Atkinson 1995 for more on "over-rapport" from the researcher.
[70] See also Mankekar 1999.

experiences into [her] own conceptual and grounded understandings of social life" whereas Schutz (1964) also found that his initial understandings of the field were inaccurate. It is therefore essential that this is taken into account when trying to conduct an interpretive enquiry.

There appears to be no singular accepted position from which to conduct ethnographic research. Nevertheless, I will argue that familiarity with the setting provides an essential requirement for fully understanding the history, nature and interaction of the fan community, which is vital for successful fan ethnography. This is supported by Nancy Baym, who described how her membership of the field meant she could draw on "intuitions and understandings" to guide her project (2000: 24)[71]. In this sense, an intuitive detailed understanding of the nature of the Murmurs community and how members interact with each other will benefit the ethnographic enquiry.

However, Andy Bennett (2002 and 2003) has criticised researchers with an insider status, most specifically in the research area of youth culture and popular music, for failing to provide a reflective account of their position in the field. Although "such knowledge and familiarity with local surroundings has substantially assisted researchers in both their quest to gain access to particular social groups and settings and in knowing which roles to play once access has been achieved" (2002: 460), it has become a habit for researchers in this area to show "an uncritical acceptance of insider knowledge as an end in itself" (2002: 461). As Bennett cautions, "there is a tendency of youth and music researchers to engage in an uncritical celebration of their insider status as a means by which to distance themselves from *other* researchers whose interest is apparently motivated simply by the demands of the project itself" (2002: 463). I shall counter this argument by offering in Chapter Eight a critical evaluation of my position as insider within the community, outlining the methodological benefits of such a status, and also the challenges that occur during the research process, elaborating on any "contradictions present in the insider/researcher role which often create tensions in the research setting" (2002: 463). Moving on from this, I shall now demonstrate the processes undertaken within my cyber-ethnography.

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[71] Wheaton (2000) also experienced benefits from her insider status, allowing her access to the male-dominated surfing field under study, as did Correll (1995) with her prior membership of the Lesbian Café in her study.

Undertaking the cyber-ethnography

I began this cyber-ethnography with the intention of examining commonality of interest within the Murmurs community, and with this, determining to what extent the object of fandom worked to hold the community together. In order to achieve this, and as a central part of the cyber-ethnographic framework, a four year period[72] of participant observation[73] of the Murmurs community was employed. Within this time frame, two sources of data were used. Firstly, posts were examined on a daily basis, and any that may have proved useful for the study were archived and stored offline for future use. When undertaking this process I made sure to preserve the whole conversation within a thread as it unfolded, rather than individual posts alone. This was to ensure that the context of the post was captured. Secondly, my interpretations of community interactions were recorded in note form in order to highlight lines of enquiry that could be developed later into chapters.

In order to supplement the participant observation and to gain an insight into members' perceptions and attitudes towards the community, my initial course of action involved a pilot study consisting of a survey conducted with community members that were encountered at various meetings for Murmurs members before R.E.M. concerts throughout their 2003 summer tour of the UK and Europe[74] (see appendix one). These were therefore distributed in a face-to-face setting, and were designed as a precursor to the formulation of more detailed questionnaires and intensive interviews that were conducted during March and April of 2004. I initially

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[72] As stated by Alasuutari, "it has been argued that a proper ethnographic study in audience ethnography entails at least several months stay in the field" (1999: 5). However, Bird claims the time spent in the field to be "relatively insignificant" (2003: 8).

[73] This analysis, originally developed by Malinowski (1922), and commonly used by ethnographers (Bourgois 1995, Blumenthal 1997) and cyber-ethnographers (Baym 2000), has been viewed as "the starting point in ethnographic research" (Schensul *et al.* 1999: 91). It involves the placement of the researcher in the core of the area of study in order to capture and examine behaviour through both observation and participation within the field itself: "at the heart of the idea of ethnography is the act of observing and listening to people as they go about their everyday lives in order that we can understand the way that they behave or think on their own terms" (Machin 2002:1). It can be seen that the way to move towards this understanding of a community's "own terms" is through prolonged immersion in the field of study, which should allow the researcher to learn about the field setting and witness changes and developments that may occur over a period of time. This immersion involves a "continuous tacking between the 'inside' and 'outside' of events: on the one hand grasping the sense of specific occurrences and gestures empathetically, on the other stepping back to situate these meanings in wider contexts" (Clifford 1988: 34). In this sense, "it is never simply a matter of [just] participating and observing" (O'Reilly 2005: 101).

[74] The meetings occurred in London; Hamburg; Berlin; Munich; Dublin; Edinburgh and Manchester.

approached thirty individuals to complete the survey and received twenty two completed returns. Demographically, out of the twenty-two respondents, two were aged under 20, nine between 20 and 30, five between 30 and 40, and six established that they were over 40. In addition, eighteen were female, compared to four who were male. In terms of time spent online each day, four claimed to spend less than 1 hour, nine indicated 1-2 hours, eight were online for 3-4 hours, and one participant spent 5-6 hours online each day. In order to gain a thorough insight into the reasons why people joined Murmurs; and how they viewed the community and conducted themselves within it, community members of varying levels of membership and degrees of participation were selected to complete the survey. Of these respondents, there were two Murmurs Crew members, three hosts, twelve regular posters and five community members that claimed to have a low level of participation. As this was intended as a pilot study, I decided to focus on specific questions which would in turn help to formulate further areas of enquiry within the proceeding online questionnaires. It was anticipated that the first survey would provide a basic outline that would prioritise the different interest levels of members and the extent of their involvement in the social network of Murmurs.

In order to assess what drew members to the community, respondents were asked to rate their reasons for joining. The main reasons selected by respondents were R.E.M. news and R.E.M. discussion. Social relationships and general discussions were not considered to be very important in terms of acting as an attraction to Murmurs. Although it appears that R.E.M. is the main attraction for joining, the survey highlighted the possibility that an individual's focus could change once they became immersed in the community. When asked in the survey to confirm that their discussions on Murmurs always focused on R.E.M., five strongly agreed, two agreed, four disagreed, three strongly disagreed, and nine were neutral. Therefore, this demonstrates that although the respondents joined Murmurs for R.E.M. news and discussion, after they are integrated within the community, R.E.M. does not necessarily remain their main topic of interest. These results surprised[75] me, and prompted a shift of focus from my original research topic on

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[75] What has been seen as a central theme of ethnographic fieldwork, as stressed by Paul Willis, is its ability to offer a "profoundly important" surprise in terms of "reaching knowledge not prefigured in one's starting paradigm" (1980: 90)[75]. As such, he declares that "the sheer surprise of a living culture is a slap to reverie" (1978: 1). This ability to be surprised cannot readily be found within the sole use of questionnaire research, where "responses of informants are necessarily pushed into predetermined categories which may bear little relation to the complexity or originality of their experience" (Coffield and MacDonald 1991: 9).

commonality of interest within Murmurs, to an exploration of the negotiation between normative and non-normative fan identities within the community. This then acted to instigate the formulation of questionnaires that would elicit a greater in depth analysis concerning this aspect of fan behaviour (see appendix two).

In an effort to maximise respondents and reach as many community members as possible, I placed a thread in the Personal Announcements forum to make a request for individuals to complete online questionnaires, and also to declare my new position as a researcher. I posted the following message within the thread:

> I'm currently conducting research for my thesis on online communities. I'm looking
> for people to answer just a few questions for me with regard to Murmurs and REM -
> related online activities. If any of you could help me, please post here, and I'll PM or
> email you the questions as soon as they are ready, sometime this week. Thank you!
> (1 March 2004)

In this instance, my insider position within the community was a distinct advantage in attracting respondents as sixty four individuals came forward to express their interest in assisting my research. Replies followed in the thread within minutes of posting the message. Many made a point of being willing to assist me due to the help I had provided them with in the past, expressing such comments as: "go for it, always good to me in [sic]with admin" (raveman2001) and "always willing to help you out Lucy! Count me in!" (SirJustinian). Others expressed a happiness to be able to offer help in anyway: "you can count me in too! I'll be glad to help in any way I can!" (Lotus Eater) and "pleased to help Lucy!" (Tortoise). This immediate positive response displays the strong social sense of the community in terms of a willingness to provide assistance to those who require help from other members.

Due to the possible international dispersion of the respondents, who could be distanced through both physicality and spoken language, it was necessary to conduct interviews and questionnaires online, most specifically through the personal messaging system within Murmurs. It operates rather like an email system in the fact that users can send other members messages (of considerable length, if they wish) which are then collected the next time the user registers online at Murmurs. To use this method of contacting the respondents was practical in the sense that it

was possible to easily keep track of who had replied, and also for the reason that it was hoped individuals would be more likely to respond while they were online at Murmurs.

Out of the sixty four respondents that were sent questionnaires, fifty eight returned them completed, most of which arrived by the next day. Participants were asked to respond to fifteen questions which were deliberately compiled in order to offer potential follow up intensive interview questions concerning specific answers, if the respondent's replies and comments displayed the need for clarification or further development. Intensive interviews are usually based on a small sample framework in order to assess in detail why interviewees have given specific answers to questions. As such, they allow the researcher to collate significant detailed information with regard to the perspective, experience and beliefs of the respondent (Charmaz 2006: 25, Forsyth and Lessler 1991, Fowler 1995).

There has been some concern expressed in regard to the reliability of interviews conducted with participants online. As Sherry Turkle observes: "virtual reality poses a new methodological challenge for the researcher: what to make of online interviews and indeed, whether and how to use them" (1995: 324, see also Campbell 2004: 44, Wilson and Peterson 2002, Madanmohan and Navelkar 2004, Hamman 2004, Taylor 1999). Cyber-ethnography therefore raises the following methodological question: "most traditional methods of data collection assume...some kind of consistency in the presentations of self over time and across places. If we rely on symbols on a screen as a representation of the person, does this have consequences for the relationships inherent in doing interviews or participant observation?" (Lyman and Wakeford 1999: 363).

Jacobson believes so, as he argues: "we cannot know with any certainty who is at the keyboard and therefore there will always be doubt, if online research is not supplemented by off-line research, about precisely who is sending an e-mail message or occupying a character in a virtual reality" (1999: 133). Therefore, Turkle's solution to her research challenge involved interviewing online only those individuals she had also met and verified in an offline setting. In response to this action, Lyman and Wakeford contemplate "how much do we need to know about nonvirtual manifestations ("the real") to interpret the data that we collect online ("the virtual")?" (1999: 363). However, I will reiterate Taylor's argument that this debate around reliability can

also be applied to an off-line setting. He questions, "Can we ever verify the subjective experience of an interviewee?" and concludes that if this verification is not absolutely achievable then, "the argument that the off-line interview poses a clearer path to a more true set of responses is not entirely convincing" (1999: 8). Slater also maintains this viewpoint in terms of the ethnographic process as a whole, declaring that "it is obvious that physical presence is no guarantee of truth, nor is mediated presence necessarily untrue, especially if that is what one is actually studying" (2002: 542). Likewise, there are declared advantages of using online interviews in that they "can overcome difficulties of face-to-face interviewing: for example, in face-to-face situations people can make judgments about you on the basis of age, gender or race that may influence the discussion" (Bucker and Dolowitz 2005: 87)[76]. In this sense, it was also envisaged that undertaking this procedure within the field setting itself would foster a sense of security that would encourage the respondent to divulge information that may otherwise not be forthcoming:

> computer interviews, like electronic mail, create a feeling of privacy. This sense of safety makes interviewees somewhat more willing to disclose information than they are willing to disclose in face-to-face interviews or on paper-and-pencil questionnaires (Sproull and Kiesler, 1991:45)[77].

However, I will question to what degree participants are willing to disclose information to the ethnographer when the ethnographer is an outsider or stranger to the community, or a member of the subculturally normative community "police". I challenge this notion that conducting interviews online through the medium of text consistently generates feelings of privacy and safety, as this fails to account for ethnographic positions and the affects they may have on participants' responses. I shall now move on to look more closely at the textual medium of the research field and examine how this data is incorporated within the study and analysed.

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[76] See Curasi 2001 for a comparison between online and face-to-face interviews.
[77] See Holge-Hazelton 2002 for an example how diabetes sufferers were more prepared to discuss personal and sensitive issues in an online rather than face-to-face setting. Also Frankel and Siang (1999), DiMarco and DiMarco (2003: 168) and Hamman (1997). Johnson also gives an interesting insight into self-disclosure in online research (2005: 23-24).

Analysing online texts

Developing the framework of a cyber-ethnography, it will be essential to analyse the language and behaviour of selected groups within Murmurs. When examining an online community, social interactions are conducted through the medium of text, rather than through face-to-face communication. It is this text that forms the basis of enquiry for the cyber-ethnographer:

> Online communities present the researcher with nothing but text. The ethnographer
> cannot observe people, other than through their textual contributions to a forum...There
> are no other artifacts to analyse other than text (Thomsen *et al.* 1998: np).

As noted by James Clifford, when the ethnographer departs, it is mainly these texts that are "taken away" for "later interpretation" (1983: 131). Within Murmurs I archived any posts that I intended to use for the study in order to provide back-up copies in case Murmurs crashed and lost data, and also for my own ease to examine them offline. This was also done in an effort to remove the risk of a member retrospectively editing or deleting the content of their posts[78]. As some posts used within the ethnography are featured to give a historical perspective of events (for example, the advent and development from Non-Revealing Revealers to Trobes in Chapter Five), I went to the old location of the Murmurs website[79] that still remains archived online[80], and also relied on a selection of posts that were archived by community members and posted within the new community location. However, due to a previous Murmurs crash in early 1999 where a large amount of data was lost, I could unfortunately not acquire as many of these postings as I had hoped. In addition to posts within the community, texts used within the study include official documents such as community Rules and Regulations, the Code of Conduct and Frequently Asked Questions. For this reason, textual analysis, which is "used to classify and evaluate the characteristics of written [and] electronic...texts" (Frey *et al.* 1990: 34), will form a significant part of the ethnographic process surrounding an online fan community (see Tepper 1997, Davis and Brewer 1997, Hartmann 2004). This is because "audience interpretation and discussion [constitutes] the 'text' under examination...[with] the textual dimensions of this fan activity [being]... primarily constitutive of the fans' interactions and interpretations" (Hills 2002:

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[78] As the study was taking place one member of the community made the decision to leave Murmurs, and in doing so edited all the posts made during his membership to remove the content of each.
[79] This is the webboard version of Murmurs that was used prior to the move to vbulletin in 2001.
[80] See http://www.archive.org/

204). This corresponds to Hine's argument that what we identify as text online "could be thought of as a temporally shifted and packaged form of interaction" (2000: 50).

When examining an online community, the language employed in posts requires detailed analysis in order to determine how it affects and shapes and reflects the general community ethos. For example, "insights into the way in which a group and its members see or define themselves can often be found in the root metaphors used in conversations" (Thomsen *et al.* 1998: np). This will also enable the researcher to ascertain the degree to which the use of language can contribute to, or militate against, the formation and cohesion of social groups and networks within the community. In accordance with this, the use of community terms within Murmurs will also be examined to ascertain the use of specific expressions and their importance and role within the community.

The validation of text as an important source of enquiry, although not considered suitably adequate as a single method of ethnographic enquiry, is stressed by MacKay *et al.*: "textual analysis may tell us something about representations and culture, but to understand what meanings people make of their culture we must ask, or try to experience it with them" (2001: 85). However, the process of "asking" participants, most specifically fans, has been considered to be fraught with the danger of them "auto legitimising" their responses (Hills 2002: 66). In this sense, Hills is not suggesting that fans cannot "discuss their feelings, passions, and personal histories of fandom in a meaningful manner," but that their discourse should be "interpreted and analysed in order to focus upon its gaps and dislocations...which are concerned with communal (or subcultural) justification in the face of 'external' hostility" (2002: 66). Being aware of this proposition that simply "asking" participants is insufficient by itself to deliver comprehensive knowledge integral to the ethnography, I aim to maintain a balance between "asking" participants, and also highlighting the "gaps and dislocations" within their responses and community discourse. To achieve this, I employed four case studies, which focus on, and provide a detailed account of, specific areas of community life within Murmurs.

Case studies

Case studies are particularly useful in an analysis of the field setting in terms of pinpointing and examining sub-groups or forums within a community and then examining the context and role of each. This study employs four case studies in order to examine in-depth specific areas of activity and behaviour within the Murmurs community that, in different ways, negotiate normative fan identity. The first (Chapter Four), focuses on the construction of a Liberal intelligentsia normative identity within the community, based on homologous values such as equality, tolerance and good will that are also reflected by the object of fandom. I demonstrate how this normative behaviour is not a given, but involves consistent maintenance and governance by the hierarchy through explicit strategies of power.

The second case study discusses Trobes (Chapter Five), whose spoiler evading activities and pursuit of the "ultimate first listen" affects the exchange of knowledge between fans and results in their temporary cultural distinctiveness from the rest of the Murmurs community. I show how it is this temporality that not only dictates the dissolution of their subcultural distinctiveness, but also affects the process of re-unification between Trobes and non-Trobes, and their attempted re-integration within the community once the need for their actions has expired.

The third case study focuses on Droolers (Chapter Six), a group that is also distinct from the wider Murmurs community, but whose distinction from these fan-cultural norms, unlike Trobes, is permanent. I argue that this is caused by the way Droolers relate to the object of fandom and the wider fan community around them as, according to my interpretation, by engaging in feminised readings, Droolers fail to correspond with the normative masculinised approach of the Murmurs community. This in turn leads to their characterisation as obsessed "others," and leads to the application of subcultural power that ensures their eventual forced relegation within the community, corresponding to what Michel Foucault (1986) terms a heterotopia.

The fourth case study is centred on Pointless Posters (Chapter Seven), who can also be seen as being confined to a heterotopic site in the form of the Chit Chat forum. I argue that this is due to their challenges to normativity in the community by de-emphasising fandom through rejecting discussion of R.E.M. and related topics in favour of feminised off-topic, general and personal-

life conversations. I also demonstrate how the positive presentation of non-normative behaviour to those within the heterotopia, and their subsequent withdrawal from community surveillance, worked against the normalization of "otherness," and encouraged this type of non-normativity within a subordinated enclave of Murmurs. This case study originally began as an investigation into the general discussion forums within the community, comparing the Free Floating Honesty forum, a place for no-holds-barred discussions and rants from members, with the These Elvis Poses and Chit Chat forums, which encourage postings on more light hearted topics. However, when examining the Chit Chat forum, I realised that the threads within, were not only being relegated due to their non-normative behaviour, but were also acting to create a situation which encouraged others to behave in a similar manner. I therefore felt that this behaviour called for its own case study and abandoned my previous plans in favour of focusing more specifically on the Pointless Posters within.

Despite the usefulness of case studies for analysing particular elements of a community, there has been some criticism with regard to their external validity, in that the method is not suitable to provide an overall view of a field setting due to the specialised examination of perhaps one-off instances that do not reflect the whole area being studied (Canon 1999: 97, Burgelman 1985: 42). This criticism could also be applied to my cyber-ethnography, as through the case studies, I have focused on specific types of behaviour within the field, and not the "whole" field. However, the issue of power and normativity means there is not a "whole" field, but rather a normative identity and various subordinated challenges to that. In addition, and to justify my reasons for conducting these case studies, the pursuit of a holistic approach has not always been considered the most beneficial method. As J. Clyde Mitchell suggests, "the search for a 'typical' case for analytic exposition is likely to be less fruitful than the search for a 'telling' case in which the particular circumstances surrounding a case, serve to make previously obscure theoretical relationships suddenly apparent..." In this sense, "case studies used in this way are clearly more than 'apt illustrations'...they are means whereby general theory may be developed" (1984: 239). Therefore, "the aim is not to infer the findings from a sample to a population, but to engender patterns and linkages of theoretical importance" (Bryman 1989: 173, see also Burgelman 1985: 42 and De Vaus 2001). I will also draw attention to Jensen and Rodgers' argument that accusations of "poor quality" and lack of generalisability in case studies that are not considered

to be externally valid are unsound as they "can be considered retrospectively as a group for a richer and broader analysis" (2001: 236)[81]. I apply this notion to my four case studies, in terms of appreciating the specificity of each case study in isolation of each other, and then also analysing them together within the wider context of the Murmurs and R.E.M. fan community. I shall undertake this with an awareness of the argument by Jarvis, who proposes that external validity is more difficult to demonstrate than internal validity, due to the uniqueness of each case study: "the nature of practice dictates that we are concerned with the specific. There may well be similarities within unique and transitory practices, as the concept of habitus implies, but this is not an essential criterion for the validity of all case studies" (1999: 84). As there were four case studies employed within the ethnography, doubts concerning external validity should be reduced, as "multiple cases augment external validity" (Leonard-Barton 1995: 41. See also Yin 2003).

Within the four case studies, an inherent methodological problem was my identification with the administrative team of the Murmurs community. For example, in terms of dealing with Trobes, I had to make decisions concerning whether to comply with Trobe demands by censoring and placing warnings around any spoilers appearing in the forums that I host, or to instead identify with the normative approach of pursuing up-to-date information and news about R.E.M.. To comply with the Trobe approach may have provided me with more opportunity to observe the reactions from normative members to Trobe behaviour. However, normative pressure for Trobes to assume responsibility for their own exposure to spoilers made me adopt this stance also, in terms of my hosting and crew responsibilities. The relegation of Droolers to the Dork Inside Edition, and the Pointless Posters to Chit-Chat also raised problems for me with my official position in the community, and as cyber-ethnographer. Discussions within the Murmurs Crew sections of the community that led to this relegation required Crew members to give opinions on what measures should be taken against these groups in the community. In this sense, I was torn between expressing myself as part of the Murmurs administrative team, and also as a cyber-ethnographer, not wanting my studies on the Droolers and Pointless Posters to be disrupted. In addition, due to my official position as an agent of subcultural policing, there was a temptation to want to encourage subcultural performative approaches from all three non-normative groups in

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[81] For a further argument against criticisms of external validity of case studies, see Yin 2003: 37, Stake 1995 and March *et al.* 1991.

their postings. However, to engage in this may have compromised my position as cyber-ethnographer, and I resolved to refrain from this course of action. This leads me to account for the ethics in my study, in terms of how I have approached the field as a public space, and maintained confidentiality towards members.

Maintaining ethics and confidentiality

> Writing as a fan means...that I feel a high degree of responsibility and
> accountability to the groups being discussed... (Jenkins 1992: 7).

Conducting this cyber-ethnography from within the fan community means that I experienced similar feelings of loyalty to fellow fans participating in this study as described above by Henry Jenkins. My first ethical consideration is the notion of privacy in participant observation (Allen 1996, Gajjala 2004, Jacobson 1999, Sudweeks and Rafaeli 1995). Cavanagh questions this issue with the ethical process of observing and reporting on online interactions in terms of whether an online space can be determined as public or private:

> Can we justifiably regard online interactions on bulletin boards, mailing lists and in
> chat rooms as [having] "public status" or do they constitute, as others may argue, a
> form of private conversation which is embedded within a public space? Or does the
> fact of private conversations occurring constitute these arenas as private spaces into
> which we, as researchers, are intruding? (Cavanagh, 1999: np)

There have been a number of different and sometimes conflicting opinions regarding this use of content posted within online communities. Whereas Paccagnella (1997) and Gatson and Zweerink (2004b) view messages posted on freely accessible websites as public material, Fernback (1997) attests that cyberspace is simultaneously both a public and private space. Another approach, highlighted by Mann and Stewart, is that within a public online forum the researcher should distinguish between posts "which illustrate the phenomenon under investigation," against "those which are used by participants as debating positions" (2000: 46). The former is based on observations by the researcher, whereas the latter rests on ownership of the content by community members. Considering these perspectives, I will observe Sharf's (1999) suggestion that although an online discussion forum is a public space from which material can be harvested, researchers should display absolute care in their use of such material and

inform any users from the outset of their intentions. As King maintains, "the potential for harm for cyberspace participants is greatest in the situation where members remain unaware that their messages are being analyzed until the results of the research are published"(1996: 120)[82]. Community members were therefore made aware within posts of my position as a researcher and participant observer. However, as highlighted by Cherny (1999), Reid (1996: 170) and Kendall (2002: 236), keeping participants continuously aware that a research project is being undertaken can be problematic. To overcome this, I placed a notification in my member profile in Murmurs of my position as a researcher, and invited members to contact me if they wanted more information[83]. I also made attempts to raise the issue and remind members within on and offline discussions when appropriate. In this sense, I made a conscious effort to portray the R.E.M. fans on Murmurs in what I initially considered to be an accurate or "real" way, regardless of the surprises I encountered in my research. However, both Henry Jenkins and Matt Hills question the notion of ethnography being used to reach the "real" (Jenkins 2006: 29)[84]. Matt Hills questions how the "real" can be reached or determined within this framework, and concludes that within empirical research, "what counts as the real will be different" (Jenkins 2006: 29), as it will be dependent on the particular theoretical framework used by the researcher. Therefore, the surprise a researcher may encounter when undertaking an ethnography is a direct product of the "theorized version of what counts as the real" (Jenkins 2006: 29). In a similar vein, Geertz asserts that "what we call our data are really our own constructions of other people's constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to" (1973: 90), constructions that are "complicated by the action of multiple subjectivities and political constraints beyond the control of the writer" (Clifford 1988: 25). As Jenkins puts it, "different interpretive grids map onto bits of the real…in different ways and produce very different interpretations, which is why that notion of a surprise of discovery seems less and less valid" (2006: 31). In this sense, he suggests that instead the value of ethnography rests within its ability to introduce "notions of dialogue and accountability," which, depending on the ethnographic method used, is arrived at in "different ways" (2006: 31). Richard Johnson also considers the potential for ethnography to "represent an unmediated chunk of authentic life experience itself, in something like its own terms," but

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[82] See also Kozinets 2002: 65 for a further discussion of this.
[83] This can be viewed as similar to Bacon-Smith's strategy of wearing a tape recorder over her shoulder to remind participants of her researcher position (1992: 299).
[84] See also Hills 2002: 72.

concedes that this "is...most difficult to deliver at all" (1986: 605). However, in an attempt to introduce a level of accountability to the fans involved in this study, I decided to follow the example of Henry Jenkins (1992. See also 2006: 31), Green *et al.* (1998), Lyn Thomas (2002: 179), Rhiannon Bury (2005: 30), Radhika Gajjala (2004), Elizabeth Bird (2003: 83), and invite feedback and comments from participants on my interpretation of events.

In this thesis I will approach Murmurs as a public space, as community members should be aware when composing posts that Murmurs is "a form that is legitimately open to public scrutiny and analysis" (Jenkins 2006: 118). For private discussions, members are able to use the private messaging or pager systems for conversation with other members that they wished to partake in, and that can not be observed by the rest of the community. In accordance with this, I will not follow Sharf's (1999), Kozinets (2002) and Reid's (1996: 170) recommendation to gain authorial consent for each quotation or posting used. Where I am quoting from material outside of "private" messaging I have considered it part of Murmurs' public space. However, in terms of the administrative areas of Murmurs, such as the Crew and Host discussion forums that remain out of bounds for other community members and guests, an ethical dilemma is encountered between my privileged access to private community material and my role as cyber-ethnographer. I decided to refrain from directly quoting any of these posts or documents, due to their confidential nature and intentions of the authors of the postings to keep this information in the private domain. For the Pointless Posters case study (Chapter Seven), I had to register to the Chit-Chat forum in order to gain access once the forum became subscriber only. As this space was then considered private, I indicated to members my position as researcher, and gained consent from members for any posts or quotes used from this forum that were posted after the transition from public to private space had occurred.

There are concerns for the cyber-ethnographer when undertaking participant observation in an online setting. For example, there remains the difficult prospect of accounting for lurkers who, because of their non-involvement, cannot be observed within the field (Blanchard 2004: 59, Lindlof and Taylor 2002: 265, Kendall 1999: 70-71, Bury 2005: 26, Paccagnella 1997). At the initial undertaking of the participant observation, I decided to approach lurkers as making no contribution to normative or non-normative practices, and therefore as not "present in any

meaningful way" (Hine 2000: 25). Although maintaining this methodological stance, I later realised that this may overlook the notion that although "lurkers may not be active participants...this does not mean that others do not orient to them" (Lindlof and Taylor 2002: 265). In this sense, the presence of lurkers or "guests" in the Murmurs community reading and viewing posts may have had an affect on normative and non-normative interactions between members. However, this did not change my resolve not to include lurkers within the study, based on their lack of action and identifiable presence within the community.

I feel it is important to further clarify my position in terms of confidentiality with regard to the contributions from community members. For any postings quoted within this thesis the author's name will remain intact as presented within Murmurs, due to my approach to the community as a public space for public conversation. In order to maintain an ethical status, interviewees were informed how their responses and information provided may be used within the study and were given an option of being referred to by their own name, their Murmurs username, listed as anonymous, or they could select another name that protected their identity. To make respondents ethically aware of my position and research intentions, the following statement appeared at the beginning of both surveys and interviews:

I am a researcher from Cardiff University conducting a study on Murmurs.com. I
would be grateful if you could spare a few minutes to answer the following questions.
You do not have to answer any question that you do not wish to answer. The
information here will be used for academic purposes by the University of Cardiff.

It was important to clarify my role not only as a community member, but also as a cyber-ethnographer in order that participants would be aware of my position and purpose behind conducting the enquiries. Personal correspondence with community members was not included unless specific permission from the member involved was granted, or it took the form of an interview. Confidentiality is of extreme importance when dealing with an online community, and shall be treated with the respect required to protect respondents who wish to remain unidentified within the thesis.

Within this chapter the different methodologies used within this thesis have been examined in turn. The adoption of an ethnographic approach, modified to an online setting, and taking into

consideration issues of ethics and confidentiality, has been discussed and justified, as has my treatment of Murmurs as a public space.

Considering the application of ethnography as a research tool, I outlined traditional methods of ethnography and argued that they are not easily transferred and applied to the virtual field. Determining the most adequate ethnographic approach for this study with regard to my unique and problematic position as an agent of subcultural policing within the community, and an R.E.M. fan, I argued how Giddens's (1984: 4) recommendation of "mutual knowledge" and "critical distance" is the most suitable to be employed within this study.

Showing how a four year period of participant observation was employed within the ethnographic framework, I highlighted the benefits of this approach, and the tensions that can occur within the process. In addition, I gave consideration to the existence of lurkers within the virtual field, and justified the reasons why I did not include them in the study.

In terms of producing a more refined research question, I showed how this was achieved through the pilot study, conducted in a face-to-face setting, and developed by further detailed questionnaires and intensive interviews. The process of locating and contacting participants was detailed, alongside my introduction to the community as a researcher.

I showed how textual analysis is a vital research tool for examining an online community, due to social interactions being conducted through the medium of text. Within this, and drawing on Matt Hills' caution to ethnographers (2002: 66), I justified the need for a balance between "asking" participants, and also highlighting the "gaps and dislocations" within their responses and community discourses.

Outlining the use of four case studies, I assessed how the case study method has been criticised for not being able to secure external validity. Drawing on the work of Leonard-Barton (1995) and J. Clyde Mitchell (1984), I argued that the employment of multiple ethnographic case studies should partly alleviate these concerns.

In the next chapter, the first of the four case studies, I shall discuss the nature of normative identity within Murmurs, and examine how it is constructed through the Liberalist "central values" (Willis 1978), such as tolerance, equality and good will (Kernohan 1998, Wolfe 2003), of the R.E.M fans' subcultural homology. I will show how this normative identity is explicitly maintained and governed within Murmurs through strategies of power employed by the community's hierarchy, such as the combined operation of the Code of Conduct, Rules and Regulations and the attempted introduction of a Reputation system.

Chapter Four. Normative identity and governance in Murmurs.com

In this chapter I will discuss how normative fan identity within Murmurs is constructed through the Liberalist "central values" (Willis 1978), such as tolerance, equality and good will (Kernohan 1998, Wolfe 2003), of the R.E.M fans' subcultural homology. I will show how the object of fandom reflects these values, and the manner in which they are explicitly communicated to community members through the Code of Conduct and Rules and Regulations.

Drawing on Henry Jenkins's application of de Certeau's "strategy" and "tactics" to fandom (1992), I will show how normative behaviour in Murmurs is not a given, but has to be governed through strategies of power employed by the community's hierarchy. I will argue that the Ignore User strategy highlights the contradictions within the Liberalist values aspired to by Murmurs, such as the tensions between equality and freedom of speech, and the difficulty of protecting these homologous "central values," while seeking to remain 'true' to Liberalist ideology.

Continuing to explore the use of strategic power to enforce normative behaviour, I will show how two strategies, Reputations and User Notes, were successfully delegitimised through tactical resistance by community members on the basis that they subverted subculturally homological values. My argument will demonstrate that this occurred because, in their surveillance of the community, the strategies ensured implicit norms that contradicted Liberalist values of equality were made explicit and visible, and in turn exposed within the community what Michel Foucault would term "governmentality" (1978).

Foucault devised the concept of "governmentality" to define a combination of two terms concerning power: "government, or the power to direct conduct," coupled with "the idea of a peculiar mentality...the presumption that 'everything' can, should, must be managed, administered, regulated by authority" (Allen 1998: 179). This form of control is conceived as "the ensemble formed by the institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections, the calculations and tactics, that allow the exercise of this very specific albeit complex form of power, which has as its target populations" (Foucault [1978] 1991: 102). The government's role within this regulation is not all-encompassing however, but rather "one of coordination...that gathers together disparate technologies of governing inhabiting many sites" (Bratich *et al.* 2003: 5). This

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population management is exercised through "one instrument or another, never directly" (Sterne 2003: 112). Thus, coordinated within the "more apparent forms of external government [such as] policing, surveillance and regulatory activities" (Lupton 1995: 9), is the instrument of self-governance, or what Foucault termed "technologies of the self" (1988) and "conduct of conduct" (1982b: 220-21), which involves "considered and calculated ways of thinking and acting that propose to shape, regulate, or manage the conduct of individuals or groups..." (Inda 2005: 6). This is to say, that "while individuals internalize the state's systems of control and surveillance, the state in its turn appropriates the various 'technologies of the self' as its means of government" (Gilleard and Higgs 2000: 102). Therefore "governmentality" incorporates "not just the ordering of activities and processes [but also] operates through subjects...to the extent that authoritative norms, calculative technologies, and forms of evaluation can be translated into the values, decisions and judgments of citizens...[in order that] they can function as part of the "self-steering" mechanisms of individuals" (Miller and Rose 1990: 18). As these mechanisms are controlled by "both the coercive and the non-coercive strategies which the state and other institutions urge on individuals for the sake of their own interests" (Lupton 1995: 9), this process encapsulates "the emergence of political rationalities, or mentalities of rule, where rule becomes a matter of the calculated management of the affairs of each and of all in order to achieve certain desirable objectives" (Rose 1996: 29). I will show in this chapter the repercussions that occur when the existence of "governmentality" in the Murmurs community, in an effort to achieve the "desirable objective" of normative behaviour, is exposed to its members and viewed as subverting the "central values" of the subcultural homology of R.E.M. fans.

The construction of normative fan identity in Murmurs

Claude Lévi-Strauss's concept of homology was first employed in subcultural studies by Paul Willis in *Profane Culture* (1978). In this study, Willis explored the subcultures of hippies and motor-bikeboys and related how these groups engaged socially to bring out particular subcultural

meanings[85]. Thus, homology was determined as "the continuous play between the group and a particular item which produces specific styles, meanings, contents and forms of consciousness" (1978: 191). Willis showed how subcultures, rather than being uncontrolled, have strictly ordered structures of meaning and value related to "objects in which they could see their central values held and reflected" (Hall 1976: 56). Consequently, it is "through the fit between [these objects] that the subcultural member makes sense of the world" (Hebdige 1979: 113). Willis viewed this fit between a group and their objects, in general, to continually provide specific types of social image.

However, the concept and application of homology in Willis's study has been questioned by some. Andy Bennett suggests that the use of homology in Willis's sense works to "compromise...the ethnographic claims of the text" due to its marginalisation of respondents' accounts, resulting in "the task of interpretation being achieved through theoretical abstraction" (2002: 454). Activities that could provide "reflexive meanings," Bennett argues, are instead approached by Willis as "structurally determined" (2002: 454). In this manner, Willis's approach is seen as subverting Agar's observation that ethnography involves "[making] sense out of the way informants naturally talk and act when they are doing ordinary activities rather than activities imposed by a researcher" (1983: 34). However, Bennett's critique surrounding the conflict between homology and ethnography in Willis's study will be countered in this thesis. Although, as Bennett observes, homology is a structural concept, in this study, it will not be imposed or "bolt[ed]...onto" (2002: 454) the subculture, but rather, used as a tool to categorise the "central values" within the community, that are firstly revealed and determined by the ethnographic analysis. In addition, as the research field is text and conversational based, respondents' accounts and postings are immediately placed at the forefront of the enquiry and as a central tenet in the "task of interpretation." As this study will be exploring how the normative standards of the community are communicated to its membership, and, in turn, how these individuals respond, these posts will be analysed to seek out the "reflexive meanings" within these activities and negotiations. In doing this, I will be analysing the "natural" activities of the

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[85] Other homological studies have focused on subcultures such as skinheads (Hall 1976: 56) and the prison class (Corcoran and Peillon 2006: 54). In addition, Dick Hebdige (1979) examined punks and highlighted the homological coherence between the appearance, music, and attitude of the subculture.

community members, ensuring that I do not impose activities onto the field in order to generate research results.

Richard Middleton also expresses concern at Willis's lack of attention to how the homology originated within a subculture (1997: 160). Willis did stress however that "objects, artefacts and institutions do not...have a single valency. It is the act of social engagement with a cultural item which activates and brings out particular meanings" (1978: 193). The motor-bike boys were shown to have adapted the image of the traditional motor-cyclist. Their refusal to wear helmets, goggles and gloves was a crucial and purposeful decision, as the use of these items would have altered "the experience and the image of motor-cycling, which would have been muffled or blocked" (1978: 55).

Normative fan identity then, within Murmurs, is closely reliant on the subcultural homology of R.E.M. fans, the "central values" of which promote a masculinised Liberal intelligentsia, encompassing political and cultural awareness, humanitarian and environmental concern, and an expressive appreciation of art, music and literature (Jovanovic 2006: 9). It can be argued that these homologous values originated from, and are maintained by, R.E.M. in their professional lives. For example, they have been described as "artist-intellectual" (Sloane 2003: 88), "the thinking fan's rock band" (Fricke 1985: 69. See also Gray 1992 and Kannberg 2001: vii), and also "liberal, laconic and oozing emotional intelligence"(Crampton 1998. See also Rosen 2005: 7)[86]. R.E.M. are also "concerned with conservation, the environment [and] general humanitarian causes" (Gray 1992: 198)[87], consistently supporting organisations such as Amnesty International, Oxfam and Greenpeace, and becoming involved in many local projects within the Athens area (See Gill 1991 and Branson 1999: 9). The band has been perceived as avoiding "the traps of celebrity, [and maintaining] their freedom of speech, presenting themselves as defenders of common sense and morality" (Bowler and Dray 1995: 3), a prospect that has led to them being

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[86] As Michael Stipe stated in an interview with Italian television in 1989, "the one thing that R.E.M. can offer is music that you can dance to if you want, you can ignore it, you can use it like furniture, but there's also something there that you can listen to and say "this is intelligent" or at least "this is not stupid" (Bowler and Dray 1995: 3). Peter Hogan also shared this view by stating that the band's lyrics "were far from being the usual pop fare: literary, oblique, poetic and evocative, they almost always avoided traditional 'boy meets girl' territory" (1997: 5).
[87] For an exploration of R.E.M.'s numerous humanitarian involvements, see Gray 1992: 193-216, Buckley 2002: 190-197 and Jovanovic and Abbott 2001.

described as one of America's "most liberal...rock groups" (Phillips 1996: np)[88]. Their fans have also been viewed in the same light, as a "kind of liberal, free-thinking audience" (Flynn 2001: np). As R.E.M. guitarist Peter Buck observed: "almost all the fans I meet are pretty cool people. They're intelligent and tend to think about things a bit more than your average rock'n'roll fans: sensible people I wouldn't mind having a drink with" (Snow 1992: 71). A campaign by online R.E.M. fans in 2000 to save the Athens railway trestle featured on the back cover of *Murmur* demonstrated their position as "among the most altruistic, selfless and politically outspoken music fans in the world" (Kaplan 2000: np). It was determined that even if the trestle's future was not secured, they had "succeeded in...showing the world the greatest qualities of both REM and their fans" (Kaplan 2000: np).

This broadly Liberalist philosophy involves the maintenance of "intellectual and political freedom, of reason and conscience" (Rayner 1998: 18) and "a commitment both to the equal moral worth of persons and to the tolerance of diverse points of view on how lives should be lived" (Kernohan 1998:1). Kant identified three values that citizens should rightly access: "lawful freedom to obey no law other than that to which he has given his consent...civil equality in recognizing no-one among the people as superior to himself...and civil independence which allows him to owe his existence and sustenance...purely to his own rights and powers" (Kant [1797] 1991: 139). This commitment of goodwill and freedom of expression demands that "political decisions about what citizens should be forced to do or prevented from doing must be made on grounds that are neutral among the competing convictions about good and bad lives that different members of the community might hold" (Dworkin 1990: 13)[89].

R.E.M. has promoted strong political involvement throughout their career, releasing their 1988 album *Green* on the same day as that year's US Presidential Elections[90], expressing their

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[88] The band has also been regarded as "confident and high-profile liberal activists" (Marino 2004: np), "die-hard liberals" (Stern and Smith 2001: 5), "a liberal, democratising voice within the music business" (Buckley 2002: 196) and "outspokenly liberal" (Galupo 2004: np). *The Guardian* also highlighted that "REM are among the few surviving standard-bearers for a transatlantic subculture that took root in the wake of punk, founded on the notion - vague, but usually palpable - that rock music should express some kind of dissent. Staunchly anti-Republican, proudly eco-conscious, and with a record of playing benefits for liberal causes, they used their trip to South America to issue at least one attention-grabbing soundbite: "George W Bush is not my president," their vocalist, Michael Stipe, told the local press" (Harris 2004: np).

[89] For more on neutrality in Liberalism, see Dworkin 1985: 4, Emanuel 1994: 35.

[90] Alongside the album release, the band intended to place adverts in the music press with a photo of the album cover, and polling booth, informing people that there were "two things to do to today." However, this was not

Liberalism through such actions as becoming part of the 2004 Vote for Change tour, and placing adverts urging Americans to vote for the latest Democratic candidate[91]. As observed by Liesbet Van Zoonen, in her study of the connections between politics and popular culture: "fan groups and political constituencies resemble each other when it comes to the endeavors that make one part of the community" (2005: 53).

A Murmurs thread concerning a 2004 concert in Atlanta where a large number of audience members vocally and physically opposed the band's on stage comments against George Bush displays how rejection of Liberalism is viewed in the community as a breach of the subcultural homology in that the "central values" of R.E.M. are misunderstood:

> Trillium Lili: "There were several very strange and tense political moments where parts of the crowd seemed to actually be attempting to drown out Stipe's comments by yelling "4 more years" or just booing, while the Kerry supporters were yelling back. I personally found such a contentious and almost openly hostile atmosphere to be totally depressing at an REM show...it...seemed profoundly sad to see fellow REM fans so divided, and that animosity seriously detracted from the atmosphere of the gig, and my ability to enjoy it. I mean there were lots of people walking around in Bush-Cheney t-shirts, and there was a big "W" banner that some people were holding out from the upstairs club seats. It was just really a weird feeling. I honestly can't understand why they would go to an REM show to do that. Have they never actually listened to the band's music and listened to the lyrics?"

> Preston: "The political thing was ridiculous - who goes to an REM show expecting anything but a liberal slant?" ("R.E.M. Sizzles Atlanta" 24 October 2004).

The comments in this thread indicate that a rejection of Liberalism by an R.E.M. fan is viewed as a rejection of, not only intellectualism, but also the "central values" that comprise the subcultural homology. As stated by member Robert Andrews: "there are certain aspects of the character of an R.E.M. fan which we share... civility, sensitivity, exploration, intelligence, tolerance, liberalism, caring" (26 November 2003). These Liberalist standards are encouraged through the

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organized in sufficient time, and the advert was instead placed and sent out on a postcard to members to members of the fan club.

[91] An example of these includes a 1986 radio advert by Michael Stipe where "he urged people to vote for [Georgia Democrat Wyche] Fowler over a backing tape of "Fall on Me"" (Gray 1992: 198-99), and 1988 advert in a Georgian newspaper stating "Stipe says don't get Bushwhacked, get out and vote. Vote smart, Dukakis" (Gray 1992: 200).

relationship between Murmurs.com and R.E.M., which developed into one of mutual interest and respect[92]:

> Murmurs.com and R.E.M. maintain close contact and mutual cooperation. While Murmurs.com is completely separate legally, financially and logistically from R.E.M., there exists a tacit level of cooperation between the two entities that serve mutually to provide R.E.M. fans with the best experience they can have in relation to being fans of the band. Ethan is in constant contact with the band's management in order to ensure that what Murmurs provides keeps to their standards and that they are informed of the goings on within the fan community.[93]

The above statement demonstrates that there is a shared appreciation of the importance of achieving and maintaining normative standards within the community that fulfill and compliment those set by the band, and therefore, the subcultural homology of Murmurs. It is anticipated that, as R.E.M. fans, members would already possess some level of understanding and appreciation of the normative conduct expected, as emphasised by Murmurs member Steve Jones: "because R.E.M.'s music is often thoughtful and good-natured, I always expect fans of the band to be fine folks. So the site did meet my expectations in this respect because I find Murmurs to be a civilised and welcoming web site" (interview, 2004). Therefore, for this user, his knowledge of the subcultural homology of R.E.M fans shaped his expectations of the Murmurs community, which were satisfied by encountering qualities of Liberalism, goodwill and intellectualism.

However, to avoid any misunderstandings, or transgressions of the subcultural homology, in order to post on Murmurs, users must agree to, and acknowledge, the rules and regulations[94] of the forum, "the set of conventions that govern manners and conduct [and] the norms for behavior in that space" (Harasim 1993: 31). This act can be viewed as a significant part of the process of becoming a member. Indeed, Howard Rheingold believes that "the most important point [for

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[92] The relationship between the band and Murmurs progressed to such an extent that the official R.E.M. website, REMHQ, has mirrored a number of reports and articles written by Murmurs members in their news section. The band have also granted the community a number of exclusive interviews and even confessed within one to reading the discussion forums to gain an insight into what songs to include in the Best Of collection. None of the band members however have actively posted on the forums.

[93] http://www.murmurs.com/index.php?page=about

[94] These rules and regulations are also commonly referred to as "netiquette" (Harasim 1993: 31, Baym 1998: 60, Zenios, Banks and Moon 2004: 148).

online communities]...is that every participant agrees to a clear written statement of the rules before joining" (2000: 174)[95].

The rules presented to new members have also been perceived as determining why an individual elects to join that particular community, rather than another: "users will join online communities in which community rules ultimately suit their preferences" (Salzberger and Elkin-Koren 2004: 84). However, this is a somewhat inaccurate assumption, as, if community rules did always deter or entice members in this manner, non-normative fans would not exist within online fan communities.

Within Murmurs, the rules that are displayed to new members upon registering stress the diverse membership, along with the importance of maintaining a degree of respect for other users, even when conflicting and oppositional views are expressed:

> We do insist that you abide by the rules and policies detailed below... It is impossible
> for the administrators and moderators of this forum to review all messages.
> Therefore, the content of posts on Murmurs is the responsibility of the author
> alone...Murmurs is a diverse community that includes members of all ages, races,
> religious beliefs, sexual orientations, and nationalities. We ask that users keep this in
> mind when reading and writing messages, and that they respect the other members of
> the community even when they disagree with their points of view. Although users
> can trade mp3's of unreleased R.E.M. material and physical bootlegs of unreleased
> R.E.M. material, any trading of other artists or any album mp3s, or exchange of
> money for bootlegs, is strictly prohibited. By clicking the Agree button, you warrant
> that you will not post any messages that are threatening or otherwise violate any
> laws. The owners of Murmurs have the right to remove, edit, move or close any
> thread for any reason. http://www.murmurs.com/talk/register.php?

It can be seen that these rules attempt to instill in prospective members Liberalist values of consideration, tolerance, respect and goodwill towards other community members, even when they do not hold the same points of view. The restriction on trading material by other artists and the notion that members would want to go beyond the official album releases to acquire and listen to unreleased material and bootlegs does enforce a focus on, and a high level of fandom towards, R.E.M. that is normative in the community. Therefore, focus on the object of fandom

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[95] However, in contrast to this, Krol and Conner-Sax show that not everyone read the rules before joining a an online group: "newbies joining card games [online] find supportive players, even when they haven't bothered to read the rules before joining a table" (1999: 276).

and Liberalism are explicit norms within Murmurs and constitute the first normative practices and homological values that are presented to members upon joining. As argued by Burnett and Bonnici, norms in a community can be viewed as either explicit, such as those in formal documents, or implicit, which may not be formalised, but are recognised as necessary to uphold within group interactions (2003: 336)[96]. Another document that presents explicit norms to members is the Code of Conduct[97]. This is intended to encourage normative behaviour and acts as a briefing tool to help those who may have been unaware of the correct conduct to follow, or who may have held non-normative views. Patrovsky and Mulligan identify the functions of a Code of Conduct as (1) informing members "what kinds of behavior are considered permissible" and (2) working to "establish a basis for taking corrective action against...recalcitrant users". They conclude that the objective of this type of document is to ensure that members "conform to the code, with a minimum use of force or penalties" (2003: 354). This can be seen within the Murmurs code, where members are again encouraged to maintain a strong Liberalist outlook with an emphasis on equality, goodwill, respect for others and responsibility. This is done by directly addressing each individual and stressing that as members they are all equal within the community:

> On a discussion board, your voice is equal to that of everyone else. You are text on screen, as are they. Your identity is what you put into your messages, and is constructed in relation to other people as your involvement in this community progresses (Code of Conduct, 14 January 2005).

The different measures used to encourage members to conform to the Code are evident in the way it shifts from an individual to a community level. Through this, members are made aware that one of the overall aims of Murmurs is to maintain freedom of expression within communications through collective effort:

> We try to create an environment where every R.E.M. fan can feel safe in being an R.E.M. fan, and not feel like they will be vilified because of it. As well, we endeavor to create an atmosphere that both celebrates freedom of expression and is an environment where people feel they can say what they want without the fear of repercussions inconsistent with the opinion they present. Basically: It cuts both ways, show respect and be respected (Code of Conduct, 14 January 2005).

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[96] For more on explicit and implicit norms, see Patrovsky and Mulligan (2003: 354).
[97] http://www.murmurs.com/forum/attachment.php?attachmentid=47768&d=1105696273

Members are reminded that the aim is to achieve a safe environment where R.E.M. fans can operate without fear of persecution. However, in reality, this does not account for non-normative approaches to fandom that occur within Murmurs, such as Trobes, Droolers and Pointless Posters (see Chapters Five, Six and Seven), who are exercising freedom of expression as R.E.M. fans, yet are not fully embraced within the community due to their oppositional approach. Nevertheless, perhaps in an effort to achieve this "safe" environment, members are encouraged to approach the posts of other members as based on inherently good intentions:

> The Web exists minus key elements of everyday communication, which help us understand the context and meaning of what someone is saying. Because of this, we are without cues as to whether or not what someone says should be seen as innocuous or malevolent. Because of this, it is important to approach all messages on this site under the assumption of goodwill, meaning that when all else fails, assume the person on the other end of the keyboard was typing in goodwill and meant no harm in what they typed. This base level assumption will help alleviate potential conflicts. When in doubt, ask for clarification; don't just consider what was said to be a malevolent act (Code of Conduct, 14 January 2005).

It is envisaged that encouraging this type of consideration from members will work to alleviate tension and possible conflict. While this is intended to promote a harmonious community, divisions between normative and non-normative performances of fandom will clearly pose problems for goodwill being exercised between all members. However, the demand for members to give the benefit of goodwill to others before responding to action is promoted as a necessary philosophy for Liberalist community relations. In conjunction with the promotion of good will, it is again stressed that respect for other members should permeate all aspects of community interaction:

> Just because a physical presence is removed from communication doesn't mean that you should also leave the respect you would hold for someone in the real world at the door. With online communication, respect is extremely important, as without the effect of physical presence, the modicum of respect used by default in everyday life is seen as an option. Because of this, it is essential that respect for each other be the default base of behavior on the discussion boards. Disrespecting others will not be tolerated by the community nor the administrators. (Code of Conduct, 14 January 2005).

The above principle works in an effort to make members aware that behind the text there is a person who deserves, and should be given, an element of respect. The offline comparison is again used to encourage members to refrain from misrepresenting themselves in their community

interactions and to maintain a degree of self responsibility by considering that what they say will determine how they will be interpreted by others:

> You are your own words. With this comes responsibility for what you say, as the only
> way of representing yourself to the community is by what you say.
> It is impossible for this community to run if people treat the presentation of themselves
> on the boards as a separate entity than what they really are. It is important for users to
> therefore take responsibility for what they say, and realize that their words - while
> possibly innocuous to them - carry a lot of weight to the targets of their comments.
> (Code of Conduct, 14 January 2005).

It can be seen that the key principles within the Code of Conduct of supporting equality, assuming goodwill, showing respect and maintaining self responsibility, are intended to direct members towards adopting the Liberalist "central values" of the subcultural homology, and therefore engaging in normative behaviour. However, as I will now move on to show, adoption of normative behaviour in Murmurs cannot be taken-for-granted. Instead, it has to be policed and enforced by the Murmurs hierarchy through strategies of power.

Policing normative behaviour

Normative behaviour in Murmurs is not just presented as desirable, but actively enforced by a hierarchical structure of administrators, super moderators, Murmurs Crew and hosts (or moderators). All members who undertake these roles are permitted to enter the restricted areas of Murmurs where they have their own forums to discuss community related issues. Exploring each in terms of seniority, the four administrators within Murmurs, which includes the creator of the website, have overall ownership of the community and therefore remain at the apex of the hierarchical structure. They also represent Murmurs to external bodies by maintaining a close contact with the R.E.M. office and engaging in any promotional work for the website. At present there are four super moderators within the community, who undertake various technical roles that demand senior attention in decision making. This can range from adjusting usernames, to banning members, and contributing to, and implementing, the decisions made by the administrators and Murmurs Crew.

The Murmurs Crew was formed in May 2001 to assist the community owner and administrators

to oversee the management of the website and act as agents of subcultural policing. By invitation only, there are currently six Crew members who have been specifically chosen for their specialised skill or craft that they can bring to the position and so help to ensure standards are maintained. It was also envisaged that the Murmurs Crew would be able to offer alternative views on various community issues and problems, and help to manage the hosts or moderators. From a personal perspective, I was invited in August 2001 to be a part of the Murmurs Crew, achieving this position after actively contributing in the community for approximately one year. I was assigned to the community team, and given the responsibility of assisting with the "Feak of the Week" award. This can be viewed as directing members towards normative behaviour, as the award is in recognition of recipients' commendable participations, which were positioned as setting an example to the rest of the community. Each week, through nominations, a member was selected by Crew vote for a special spotlight that included a short biography and testimonials from friends within the community attesting to the individual's contributions to the community. My role was to present the list of suitable nominees[98] each week to Crew members, compose the biography and collate the testimonials from members. To undertake this task, it was necessary for me to ensure I had an up-to-date and thorough knowledge of community events and the behaviour displayed by members, including hosts. This also enabled me to fulfil my Crew role by making judgements on community incidents that required action, such as banning or issuing warnings to users that severely contravened normative behaviour, acting as an intermediary in disputes between hosts and community members, or giving advice to newbies. Assuming the position of Crew member also affected my behaviour in the community. My transformation from being a "regular" member to securing a significant place in the hierarchy meant I acquired a sudden responsibility within my posts and community interactions to represent the values of my official Crew position. While the new role allowed me access to previously hidden areas of the community and degrees of power, this responsibility made me behave in a more cautious manner, as members are continuously alerted to my position as Crew member through the notification under my username within all my posts.

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[98] Members could be nominated by fellow members, or suggested by Crew members in the weekly Crew discussion thread.

Many Crew members also assume a dual role as hosts within the community. In addition to being a Crew member, I also act as a host of the Community, Entertainment and People sections. Each forum within Murmurs is moderated by one or more hosts, who are also participating members. At present there are thirty eight appointed hosts, with many commanding duplicate roles to act as moderators in a number of forums. Hosts are selected through applications when a vacancy occurs and are expected to display a high level of interest in the topic of the forum, and also demonstrate an appreciation and compliance to the accepted values and norms of the community. Prospective hosts submit their applications through private messaging and successful candidates are chosen by the Murmurs Crew. Hosts are also selected based on their standing in the community and their willingness to offer support and assistance to others. This can be seen as an effort to improve and maintain normative standards in the community. Within Murmurs, the duties of a host include managing the forum in a way that ensures it operates efficiently and in alignment with the normative aims and objectives of the community. Hosts can be viewed as an essential element of the community due to this role as representing an "enforcer of the rules, guardian of the gate, helper to those in need, and example to the community of how to behave" (Powazek, 2002: 99)[99]. Therefore, "it is typically the moderator...who sets the netiquette-whether by written guidelines or by modelling the appropriate behavior" (Quarterman 1993: 31).

I shall now examine the strategies imposed by the Murmurs hierarchy to mark and police normative behaviour, and the tactics that were employed by members to retaliate against this. In *Textual Poachers* (1992), Henry Jenkins applies Michel de Certeau's notion of "poaching" from *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984) to fandom, which opposes tactics to strategies. Strategies entail "assertions of power and dominance" (Jagodzinski 1997: 197) that are "performed from a position of strength, employing... property and authority," (Jenkins 1992: 45). They are "associated with space, and specifically with those spaces which are owned and operated by [these] forces... consolidating power over others who impinge on that space" (Bukatman 2001: 160). In contrast to this, tactics are "performances, tricks, poaches, parasitic appropriations" (Jagodzinski 1997: 197), "the negotiation and resistance of imposed frameworks (Brooker &

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[99] Some works that briefly mention the role of moderators to enforce rules and norms in a community include Bruhn 2005: 224, Menon 2002: 123, Preece and Maloney-Krichmar 2003: 603, Neff 2002: 343-344, Harasim 1995: 185, Flock and Mekhilef 2006: 1410.

Jermyn 2003: 169), exercised by "the mobile population of the dispossessed and the powerless" (Jenkins 1992: 45)[100]. As such, "the place of a tactic belongs to the other" (Bukatman 2001: 160). de Certeau criticised Michel Foucault for placing too much emphasis on strategies of the dominant, which only "neglects the incessant activities of opposition" (Barbour 1993: 58). He argues that it is "impossible to reduce the functioning of a society to a dominant type of procedures" (1984: 48) and instead concluded that "a society is…composed of certain foregrounded practices organizing its normative institutions *and* of innumerable other practices that remain "minor" (1984: 48). In this sense, I will argue that within R.E.M. fandom, R.E.M., as producers, perform strategies, whereas their fans use tactics. In Murmurs, it is those in charge of the community, such as the administration team, Crew members and hosts, who have strategies, while tactics are employed by subordinate community members. However, as I will show later in this chapter, which will justify my use of both de Certeau and Foucault, specific strategies (User Notes and Reputations) exposed within the community what Foucault termed Governmentality (1978) and were rejected by the weak, which gives justification to de Certeau's concern surrounding Foucault's focus on the power of the "strong" at the expense of subordinate groups.

The development of these "calculations" (de Certeau 1984: 35-37) in Murmurs, can be determined alongside the move of the website in 2001, from the previous webboard to a larger forum webspace to cater for increased membership, and to facilitate higher frequency of posts. In this new and more populated location, there arose issues of non-normativity that received immediate attention from normative members:

> I've noticed a number of people who seem to reply to every thread and start many
> topics when they don't even have anything to add to them…it really is getting to be a
> problem… I rarely start a thread myself and when I do I make sure it isn't something
> that's been done or that nobody would give a shit about. A simple rule that would
> make this place much better would be to make sure you have something to say at least
> most of the time that you post. Sure, there's times when a simple "I agree" and not
> much more elaboration is fine and ok and even necessary but try to facilitate at least a
> little discussion some of the time. There are people with 200 or 300 or more posts that
> I've really never read anything even slightly interesting from at all
> (Dream Brother, 31 May 2001).

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[100] Certain texts, such as *Xena: Warrior Princess*, are viewed as actively encouraging tactics (Brooker and Jermyn 2003: 169 and Gwenllian-Jones 2000: 406).

To combat this non-normative behaviour of failing to create the intelligent posts demanded by the subcultural homology, an Ignore User strategy was implemented into Murmurs in an effort to mark and silence non-normative posters until normative behaviour could be re-established. As Ian Buchanan states, rather than being seen as binary opposites, strategies and tactics are "dialectical rather than polemological" (2000: 86), a notion evident in the discussion of normative strategy between the Murmurs hierarchy and community members. However, I will argue that this strategy, due to its subversion of freedom of speech and tolerance, made visible the contradictions within the Liberalist values of Murmurs, and the difficulty of protecting these homologous "central values," and remaining true to Liberalist ideology. This principle has been determined as "the problem at the heart of liberal politics-how to reconcile the exercise of authority with the very values-freedom, tolerance, diversity-supposedly protected by that authority" (Fish 1994: 34).

The Ignore List provided members with the option of adding fellow users to a list that removed all their posts, instead stating "this user is on your ignore list. To view this post anyway, click here." Personal messages sent from the ignored user to the member using the feature against them were also rejected. However, hosts, moderators and webmasters were immune from the ignore system. An example of the feature being used against the non-normative poster is evident in a thread created by a Murmurs host entitled "Let's ignore Koavf" which urged other members to place a user named Koavf on their Ignore List[101] due to his resistance to communal norms:

Kelly A: "He's obviously a sexist and racist asshole that doesn't belong in this
community. He doesn't accept anyone that's different from him, and nothing we say
will change his mind. He gives Christianity a bad name. I've put him on my ignore list,
and I encourage everyone else to do the same."

Pebbles: "Well, he stopped arguing in the "PC" thread when I refused to bother
refuting his points - it works. If someone is being obnoxious in their desperate bid for
the spotlight, turn the spotlight off. The philosophy board is what WE make it..... we
can turn this train around any time. As long as we recognize what is going on, we
won't be victims of it. Count me in (23 November 2001).

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[101] However, it is important to note that this thread was a reaction to Koavf's declaration that "If no one posted any responses to what I posted, then I wouldn't debate" (16 November 2001).

However, it is evident that the Ignore User strategy, through its means of exclusion and rejection, contravened Libertarian values of tolerance, good will and freedom of expression that were central to the subcultural homology. Mobius laments the loss of these values in the actions of members that were actively supporting the system:

> please tell me this thread is a joke. what happened to live and let live. judge
> ye not etc. etc., ignore or engage. read or don't read??? will you be burning books
> next?? he's just stating his beliefs, he's just doing what he does, it's not like you have to
> accept any of it or respond to any of it. no one's forcing you to read his posts or
> respond to them. agree with them or not, he is entitled to post what he does without
> having to put up with bullshit like this. (Mobius, 23 November 2001).

This was also endorsed by Pylon who viewed the Ignore feature to be incompatible with freedom of expression central to Liberalist ideology: "if you want to ignore him, fine, that is up to the individual but I don't think a torch lit procession demanding or even suggesting ostracism…is in the spirit of Murmurs or free speech" (23 November 2001). However, the strategists defended their actions as their right to exercise their own freedom of speech: "I think everyone should be able to express their opinions, but when someone offends over half the people in the forum, there can be the natural consequences of opposition and rejection…The opposition and rejection is free speech too" (Kelly A, 25 November 2001). Because of this, ultimately Ignore User as a feature was not tactically resisted successfully.

This situation highlights the contradictions and tensions within Liberalism between demanding freedom of speech, and yet opposing Right Wing intolerance. As Kernohan states, "just as free expression serves important interests, an accumulation of expressive activities harms important interests." Therefore, the apparent solution, which does not do away with a contradiction at the heart of Liberal discourses, is to "weigh these interests against one another" (1998: 103).

In this sense, the users of the Ignore feature, observing Koavf's "sexist and intolerant" (Gin, 25 November 2001) remarks, viewed their "important interests," that is, the Liberalist values of the subcultural homology, being harmed. As Stanley Fish explains: "in the eyes of the liberal, the pronouncements of fundamentalists are…dangerous…they flow from ignorance and bigotry, and if they go unchecked they may success in turning the nation away from reason" (1994: 136). However, Stephen Carter suggests that Liberalism "has very little idea of how to cope with

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the...people who embrace [conservatism]" (1987: 978) and ends up being "curiously intolerant" as a result of this (1987: 981). Larry Alexander, discussing "the failure of liberalism to provide a justification for tolerating illiberal views," concludes that this occurs because "the great liberal freedoms" are "deeply paradoxical" (2005: 147). As Stanley Fish explains, "liberal thought begins in the acknowledgment that faction, difference, and point of view are irreducible; but the liberal strategy is to devise (or attempt to devise) procedural mechanisms that are neutral with respect to point of view and therefore can serve to frame partisan debates in a non partisan manner." This contradiction is therefore innate in Liberalism, and thereby, I conclude, also in the Murmurs community: "Liberal government cannot help but be partisan, which means that liberalism as governmental non-partisanship...is an impossibility" (2005: 147).

However, in contrast to this, I will now move on to show how Reputations and User Notes, two specific strategies of surveillance by the official Murmurs hierarchy to police normative behaviour, were successfully tactically resisted by fans, because these strategies, by making implicit norms explicit, rendered community hierarchies of subcultural capital visible in a way which contradicted the Liberalist "central values" and egalitarianism of the subcultural homology.

The delegitimisation of strategic power through tactical resistance

In July 2004, two strategies, Reputations and User Notes, were introduced into the community by the Murmurs hierarchy to enforce normative behaviour. However, as I will show, both were successfully tactically resisted by fans who discursively positioned the strategies in such a way that defended the "central values" of the subcultural homology, and therefore, what it should mean to be an R.E.M. fan.

The Reputation system[102], was introduced to the Murmurs community as a strategy for rating members and indicating quality of posts[103]. Because of this, its intended application into the

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[102] For more on different reputation systems, see Chadwick 2005.
[103] For more on Slashdot's karma system, see Lampe and Resnick 2004, Benkler 2006, Powazek 2002: 127, Landlow 2006: 398, McArthur, Graves and Giersch 2001: 214, Fisher 2004: 254, Doorten et al. 2004: 143. Comtella also employed a similar system, but permitted the more normative members with more points that could be handed

community was to function as a surveillance and policing system, to mark the non-normative from the normative and direct resistant users towards normative behaviour. The notion of reputation has been viewed as working to achieve moral and social order in that it "results from transmission of beliefs about how...agents are evaluated with regard to socially desirable conduct [which] represents one or another of the solutions to the problem of social order and may consist of cooperation or altruism, reciprocity, or norm obedience" (Conte and Paolucci 2002: 1).

Community members could award points anonymously to any posts they deemed worthy of approval, or give negative feedback to those posts considered unfavourable. An individual's acquirement of reputation was then displayed on their profile through a number of small coloured icons which indicated their levels achieved[104]. A number of red icons would indicate a negative reputation, whilst a row of green icons indicated a positive one. A similar points system is evident within the technology news website, Slashdot[105], in the form of "karma", which indicates a poster's "reputation for contributing high-quality comments, measured by the ratings his/her previous comments collected" (Cheng and Vassileva 2005: 153). Therefore, a member can "read the Slashdot site...knowing that what [is] read...will come from people who the community has found tend to make valuable contributions" (Shane 2004: 13). Alongside the rating given to users, members could also leave an anonymous comment to support their evaluation.

The second strategy implemented in an effort to encourage normative behaviour was the User Notes feature. These were attached to a member's profile and enabled other users to pass comment about that particular member, for all to see. However, the manner with which User Notes were introduced into the community caused confusion amongst members, especially as it was initiated alongside the Reputation system. Rather than explaining the purpose and method of

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out to other users, thereby making them "more influential in the community" (Cheng & Vassileva 2005: 154). Other websites that also incorporate reputation systems include eBay and QXL.com (Chadwick 2005: 108).
[104] The different levels achievable included "user has a little shameless behaviour in the past" (up to -49 points), "user is an unknown quantity at this point" (0 - 9 Points), "user is on a distinguished road" (10 - 49 Points) and "user will become famous soon enough" (50 - 149 Points). It is apparent within this how members are urged to maintain, or work towards, normativity, and leave the "shame" of non-normative behaviour behind.
[105] http://www.slashdot.com
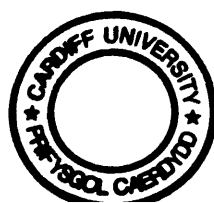
operation to members, the system was simply placed by the administrator into the community without proper introduction.

However, the fact that the Reputations system was based on anonymity, with the author remaining unidentified, became a cause for concern for some members, who felt its introduction would have a negative effect on the community: "I think that these reputation scores are already damaging the board and will continue to do so. I see nothing positive that will come from them. Is anyone with me on this?" (Kelly A, 7 July 2004).Other comments from members displayed five different tactics used in order to resist both strategies:

i   References to the tactics used in other online communities to resist strategies.
ii   The use of a discourse of "childishness."
iii   An emphasis on the strategies' subversion of Liberalist values of tolerance.
iv   The use of discourse that stresses humanitarian Liberalist values of the
      subcultural homology.
v   Arguments stressing Liberalist values of equality.

The first tactic, stressing how members in other online communities had made efforts to tactically resist the Reputations strategy, is evident in dear23's post relating the actions by some individuals to manipulate the system by acquiring positive reputation points:

> I saw them cause a lot of problems. Whole 75+ threads were started for the sole
> purpose of pos repping the person above you so the posters would have many green
> dots. People were constantly interrupting threads to bitch about a neg rep they'd just
> recieve. I think you can disable them... no one really did that, though, they just
> complained about getting bad ones. People said they were afraid to post because of the
> reps they'd get (dear23, 5 July 2004)[106].

However, discouraging non-normative members by making them "afraid to post" is the exact purpose of the Reputations system. Perhaps as evidence of this, in dear23's example, community members' desire to gain status through an accumulation of positive reputation became the driving force for interactions and resulted in the system overwhelming the community. Another member also outlined tactics used in another community to disrupt the system:

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[106] This member also continued later that day, indicating that something in the community may be lost if the system is enabled: "it can get way ugly... at that site, I didn't mind so much because the overall mood isn't exactly very friendly, but here, it just seems like it would ruin something" (dear23, 5 July 2004).

I post on another BB and we have a lot of fun with the rep points. As long as nobody takes them too seriously. We are restricted to one rep increase or reduction per person once every seven days so it doesn't get too out of hand...One of our more "rebellious" members prides himself with regularly giving minus rep points just to mess with everyone. So what did we do to "retaliate"? We raised his reputation so high he was pissed! It's just a big joke and we/he all laugh about it (yamahamama, 5 July 2004).

This example displays further evidence of tactical resistance against the Reputations system whereby members "mess" with reputation levels in order to subvert the strategy within its own terms.

The second tactic involved the use of a discourse of "childishness" to de-legitimate strategic power. Some stressed that many members have already acquired reputations within the community based on their conduct and style of interactions, and therefore did not need to be further classified, but this time in what was said to be a juvenile manner: "there are many people here with reputations, less so on a childish level but more of just a style of posting and replying" (kal298, 6 July 2004). Indeed, the subcultural homology dictates that reputations are already implicitly assessed within the community, through subcultural capital, a process that causes the non-normative to be "othered." However, as is evident from kal298's response, the Reputations system is viewed as providing a less sophisticated and more "childish" procedure of classification than that which already implicitly exists within Murmurs. As jlbreck stated: "the reputations points process reminds me of the Slam books we used to pass around in junior high" (7 July 2004), and Mary was reminded of her "elementary school teachers' check-mark systems on the board...don't get too many checks by your name, or it's eraser-slapping time!" (6 July 2004). This tactic was used by another poster to criticise both strategies:

I'm against them.... I am intrigued by how the new system will work, once that comes together, so it's not that I'm against change. I just think that things like user notes and reputation points detract from a sense of community and they make me feel like I'm participating in a site full of high-schoolers. I never could get into the whole journal thing either, but with those, I can choose not to participate and it doesn't affect me if others choose differently (Internet Legend, 9 July 2004).

Although this member objects to the introduction of User Notes, she is open to supporting elements of change within the community. However, her comments give a strong impression that the recent changes will not work to maintain the normative image of the community as a Liberal

intelligentsia, but will instead promote "childish" practices found in high school. This viewpoint is supported by comments from jlbreck that also consider User Notes to lower the tone of the community to a non-normative, juvenile level:

> I find these to be akin to junior high school slambooks. I don't know if slambooks still exist, and in case they don't, I will describe one. It is a notebook where people sign next to a number and every page has a person's name at the top. The point is to make comments about every person and you sign you comments with the number you signed in next to. So, if this were a slambook and I was on Donna's page, I might write something like cute, sweet, really nice, very cool and then sign with my number. I don't mean to put down kids in junior high; I merely feel that this was one of the more juvenile pasttimes while I was there. If someone has an issue with me, they should pm me and start a dialog, or tell me off or whatever (jlbreck, 9 July 2004).

Therefore, these Murmurs strategies are projected by the tacticians to be in direct contradiction to the subculturally homologous notions of Liberal intelligentsia and masculinised discourse in the community, which themselves evoke a sense of maturity and adulthood. Administrators' attempted strategies are instead tactically associated with non-normative feminised readings and discourse, which are seen as infantile. As Emma Renold suggests, childhood is feminised, whereas masculinity is equated with maturity (2005: 34)[107]. As David Plummer discovers with his study of homophobia: "masculinity contrasts with immaturity" (1999: 47). Stupidus's declaration that "I can see only some chit chat people and newbies using [the Reputations system]" (6 July 2004) further illustrates this[108].

The third tactic is one which extols the Liberalist virtues of tolerance. Kelly A adopted this tactic by drawing attention to the inadequacy and failure of the imposed strategy to allow for tolerance as demanded by the subcultural homology. For this user, relationships within the community are built through repeated interaction over time, and thus there is a need for the user to show tolerance, rather than judge others through simplified indicators of their "good" or "bad" assigned characteristics:

> It takes time for people to get to know one another, and I guess I don't see that as a problem. There are several people here that I respect now after initially disliking them.

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[107] See also Berry and McArthur 1986, who discovered that "baby" faces were associated with femininity and weakness, while adult ones were judged as masculine and powerful.
[108] See Chapter Seven for discussion about the use of feminised discourse by posters within the Chit-Chat forum.

A simple "good/bad" indicator is oversimplifying things in my opinion. Relationships are much more complex than that (Kelly A, 6 July 2004).

This lack of effective communication concerning the introduction of User Notes was stressed by mrdavesanchez, who not only criticised the method of introduction, but also questioned the purpose to which User Notes would be used. This fourth resistant tactic evident in the community was to use discourse that emphasised the humanitarian values of the subcultural homology and associated User Notes with commerciality to show its breach of these values:

I am a person and I want to be treated as such. This is not Ebay and I am not selling my reputation to post here nor do I feel that my persona has to be self-organized into some nice little data elements for someone else's pleasure. We are not putting stars by people's names as being a "Good Murmursian". What are we expecting in these usernotes?...I am not here to sell myself; I am here to learn information, to discuss, to argue, to think and to comprehend. Instead of the board itself being distributed like a city, now we are the city. We are the storefronts, our usernames and our personas are being used in a manner that is inconsistent with what I think is right (mrdavesanchez, 7 July 2004).

User Notes are here anticipated as having a negative effect on Murmurs by transforming the community into one based on a drive for accumulation of positive comments from other community members. In this manner, the poster views the community being changed to a setting where members are eager to classify and promote themselves in a commercial sense and his tactic of drawing an analogy between members and "storefronts," is an objection to being used or positioned as a commodity.

The following comments engage in the fifth and final discernable tactic, which again argues for homologous Liberalist values of equality:

This is just playground politics. The fashionable ones, the unfashionable ones, and the ones who just don't seem to fit in anywhere! You're making a coloured dot a first impression. In a forum, there shouldn't be status, everyone should feel at ease with saying something or answering back. The natural instinct of most is to 'musy' up to the popular people, regardless of what they do or say. The whole idea stinks of compartmentalism, hierarchy and social acceptability - or not as the case may be (Lois, 16 August 2004).

This perception is critical of the way the Reputation system favours the normative (the "fashionable") against the non-normative (the "unfashionable"). Within Slashdot, a similar

situation occurs, as "good comments made by new users or the users who haven't contributed highly rated comments so far tend not to receive a deserving attention and to collect sufficient ratings to raise the "karma" level of their contributor" (Cheng and Vassileva 2005: 153)[109]. This is a prospect in line with what Robert Merton termed "the Matthew[110] effect" (1968b. See also Merton 1988 for a re-examination of his theory)[111]. This process of social inequality occurs when "already eminent scientists gain disproportionate peer recognition and acclaim in cases of collaboration" (Sztompka 1996:16), while "relatively unknown scientists tend to get disproportionately little credit for comparable contributions" (Merton 1968b: 57). This thereby reinforces the normative in the sense of awarding credit to "already famous people" (Merton 1968b: 57), ensuring that "reputational property increases like economic capital and, just like economic capital, creates sharp inequalities in status" (Fuchs 1992: 72).

Lois highlights the possibility that a member's first impression of others would be reduced to, and based on, the interpretation of a "coloured dot". For her, this is a situation that, by encouraging the influence of status within the community in this manner, ensures the boundaries between social groups are more defined, an occurrence that promotes inequality. Mrdavesanchez uses the same tactic of arguing for equality:

> The entire purpose of this site even with the stupid avatars or sig files or whatever is that you have the opportunity to choose your own individuality and not have something assigned for you by other people that can positively and or negatively influence other people. Now they might do nothing, they might do something. I do not think that these are principles that this community was founded on (mrdavesanchez, 6 July 2004).

However, as I have established earlier in this chapter, there is already a de facto reputation/status hierarchy within Murmurs, through the subcultural homology, and via levels of subcultural capital. It is, rather, the move from implicit to explicit norms that seems to bother community

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[109] However, this prospect is welcomed by Peter Shane who values the ability of Slashdot to "ensure that I wade through relatively little of what I and like-minded readers consider dross" (2004: 13). Slashdot also employs a "threshold" filter that can "block lower quality comments" (Benkler 2006: 78). Therefore, "if a user sets a high threshold level, they will only see posts that are considered of high quality by the moderators" (Benkler 2006: 78). As Arno Scharl states, "thus rubbish gets hidden...while good messages get highlighted" (2004: 223).
[110] The effect is named after the Gospel According to Matthew, which states that "for unto everyone that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance: but from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath" (Ludwig 1995: 198). As Merton states, "this is the form, it seems, that the distribution of psychic income and cognitive wealth in science also takes" ([1998]1996: 320).
[111] For another application of this to Slashdot, see Cheng and Vassileva 2005: 153.

members, as it makes highly visible community hierarchies that contest Liberalist values of equality. I would argue that as long as these hierarchical systems remain implicit, the contradictions embedded within Liberalism can be glossed over and remain ignored. However, as soon as hierarchies come under surveillance, or are made explicit, the contradiction becomes too visible and threatening. As Michel Foucault states, "visibility is a trap" (1977: 93).The act of surveillance in society has been deemed a strategy of power that acts as a "component in an ideological offensive to reclaim…a desired sociospatial order" (Coleman 2004: 2. See also Bell 1984: 108). I would argue that the purpose of the Reputations and User Notes strategies within Murmurs is "to operate invisibly while providing visibility; and to foster subjects' participation in their own monitoring (self-policing), sometimes involuntarily" (Ericson *et al.* 35). This is to say. members are encouraged to engage in surveillance in order to mark and govern non-normative fan identity themselves. Therefore, Murmurs can be regarded as approaching the position of a "surveillance community." This brings me again to discuss what Foucault termed Governmentality ([1978] 1991), which entails "continuity between the rule of self, household and state whose interruption precipitates crisis in all these areas" (Baddley 1997: 64). As I outlined earlier in this chapter, the concept describes a form of power that arises when the state endeavours "to improve the wealth of the nation and the happiness of its citizens by means of the systematic identification of individual needs and characteristics whilst at the same time regulating and policing their actions in ways which act to strengthen the role of the state" (Loader 1997: 12). Therefore, to "improve the wealth" of the community, Murmurs employs these strategies of power to mark the non-normative and reinforce the "central values" of the subcultural homology. However, as I have shown, the strategies used "precipitated crisis" because they at least partially contradicted the very Liberalist values they were attempting to defend. The Reputations system was eventually abandoned on 7th July 2004 after only three days of use, and, while User Notes still remain in the community today, the feature is seldom used. Therefore both strategies were successfully tactically resisted by the community. However, this is a dialectical process that will continue in Murmurs as long as normative fan identity is policed and governed. As Henry Jenkins warns: "tactics can never fully overcome strategy; yet, the strategist cannot prevent the tactician from striking again" (1992: 45).

In this chapter I have examined how normative fan identity within Murmurs is constructed and reinforced through the "central values" of the subcultural homology, which focus on the Liberalist standards displayed by the object of fandom. I showed how members are directed to these values through the Code of Conduct and community Rules and Regulations.

I also demonstrated, using Henry Jenkins's (1992) application to fandom of de Certeau's concepts of "strategy" and "tactics," how normative behaviour in Murmurs cannot be assumed, but has to be governed through strategies of power employed by the community's hierarchy. I argued that the Ignore User strategy exposed the contradictions within the Liberalist values aspired to by Murmurs, such as tensions between equality and freedom of speech, and demonstrated the problem of protecting these homologous "central values," while remaining consistent with Liberalist ideology.

I showed how two strategies, Reputations and User Notes, were successfully delegitimised through tactical resistance by community members, arguing that they subverted homological "central values." I suggested that this occurred because the specific strategies, in their surveillance of the community, ensured implicit norms that contradicted Liberalist values of equality were made explicit and hence excessively exposed the existence within the community of what Michel Foucault would term "governmentality" (1978).

In the next chapter, I shall introduce a turning point in the narrative of this thesis, by presenting the first of three case studies that examine non-normative fan activity within Murmurs that rejects the "central values" of the subcultural homology. The first case study will introduce and examine a social sub-group within Murmurs, the Triskaidekaphobics (Trobes), who, out of the three non-normative groups under study, merit first consideration because they are closest to the normative appreciation of R.E.M.'s music as art. However, this appreciation is undertaken in a way that ultimately makes them non-normative. I display this by arguing how Trobes' spoiler evading activities affect the exchange of knowledge between fans and results in their precise cultural distinctiveness from the rest of the Murmurs community. I then move on to discuss Droolers and Pointless Pointers, subjects of the second and third case studies in Chapters 6 and 7, who are non-normative in a different way to Trobes, in that they are opposed to the normative

masculine intelligentsia approach to R.E.M. as a "thinking fan's rock band" and because of this are confined to what Michel Foucault (1986) terms a "heterotopia" of deviance. Because the Murmurs community regards masculinised readings as normative behaviour, the Drooler's culturally feminised approach, I will show, fails to correspond with what Murmurs constitutes, and what Henry Jenkins has termed as the "right way" to read as a fan (1992: 88). Pointless Posters also display these non-normative tendencies; however, in contrast to Droolers and Trobes who negotiate fandom, I argue that Pointless Posters instead de-emphasise it through rejecting discussion on R.E.M. and related topics in favour of feminised off-topic, general and personal life conversations.

Examining how all three groups are approached by and in relation to normative fan identity, and the methods through which normalisation is attempted, I will show how the Murmurs fan community negotiates different types of fan behaviour that appear to be a threat to the "central values" of R.E.M. fans' subcultural homology.

Chapter Five. Trobes

In the last chapter I argued that normative fan identity within Murmurs is constructed through Liberalist "central values" of the R.E.M fans' subcultural homology, such as tolerance, equality and good will. I discussed how it is possible to view a reflection of these values in the object of fandom, and the explicit manner in which they are communicated to Murmurs members through the Code of Conduct and Rules and Regulations.

In this chapter I shall now present the first of three case studies that examine non-normative fan activity within Murmurs that reject the "central values" of the subcultural homology. This first case study will introduce and examine a social sub-group within Murmurs, the Triskaidekaphobics (Trobes), who, out of the three non-normative groups under study, will be considered first due to their closest proximity to the normative appreciation of R.E.M.'s music as art, in their attempts to recapture the pre-Internet experience of listening to and purchasing a new album as a singular event. However, as I will show, this appreciation is undertaken in a way that ultimately makes Trobes non-normative, due to their temporary spoiler evading activities, which disrupt the exchange of knowledge with other members and results in their precise subcultural distinctiveness from the rest of the Murmurs community. This, I suggest, affects not only inter-relationships, but also Trobe accumulation of fan cultural capital, which is dependent on the acquisition and exchange of knowledge surrounding the object of fandom. However, I show that this situation allows them to create their own temporary forms of inverted fan cultural capital that are distinct from the rest of the Murmurs community, and argue that this process places Trobes in a position between non-Trobes and "casual" fans, subsequently operating as a different interpretive community.

After exploring the reasons for the development of Trobes, I analyse the repercussions that arise for them, being a non-normative group who are motivated by a pursuit of pleasure that is temporary and nostalgically based, and therefore unorthodox in manner to the rest of the community. I argue that it is this temporality that not only dictates the dissolution of their subcultural distinctiveness, but also allows a smooth process of re-unification between Trobes

and non-Trobes, and their attempted re-integration within the community once the need for their non-normative actions has expired.

The pursuit of the ultimate first listen

The Trobes operate in direct opposition to the information that the Internet and Murmurs can provide. This is to say, instead of embracing the rapid flow of information and new processes of musical distribution that the new technology can deliver (Jones 2002 and Peterson and Ryan 2004), they are driven by a nostalgic aim to recapture the experience of buying a new release by a band without any prior knowledge of its contents, other than information which has been officially released. This motivation is encapsulated by the Trobe host who juxtaposes the different ways of approaching an album release and laments the disjointed process of experiencing a new album through the Murmurs community:

> One of the most amazing times to be an R.E.M. fan (or a fan of any band, really) is that moment when you rush excitedly into the record store after work or school and grab a new album on the day of its release. You study the album art, pull out the disc, bring it home, play it and a whole new world opens up for you... But, unfortunately, in this crazy world of murmurs.com and the Internet, the old feeling of awe and surprise at a new record has all but disappeared. That's because all you have to do is come to murmurs every day during the recording process, check the news articles, download the cover art, download the mp3s, all in an excited, tedious process that seems harmless - until the day the album comes out and you're standing in the record store with nothing new and you realize you've taken away from the experience, lessened the intensity of the ultimate moment as a fan of recorded music (madloop, 21 September 2002).

It can be seen from these comments that the Trobe view of approaching new musical content is formed on the premise that this new process of experiencing music is not only transforming what used to be a singular event into a disjointed one, but that it also, and most significantly, diminishes the levels of pleasure that the fan can experience, in as much as the "awe and surprise" of the occasion is lost. From this perspective, the Trobe method of experiencing a new R.E.M. album works to re-emphasise its value as an aesthetic object. I will also suggest that Trobe activities, in addition to resisting the normative practices of the Murmurs community, also defy the music industry driven template of album promotion[112] and release cycle[113]. Instead of

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[112] For an example of how the music industry generates pre-release interest in a new music product, see Fetscherin

responding to pre-release information and material, with which the industry generates interest and confers economic value on a product, Trobes, I would argue, actually resist the industrial events and processes leading up to the album release.

It is apparent that Trobes are committed to an effort to recapture and reinstate the first listening process as a singular event, rather than a gradual process of exposure. They urge other community members who wish to join them to avoid ingesting any new information concerning the new R.E.M. album before it is released. In order to assist this, they have their own sub-forum within the R.E.M. music forum and also have a special icon to post in their signatures to express their membership. Any new information concerning the album that is released unofficially online is classed as a spoiler by Trobes. A spoiler can be defined as "a piece of information…which has either not been aired to the general demographic of the online community, or which (in an alternative definition) has not yet been seen by an individual participant in that community" (Cantwell 2004: np). Because of this, spoilers have been perceived to "connote incorrect, cruel, and mischievous practices…hence [presenting] themselves as oddities and aberrations" (Gray and Mittell 2007: np). Jonathan Gray, drawing upon Gerard Genette's (1997) concept of "paratexts," which are "semi-textual fragments that surround and position the work" (2003: 72) views spoilers as occupying this position between reader and the text. Due to its sometimes exclusivity, spoiler information can be of great interest to some fans[114], and also regarded as a means of gaining status[115] and social capital[116] within a community.

(2003: 319) who outlines the inclusion of a free CD in *The Sunday Times* that included new material from a forthcoming Oasis album. O'Sullivan, Dutton, and Rayner (2003: 170) also describe pre-release marketing strategies within the music industry. An alternative perspective is presented by Buckley (2004: 99) who focuses on the adverse effects of pre-release promotion whereby older David Bowie fans were "turned off" by the marketing for his jungle album.

[113] The cycle of an album or single release is described in Miller (2004: 243) who recounts the typical pattern of Depeche Mode releases.

[114] See "Spoiled Rotten?" available at http://www.poppolitics.com/articles/2003-03-26-spoiledrotten.shtml and "Spoiler Sports" at http://www.poppolitics.com/articles/2002-01-10-spoilers.shtml for an account of the importance of spoilers for fans of the reality television show, *Survivor*, "who freeze their videotapes and mull over scenes that may or may not provide clues" (Wright 2002: np). Wright also outlines how misleading spoilers can be used. In this instance, due to the high levels of "fake" spoilers, members posting spoiler material were often treated in a hostile manner (see also Gray and Mittell (2007:np) for a description of "foilers" in the *Lost* fan communities and Jenkins 2006: 25 for disinformation campaigns from *Survivor* producers to its fans). Books collecting spoiler information for fans have even been released. For example, W. Frederick Zimmerman's (2004) *Unauthorized "Half-Blood Prince" Update: News and Speculation about Harry Potter Book Six by J. K. Rowling*, which collates spoilers and known information about the then forthcoming novel.

[115] The ChillOne in *The Spoiler: Revealing the Secrets of Survivor* (2003) recounts his attempt to acquire power and "legendary status within the spoiler community" (p32) through gradual revelation of "tantalizing" spoiler material

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For Trobes, spoilers can take the form of song files or snippets, revelations of new song titles or lyrics, information on any musicians involved, descriptions or images of any cover artwork and any other reference to the style and content of the music. Any thread containing details of this nature is requested to be marked with a spoiler warning[117] in the title so Trobes can approach it with caution. Members are requested to take the sacred oath for the club before joining, which attempts to consolidate their loyalty to both the club and other Trobes:

> I pledge my eternal soul to not listen to the new REM songs before the release of the
> next album, unless said songs are debuted via official non-internet media, such as Vh1,
> MTV or on my local radio station. If I do, I will be shamed amongst my fellow oath-
> takers and will not enjoy the new album nearly as much as they will. I understand that
> by breaking any of the codes of my oath, I will be subject to whatever punishment my
> fellow oath-takers deem fit, cruel and unusual or not (madloop, 21 September 2002).

Trobes are allowed to listen to any new songs performed during an R.E.M. concert they may attend. They are however not allowed to download any Mp3s of the songs performed live. If a concert is streamed live online, they are permitted to listen to that show once only and must refrain from making a note of any new song lyrics, a prospect which acts as a simulation of "liveness" that, it is felt, does not detract from the Trobe oath of behaviour.

The actual creation of a social club within Murmurs for those who choose not to partake in the digestion and discussion of any new album pre-release information began in late 2000, in anticipation of R.E.M.'s twelfth studio album, *Reveal*. Calling themselves the Non-Revealing Revealers, some community members rallied together to refrain from listening to, or reading about, any new information concerning *Reveal* before the actual album release. R.E.M's previous

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concerning the reality television show. He strategically released information to the community at various intervals during the season broadcast in order to prolong his standing in the community (see also Jenkins 2006 for more on ChillOne). Baym (1997) also acknowledges the status some soap opera fans participating in the r.a.t.s. online community can acquire against those who cannot access the fan network, due to their potential exposure to spoiler information. Spoilers have even been used by whole communities to gain status within the wider fan community. Christoper Wright refers to a situation where different *Survivor* websites "actually compete to see which can land the most accurate spoilers or analysis, and those who succeed gain stature in the eyes of the online community, unless they are perceived as arrogant" (2006: 178).
[116] Wright (2006: 178) also outlines how spoiler information can be regarded as "pseudo-commodities" in that they are viewed in the community as having value. Because of this, spoilers can be used by members to generate social capital.
[117] See Henry Jenkins for a description of the spoiler process for *Twin Peaks* fans and how "possible" and "probable" spoiler warnings were used (2006: 125).

studio album, *Up*, was released in 1998, and therefore *Reveal* was the first album to be released by the band following the expansion of Murmurs as a fan community, and also within the up-to-date flow of information that is possible on the Internet. It is interesting therefore, that this approach by community members was adopted in anticipation of how something might be spoiled for them, rather than from experience concerning another R.E.M. album release. With the creation of Non-Revealing Revealers to signify those who refrained from involvement in the consumption of news concerning the new album, the significantly larger group who were actively ingesting information were soon termed The Revealers. For some individuals, the club changed their experience of both listening to, and enjoying the new album:

> For the last album, a club was started - THE NON-REVEALING REVEALERS. Our mission was simple: to recapture the awe and excitement of the day of an album's public release. Supporting each other as best as we could, and even getting Ethan to make us our own forum, we strove to ignore the news, to keep everything a mystery until the day of release - and it worked! (madloop, 21 September 2002).

After the success of the Non-Revealing Revealers, it was decided by the cluster of group members that they would apply the same method of approach to the release of the next album. As the only information known about the next R.E.M. studio album was that it was their thirteenth, it was suggested that the new name for the group should be the Triskaidekaphobics or Trobes for short, which indicates a fear of the number thirteen. A sub-forum was again created within which the club could discuss their levels of commitment, provide encouragement for each other and talk about what they hoped or anticipated the new music would sound like. Members also made themselves available on chat clients such as AOL Instant Messenger to provide support for group members when a new snippet of information, or song, was revealed. The Trobe club members often sought to encourage each other and remind themselves of the reason why they were abstaining from being exposed to any new information, and what results this would ultimately deliver to them. The possibility that they would enjoy the new musical product considerably more than the non-Trobes was stressed with a seemingly religious fervour[118]:

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[118] See Jindra (1999: 220) for a discussion concerning how some *Star Trek* fans express their fandom through the use of religious language, and Cavicchi (1998: 42) who examines how some Bruce Springsteen fans describe exposure to his music as a religious conversion. See also Hills (2002: 124) for an exploration of religious terminology within fandom.

Folks, there a-gonna be people who are gonna oppose the righteous things we do!...are gonna try and put us down, are gonna try and ridicule us, are gonna try and make us feel like freaks...are gonna try and tempt us with mp3s and hints that things are being revealed in other forums...we shall enjoy a fresh new album come next Spring! we shall open that plastic wrap and/or cardboard box that surrounds the jewel case, pop in the CD and hear fresh new never-before-heard-by-our-ears sound. WE SHALL RING IN A NEW ALBUM WITH JOY, WITH UTTER AND COMPLETE PURITY, WITH UNSTAINED HEARTS AND MINDS! and it will be great! and it will be wonderful! and it will be sublime! keep the faith - and we shall have the last laugh indeed!!! (madloop, 21 September 2002).

Trobes constantly remind themselves to "keep the faith" in the belief that deferred gratification will deliver a greater reward than that experienced by non-Trobes, in the shape of the ultimate first listen[119]. Although Trobes believe that they will have the "last laugh", it remains to be seen how their position and integration within the community is affected both in terms of their relations with non-Trobes, other Trobe members and in their expressions of fandom. To examine this, I shall now move on to explore how Trobes and non-Trobes' opposing interpretations of what constitutes the most pleasurable approach to a new R.E.M. album release became a source of conflict within Murmurs that remained unresolved due to Trobes' failure to adequately articulate the required sub-cultural knowledge of the community.

Conflicting interpretations of pleasure

Kerr, Kücklich, and Brereton maintain that, with regard to pleasure within the sphere of new media, there has been insufficient "attention paid to the variation in quality or depth between experiences" (2006: 64), a consideration which I intend to address in this section. The most significant aspect of the relationship between Trobes and non-Trobes is the division of conversation exchange, which is based upon conflicting interpretations of pleasure. As Murmurs is centred on continued discussion, there will be resultant effects on a social group that seek to exclude themselves from the main topic and focus of conversation, such as a new R.E.M. release. This method of isolation ensures that dialogue between Trobes and non-Trobes is kept at a minimum with regard to information concerning the new record. Even though Trobes and non-

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[119] However, as madloop's observations on the chapter confirm: "any animosity or conflict [with non-Trobes or Revealers] was...tongue-in-cheek. Although I was very serious in my aim to stay pure, my ragging on non-Trobes and my use of pseudo-religious phrases like "Keep the faith" was meant to be playful" (Interview, 2007).

Trobes will purchase the same product, Trobes are confident that their self-enforced time-lapse and approach to the album as a singular event will ensure a higher level of pleasure, enhanced by non-discussion until the day of release:

> we're gonna keep the spoilers as much of a mystery as possible until the actual album comes out. so post way about anything you'd like concerning the new album, as long as it doesn't give any details about the album away. feel free to proclaim your love for REM, your impatience, your hopes, your nightmares, your anything and everything. we can come here and chat about the album whenever we want, with the freedom from the fear that it will be spoiled like it will be for the non-believers. best of all, we can gloat in the knowledge that we are taking back CD-buying joy from the clutches of the technology-obsessed revealers! (madloop, 21 September 2002).

It is apparent from the above quote that Trobes view their activities to be based on an aesthetic appreciation of R.E.M.'s music as art, and that it should be experienced in a way that compliments this viewpoint. Their position is seen as a nostalgic retrieval of pleasure that was commonplace before the introduction of the Internet brought new possibilities to the listening process[120]. Trobes view this as an authentic way to experience the music, whereas non-Trobes are criticised for their obsessive perusal of information through technology, a method which is viewed as inauthentic and as eventually "spoiling" the "ultimate moment."

How can these conflicting interpretations of pleasure be understood? John Fiske (1987) presented a model of the 'active audience' that can make their own meanings surrounding a text. He maintains that pleasure occurs as a result of a "particular relationship between meanings and power...which serve the interests of the reader rather than...the dominant" (1987: 19). According to Fiske, pleasure from a subordinate perspective is constructed around the affirmation of a social identity that defies "the structure of domination" (1987: 19). The subordinate then "may be disempowered, but they are not powerless," due to their defiant actions. Therefore, while Trobes can be seen as operating from a subordinate position, and deriving pleasure according to their own meanings and concerns, they have the power to determine their own pleasure in relation to the dominant capitalist forces within the community.

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[120] See Jones for an outline of how the Internet has altered how music can be experienced, most significantly by "shifting the sites of hearing and listening and of buying music in spatial terms" (2000: 218).

There are a number of ways that fans have been determined by scholars to derive pleasure, which can differ between communities and objects of fandom. Nancy Baym focuses on how r.a.t.s. fans' interpretative and discussion practices within the community increase their pleasure gained from the text (2000: 94). Louise Spence, in her study of soap opera fans, refers to the pleasure found for many, not through the actual knowing of a particular narrative, "but in the process of knowing." She concludes that "satisfaction comes from the excitement produced by waiting...and in experiencing the new telling of what is recognized as the same old story" (2005: 78). The concept of gaining pleasure from prediction and speculation is echoed by Charlotte Brunsdon (1997: 21), Derek Foster (2004: 270), and also John Tulloch (1990), who explores the effects of sameness, surprise and resistance upon fan pleasures. In *The Pleasures of Horror* Matt Hills approaches pleasure from a 'performative' perspective. This is to say, pleasure is considered, not as a "simple description of some pre-existent state of affairs" (2005c: x), but as a "performed and constructed" cultural act through which identity can be articulated (2005c: ix), as is evident with the activities of the Trobes. It can be seen that due to their self isolation, Trobes "perform" and "construct" (Hills 2005c: ix) pleasure by discussing among themselves rather than with the rest of Murmurs their hopes and aspirations for the design and content of the new album, a "text which does not yet truly exist" (Chin and Gray 2001: 1). This act also allows them to derive pleasure from the process of not knowing what other community members are both experiencing and thinking about any new information that is revealed. Therefore, it is through these performances that Trobe identity is articulated. However, how is this perception viewed by the rest of the community? Adamfoxy illustrates how non-Trobes define pleasure in terms of experiencing the "hype" of a new release as it happens:

> All that "Trobe" stuff is crap,, Why not just enjoy the hype etc.. surrounding the
> forthcoming album. I can't wait to hear the new stuff and reading about it only makes
> me all the more excited. It's also great that various people in the media are talking
> about the new album. Nevertheless if it makes some people happy to be kept in the
> dark until the official release of the album then good luck to you, however I
> personally don't see the point (adamfoxy, 27 July 2004).

These opposing interpretations concerning preferred ways in which to achieve fan pleasure convey not only the different approaches made by members, but also how they can influence social relationships in the community. Simon Frith observes the complex nature of defining pleasure by determining that it is:

too disparate a set of events, individual and collective, active and passive, defined against different situations of displeasure/pain/reality. Pleasure, in turn, is not just a psychological effect but refers to a set of experiences rooted in the social relations of production (Frith 1982: 503). (See also O'Connor and Klaus 2000: 317).

In this light, Trobe approaches to pleasure have been criticised for creating a space that, by excluding specific discussion, partly removes the "social relations" element that can bring a "set of experiences" from other members of the community:

> if this place is for those who don't want to talk about the new album...what the hell will be talked around here? i understand what this is not for. i can't understand what this is for. i hope you understand what i'm saying. can someone come up with a explanation for the existence of this space? (new adventures, 20 September 2002).

This user however appears to be unaware that the Trobe forum and club functions through discussion concerning that which they cannot discuss, and through social relations of consumption. Conversation is therefore centred on anticipation of the event and this sense of mystery is the driving force of enjoyment and pleasure for Trobe club members. Louise Spence asserts that although things to come in the narrative have not yet occurred, "we have an expectation of them in mind, and that expectation acts as a structuring presence" (2005: 78). For Trobes, their expectations of the new R.E.M. album act as a "structuring presence" on which they base their anticipations of forthcoming pleasure. Daniel Cavicchi in his study of Bruce Springsteen fans also outlines the expectations surrounding a forthcoming concert, where "fond memories of previous shows" (1998: 25) acted to influence expectations of pleasure. The following post from a non-Trobe criticises this process, while at the same time encapsulating the excitement and pleasure felt by club members:

> They're gonna talk about how excited they are to be thinking about the new album, and how they just can't wait, and how they're going to enjoy it SO much more than those of us who are busily downloading songs the first chance we get so that we can dissect them at leisure before the album even comes OUT, and they're going to gleefully discuss what the cover art might look like, and maybe then they'll have a tea party. Oh, and they'll get to argue amongst themselves about whether it's cheating to listen to various promo releases and talk about how mean all the people who are spoiling for themselves are because we mentioned something to them about what we've heard or seen. I can hardly wait. I love non-Revealers
> (Internet Legend, 20 September 2002).

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It is apparent from this comment that non-Trobes gain their pleasure from lengthy discussion of any new leaked material before it is officially released. It is in essence a preference to observe and enjoy the processes of the album creation which is in direct opposition to the concerns of Trobes, who instead focus on the enjoyment of the outcome of the album, and experience pleasure from being unaware of the production processes. While both groups have different interpretations of how pleasure is achieved, they each perceive their position to be more valid than the other, assuming "that [their] pleasures are produced through their own discernment, activity/agency and subcultural knowledge" (Hills 2004: 90).

Trobe club members believe that their enjoyment of the new album will be much greater than that experienced by non-Trobes. This contention between the two groups generated sufficient interest that a poll constructed to reinforce Trobe distinction, entitled "How much more will the Trobes enjoy hearing the album than the greedy revealers?" was conducted in the Trobe forum, attracting seventeen respondents. From the optionsavailable, 10.34% of respondents voted "a lot", 10.34% voted "a lot lot", 13.79% voted "a real lot", 24.14% voted "oh boy it's a lot, I tell you" and the largest percentage factor, at 41.38%, voted "infinity times eleven." The distinction of enjoyment between the two groups however was called into question by those who viewed the level of pleasure as not being dictated by the time of purchase or access to pre-release material, but by other pertinent factors:

> I think the question isn't how much pleasure each group will feel relative to the other.
> The question would properly be when each will get that pleasure (Internet Legend, 19
> October 2002).

This non-Trobe views the listening process from a different perspective. For Internet Legend, both groups are justified in their approach and will experience levels of pleasure. Instead, the important aspect is the time frame and the moment pleasure is actually experienced. To measure the level of enjoyment experienced by listeners and to make comparisons to indicate who has received greater benefits is considered irrelevant. This debate was taken further to suggest the actual time of listen, irrespective of when the album was released, is not as important as the emotional impact the album has on the listener:

> No matter WHEN you heard it in relation to pre-release/release time lines...the most
> crucial thing is HOW it moved you when you did hear it. No one can take that from

you. There could be someone out on this planet right now, buying Automatic...having
never heard of the band...and the feeling they may be getting from that very FIRST
listen, may give THEM the feeling they are the first on earth to hear this album.
Really HEAR it (cuyahoga, 19 October 2002).

In this sense, importance is placed on the impact of exposure rather than time of purchase. In this regard, it would be possible to buy an album that was issued over ten years ago and still be as emotionally moved as if purchasing a current release. The pleasure is found therefore in the aesthetics of the text and any deferment or pre-release exposure to information is considered to be irrelevant to the ultimate enjoyment.

The following poster adopts a different viewpoint on information exposure and regards the increasing influx of new details and song clips to be part of the excitement and build-up to the album release. For this user, time of purchase is secondary to observing the crafting and development of those elements which comprise the new release:

Getting to listen to studio bits and witnessing how the songs grow and develop (if
such a thing will ever happen) could be not only interesting but a joy itself. As for the
comments of people who listened to the album or are involved in the process, well,
they never ruined my own thoughts about it. Hearing that "Reveal" was atmospheric,
lush and I-can't-remember-now-what-else didn't influence me much or spoilt my
enjoyment on the day of its release. I'm not joining yet. I guess you'll have to try harder
on me.... (Eraserhead, 17 September 2002).

However, when applied to an online community such as Murmurs which survives on ongoing discussion, the time of purchase is important for those who wish to contribute to current discussions. As information and material from a new album can be leaked weeks or even months before the official release date, by the time Trobes have made their purchases and are willing to discuss that which is new to them, the non-Trobes in the community will have already held numerous discussions concerning those topics. This time lapse in access affects discussions between the two groups because while Trobes are discussing what the release might be like, non-Trobes are discussing what the release is actually like. Therefore, Trobes may discover that the majority of individuals available and willing to discuss album-related first impressions are other Trobes or "casual fans," and therefore when it was bought, how it was received and levels of pleasure attained will affect community relationships and hierarchies. This situation can be

applied to what Matt Hills has termed "just-in-time fandom", which is seen as an intensification of the "rhythms and temporalities of broadcasting" centred around a specific text, where fans feel compelled to comment and engage in discussion immediately after, or even during, the time the text is broadcast or released. Hills believes that they respond in this fashion "perhaps in order to demonstrate the 'timeliness' and responsiveness of their devotion" (2001:178). This can be applied to Murmurs in terms of Trobes and non-Trobes. The non-Trobes that engage in regular posting immediately on the acquisition of relevant material and information that is not essentially reliant on the time of release display "just in time" characteristics. Trobes, in contrast to this, have a delayed reaction due to the restrictions enforced by the rules of the group. However, both groups view their actions as indicative of their higher levels of fandom and as a way to intensify their pleasure as fans.

Having shown the conflicting approaches to pleasure between Trobes and non-Trobes, I shall now move on to explore how Trobes endeavoured to remain loyal to their oath and pursued their pleasure through attempted cohesion as a group, supporting each other in what was deemed their first test: the resistance of a new R.E.M. song that explicitly endorsed the Liberalist "central values" of the community.

Resisting "The Final Straw"

During the months before the new album release, the focus of discussion within the Trobe club was placed on debating individual aspirations and projections concerning the content of the new R.E.M. product. Inherent in this discussion were recommended strategies for minimising exposure to new material forbidden by the club.

For those with demonstrated experience of enduring the denial process, it was important for them to offer support and assistance to those members who were without prior experience and therefore needed assurance and guidance. The level of support sought by, and given to, group members provided the driving force of discussion and social interaction within the club. On occasions, various members found it difficult to continue to abstain from accessing new material, for a variety of reasons, including personal ethics. They invariably sought advice and help from

the other Trobes when an R.E.M. song from the forthcoming album entitled "The Final Straw," that fulfilled Murmurs' Liberalist values by protesting against the War in Iraq, was placed on the official R.E.M. website for download:

> this is haaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaard. I didn't think it would be so hard. I always thought i would be very cool with it, but i'm not. Especially because i heard it's an anti-war song, and in these times of war, i really need to hear some. Particularly by rem. If it's going to be the new single, is it ok then? Help me, i'm really tempted right now. Are you REALLY sure it's going to be on the next album? Really sure? (truffel, 25 March 2003).

This poster found it difficult to abstain from listening to the new song, due to a strong moral sense of duty, being torn between homologous Liberalist anti-War beliefs and a sense of loyalty to the Trobe community. A thread was also created in the *Pop Songs* forum by Oddfellows151 who, experiencing the same dilemma, sought to determine if simply reading the lyrics to the song was permitted. Trobe member Stoffel urged the poster to consider full exposure to the music, declaring "this song is a big exception, this is an anti war song, and should be heard" (25 March 2003). Non Trobes soon followed with a similar emphasis on the Liberal "central values" of the community, in an attempt at normalisation. As Pillowy Star exclaimed: "Everyone who doesn't download "Final Straw" because she/he wants to stay a trobe, will one day regret that they haven't listened to it when it was released/posted AND meant to provide a little comfort during an outstanding situation" (26 March 2003). Phlmth also stressed the current "unusual and hard times," concluding that "if you feel you'll be hearing something from the heart, offered up by REM, in respect to this war, then listen. It will mean something now" (26 March 2003).

In the midst of this potentially damaging situation for the Trobes, the leader himself urged those who needed help to contact him immediately through instant messenger:

> Trobes, this is your first test. Good luck. I will be here for support. PM me if you feel tempted or about to lose control. remember, my AIM screename is DrOmnicom. look for me before you PM (madloop, 25 March 2003).

This demonstrates the existence of a strong support system that went beyond the confines of the forum into personal messaging and chat rooms. This assistance was forthcoming at numerous times on the message board to help those who displayed serious doubt about their ability to

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remain true to the Trobe club oath. Some members viewed the situation as a test of their faith, in a series of forthcoming temptations:

It's has been said that a new song [CENSORED BY HOST] maybe posted at [CENSORED BY HOST]! If it is, this is going to be a big test. I need all the help I can get to stay strong and wait until it's offically released on record! HELP!!!
(Lori, 24 March 2003).

This poster's cry for help inadvertently placed other Trobes in a situation of exposure to the new material, by indicating the song title and location for download. This was immediately censored by the forum host, who removed the offending descriptions and responded to the user, and other Trobes, with a reply aimed to unite and inspire the members:

TROBES - BE STRONG. DO NOT DOWNLOAD THIS SONG. This is your first test
- pass it with flying colors!...remember two things: 1. you are not alone! 2. hearing a new REM album fresh on the day of its release - what joy! (madloop, 25 March 20003).

It is possible that the strong levels of support provided helped to achieve the desired affect in encouraging some group members to successfully minimise their exposure to *The Final Straw*, despite its strong connection to Murmurs' Liberal "central values." It is evident however, that others were more resilient and able to resist potential temptations without the need for support:

I've still only heard two songs, seen the cover artwork & video for LNY [Leaving New York]. Not much longer to wait for the whole record now (Lori, 26 September 2004).

I've heard LNY and seen the cover art and am looking forward to buying it at the store and listening to it on a proper stereo, don't want to cheapen the first time with the inferior quality of my computer's speakers (wendellg, 29 September 2004).

I've heard LNY (about a thousand times) but I consider it legit because hey, it's the single and we're *supposed* to have heard it. In a moment of weakness I downloaded the sampler track, but came to my senses and deleted it before the "LNY" clip was Over. I downloaded the Oxfam show but skipped over the new songs. Nothing beats the feeling of going to the record store bright and early on a Tuesday morning, picking up the album from the "new releases" rack and then running home to absorb, analyze and dissect. It's a tradition I will never relinquish (Heather, 26 September 2004).

Others however failed to observe the rules of the club. The group founder and host, madloop, abandoned his position in the Trobes due to his early exposure to the new material and

subsequent dissatisfaction. For him, the anticipation and build-up to the release and first listen of the previous album, Reveal, was more enjoyable than the repeated listening over the months to follow:

> Before Reveal I founded the non-Revealing Revealers and we pledged not to listen to any bits or pieces of the album until the day of its release. The reason was to find the perfect enjoyment – the ultimate first listen. I did it. And I loved it. But as the months went by, it became clear that I did not like the album. It became my least favorite album by the band. And when Around the Sun began to leak, I abandoned my position as head trobe. I abandoned the trobes because I was afraid the new album would be Reveal 2 – or, gasp, even worse. So when Around the Sun began streaming online, I listened. Once. I could barely get through it. I hated the lyrics. I hated the music. And for the first time, I hated R.E.M. I've now learned an important lesson – something, as head trobe, I should have known: don't listen to albums until they come out (madloop, 5 October 2004).

Madloop's capitulation to temptation affected both his membership of the Trobe club, and his anticipated vision of his first listen to the album. His "awe" quickly faded to disappointment, even though he achieved "the ultimate first listen." When offering feedback to this chapter, madloop commented further on his experience of being disappointed with *Around the Sun*, displaying that complete abstinence from exposure to new material is not always beneficial:

> Around the Sun is considered by many (including me) to be R.E.M.'s worst album, and I can now plainly remember the first time I heard the first track (and first single) Leaving New York -- and being, for the first time ever, underwhelmed and disappointed with an R.E.M. lead single. With the non-Revealing Revealers I stayed totally pure until a day or two before the release of Reveal, only hearing tracks when I saw the band live in Cologne, Germany. With Around the Sun, I eventually broke down and listened to brief clips on R.E.M.'s MySpace page before the album was released – and that actually benefited my first listen to the album proper, in that I was more prepared for disappointment... (madloop, interview, 2007).

Gray and Mittell also discuss how spoilers are used by some *Lost* fans to "prepare for the eventual let down of watching [what they believe will be a disappointing] episode of the how (2007: np), as does Barker and Brooks with *2000AD* readers who "[get] ready to be disappointed" with the forthcoming Judge Dredd film (1998: 59).

For madloop, this early exposure to the new release affected his relationship with other Trobes

due to the fact that he had listened to the new material and could not therefore share in anticipatory discussion with other Trobe members. Instead, he was obliged to engage in discussion with non-Trobes, who had also listened to the new material. However, he realised how this had affected his relations with other Trobe members and understood how this decision changed his listening experience and reception of the new album. This again raises the question concerning the strength of social bonds within the club. A Trobe member who chooses to listen to new R.E.M. material cannot remain a participating member. Therefore, those who choose to succumb to temptation demonstrate the fragility of the social bonds formed within the club because, for them, these bonds are ultimately weaker than their attraction to R.E.M. and their music. Other members however, were true to the sacred Trobe oath and found enjoyment in planning where and how the first listen would take place:

> I've stayed true to my promise. It's been hard. Damn, I should get a medal of honor or something for not downloading ATS despite countless temptations. Ah well, the reward will be so much sweeter. I can see it now...I go to Borders and pick up the new album, wait until I get home to listen to it (I also promised myself I wouldn't listen to it in the car on the way home or on my Walkman), and then as soon as I get home I open the case (I can't take it out of the wrapper until I get home either) and put it carefully in the CD player. I shut the lights off and listen to the whole thing in the dark. I won't do anything else. Just listen... (Opera Ghost, 30 September 2004).

It is possible here to observe the approach from Trobes to experience the album as an aesthetic object. Instead of listening through a computer in a segmented fashion as practised by non-Trobes, there is an emphasis on experiencing the music as a whole product in a setting that also compliments the anticipated quality of the album[121]. The anticipation of members to regard the first listen to the album as a private and special event is also considered by Cavicchi, who observed how fans can view listening to music made by the object of fandom as a "private" and "pure" event (1998:114).

Some members not only remained faithful to their oath, but surpassed the expected standard of

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[121] Inspectorjason, providing feedback on his Trobe experience also stressed similar motivations: "I never really took the "Trobe" idea seriously, but enjoyed referring to myself as such shortly before Around The Sun came out in stores because I really did want to save the listening experience for when I actually had the CD in my hands and could listen to it on a good stereo system instead of a computer" (Interview, 2007).

behaviour by going to greater lengths to ensure absolute pleasure for their first listen by delaying this until even past the release date:

> I'm going to one-up the rest of you triskaidekaphobes. Since I'm going to be leaving for
>
> a work conference in New Orleans early tomorrow morning with some co-workers and won't be back until Friday, I'm probably going to just wait and buy Around The Sun when I get back, as I won't have a chance to listen to it over the next few days. I'm afraid that, if I get it today, I'll get into it and then not be able to listen to it again until Friday. The only song that I've heard from the album is "Leaving New York" (inspectorjason, 05 October 2004).

> Well, Donna bought the CD 3 days ago, and I still haven't sat down and listened to it. Am I the ultimate trobe or what? (Kelly A, 08 October 2004).

The above posts display a competitive element between the club members, who appear to be proud of their individual abstinence and ability to delay the listening process longer than that required after the album release. This action can be seen as a last bid to acquire value and increased status for the members who anticipate gaining communally validated status from such behaviour. However, what levels of status can actually be acquired from these actions once the majority of Trobe members have discontinued their practices and made efforts to reunite with the rest of the community? Although these particular Trobes may prolong their subcultural distinctiveness, which would otherwise be diminished upon reunification with the non-Trobes, this process may also work to ensure further isolation from the rest of the community.

It can be seen that although there are specific rules within the club, the commitment from members is not uniform, and may be based on different motivations or concerns. In addition, individual commitment to the Trobe oath is susceptible to exposure to either wanted or unwanted information from spoilers.

Having discussed how Trobe members support each other in an effort to collectively remain true to the Trobe oath, I shall now move on to look at how their non-normative actions of resisting spoiler material results in division from the rest of the community, due to Trobe contravention of Murmurs' "shared assumptions" (Hills 2004: 19).

Spoilers

Although there have been a number of studies that consider the effects of spoilers (Hill and Calcutt 2001, Baym 2000, Foster 2004, Wright 2004, Jenkins 2006b)[122], they tend to focus on television or film fan communities rather than music fans. In addition, although Foster does acknowledge that spoiled fans derive a "different kind of pleasure" to unspoiled fans (2004: 284), there has also been inadequate attention given towards the divisions that can occur between the spoiled and the un-spoiled within a fan community.

Nancy Baym observes that the use of spoiler warnings creates a "barrier between the viewer who does not want to know what will happen ahead of time and the preview" (2000: 88). This view however fails to consider the barriers that can also arise between community members due to differences and contradictions within what fans "want to know." I will suggest that within Trobe activities, the avoidance of spoilers creates a barrier not only between Trobes and the fan text, but also between Trobes and the rest of the community[123].

Emily Nussbaum views a similar division in television audiences who choose to observe or ignore spoilers concerning their favourite programmes. She observes that "the viewers at home have become two parallel audiences: the isolates and the plugged-in" and that "being plugged-in means becoming invested in the creation of the show" (2002: np). To draw an analogy, being "plugged-in" in Murmurs is to be a non-Trobe and to discuss anticipated and released material as it develops. In contrast to this, Trobes could be classed as "isolates." However, this would instead be a shared isolation with a modified sense of involvement based on their own control of exposure to the development process and eventual first listen.

A major issue which affects the relationship between Trobes and non-Trobes is one of responsibility for spoiling and non-spoiling. There has been a debate between those who believe that Trobes should be solely responsible for ensuring they do not come into contact with spoilers

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[122] McLaughlin, Osborne, and Smith (1995: 99 and 1995: 106) also mention how failure to post spoiler warnings within some newsgroups can be a violation of convention.

[123] In addition, it is possible to observe that spoilers can also sometimes initiate barriers between fans and the object or text of fandom. Kurt Lancaster (2001: 23) outlines the tensions that arose between Babylon 5 fans and the producer of the show, Joe Straczynski, who believed that spoilers were misleading fans, as their anticipation could lead them to erroneously predict the outcome of a narrative. In turn, this situation also supports Jenkins view that "the relationship between fan and producer...is not always a happy or comfortable one" (1992: 32).

placed on the other sections of the boards by other members of the community, and those who believe that non-Trobes should not discuss any information that would compromise the Trobe position, without giving them prior warning. This latter perspective was articulated by a Trobe who drew attention to the notion that non-Trobes should not only be responsible for the spoiler-free content of their posts, but also for the information within the titles of threads:

> There seems too much stuff on murmurs that is not trobe-friendly... The problem is the titles include stuff we don't want to know. We somehow need to get people to put a warning for trobes in the titles (incka, 17 November 2003).

However this request presupposed that non-Trobes had the same understanding as Trobes of what constitutes a spoiler. This assumption, combined with the expectation that other community members would respond positively and would understand the Trobe position, provoked adverse responses from non-Trobes who were not previously active within the Trobe forum, but entered to voice their opinions:

> What we need is Trobes stop whining. Trobes will, as of now, be forbidden to go to future R.E.M. gigs as there might be new material being played. Trobes will, as of now, be excluded from Newsstand as there might be news in a post containing song names, lyrics snippets from the next record. Trobes will ... mmm ... get my point? Trobes better go into soletary confinement till the new record's released. Even the first single will give away info about the new record, thus Trobes can't buy that either My conclusion: being a trobe is mission impossible! (aquila, 18 November 2003).

These comments demonstrate the debates that can occur within fan communities concerning the interpretation of what a spoiler actually is, and the extent to which the un-spoiled can remain immune from exposure. Some other community members also called into question the Trobe process of attempting to preserve all information, even song titles, until the day of release:

> Well thats what THIS forum is all about not the rest of the site. We cannot stop talking about new music if people dont want to hear about song titles. I really doubt that announcing a song title in a post is that big of deal. And if you are mistakenly downloading songs or looking at pictures on the internet of new songs or cover art of future rem releases then maybe its time to take a computer class (mrdavesanchez, 18 November 2003).

This poster works from the perspective that both Trobes and non-Trobes cannot achieve mutual satisfaction within the community without a level of division. He draws a distinction between the different functions of the Trobe and non-Trobes forums and later suggests that Trobes should only view and participate in specific areas, or otherwise leave the community during this period:

I would think that the purpose of the Trobes is the prevention of these three things.
1. Looking at any coverart
2. Listening to any tracks
3. Reading any lyrics or Lyrical Interpretations
So if ... anyone else is whining maybe you shouldnt come to murmurs or only view the non rem threads (mrdavesanchez, 19 November 2003).

The different interpretations of what constitutes a spoiler are again raised. This community member has a precise definition of what he believes to be the three core concerns that Trobes should avoid. However, his priorities are based on the standards that he is trying to impose on the Trobe forum. For instance, he neglects to include mentions of song titles or revelations and reviews about the musical style and content as major concerns, because they lack importance to him. This inability to understand the Trobe point of view caused confusion about the importance of different distinctions accorded to spoilers:

How can knowing a title of a song ruin the experience of hearing the album for the first time? And why would hearing it live and finding out the title be ok but seeing the title on We Talk not be ok? That doesn't make any sense to me. Also, if you're really gung ho about not knowing anything about the new album, Murmurs is not the place to visit. About the only way to do it would be to automatically mark all messages in all the R.E.M. forums "read" every time you visit. Have fun with that (Dream Brother, 19 November 2003).

In this regard, it was suggested that if Trobes planned to follow their oath to the extreme, then they should either isolate themselves from the R.E.M. discussion forums, or look elsewhere than Murmurs.

Another poster took a different perspective in pursuit of a solution and recommended Trobes access alternative forums and view thread titles with caution. It was considered that the onus for being exposed to, and accessing, unwanted material was the responsibility of the Trobe, rather than the poster:

with all due respect to the trobe community, i think it's clear from the trobe oath and rationale that the burden of remaining information-free regarding album #13 is generally on the trobe, and not on Murmurs members at large. aside from reading the titles of threads when you use the "view all new posts" command, i think that if you stay out of certain forums you will be relatively safe from spoilers. i'm not a trobe, but i also don't want to know every living detail of #13 before it comes out, so i suppose that as the release approaches, i'll be reading selectively. but that's my reponsibility, and if i inadvertently read something that tells me more than i want to know, then i'm surely not going to blame the poster (Crescent, 19 November 2003).

It can be seen that, as more information concerning the new album is dispersed and discussed within Murmurs, the division between Trobes and non-Trobes is widened. It appears that efforts by Trobes to draw the two groups closer together were unsuccessful. This could suggest that Trobes did not sufficiently articulate subcultural knowledge in their posts that was required to draw a more positive response from the non-Trobes. Matt Hills observes that a requisite part of successful interaction in a fan community is the enunciation of "shared assumptions within the fan culture" (2004: 19). He considers that threads which promote agreeable responses can be regarded as a "successful sub-cultural performative – a successful 'doing' of being a...fan, which other fans iterate in their responses." Conversely, threads that attract negative responses only work to "demarcate the boundaries to appropriate fan-cultural identity." It could be argued that Trobes fail to adopt a sufficiently performative approach. While their constative statements describe the situation, (Hills 2005c: 1-7) they fail to communicate the required levels of subcultural knowledge which, it can be argued, will be more likely to elicit positive responses. This situation can be viewed in contrast to Baym's depiction of spoilers in a fan community where the un-spoiled simply "appreciate" not being exposed to spoilers, and the others "like knowing the spoilers" (2000:88). Bowen (2005: 39) also adopts a similar observation in his account of *Star Wars* fans. While he acknowledges that some fans welcome spoiler information, and others do not, he neglects to explore the situation any further. These approaches do not account for, or attempt to analyse, any possible divisions and tensions that may occur between the two groups[124].

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[124] However, for a good starting point on this issue, see Rebecca Williams who identifies the problem of this type of division as something that is constantly "negotiated by fans torn between wanting to sustain an element of suspense....and being involved in the most up to date gossip with other fans" (2004: np) She also stresses the effects of a lack of social interaction and communication between divided community members where the spoiled

Although Trobes do have a number of activities that work to consolidate the group, such as regular supportive discussion and speculations on the forthcoming album, there is a distinct lack of opportunity to engage in ongoing and regular decoding of material as apparent in the rest of the community. This will affect social relationships being formed, developed and maintained within the forum and also between Trobes and non-Trobes. Matt Hills also highlights the problem when fan communities are forced to conform in accordance with broadcast schedules. In his examination of the Alt.tv.xfiles newsgroup, he observed that this situation had a lasting effect on the community - "its affective space remains tied to a commodity-text, and atx therefore remains bound to the schedules and The X-Files US transmission dates and times" (2001: 157). This is an important perception, because within a discussion based community, this alteration in communal relationships and communication exchange will have significant effects on an individual's accumulation of subcultural and fan cultural capital. The membership of a social club within Murmurs may expand an individual's social network, and strengthen bonds with other members. However, as I have shown, the "unspoiled" Trobe club in one respect operates to isolate the club members from the rest of the community. Therefore, this will ensure the reduction of social interaction and discussion with the large percentage of Murmurs members who actively ingest and exchange new information. I shall now move on to explore how this situation not only disrupts Trobe acquisition of fan cultural capital and exchange of knowledge with other community members, but also how it allows them to create their own temporary forms of inverted fan cultural capital that are distinct from the rest of the Murmurs community. I argue that this process places Trobes in a position between non-Trobes and "casual" fans, subsequently operating as a distinct interpretive community.

Fan cultural capital and the imbalance of knowledge

Within the Trobe club, fandom is expressed and experienced by members in a number of ways that distinguish them as a group from non-Trobe R.E.M. fans. Given this situation, it is necessary to inquire how the distinctive and temporary nature of their activities affects both the

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members "have a common ground on which to base their relationships," compared to the un-spoiled who are "deprived of activities centred on the decoding of spoilers..." (2004: np).

accumulation, and value levels of, fan cultural capital. Bourdieu's (1984) notion of social and cultural capital has been applied to fandom, most notably by John Fiske, who uses it to determine a "cultural economy" that can be found within the actions of fans. His insistence that "knowledge is fundamental to the accumulation of cultural capital" (1992: 42) is also shared by Hobson (1989) and Hunt (2003). Henry Jenkins also refers to the importance of the "exchange of knowledge between different segments of the [fan] community" (1992: 7), concluding that "knowledge equals prestige, reputation, power" (2006: 125), as does Majorie D. Kibby in her relation of the "ritual sharing of information" between John Prine fans (2000: 96)[125].

However, when spoilers and their surrounding tensions appear within a fan community, there appears to be an alteration in the use and acquisition of knowledge. As is evident within the activities of Trobes and the notion of spoilers in general, I will support Cantwell's (2004: np) observation that the manner in which fan "knowledge is negotiated shows that it is not indiscriminately embraced." Thus, maximum possible knowledge is not an absolute motivation for *all* members of a fan community. Knowledge of the object of fandom is no longer exchanged and accumulated by potentially all interested members of the community, but rather, the division of spoiled and un-spoiled members in a community creates instead an imbalance of knowledge. It can be accepted that members of a fan community can display varying degrees of knowledge: that I will not dispute. However, when a collective of members, in this instance the Trobes, make a decision to remain unexposed to new information that is of great interest to other members of the community, a significant imbalance of knowledge occurs which may be temporary, but can have disruptive effects on the community.

Considering the implications of this imbalance, it is necessary to take into account how this prospect combines with Pierre Lévy's (1997) concept of the "cosmopedia" and the collective and overlapping knowledge that can be found within this space. Lévy offers a vision of the technological future that is "a utopian one, based on a form of direct, computer-mediated democracy" (1997: 57). Within this, the cosmopedia is interpreted as a "knowledge space" that produces "collective intelligence", which is "a form of universally distributed intelligence,

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[125] For more on this see also Lyn Thomas (2002: 89-91) who examines the importance of knowledgeable readings and knowledge exchange for *Inspector Morse* fans.

constantly enhanced, coordinated in real time, and resulting in the effective mobilization of skills" (1997: 13). Lévy views the "deterritorialization" of knowledge that occurs within the cosmopedia through the breakdown of geographical barriers as enabling wider and more rapid lines of communication, participation and information exchange.

Henry Jenkins concludes that fan communities online could constitute "fully realized versions" of the cosmopedia due to them being "held together through the mutual production and reciprocal exchange of knowledge" (2006b: 27) and the "collective production, debate, and circulations of meanings" (2002:158). Jenkins applies these observations to *Survivor* spoiler fans who he determines demonstrate "collective intelligence in practice" (2006b: 28), as do Gray and Mittell (2007) argue of the television show *Lost*. Jenkins concludes that "what holds a collective intelligence together is not the possession of knowledge-which is relatively static, but the social process of acquiring knowledge-which is dynamic and participatory..." (2006b: 54). However, when a fan community is divided between those who are, and are not, willing to participate in the exchange of spoiler knowledge, even on a temporary level, how does this affect the "collective intelligence" of the community? How do Trobes fit within the concept of fan 'cosmopedia'? I will suggest that because Trobes temporarily do not contribute to the collective intelligence due to their non-involvement in the exchange of information, their practices meet the criteria of "unanswered questions" that Lévy projects will "create tension within cosmopedic space..." (1997: 217). This is because the nature of the Trobe position means that they disrupt the collective exchange of knowledge and production of meanings, and by doing so call into question Jenkins' application of the cosmopedia.

In relation to this, and due to their elective isolation from new R.E.M. information, it is important to assess how fan cultural capital is affected by, and acquired within, the Trobe club. There appears to be a distinct dichotomy in the acquisition and value levels of fan cultural capital between Trobes and non-Trobes. It can be determined that as a result of their membership to the Trobe club, fan cultural capital is affected in a number of ways. Within the Trobe group, fan cultural capital still operates, yet in reverse to that experienced by non-Trobes. That which may be shameful as a fan to admit in the main R.E.M. forums, such as displaying a non interest, is instead applauded here. Within the Trobe forum the less you know about the current R.E.M. release the greater status and belonging you have, which is the opposite to the function of fan

cultural capital in the other R.E.M. related forums. Within these non-Trobe forums, displaying knowledge about the band and their current activities is a vital component of accruing fan cultural capital.

It can be seen therefore that Trobes do not conform to the behaviours and processes that acquire and validate fan cultural capital within the rest of the community, but instead work to create their own forms of capital. Jeffrey Sconce observes a similar occurrence within fans of trash cinema whose distinctions are applied to academia. Drawing on Bourdieu, he contemplates the attraction that different types of cultural capital will have for those who have yet to develop official cultural capital or transfer their educational capital into economic capital. He concludes that fans that fulfil these categories look towards trash culture as "a source of refuge and revenge" due to their exiled nature. (1995: 379). This occurrence also compliments Bourdieu's perception that the dominated bourgeoisie seek to increase their accumulation of cultural capital "by making 'risky' investments in new forms of cultural distinction and hence in new fields of cultural value (trash cinema in this case)" (Hills 2002: 59). Although the Trobes do not map onto a specific class faction, and cannot therefore be classed as dominated bourgeoisie, I will argue that they make similar investments by inverting the pre-existent forms of fan cultural capital in the community and working to extend them into different areas to create new forms of value and capital.

The process of minimising knowledge is of great importance to Trobes who actively attempt to alter their listening experience towards the album release. They essentially seek to control their consumption and reception of the product in an effort to recapture the feeling gained from earlier enjoyable aesthetic encounters. It is important to ask therefore how this imbalance of knowledge affects their experiences and perception of being a fan. For some, the first listen is often one of the most memorable experiences of their fandom and can act as an historical determinant in any fan self-classification:

> When I heard Reveal it was totally fresh in every way - I hadn't heard a single song
> (besides the already-released radio single Imitation of Life) from the album until two
> days before the release, when I saw them perform a free show in Cologne, Germany.
> By the time I got home from that weekend, it was time to walk through the streets of
> Prague with my Discman, enjoying a new and strange album – a moment I will never
> forget (madloop, 21 September 2002).

This comment articulates not only the sense of individual pleasure that was experienced in the form of a memorable initial listen, but also a significant and meaningful occasion. One Trobe member, whose experience of the last album was greatly diminished due to the online pre-release of material, discovered a greater appreciation of the later new music upon first listen:

> It really gave me that old school feeling of buying an album. I kept away from the songs until the day i bought it-4 days after it came out-and then listened to the whole thing during one drive. I remember that first listen as I did Up which was a similar experience. Reveal wasn't like that at all-i knew more than half of it going in. It made me appreciate the whole experience much less. This time I listened carefully and appreciated every fresh song. It was very satisfying, moreso than i had though it'd be (Jason, interview, 2005).

Another Trobe member, who had also listened to the previous R.E.M. album before its release, suffered a similar experience:

> I had listened to other albums (Reveal, New Order - Get Ready, etc.) online before the album release and found that it somewhat diminished my enjoyment because the record release date was not a big deal anymore to me. My listening experience as a "Trobe" this time around, therefore, enhanced my experiences as a fan because I rushed out to the record store to buy the new album as soon as I got a chance and I felt the "old school" rush of wanting to get home to listen to the album when I bought it (inspectorjason, interview, 2005).

Both individuals display a desire to change their listening experience from a fragmented one, as witnessed with their pre-exposure to the Reveal album, to a single occasion that can be re-told to other fans. The prospect of having a story to re-tell to others can often be very desirable – fans often enjoy relating to others about the moment they became a fan (see Cavicchi 1998 and Kibby 2000: 95 for music fans, Jenkins 1992: 58 for television fans, and Hills 2004 for genre fans). It could be argued that this desire for a clear fan self-narrative forms the basic principle of membership to the Trobe club and forms the basis of how their fandom is interpreted and expressed.

In this respect, how do Trobes view and define their levels of fandom? How does their temporary lack of knowledge affect the ways in which they view themselves as fans? In order to assess this,

it is important to recognise the variations and fluidity that can occur when trying to identify the degree of fandom expressed by an individual. This supports Daniel Cavicchi's findings that fans cannot necessarily be classified into clear 'levels' of fandom:

> fandom is, in practise, less of a ready-made category that clearly separates one person from all others and more of a process of distinction in which a fan must constantly question and monitor his or her experience, background, attitudes, and behaviours, relative to all the other people involved in any rock audience (Cavicchi 1998:107).

Garry Crawford also shares this view in his account of sports fans as "neo-tribes" who are the "loose, fluid, and often temporal communities and groups that individuals move in and out of often several times in their everyday lives" (2004: 40-41). In addition, Cornel Sandvoss has added another dimension to the debate. He defines fandom as "the regular, emotionally involved consumption of a given narrative or text" (2005:8). However, he also asserts that this emotional investment does not always relate to members' individual classifications as fans.

This self classification is evident within Murmurs. A casual R.E.M. fan is distinguished as someone who owns some of the later albums released on the Warner Brothers label, rather than their older recordings, and does not possess the same appreciation, interest and knowledge of the music as other fans[126]. In an attempt to clarify the boundaries between levels of fandom one Trobe recognised a casual fan of R.E.M. as:

> someone who has out of time and automatic for the people but probably sold monster when they realised it was a rocker. they might also like the music but not the people or appreciate them as artists but have other musical priorities (Astrid, interview, 2005).

In relation to this, some Trobe members consider themselves to be in a different and higher category of fandom when compared to the casual listener, having perceptions about their level of

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[126] For further explorations of casual fans, see Cavicchi (1998: 97) for how Bruce Springsteen fans define "casual" listeners. Cavicchi also examines the differences between fans and "ordinary audience" members at an event. He highlights how Springsteen fans view "ordinary audience" members as passive, in contrast to their own "active, serious and interpretive" participation, which is "shaped by something larger than the performance itself" (1998: 92).
See also Jerry W. Jarrett (2004: 159) who examines the dangers of attracting casual wrestling fans at the expense of the "traditional" fan; Paul Marcel Levesque (2006: 204) who outlines the different responses from casual Bob Dylan fans to certain hit songs, and Barker and Brooks who make distinctions between "casual, "regular" and "committed" comic readers (1998: 14).

fandom, without giving actual reasons and considerations: "I passed that [being a casual fan] long ago. I am a very hardcore fan" (Jason, Interview, 2005).

I will suggest here that for some Trobes, the nostalgic occasion of the first listen is an integral part of their fandom, and therefore can effect personal interpretations of their status as a fan. Others consider their fan status level to be defined as a result of a long-term affiliation and a deep interest in the band beyond their music, which began before the group became popular worldwide:

> definitely not casual. having discovered them in my early teens in 1986 i was still
> able to follow their growing up process and they provided the soundtrack to mine.
> my appreciation of them goes far beyond the music (Astrid, interview, 2005).

In contrast to this, one member prefers to be viewed by other members of the community as a casual fan, due to his lack of involvement in the R.E.M. related forums within Murmurs. For inspectorjason, the focus of interest is placed on the music, rather than the band. He does not consider his long term involvement in the community to be an indicator of high-level fan status:

> I would like to think that others on the site view me as a casual R.E.M. fan, in that I
> rarely post in the R.E.M. forums because I've done so before over the years in polls,
> etc. and have been immersing myself in other bands over the past few years. I've never
> posted in the Band Member forums before (Stipe/Berry/Buck/Mills forums) because I
> view the band as a whole and not according to the whereabouts of each band member's
> personal life (inspectorjason, interview, 2005).

Trobes collectively may have an extensive historical knowledge of R.E.M. as a group and their musical output, yet in this instance, when purchasing the new album, they may hold the same, or even less, awareness as the casual fans or general audience who may be less devoted, but more aware of the product content. This affects Trobes' status as fans and how they are viewed by others within the community. Fiske's statement that "the fan is an 'excessive reader' who differs from the 'ordinary' one in degree rather than kind" 1992:46) must also be considered at this point. Because Trobes approach the new release in a manner that is contrary to that displayed by the majority of the fan community, under Fiske's definition they might be considered "ordinary" readers. However, it is important to understand how the listening process will differ between Trobes and casual fans. Even though both may purchase the new product with the same (limited) knowledge of the new music, Trobes will apply longer-term historical, cultural and musical

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knowledge of the band to the music upon first listen. This will place them in a far better position to discuss issues concerning the album with other self-classified 'fans' after release, and this is what distinguishes them from a casual fan. As such, they are then a different interpretive community, existing temporarily between the subject positions of non-Trobes and casual fans.

Indeed, some Trobes considered that their club activities elevated their standing as an R.E.M. fan. One Trobe who could not ignore his strong desire to access information, considered his downfall as evidence of being a 'true' fan: "its impossible to be an rem fan and resist such incredible temptation!" (Octopus, 15 September 2004) Others however, felt their will to resist cemented and endorsed their fandom, and set them aside as greater fans:

> I'm proud to say that I have not downloaded it yet, and I don't plan to. Obviously I love them more than all of you because I love them enough to wait!!!!! (Opera Ghost, 16 September 2004).

Another individual believed that in order to achieve the full Trobe experience, it was necessary to be a long serving fan with prior knowledge and actual experience of the process. He considered the complete experience to be an indicator of high level fandom:

> To be a trobe you have to be a long time fan to have experienced it before, know what you're missing/getting out of it. Maybe others would on the surface see it as lesser, not caring as much, but in reality its being a bigger fan. Its kind of like saving the favorite part of your plate for last. To an observer it may seem like thats the part you like the least, but in reality its saving best for last (if you could understand that) (Jason, interview, 2005).

Therefore, this poster believes that while others may interpret the Trobe situation as an indication of lack of interest, their situation was in fact indicative of a stronger commitment as a fan.

It can be concluded that the Trobe process of choosing to operate through meaningful self-denial of information available concerning the new album creates an imbalance of knowledge and a self-inflicted reduction of fan-cultural capital for these users. It also creates an inversion and extension of fan cultural capital whereby new forms of value and capital are created within the community. As they will be unable to participate in any discussions concerning the new material with other Murmurs members, it would be interesting to consider what affect this would have on

their standing within the community and their interaction with other users who chose to embrace the new information, rather than turn against it. This leads me to move on to examine the Trobe process of re-integration with the rest of the community and desired re-acquisition of fan cultural capital once the album has been released. As I will show, this re-integration process with non-Trobes was as easily achievable as anticipated by the Trobe club, despite their non-normative actions during the period of self-isolation.

Reunification of the spoiled and un-spoiled

In order to ascertain the level of involvement and discussion remaining within the Trobe group after the album release, and to assess Trobes' feelings with regard to the purchase and reception of the new R.E.M. album, *Around the Sun*, I placed a thread within the forum entitled *How was it for you?*:

> I wasn't a Trobe but I followed a lot of the threads with great interest. I just wondered - now that the album has been out for a short while, how did being a Trobe change the experience of buying and listening to the new album for you? (lucy, 15 November 2004).

The thread received little reaction, and those who did reply were either Non-Trobes, or were unaware of what being a Trobe actually meant. Therefore this could indicate that there is no real Trobe group left post-release, until the stimulus for re-emergence arises. Since the new album has been released, there have only been two new threads posted within the Trobe forum, with both receiving only one or no replies. Given this situation, it is important to consider why Trobe interaction ceased after the album was released, and why they did not discuss their thoughts and feelings about the new release within their forum. It is possible that the abrupt end to the group indicates that the bonds that were formed were of insufficient strength to ensure continued contact and momentum within the forum. It could also be as a result of their loss of distinctiveness as a group. Two months after the album has been released there is little interaction between the Trobe members – this is contrary to the earlier claims from the group in regard to the pleasure and excitement factor that was mentioned in so many posts and threads building up to the album release. There has been no Trobe reaction to the recent threads placed in

the forum and little discussion of the frequently mentioned higher level of pleasure they would receive upon first listen. When the Trobe club was preparing for the release of the new album, many enjoyed exchanging information on what they had and had not listened to, so why the lack of activity now? Perhaps the fact that the forum host and club leader himself had to resign due to his failure to resist temptation may be one reason for the lack of activity as he was the main source of motivation with regard to creating new threads, recruiting new members and providing and encouraging support within the group. It is also possible that the Trobe members were simply eager to re-ingratiate themselves into discussions with the rest of the community and this superseded all other considerations.

To examine this further, it is important to consider the Trobe point of view concerning the lack of activity in the forum once the album had been released. A major contributory factor to the lack of activity for one respondent centred on the low number of long-term Murmurs members in the Trobe club who had been through the experience before and understood the commitment required:

> Of the members I bet many broke the rules. The members were not more "senior" members of the site so could have casually signed up. Lastly triskades.... whatever forum should have been in the ATS forum, not pop songs. It would have gotten more exposure. PS if you look you'll see-I tried! (Jason, interview, 2005).

For Jason, the Trobes forum attracted the wrong composition of membership and was erroneously located in the *Pop Songs* forum which is for discussion of past releases, rather than the *Around the Sun* forum, which catered for information on the new album. Stoffel blamed the lack of interest in discussion within the Trobe club on the completion of their mission, and the subsequent desire to enter discussions with other, non-Trobe, community members:

> I think there isn't much to say about an album you aren't listing to, and then when you hear it i guess you just jump into the discusions that are going already, and don't think about the 'trobe' part anymore (Stoffel, interview, 2005).

This viewpoint is endorsed by another Trobe member, who perceives the post-release situation as one where Trobes and non-Trobes cease to be divided and are united in their position to discuss the music on equal levels:

The "Trobe" forum is probably not as relevant after the actual release of an album because Trobes are now listening to the music and enjoying it in the same way that everyone else is. After the official release of a band's album, Trobes and Non-Trobes are pretty much on equal ground because the music is out there in all formats (inspectorjason, interview, 2005)[127]

This seems to suggest that it is an accepted process for Trobes to withdraw from observations and discussions with non-Trobes concerning the album, and then to immediately re-integrate when the need for withdrawal is no longer required. This temporary isolation demonstrates that Trobes' subcultural distinctiveness was based on their non-spoiler anticipation of the new album. Now the album is released and they have been exposed to the listening process, any post-listening discussion would not be communally distinctive. Therefore it is the termination of their subcultural distinctiveness, alongside the desire to re-establish levels of fan cultural and subcultural capital that may have been forfeited by many Trobe members during their community division, which could be the main explanation for the lack of activity in the Trobe forum with the conclusion brought by the album release.

This chapter has attempted to examine the situations that arise when a distinct group within the Murmurs community endeavour to resist the new technology and its temporalities in a nostalgic effort to recapture the pre-Internet experience of listening to and purchasing a new album as a singular event.

I have illustrated how different interpretations and performances of fan pleasure enacted by Trobes and non-Trobes have been a source of conflict within the community. I have argued that this conflict has not been resolved due to the Trobe failure to articulate the required subcultural knowledge in their requests to the rest of the community that would have produced successful subcultural performatives, and perhaps more supportive responses.

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[127] Inspectorjason expanded on this when offering feedback to the chapter: "This was my first experience, of sorts, with identifying with the "Trobe" frame of mind and the anticipation of music that we had not yet heard was a common bond between all of us, regardless of what we, as individuals, thought of the album once we had a chance to hear it. When the album was finally released, there was no longer a distinction between "Trobes", and other fans" (Interview, 2007).

I have suggested that The Trobe group, along with their avoidance of spoilers, disrupt the exchange of knowledge within the community and thereby initiate an imbalance of knowledge between members. I have questioned how this situation conforms to Pierre Lévy's cosmopedia and have argued that the activities of Trobes contradict his claim that "knowledge space" necessarily produces "collective intelligence."

I have highlighted the distinct dichotomy between the acquisition and value levels of fan cultural capital between Trobes and non-Trobes. As a result of this, I have argued that the Trobes work to create their own temporary forms of inverted fan cultural capital within the community. To support this, I have used Jeffrey Sconce's observation on trash cinema fans that also developed their own different types of cultural capital.

Trobes, I have argued, occupy positions between non-Trobes and casual fans. I have shown that they alternate between the definitions made by Fiske in regard to "excessive" and "ordinary" fan readers. They lack the current information about the new album held by "excessive" readers, and are able to recall and use longer-term historical, cultural and musical knowledge of the band to apply to the first listen which places them in a different position to "casual" fans or "ordinary" readers. This, I suggest, indicates that they exist between subject positions of non-Trobes and "casual" fans and therefore constitute a different, albeit temporary interpretive community.

I have questioned how subcultural distinctiveness can affect both a fan sub-group and also its surrounding fan community. By temporarily evading knowledge concerning a new album release, Trobes maintain their distinctiveness from the rest of Murmurs until the reasons for their actions have ended. I have analysed this situation and argued that the reunification process between Trobes and non-Trobes, due to the end of their subcultural distinctions, is as easily achieved as some Trobe members maintained.

In the next chapter I shall move on to introduce and examine Droolers, another group who, through their social engagement, are also distinct from the rest of the Murmurs community, but unlike Trobes, display permanent distinction from fan-cultural norms. I argue that this distinction is caused by the way Droolers relate to the object of fandom and the wider fan community

around them, due to their subversion of Murmurs' normative "masculine intelligentsia" approach to R.E.M. as a "thinking fan's rock band."

Chapter Six. Droolers

You've been sanctified
And I've been tried
Guilty by association
You've been canonized
And I've been fried
Guilty by association

All the little loonies
With a salient obsession
Come out from the boonies
With their sharpies and their guns
Loaded with questions
(Vic Chesnutt, *Guilty by Association*, 1995)[128]

In the last chapter, I explored the Trobes who, through their action of avoiding spoilers, self-impose a temporary absence from normative fan identity within Murmurs. In this chapter, I want to move on to introduce and examine Droolers, who, by the manner in which they culturally engage with R.E.M. and R.E.M. fandom, are also distinct from the rest of the community, but whose distinction from fan-cultural norms is permanent.

I will argue that this distinction is caused by the way Droolers relate to the object of fandom and the wider fan community around them, most specifically with regard to their engagement in culturally constructed gendered readings. Because the Murmurs community regards masculinised readings as normative behaviour, the Drooler's feminised approach fails to correspond with what Murmurs constitutes as the "right way" to read as a fan, which is, in essence, what Henry Jenkins has described as knowing the "expectations and conventions of the fan community" (1992:88). Furthermore, I will suggest that the unwillingness of Droolers to conform to the expressed wishes of other community members to read in the "right way," contradicts the claim by Jenkins that fans are always "responsive" to the demands of fandom, such as "expectations about what narratives are "appropriate" for fannish interest, what interpretations are "legitimate," and so

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[128] This 1995 song written by Athens singer-songwriter Vic Chesnutt features vocals from Michael Stipe, who, in 1988, produced Chesnutt's first album. This release "led to innumerable run-ins with probing Stipe obsessives, and in turn to the writing of Guilty by Association, a description of a friendship compromised by the albatross of celebrity" (*Sunday Times*, November 10, 1996). The lyrics describe Chesnutt's experiences with fans that he refers to as "little loonies" that are "loaded with questions." In the 2001 Q Magazine R.E.M. special, Chesnutt stated: "I met a lot of rabid R.E.M. fans, crazy freaks who'd want to touch the hand that touched Michael. I wrote a song about it, Guilty by Association, and the great punk rock coup of my career was to get Michael to sing on it."

forth" (1992: 88). Their continued feminised readings, and thereby resistance of normativity, I will show, results in Droolers being approached as what Mary Douglas (1966) terms "matter out of place." However, I will demonstrate how, through the creation of the People Forums, Droolers, paradoxically, are structured into the Murmurs system. This in turn leads to their characterisation as obsessed "others," and leads to the application of subcultural power that ensures their eventual forced relegation within the community, corresponding to what Michel Foucault (1986) terms a heterotopia. Drawing on Joli Jensen's (1992) study on fan characterisation, I will show that fans can be negatively characterized, not only within mass-media coverage, but also by other fans themselves. I will argue that Droolers, due to their failure to reflect the "central values" of R.E.M. fans and the Murmurs community, do not fit within the ordered structures of subcultural homologies and as such, this is the cause of their rejection.

The rise of the drool pool

In *Textual Poachers* Henry Jenkins argues that within a fan community there is a "right way" of reading and approaching the text or object of fandom that is determined and enforced by normative fan identity. He maintains that learning and understanding this "right way" to read is part of the socialization process where fans learn "how to employ and comprehend the community's particular interpretive conventions" (1992: 89). Other scholars have used Jenkins' model to identify legitimate forms of reading within fan communities and practices (Carruthers 2004, Bury 2005) and it is evident within Murmurs that there are specific forms of behaviour and readings that members are generally expected to conform to, which, as Chapter Four displays, are set out in the Code of Conduct. These norms are "structural in that they are routine and systematic features of the language" of an online community (Baym 2000: 141) and correspond with culturally constructed gendered readings which, as I highlighted in the Literature Review, must be performatively reaffirmed. The process of constructing gender within a culture involves "the individual [being] constructed and [constructing] herself/himself in relation to the cultural representations of what is male and what is female. To be so constructed... [is] to be inserted into a matrix of social meanings, and thereby into a mode of cultural discourse" (Moor 1986 [1996]: 179. See also Mead 1935, Butler 1990, Ortner and Whitehead 1981: 1, Kimmel 2005,

Cucchiari 1981, Harding 1998, Hale: 2003: 67, Howard and Hollander 2000, Wolfe, Jaffe and Crook 2006).

I argue that this process occurs within Murmurs, whereby what it means to be masculine and feminine is a cultural construction enacted by the community. Whereas, as I showed in Chapter Four, Murmurs constructs masculinity as an integral part of Liberal intelligentsia (and thereby part of the "central values" of the subcultural homology), femininity is instead defined "in terms of the absence of (allegedly) masculine characteristics" (Morley 2004: 95) such as reason and intellectualism. While these normative expectations conform to the principles suggested by Jenkins, I will argue that the manner in which Droolers engage with the object of fandom, and also other fans, works against the "right way" of reading in this specific fan community. Droolers are in effect viewed in relation to the normative fan identity of Murmurs as "misreading," which suggests there are "proper strategies of reading...which if followed produce legitimate meanings" and also "improper strategies... which... produce less worthy results" (Jenkins 1992: 33).

However, "misreading" is not always considered to produce results that are "less worthy." Instead, it has been viewed by certain scholars as more productive than more legitimate readings (see Guy-Bray 2002: 8 and Faure 1996: 138). Jes Battis (2006: np) also observes that the homoerotic misreading of the relationship between Clark and Lex in the TV show *Smallville* is "potentially a lot more interesting than the heterosexually "correct" reading of these two characters as close male friends." However, in Murmurs, misreading by Droolers is considered counter-productive to the intellectual image aspired to by the community. To understand how and why this occurs, I will now examine the People Forums, where drooler activity has been the most intense and prevalent.

The People Forums in Murmurs function specifically to cater for discussion on topics associated with R.E.M. band members, who each have their own designated sub-forum. These forums were originally used in line with the normative culturally masculinised reading strategies, which, to complement the Liberal intelligentsia image of the band and community, encouraged a predominant focus on the band members' artistic outlooks, song writing and musical abilities.

However, in recent years the areas of interest in the Michael Stipe and Mike Mills forums shifted in opposition to this, and instead began to adopt a culturally feminised approach that encompassed issues surrounding their personal life and physical attributes. This altered focus of attention was accompanied by posts that displayed extreme levels of adoration and desire, which were identified in the community as drooling[129].

A culturally feminised focus on the physicality of the object of fandom has been a subject of much contention amongst fan communities that have tended to possess masculinised normative identities. Andrea Macdonald, in her account of *Quantum Leap* fans, described how some posts from female fans were "forced off" (1998: 146) the discussion newsgroup rec.arts.tv. due to their focus on "Scott Bakula's cute butt" and the relationships between characters in the show (1998: 148). These fans eventually formed their own private offshoot club from the main newsgroup and email list. Susan Clerc also discovered divisions between different gendered readings of *Star Trek, X-Files* and *Babylon 5* fans, and observed the creation of a number of "estrogen brigades" formed by members to discuss issues in isolation from the main, culturally masculinised, fan community to which they belonged (2000:224 and 1996:43, see also Bury 2005 for an examination of the David Duchovny Estrogen Brigade[130]). In these instances, fans that had a preference for feminised readings were forced to withdraw from wider community participation and converse in private. How are feminised readings expressed and received in the Murmurs community?

A prime example of drooling is contained within a thread posted by a member named Millsfreak enquiring "How Does Mike Smell?" that displays the manner in which Droolers can engage with each other:

Millsfreak: "If you find out what colonge it is......let me know...that way I can buy it and then put it on my pillow and smell him all night. If I could smell him....then...I would be weak at the knees too!!!"

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[129] Drooling has also been observed within other fan communities. For example, Sarah R. Wakefield (2001) outlines the desire expressed by female *X-Files* fans towards the character Dana Scully in the community the Order of the Blessed Saint Scully the Enigmatic, with a fondness for discussing her clothes and hair. Salmon and Clerc (2005: 168) also examine female wrestling fans that drool and engage in mailing lists such as "Wresting Hunks."

[130] See also Doss (1999:116 – 161) for an examination on Elvis fans and the focus from some on his physicality.

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Texarkana flower: "*sigh* he looks like he smells good . . . . ."

Millsfreak: "Yeah...he does....I'm telling you...I would put that colonge on my pillow. I don't care...If I smell like him...at least I smell good"

Texarkana flower: "omg, that would ensure good Mike dreams every night!"

Millsfreak: "Honestly....how do you think he smells? Like a sweet rose? Like cookies? Like English Leather? Like Musk? Like Lemons?" (10 March 2004).

This thread is representative of the style of conversation and level of appreciation expressed within the forum by Droolers. The emotional discussion of Mike's physicality can be seen as pleasurable for Droolers due to "the opportunity to empathize with others' feelings" (Baym 2000: 94). However, according to my interpretation it is feminised, as it is unavoidably contrary to the masculine reading conventions that are encouraged in the community. Droolers also entice each other through tempting stories and accounts that encourage the perpetuation of this particular expression of fandom within the forum[131]. This is evident in the following extracts from a thread, which acted as a positive performance of fan identity for Droolers, in its recollection from a fan of an experience backstage with Mike Mills on the 2004 American tour:

well, i'm not one to kiss and tell, but since you are all just as big fans as i am i'll spill the beans. i hope mike can forgive me! after mike left the backstage meet and greet, in comes one of the manager-type guys and comes over to me and says "mr. mills has requested i escort you backstage" so naturally i jumped up and followed him... i sit there for just a few minutes and here comes mike and two other guys and mike says "i thought you might like to walk me out. (trust me - just writing this gives me that same OH MY GOD feeling as it did when he said it.) so we walk out by the bus and that's where some fans were waiting for autographs. from there it's pretty much a blur. seriously - i was in such a state of amazement and euphoria. but he does have the softest lips i've ever known. a few incredible kisses and then he had to go. and i walked on clouds back to my car. maybe some day my prince will come again. until then....sigh......... (lvchld, 02 November 2004)

This post expresses an emotional experience, based on escapism. As such, this personal encounter, although presented as real, could be interpreted as a communal fantasy whereby the drooler takes an opportunity to become "part of another world and participate in its glamour in contrast to their own lives" (Stacey 1994: 116). This is evident in the distinction made between

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[131] See Fischer and Landy for an outline on how scandalous information can "liven up" the work of a star, and be a "guilty pleasure" for fans (2004: 4).

the drooler and "some fans" waiting for autographs. In this situation the drooler is no longer simply a fan, but has temporarily transcended to "another world" that is markedly different from her own, and more closely aligned with the star. Jackie Stacey suggests that it is precisely the "difference between these worlds that produces the fascination and the desire for movement from one to the other" (1994: 117). The dream-like language of walking on clouds, coupled with the imagery of Mike Mills as a prince that takes the fan into this other world, corresponds with "projected desires of better things" that are "lacking in everyday life" (1994: 120).

By sharing this account of escapism with the community, other fans reflected this positive performance of drooler fan identity and viewed it as an encouragement to believe that they would also have an opportunity to be noticed and chosen by Mike, in the hope of moving into "another world." Because the above fan described being selected by Mike Mills from the audience at an R.E.M. concert, rather than a more unattainable setting, it is possible that others would consider that the same occurrence could happen to them. This reflects what Sheryl Garratt has referred to as an "illusion of accessibility" where the image of the star includes a level of ordinariness that entices fans to suppose that "one day, he could be theirs.[132]" To encourage this, the artist should be "careful never to mention a girlfriend or even the type of woman they prefer in any but the vaguest terms" (2004: 404). The attraction of this level of ordinariness within the image of a star can be combined with the suggestion of their difference, offering the fan transcendence into "another world." This is further evident in the following post where, in an effort to establish the type of person that Mike was likely to choose and find attractive, one member attempted to define how and why the situation took place, and what characteristics helped to form the attraction:

> WOW what a great story! That is one of the best Mills stories I've heard. Now how did you catch his eye to begin with? Are you a brunette? Blonde? I always figured he liked skinny, young blonde types. I remember him flirting with 2 of them at the Denver concert a few years back (where he introduced Julian for the first time). And I think Julian's mom is a blonde too. Maybe he's open for all types (sigh, wishful thinking)...i.e. normal girls like us! Thanks again for sharing! (camilla, 5 November

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[132] Caryn James (2006) observed a similar accessible illusion cultivated by Princess Diana who perfected "the common touch although she was anything but." Tracy Moore (2005: np) focuses on an "illusion of accessibility" that can be cultivated for some bands online. Although a MySpace page was created for one band that appeared to give direct access to its members, it was maintained by the owner of the official website, which led Moore to conclude that "none of the members really look at the page all that much."

2004).

This poster simultaneously conjures an image of Mike as attainable, with a level of ordinariness maintaining the "illusion of accessibility," and also acknowledges his difference by considering it "wishful thinking" for him to choose from "normal girls like us."[133] This was developed further in the thread when a poster who supposedly witnessed the event indicated her willingness to impress her advances on Mike Mills if the opportunity should arise:

> I saw everything that happened outside the tour bus. You are one lucky girl!!!! Now if
> only I could seduce Mike without my boyfriend knowing hehe jking (beezd, 25
> October 2004).

This statement, although presented as a light-hearted comment, can be taken in conjunction with the previous drooling posts, as indicative of the way that fans can show differing intensities of appreciation in their postings towards the object of fandom. In alignment with this, it is important to recognise that the Mike Mills forum is not completely comprised of Droolers, but is rather a social mix of members with varying levels of interest and different preferences for discussion topics. It is however noticeable that Droolers are more prominent in this sub-forum, due to their different interpretation and expression of fandom compared to the majority of the community and which, in effect, attracts criticism because it is out of synchronisation with the accepted standards expected of R.E.M. fans in Murmurs. This viewpoint is endorsed by the Mike Mills forum host:

> As host of that conference, there are times I want to put my head in my hands and cry.
> It's not all bad though, there are quite a few Mills fans who are sharp and witty and can
> talk about topics other than Mike's hair and smell and ass. It's just that the droolers are
> more obvious, and some of them could qualify for a doctorate if the topic was explain
> in a zillion words the myriad ways Mike Mills is sexy . It takes a bit more searching but
> there are some good threads in there. Ya just have to look for them (Sweet Fanny
> Addams, 11 November 2004).

These comments highlight hierarchical preferences which coincide with the call for change from normative fans. This situation was not specific to the Mike Mills forum, but was also evident in the Michael Stipe forum, which was fraught with a similar conflict. While Droolers are common to both forums, there are discernable differences in their outlook and approach. As Droolers in

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[133] A similar occurrence was recognised by Prandstaller (2003: 17) among Adam Clayton fans, who displayed a strong identification with his new girlfriend, an American fan who was viewed as a "normal, common girl."

the Mike Mills forum converse with an anticipation of their desires being realised in an offline setting, droolers in the Michael Stipe forum, besides expressing admiration for his physical features, are driven to excuse his actions and behaviour, to defend him, to presume to know his thoughts and to project an image of themselves that assumes they are just like him.

Jackie Stacey emphasises the power fan identification with stars can have. She maintains that it can be contradictory: "they value difference for taking them into a world in which their desires could potentially be fulfilled... [yet] they value similarity for enabling them to recognise qualities they already have" (1994:128). Droolers in the Michael Stipe forum actively negotiate an appreciation of the difference between themselves and the object of fandom, and subsequently demonstrate "a desire to move across that difference and become more like the star" (2000: 149).When this occurs, similarities with the object of fandom are not only recognised, but are also actively pursued: "many forms of identification involve processes of transformation and the production of new identities, combining the spectactor's existing identity with her desired identity and her reading of the star's identity" (1991: 160)[134]. From a similar standpoint, Cornel Sandvoss argues, in his examination of processes of self-reflection in fandom, that "the object of fandom, whether it is a sports team, a television programme, a film or pop star, is intrinsically interwoven with our sense of self, with who we are, would like to be, and think we are" (2005: 96)[135]. He thus suggests a model of fandom based on self-reflection between the fan and object of fandom, whereby the object operates as "part of the fan's (sense of) self" (2005: 101). Practices of self-reflection are evident "in the way in which [fans] superimpose attributes of the self, their beliefs and value systems and, ultimately, their sense of self on the object of fandom" (2005: 104). However, this process, he argues, is based on narcissism, a procedure of misrecognition, whereby "our fascination with the object of fandom does not arise out of the fact that, objectively, it is like us, but is instead based on the projection of our own image" (2005: 104). In this sense, the fan text "functions as a mirror" through which "fan's self-recognition" and meanings of readings are shaped (2005: 108).

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[134] See Willamson for an illustration how some female vampire fans experience the same self identification with their favourite vampire stars (2005: 160-162).

[135] See also Sandvoss 2003for an examination of football fandom as a space of self-reflection.

How does desire for the star correspond with this identification? Constance Penley (1992) examines the amalgamation of desire and identification within the "slash" fiction of female *Star Trek* fans where Spock and Kirk are depicted as lovers, yet "not somehow being homosexual" (1992: 488). This allows the women to "be Kirk or Spock...and also still have (as sexual objects) either or both of them since, as heterosexuals, they are not unavailable to women." With this, Penley demonstrates that women can "resist, negotiate, and adapt to their own desires' a mainstream product offered for their consumption" (1992: 484). I would argue that this behaviour is evident in the Michael Stipe forum where Droolers identify with, defend, and adapt Michael to their own desires, projecting and protecting their "own image" (Sandvoss 2005: 104) of him. This is apparent in a thread entitled "Saint or Scum?" which included the link to a website exposing him as a bad tipper in restaurants:

> Stipeeyes: I wonder where they get their bogus info from. I'm sure Michael is a saint when it comes to tipping. Unless he had bad service. Then they get little tip.

> Kanyons Girl: I think someone made a mistake and put Michael Stipe in the incorrect column.

> Stipeeyes: I knew Michael was a good tipper. Because he isn't greedy with his money.

> Lotus eater: That is ok, any tip would be a bonus just to get the priviledge to wait on Michael!

> Delerium: maybe it's just reports from disgruntled waiters who caught them on bad nights. i try to tip a lot but if i'm having a bad day, or know i'm going to be short cash for the week, i don't tip well either (15 November 2001).

These Droolers express appreciation for the object of fandom in a different manner to those in the Mike Mills forum. Rather than solely pursuing ideals of romance that they can personally achieve, Droolers in this forum also display a belief that Michael needs them to protect him[136]. The strong elements of defensiveness in the above thread can be seen as an attempt to provide support in countering the negative portrayal of Michael, in this case, as a bad tipper. They defend

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[136] Jeanne Lucas has observed similar behaviour from Barry Manilow fans. She states "It's like they feel Barry needs them desperately...It's not that they need him, he needs them...It's like he's this flawed, needy guy that they have to be there to support." However, she later concludes that these fans "need to feel that they belong somewhere... [it is] more to do with their needs than it ever does Barry" (Butler, 2002: 181). T.J. Craig also discovered a similar situation with Japanese idols that, through connections of companionship to their fans, "evoke the sense that they should be protected carefully" (2000: 313). Likewise, Sue Wise described her perception of Elvis as "someone to care about, to be interested in, and to defend against criticism" (2004: 395).

his character by suggesting that the information is untrue or can be justified in a series of ways. As Sandvoss explains, objects of fandom are "at risk of external interference," and when this occurs, the object can become "privileged over the self" in the sense that "fans are prepared to adjust to changing external textual characteristics of their object of fandom, even when they are understood to be in opposition to the fan's world view and self-image" (2005: 112). However, as I have shown, Droolers, rather than adjusting to the negative portrayals of Michael, instead excuse his behaviour by adapting it to their own desires through the rejection of reports that contradict their self-reflective image of him[137]. In 2005, after an account of an unpleasant fan experience with Michael was posted, it was suggested that members should refrain from posting threads that showed Michael in a negative fashion, in order that their perceived and desired positive image of him would be preserved:

> From now on can please not have threads that go like this. Sorry, it's not that it's a bad post or anything I just don't like hearing about Michael Stipe being rude and arrogant. I know that sounds really stupid but in my head I have an image of Michael being this really nice kind person and I don't want to spoil that. Sorry if that sounds stupid. I'm sure it's probably not his fault or anything when he is rude, he has a write to his privacy but I like to think of him in a certain way, and yes I know that sounds stupid, again sorry. (Vegies-R-funny, 24 August 2005)

It is evident from this post that Droolers' defensive approach to portrayals of Michael developed from excusing his behaviour to also attempting to remove or censor unfavourable details that did not complement their preferred image of him[138]. Furthermore, they attempt to predict his actions from a sometimes benevolent perspective that falls in line with their own identification of how he and they would act, which, according to their perception, is the same. In this sense, they are

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[137] See Prandstaller (2003: 15) for an outline how Adam Clayton is portrayed by his fans in one community, and how disappointment for his silence during talk shows was transformed by some into a "positive trait" that increased his appeal.

[138] Toby Miller outlines how fan clubs, magazines and bulletin boards react to criticism from fans differently: it is not accepted by all three mediums (2003: 104). In some fan communities, the avoidance of negative comments from users forms part of the rules. Bradforums.net, a community for Brad Pitt fans, does not permit negative posts from members. Critical posts are deleted and members have a "three strike and you're out" warning system. (Libby, 9 April, 2006 http://bradforums.net/lofiversion/index.php/t4966.html) Mullen *et al.* state "for some fans, the disclosure of intimate details about their idol is cause for disillusionment rather than encouraging the pursuit of a closer relationship" (2000: 225). Sometimes fans are encouraged to avoid negative thoughts in order to promote cohesion and benefit the object of fandom. Gatto (2004: 65) accounts the Chicago Cub's manager's appeal to fans to refrain from negative thinking and comments in order to achieve a more positive outcome that would lead to success for the team. Daniel Cavicchi also highlights how some Bruce Springsteen fans viewed negativity from others to an album release to be an indicator of their "casual fan" status (1998: 103).

seemingly performing and projecting parallels between themselves and the object of fandom (Sandvoss 2005: 111).

Other threads similarly provide excuses for Michael's conduct by giving reasons that exonerate him and place the onus for the problem on other people and circumstances outside his control:

> Stipeeyes: I have no criticisms about Michael. I always found him to be very polite in interviews. I do have a bootleg from when R.E.M. played California in 1999. A girl had corrected Michael on how he said the word aztec. Which he pronounces astec. He seems to have trouble making a z sound so he just uses the s sound. And Michael said, "You mean there are actually smart women in this country?" Well that was the only thing I didn't like. But he apologized for that comment. I was very shocked Michael made such a comment considering how much respect and admiration he has for women. So I'm sure he was just having a bad day which I could tell by listening to the entire show. He was a little moody. Maybe on that particular day he had to deal with women who were not using their brains. Happens sometimes...At least he apologized.

> Zimti: Well, I never got tired of him ;) or thought he was a jerk in an interview - I really love the way he sometimes deals with interviewers (you know - telling them stupid things and fooling them etc.) ;) I think it's lots of fun and sometimes the interviewers are idiots because they take everything he says seriously :D Of course he sucked in a song sometimes but that's human! (3 November 2002).

It is clear from the above that the cause of the misdemeanors in these examples rests with other parties, rather than Michael. For instance, bad behaviour in an interview is the fault of the interviewer for taking Michael's words seriously. In cases where he cannot be exonerated, the incident is put down to simple human error.

Through these feminised readings, Droolers are not performing in a manner consistent with the intended functions of the People Forum. They are, in effect, seemingly considered by normative fans to be engaged in the wrong way of reading the object of fandom. Their actions are regarded as reducing Mike and Michael to figures of identification and/or objectification, a conduct that is in opposition to the expected standards of behaviour and normative readings of the community. I shall now examine the normative masculine approach that I interpret is adopted by the community and determine how it is continually reinforced within the Peter Buck and Bill Berry forums.

Appreciating the cool: normative masculinised discourse in the People Forums

It is my intention here to argue that fan practices in this community "privilege masculine competencies and dispositions" (Hollows 2003: 39). In Murmurs, masculine discourse is viewed as producing a normative fan activity and therefore, in contrast to the feminine approach of Droolers, tends to hold greater subcultural power. As I discussed in Chapter Four, normativity in Murmurs is reinforced by the subcultural homology of R.E.M. fans, the "central values" of which promote a masculinised Liberal intelligentsia. Thus, any non-normative behaviour would entail a breach of these values. To understand this further, I now want to look at the other band forums, focusing on Peter Buck and Bill Berry, where normativity is more prevalent. The Peter Buck forum is mainly consistent with the "right way" of reading in the manner it attracts discussion from fans who adopt more masculinised discussions, which tend to focus on his song writing and musical creativity. Because of this, drooling, which is viewed as feminised discourse, is minimal. Although the forum does contain some conversation regarding Peter's personal life, the masculine focus is maintained through a concentration on his public persona, interests and achievements. This perception is apparent in the following extract of a thread entitled "Peter's Equipment" which displays the analytical, technical and informative levels of masculinised discourse that the majority of the fans in the forum aspire to:

Particle Wolf: "Ok, i know this will have been posted many a time before, but i was wondering what equipment Peter uses??"

Michi85: "Peter usually uses: Rickenbacker 360 for much songs, Rickenbacker 330 for Me in honey and i want to be wrong, Taylor jumbo acoustic 800 series, Mandolin Gibson, Banjo i don't know the signature, Vox AC-30 for live show and Savage rehearsal hall, e-bow for walk unafraid, electron blue, leave, ebow the letter and various Pedal."

LST 390: "Does this mean ME N HONEY's in an open tuning?"

Sweden: "From what I remember, Me in Honey is in C sharp, right? I seem to remember Peter playing a C shord shape for the verses during the shows I saw. Maybe it's simply tuned in F, which would make the above equation work(?) I guess there was enough time for Dewitt to re-tune the Rick 330 between the two songs during the shows where they both were played..." (1 July 2005).

This thread demonstrates that the forum holds a more reserved and emotionally tempered appreciation that is not intrusive and offensive, and corresponds more clearly with the fan culture's "right way" of reading.

While some fans prefer to discuss the technical aspects of Peter Buck's music, there are others that also focus on his physical attributes. However, this masculinised approach is markedly different from that found in the Michael Stipe and Mike Mills forums. Descriptions of Peter's physicality tend to be based around the compliment that his image is very "cool" and relaxed, a feature which is appreciated and respected by his fans. Identification with, and desire towards, the star, as evident in the Michael Stipe and Mike Mills forums is here explicitly rejected. This is evident in an extract from a thread entitled "In which R.E.M. video do you think Peter looks his best?:"

> Remfmfan: "As I was having an 'R.E.M. Video Day' last Saturday... I noticed how unbelievably cool Peter is in the video for Shiny Happy People. Not only do I love his refusal to smile or show any emotion in the majority of the video, his hair looks great, and I love the fact he's "playing" the mandolin for a song that doesn't even feature that instrument. Also, toward the very end of the video, you can see Peter let loose and dance a bit next to Bill...I love it...

> Sibko: "I don't know about best but he looks pretty cool in Drive, it almost doesnt even look like PB, almost like his evil twin."

> OneArpeggioPete: "second vote here for what's the frequency, kenneth. he's incredibly cool in that one. and i love the way he looks bored in the great beyond."

> Jlbreck: "Star 69 is a favorite of mine. I can't describe when it takes place, but there's a segment of him playing guitar in the middle that is very cool" (11 February 2005).

Although this thread is focused on Peter's physicality, the posters, with the "right way" of reading in mind, express appreciation rather than desire. Why do these fans express themselves differently than Droolers? I will suggest that this occurs due to an imbalance of knowledge between Droolers and other community members. I discussed in Chapter Five how Trobes, through their avoidance of spoilers, and self-imposed isolation, initiate an imbalance of knowledge within the community. I would argue that here Droolers, because of their misreading, hold, and attempt to exchange, a type of knowledge which is not considered socially acceptable by the wider community. In making a comparison between male "nerds" and heavy metal

listeners, Will Straw highlights how "certain forms of knowledge" can work to relegate a group because of their "inability to translate knowledge into socially acceptable forms of competence" (1983[2004]: 105), something, I suggest, that is happening here. The feminised knowledge held by droolers secures their position in a "relationship of polar opposition" against the normative masculinity of the community. Although in Straw's example the nerds are male, Henry Jenkins demonstrates in his study of "trekkies," how nerds of both genders are often feminised, de-sexualised, and seen as being "infantile [and] emotionally and intellectually immature" (Jenkins 1992: 10). Droolers occupy a similar standing and are subsequently "devalued and marginalized" (Straw 1983[2004]: 105), due to their resistance to the interpretive norms of the community.

The Bill Berry forum allows for discussion concerning R.E.M.'s drummer, who retired from the band in 1997. In testament to his popularity, the forum continues to attract and maintain members with interest in his past as a member of the band, and also current activities as a farmer. Due to his change in lifestyle and infrequent public appearances, the main focus of the forum is seldom based on current events, but rather on speculation and discussions surrounding his past. The forum is also maintained through a virtual bar named The Tractor Club. It is through this outlet that forum members can have a virtual drink and socialise in "Bill's barn." Whilst this social aspect helps encourage members to participate in the normative masculine discourse, of equal significance in the contribution to the forum's well-being is the appreciation of art and poetry that can be found in many threads. It can be seen that contributors to this forum express their fandom in a different manner to those in the other band member forums, by being informative and also creative in their approach. This is evident in a long-running poetry thread where members construct and post poems concerning Bill Berry:

> I thought it would be fun to have a thread devoted to Bill poems, we are such a
> talented lot here I am sure we can come up with some really good ones, here is
> mine........

> Bill, I miss you night and day
> Ever since with REM, you no longer play
> If I could see you again, I'm sure I'd be fine
> So please consider playing with REM one more time (mrs berry, 15 October 2001).

It is clear that the username of this member as "mrs berry" expresses marital desire towards Bill. However, this user's desire is not rejected within the forum as it is expressed in normative masculinised discourse. Her poem is also composed in this manner, with a concentration on Bill's musical abilities. Within this forum, members also compile haikus and R.E.M. song parodies, with the lyrics altered to focus on Bill. This type of creative approach can also be found through the medium of Bill artwork, and fan fiction. In this respect, a thread was constructed for the creation of a long-running fictional story based on Bill farm's life which allowed forum members to create each instalment and continue the story:

OneArpeggioPete: "mmm, what a beautiful day", bill smiled to himself when he emerged into the hot july sun of oconee county adjusting the shoulderstraps of his dungarees...he sighed good-naturedly to himself and climbed onto the tractor to..."

Susan Elaine: "...plough the acres that lay ahead of him. He stifled a yawn as he turned the key to his prized tractor. Suddenly, from behind him, a soothing voice spoke. Almost falling from behind the wheel in shock Bill turned to face the unknown voice......"

Tessa:"...Mind if I accompany you for a little while?" Bill was speechless as he watched the dark figure readjust his black overcoat...He couldn't see his face underneath the hood ... a hood which was as pitch black as nothing he had ever seen before, blacker than his vinyl albums in a darkened room ... The figure: "We have some business to do ..." (14-15 November, 2002).

However, it is clear that, although these Bill Berry fans engage in fantasy, it is markedly different to that of Droolers in the Mike Mills forum. Fans here reject romanticism and, rather than creating a fantasy based on aspirations of escapism, which is associated with drooling, this fan fiction projects Bill's engagement in various practical situations, such as using his tractor and ploughing fields.

From an overall perspective it can be seen that the band member forums reveal different expressions of fandom, some of which are more clearly welcomed into the community than others. The level of drooling in the Michael Stipe and Mike Mills forums has been a concern for many members, while the focus on music in the Peter Buck forum and the creativity of the Bill Berry section have been more accepted due to their compliance with the normative intellectual image of the community. This situation can be seen as endorsing Cline's observation that if you

are female and a fan of a rock band, "you're careful to discuss the band in terms of their artistic merits" (1992: 69). Thus, this can be applied to some extent to both male and female community members within Murmurs: it is masculinised discussion of R.E.M.'s "artistic merit" that is accepted, rather than a heterosexual feminised concentration on their physicality. Therefore, the normative masculine readings of the community dictate that female community members must "distance themselves from the negative associations of femininity" (Hollows 2003: 39) by becoming "one of the boys" (Frith and McRobbie 1978 [2004]: 377, and Thornton 2003: 104) if they are to be accepted[139]. Therefore, this othering of feminised readings seemingly demonstrates how "women's participation in computer-mediated spaces is subordinated" (Macdonald 1998:148).These circumstances also support Graham's assertion that individuals belong to a community because they "accept and adhere to norms and standards...which define and constitute membership, and we remain members only so long as this is true" (1999: 142).

It is evident that Droolers fail to observe the norms and standards of the community and I will move on to look at how this breach of the "central values" of the subcultural homology affects their membership of Murmurs. To understand this, I shall now focus on how the misreading by Droolers affects the "ordered structures" of the community, and examine the manner in which they are subsequently characterised.

From loonies to dorks: homology and characterisation

As I argued in Chapter Four, the homology of R.E.M. fans is mainly projected through Liberal intelligentsia[140], which encompasses political and cultural awareness, environmental concern, and an expressive appreciation of art, music and literature. These qualities are reinforced by the band themselves in their music, lyrics, conduct, and the manner in which they publicly support local and national charitable organisations. In this way, R.E.M. projects an image as "southern

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[139] However, in a community where normative behaviour is feminised, the opposite may apply. S. Elizabeth Bird, in her study of the *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman* e-mail discussion list, observed a situation where male members "soon learn to adapt their communication style to fit the predominant mode, or else they drift away, as many have done" (2003: 67).
[140] See Bannister (2006: 25-57) for a discussion on how masculine power in culture is articulated through intellectualism.

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gentlemen" that it is hoped others will emulate[141]. It is also an example of how R.E.M. fans, and the Murmurs community, "make sense" of their world.

In this regard, I would argue that Droolers, through the feminised manner in which they socially engage, work against the masculinised intellectual image that R.E.M. fans attempt to reinforce. Their actions repress and contradict the otherwise subculturally desired social image. As such, Droolers fail to reflect or uphold the "central values" that form the homology of the community and as a consequence they are rejected by the "ordered structures" of meaning linked to normative fan identity. A similar occurrence is recounted by Salmon and Clerc in their study of female wrestling fans. Their drooling was construed as an "unintended interpretation" that contradicted the "central values" of wrestling, which was to project a manly image. The appearance of wrestler Shawn Michaels in *Playgirl* magazine infuriated male fans, who chanted and booed at matches (2005: 169). The removal of his title and revamp of his character was an effort to counteract the threat to the image of wrestling posed by Droolers, who did not fit within the wrestling fans' subcultural homology.

How, then, do normative fans in Murmurs interpret the breach of these "central values"? For fan poster Eric, the influx of younger members into the community played a prominent part in devaluing the language and content of the band member forums:

> The community is much younger today and the fans of murmurs tend to be a lot less intelligent than they were 2 or 4 or 6 years ago. Messageboards tend to capture youngsters wanting to speak in chat speak and not intelligent people that want to talk about REM. People would rather look at photos of REM rather than listen to the music. They care about popularity rather than spirit. (Eric, interview, 2005.)

These comments are critical of the current state of the People Forums, where it was felt a different kind of fandom was being expressed by the way Droolers showed preferences for viewing and discussing images of the band, rather than showing an "intelligent" appreciation of the music. For Eric, youth was not equated with intelligent posts, and therefore did not contribute to the accepted intellectual image of an R.E.M. fan aspired to by the Murmurs community. For another respondent, it was the prominent existence of Droolers within the community, and their

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[141] The phrase has been applied to the band consistently throughout their career. For example, Fiona Sturges (2003: np) describes Michael Stipe as a charming "southern gentleman."

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feminised approach of individualising and objectifying the band, that in turn affected his own fandom and resulted in his diminished appreciation of R.E.M.[142]:

> Part of my loss of interest in R.E.M. over the years can be attributed to this very website as well. When one visits an R.E.M. site for years and is constantly besiged with sig files of Stipe's bald head, belly button, or Mike Mills's long wavy hair and *Monster*-jacket, over-exposure to something is inevitable. I've never liked the objectification of R.E.M. band members and have only visited the "Stipe/Mills/Buck/ Berry" forums a couple of times during my six years here, but these objectifications of the band seem to have spread throughout the site by way of osmosis through avatars, sig files, R.E.M.-smiles, and other acts of expression. I'm not offended by any of this, necessarily, but it really doesn't make me want to listen to R.E.M. that much. (inspectorjason, interview, 2005).

The comments from this respondent specifically identify his loss of interest in R.E.M. as having been caused by an over exposure to drooling, which is an indication that his normative masculine discourse is directly opposed to the feminised fan readings of Droolers[143]. According to Inspector Jason, Droolers' feminised values are construed as being too preoccupied with physical image and a desire for information about the private lives of the band members[144]:

> chit chat about people we admire is one thing - it can be interesting. What I find odd is the 'need to know' phenomena with some people. *Why* exactly do you need to know? What impact would that have on your enjoyment of the band? None? Then why do you need to? Collecting information about the intimate parts of people lives sounds like obsession to me. (DrinkTheElixer, 29 September 2004)

It can be seen in the above post that Droolers are viewed as pursuing a level of intimacy irrelevant to their enjoyment of the music, an action which can be construed as a contradiction of the intellectual values that run through the homological structure of the community's meanings and values. This prospect leads to Droolers' characterisation by the poster as obsessed, and

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[142] This situation also confirms Chris Rojek's assertion that fans "are capable of withdrawing attachment as well as affirming it" (2001: 48).

[143] This is also evident in inspector jason's feedback to this chapter: "For me, it's always been all about the music when it comes to being a fan of R.E.M. I don't want to be best friends with the individual band members or know about their personal lives beyond what they choose to divulge in their songs that are released to the public. I feel the same way about other artists. I consider myself a serious music fan, with "music fan" being the key description, and this carries over to other forms of media as well. As Stephen King once wrote, "It's the tale, not he who tells it." With R.E.M.'s music, as well as the music from other artists, it's the song, not the person who sings it" (Interview, 2007).

[144] Laderman (2003: 34) describes the fervor of Rudolph Valentino fans to access as much intimate details about the star's personal life as possible. After his death, some fans desired to maintain this personal access and even sought out his body at the funeral parlour.

therefore disreputable. Joli Jenson refers to the abundance of literature that repeatedly characterises fandom as "excessive, bordering on deranged, behavior" (1992: 9). She states that when fans are continually characterised as "them," they can be differentiated from scholars ("people like us") and respectable aficionados. Once this occurs and "fans are characterised as deviant, they can be treated as disreputable, even dangerous...[145]" For instance, the Vic Chesnutt lyrics cited at the beginning of this chapter refer to R.E.M. fans as obsessed "little loonies" and so distances them from the musicians. Droolers demonstrate that this characterisation occurs, not only within literature on fandom[146], but also between fans themselves. The following post is an example of how non-Droolers can exercise their subcultural power to characterise Droolers as "delusional" and "dumb," which works to create a distinction between normative fan identity ("us") and "them":

> Does anyone have an idea how to get these forums back to a state where you don't
> have to cringe with embarassment as soon as you enter them because you're confronted
> with a load of posts concerned with JMS'/genitals/mike's kissing skills etc.?
> i usually don't call people delusional or dumb, but that's just what comes to mind after
> having observed that kind of stuff going on for quite a while now (MeanCat, 17
> November 2004).

This poster regards Droolers as an embarrassment to the forums. Her request for ideas and solutions from "anyone" to restore the People Forums to their previous normative state further classifies Droolers as "others," as they are not included in this appeal. Jenson observes that when this othering occurs, the fan can be characterised as "an obsessed loner, suffering from a disease of isolation, or a frenzied crowd member, suffering from a disease of contagion" (1992:13). In the following two posts, both forms of characterisation are evident. In the first post, from a thread entitled "Yer all sick" placed within the Mike Mills forum, Droolers are rendered as loners that need to combat isolation in their lives:

> yer all a bunch of sick puppies and you need to get a life.
> get a boyfriend.
> go to weight watchers'.
> volunteer with the american red cross.

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[145] In addition, David Sibley states "in order to legitimate their exclusion, people who are defined as 'other', or residual, beyond the boundaries of the acceptable, are commonly represented as less than human" (1992: 107).
[146] Droolers have also been characterised as engaging in teenage like behaviour. Bernard Zuel's 2004 article on Viggo Mortensen fans repeatedly refers to them as having a "crush," and contrasts this with their adult professional lives.

learn to salsa dance.
something.
please you need therapy (Thursday, 16 October 2004).

This range of suggestions to alter Droolers' perceived isolatory condition, categorises them as social misfits and indicates "a presumed social dysfunction" (Jenson 1992: 9). In order to "get a life," the poster asserts they must expand their social network and develop other interests besides R.E.M. The following post continues to not only characterise Droolers as "scary" loners, but also "frenzied crowd members" that need to "chill out":

> I have never been in that conference until about 10 minutes ago. That place is legitimately scary. Scary as hell. There is some freaky, obsessive, and lonely people in there. Wow. I don't get the fuss. Big deal. You met [Mike Mills]. I met him too. When I met him, he had his kid with him. Who the hell cares? And I could have met Michael, Peter and Scott before the VFC show in St. Paul, I was within arms reach of a all three of them at different times, and no security. Just standing around in a lobby area. Just left them alone, so as to not be stalker-ific. People gots to chill out (Sam, 11 November 2004).

This poster expresses confusion over the "fuss" made by Droolers over the band members. He contrasts his own experiences of meeting the band in a relaxed setting where security was not needed to a presumed hysterical and "stalker-ific" reaction from Droolers if they had been in the same situation. His lack of emotion expressed when recounting his experience corresponds with Jensen's claim that "those who exhibit charged and passionate responses are believed to be out of control; those who exhibit subdued and unimpassioned reactions are deemed to be superior types" (1992: 24). It is my interpretation that within Murmurs, masculinised "unimpassioned reaction" towards the band members is normative and conflicts with the feminised, "out of control" reaction of Droolers[147].

Following this tendency to characterise Droolers because of their resistance to Murmur's subcultural homology, it is necessary to ascertain how the community reacted, and what action was taken to resolve conflict between normative and non-normative readings. In this respect, I will now turn my attention towards the strategies employed by the community to restore order and normativity.

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[147] For an examination how emotion has been devalued and also placed as a feminine quality, see Blumenthal (1997: 90).

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"Matter out of place": discourses of order and rationality

In *Purity and Danger* Mary Douglas, inspired by the work of William James (1902), approaches dirt as "matter out of place," which implies a "set of ordered relations and a contravention of that order" (1966: 44)[148]. In this respect, dirt is "never a unique, isolated event", but rather, she asserts that "where there is dirt there is system" and that this ordering entails "rejecting inappropriate elements," which results in dirt being a "by-product" that has to be removed if order is to be maintained. Douglas illustrated this by referencing shoes, which are not dirty alone, but became so once placed on a dining table. Thus, to restore order, the shoes would have to be removed and returned to their correct place. The classification of items that overstep their natural boundaries as "dirt" was also applied to other objects out of place such as food on clothing, cooking implements in the bedroom, clothing on chairs, and exposed underwear[149]. Kristeva suggests that disgust upon encountering these objects "is not a quality in itself, but it applies only to what relates to a boundary and, more particularly, represents the object jettisoned out of that boundary, its other side, a margin" (1982: 69). David Sibley argues that the "othering" of groups as "matter out of place" ensures that the boundaries of a culture "are continually redrawn to distinguish between those who belong, and those who, because of some perceived cultural difference, are deemed to be out of place" (1992: 107). Lupton also recognises the effects of "matter out of place" on boundaries. She states that "it is particularly at the margins of the body/society that concerns and anxieties about purity and danger are directed. Because margins mark and straddle boundaries, they are liminal and therefore dangerous, requiring high levels of policing and control" (1999: 41).

Douglas proposes that in our efforts to remove this dirt, such as restoring objects to their rightful place, decorating, and tidying, "we are not governed by anxiety to escape disease, but are positively re-ordering our environment, making it conform to an idea" (1966: xxv). Applying this concept further, she maintains that defilement can also occur when cultural categorizations are breached: "those species are unclean which are imperfect members of their class or whose

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[148] See Aileen Douglas's (1995) study on Tobias Smollett's work *Travels Through France and Italy* to understand how dirt and filth appeared as "matter out of place" to the author, due to its disruption of ordered relations.
[149] Bodily fluids have also been approached as "out of place": see Grosz 1994, Longhurst 2001, Seymour 1998, Connolly 1999, Zerubavel 1993, Squire 2003, McCracken 2003, Buckley and Gottlieb 1988.

class itself confounds the general scheme of the world" (1996: 69)[150]. Miller finds difficulty with this perspective, citing the example of opossums that, while resembling rats, do not generate the same levels of disgust[151]. He argues that "the cuteness of marsupials shows that not all category transgressions will pollute or be dangerous" (1997: 267). Murray also questions Douglas's argument by suggesting that breaches of category are not always problematic. He maintains that in the past, interstitiality was sometimes reconciled for co-existence, and "if there is any psychological reality to the "horror" purportedly inspired by such classification difficulties, it is confined to anthropologists intent on eliciting complete and exhaustive contrast sets" (1983: 369).[152] However, Douglas responded to these criticisms in a 1972 article entitled "Self Evidence" where she conceded that anomalies were of neutral value, and could be afforded positive or negative value within the order of a cultural system.

Kriseva identifies interstitial species as abject, being neither "subject nor object" (1982: 2)[153]. In this sense, she argues it is not "lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (1982: 4). Caroline Fusco suggests that this "process of abjection...is both aggressive and spatialized" where "that which is not proper is pushed away; it is refused; it is sent to the margins" (2006: 9). In keeping with this approach to impurity, Stuart Hall similarly argues that a culture can become unsettled by this "matter out of place," which he construes as: "the breaking of our unwritten rules and codes. Dirt in the garden is fine, but dirt in one's bedroom is "matter out of place" – a sign of pollution, of symbolic boundaries being transgressed, of taboos broken" (2003: 236).

I will argue that Droolers are targeted as "matter out of place," a pollutant within Murmurs, due to their non-compliance with normative discourse.[154] As such, they break the "rules and codes"

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[150] Transgressions of categories can activate feelings of disgust surrounding the threat posed to boundaries (Smith and Davidson 2006). Noel Carroll applies this to monsters of the horror genre, which can be regarded as impure if they are "categorically interstitial, categorically contradictory, incomplete, or formless" (1990: 32. See also Prince 2004: 93). In addition, Patrick Joyce cites the food market as an example, where matter can rot and decay, and become "out of its fixed place" (2003: 82 and 2002: 110).
[151] Further approaches towards "matter out of place" producing feelings of disgust can be found in Rozin et al. 1997, Purkiss 1996: 121, Dean and Lane 2001, Trotter 1993, Twigg 2000, Nussbaum 2004.
[152] For a development of this, see Sibley 2003: 38.
[153] For discussions on abjection, see Williams 2001, Longhurst 2001, McClintock 1995, Young 1990,
[154] See Carol Lowery Delaney (2004: 40) for an account of how nomads, gypsies, and most specifically, the

of the community by indulging in the taboo of feminised readings, which ensures their actions are viewed as a defilement of "pure," normative behaviour.[155] This action ensures they are therefore regarded as "un-natural relative to [Murmurs'] conceptual scheme of nature. They do not fit the scheme; they violate it" (Carroll 1990: 34).[156] As Douglas states, "taboo is a spontaneous coding practice which sets up a vocabulary of spatial limits and physical and verbal signals...feared contagion extends the danger of a broken taboo to the whole community" (2002: xiii). Douglas presents five methods with which a culture can respond to "matter out of place": through categorisation; elimination; segregation; marking as dangerous, and incorporation into ritual. Hall acknowledges that the procedure used to combat a pollutant is "to sweep it up, throw it out, restore the place to order, bring back the normal state of affairs" (2003: 330)[157]. David Sibley also acknowledges that "separation is a part of the process of purification – it is the means by which defilement or pollution is avoided..." (2003: 37)[158].

However, Douglas maintains that although the creation of order is pursued, "we do not simply condemn disorder" (2003: 117). Instead, while acknowledging its capacity to undermine existing orders, the "potentiality" and symbolism of both "danger and power" is recognised: "to have been in the margins is to have been in contact with danger, to have been at a source of power" (2003: 98). I will argue that by creating the People Forums, Murmurs structured into its system a destructive power, a pollutant, in the form of drooling, an activity that they were actually attempting to reject. Douglas states "the polluting person is always in the wrong. He has developed some wrong condition or simply crossed some line which should not have been crossed and this displacement unleashes danger..." (1966: 136). With this in mind, I will now

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homeless can be viewed as "matter out of place" in society. Mulattoes have also been interpreted in the same way (see Beezley 2000: 232 and Dawkins 2003: 179) and also "fat" people (LeBesco 2004 and Huff 2001: 47). Also, for a study on how the Sony Walkman was initially viewed in the same category see du Gay *et al.* (2003: 116). Waste (Sundqvist 2002 and Kennedy 2007), the disabled (Thompson 1997), refugees (Malkki 1995), street children (Stephens 1995), pests (Knight 2000:14 and Putman 1989:2), and asylum seekers and terrorists (Aas 2006) have also been approached in this manner.

[155] David Sibley states, "an awareness of group boundaries can be expressed in the opposition between purity and defilement" (2003: 36).

[156] As highlighted by David Morley, "the key problems pertain to elements, objects or persons which lack the virtue of clarity of belonging" (2000: 143).

[157] However, Catherine M. Murphy simplifies the purification procedure by stating that "all one needs to do to remedy pollution is to put the matter back 'in place'" (2003: 117).

[158] David Morley argues that separation as part of the purification process is very much evident within contemporary life: "because group membership is usually the main definer of individual rights, it is often felt to be essential to maintain the boundary separating members from strangers by expelling polluting individuals or symbolic objects" (2000: 143).

examine the strategies that were employed against Droolers in an effort to combat their "destructive" capacities and restore order and normativity in the community.

In order to limit the activities of Droolers, members who objected to this style of posting insisted on the introduction of measures that would reinstate the intellectual level of discussion that had been transgressed. As an expression of their subcultural power, a welcome note in the Mike Mills forum was introduced to combat this shift and to refocus attention back to the discussion of Mike's music and public life:

> Here you'll find discussions about any songs, side projects, bass guitars, keyboards or harmony vocals written/played/sung by our favorite bespectacled multi-instrumentalist Michael Edward Mills, as well as less serious (to say the least...) ramblings about nudie suits and outrageously loud shirts as worn by Mr. Mills.
> So if you would like to know what kind of bass Mike played on Reckoning, if you want to rave about your favorite harmony vocal arrangement in an R.E.M. song or if you just feel the resolute urge to comment on Mike's stage outfit in Camden NJ in 1999, this is the place. Topics to avoid: Nothing specific - just respect the band members' and associates' private lives (MeanCat, 7 August 2002).

I will suggest that this attempt to control discussions was also intended to guide Droolers to read in the "right way" by recommending the use of appropriate topics more suitable to the normative practices of the community. It is evident that feminised threads such as "Mike in underwear," "I Love Mike Mills" and "What made you fall for Mike?" did not facilitate the community's expected level or content of intellectual conversation. This is more appropriately represented in a thread entitled "Mike Mills the Musician," which can be seen as an attempt to move the focus of discussions back to a masculine reading of Mike's professional and creative qualities:

> What is it about Mike that knocks your socks off? (This is a drool free discussion BTW guys). Musically, what is it about Mike Mills that sets him apart from the rest, creatively and performance wise? Lets make this a good long discussion with the drool buckets left at the door everyone (DrinkTheElixer, 13 November 2004).

This post is an explicit request to avoid drool, which is not considered to make an intellectual contribution to the recommended topics of conversation. I conclude the demand for "drool buckets" to be "left at the door" is a symbolic injunction that subordinates Droolers and targets drool as a pollutant contaminating the community with feminised readings. This attempt to increase the focus on elements of Mike's life that were considered more appropriate for

discussion by non-droolers was also echoed by the host of the forum, who expressed frustration at the behaviour from fellow fans she felt to be abnormal:

> HEARTFELT PLEA FROM THE MILLS FORUM: anyone who has anything
> intelligent to say about Mike that does not involve his hair (permed or not? ooh so
> sofffffft, so not permed I KNOW thes things) his ass (WOWIE ZOWIE GIMME
> SOME OF THEM BUNS) or his expensive tastes in wine, please, PLEASE post your
> opinions on the man's music, creativity, political ideas, ANYTHING halfway normal
> for the love of God! (Sweet Fanny Adams, 11 November 2004).

The above plea also demonstrates a desire to populate the forum with intelligent posts and discussions that would better represent the perceived image of an R.E.M. fan subscribed to by the community. The feminised emotional approach of Droolers is mocked and contrasted with culturally masculinised readings, which offer opinions on "intelligent" subjects. This again works to illustrate the divisions that exist between those who hold different interpretations of how to express their fandom within the forum, with Droolers and non-Droolers each perceiving their method of approach to be the "right way." It can be seen however that non-Droolers display their subcultural power by gaining official support for their definitions of what is "normal" fan behaviour within the community.

The Mike Mills forum attracted increased criticism from fellow fans within and outside the forum when Droolers turned their attentions towards Mike's teenage son, Julian. His existence had previously been kept private until he was brought on stage by the band during a concert. The surfacing of this information on Murmurs encouraged Droolers to speculate if Mike was married, what his son looked like, and to form a Julian Mills Crush Club. It was felt that these activities by Droolers misrepresented both R.E.M. fans and the Murmurs community, and had now elevated the Mike Mills forum to a level of disturbance that had only previously been found within the Michael Stipe forum. Concern about this situation was voiced in a thread entitled "ITS OFFICIAL: Mills Conference Scarier than the Stipe Conference," which gave four reasons for its occurrence:

> 1. Mills Conference folks have been able to fly in below the radar for years because of all the
> nutty Stipe Stuff going on, so they do not get the same beratement that the Stipe people get or
> have received for the past few years
> 2. Many of the Stipe people have either left or were posting because of earlier incidents with
> fake Michaels online. That has died down and now we have to worry about Mills' Son online

(or supposed son as I do not talk to anyone about this)
3. After seeing some of the scary Stipe fiends in action there is a different scariness that you do not have to worry about. Plus, they have been bombarded with shit for several years.
4. Mills is NOT Gay. Michael is gay and most fans have been able to finally accept that as they really do not have a chance in hell. With Peter married, the final one is Mikey Mills. More people going to shows seem to be in love with Mike Mills and talk about him in the posts than Stipe and that is a change from years past (mrdavesanchez, 11 November 2004).

The above poster perceived a shift that elevated Mike Mills, because of his single status, into an attainable individual with whom fans could imagine that a relationship was possible[159]. This situation only served to heighten the intensity of Droolers in the forum, who were seemingly motivated by anticipation of fulfilling this possibility.

The Michael Stipe forum was initially intended for discussions on a range of topics concerning the lead singer, such as his political views, photography, fashion, film production, lyrics and vocals. However, in conjunction with the Mike Mills conference, the forum received an abundance of drooling posts. In an effort to avoid discord between members, and as a consequence of the ardent nature of some fans that persisted in focusing their attention on aspects of Michael's private life[160], the welcoming note to the forum advised users to refrain from approaching certain subjects that were considered to be too personal and intrusive:

What should i avoid?

Private Life
All band members' lives should remain private. Please respect that. Photographs of band member's families and partners or homes, or links to those photographs will be removed from the site. Also kindly refrain from posting pictures taken with a long lens/paparazzi style. These may also be removed at the discretion of admin. Always better to check first.

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[159] David Giles contends that although celebrities may be remote personalities, they are attainable individuals "with whom a bilateral relationship is possible" (2000: 129). Diane Saks gives recommendations on the career choices a fan should make to be closer to their favourite star. She states that even though there is a "less than one per cent chance of having a relationship with your favorite celebrity... [this] doesn't mean that it can't come true" (2005: 88). In this respect, it is not unreasonable for droolers to consider a relationship with Mike Mills is possible, due to his single status, and therefore potential availability.
[160] Chris Rojek states "celebrity status always implies a spilt between a private self and a public self". The public persona is a "staged activity," while a large percentage of the private self is kept "in reserve" (2001: 11). The droolers are perceived to impinge on this private reserve.

Sexuality
Michael's sexuality/the Aids rumours have been discussed countless times. The
subject isn't taboo but please refer to old threads to see whether you can add anything
new or innovative to the conversation before resurrecting them
(Maybelline Eyes, 23 May 2002).

This welcome note is a formal attempt to encourage Droolers to show respect for Michael's privacy concerning his personal life and sexuality. As such, participants are being encouraged to prioritize reason over emotion when discussing Michael in the forum. A 2001 thread entitled "Oh my God how would HE feel?" requested the same change in behaviour from Droolers, yet pursued it in a more direct manner, through questioning and imagining what Michael Stipe would think, should he peruse the forum[161]:

can you imagine what michael would feel, if he read all this crazy stuff 'we' write
about him? i think i couldn't stand the thought of people trying to examine my mind
and dissecting my soul. everybody here thinks he/she is a really special fan, and maybe
he/she is the one fan, who really counts for REM. or maybe he/she is michaels
soulmate or what.....i'm sorry, but that's pure illusion. you, you single person in front of
your computer, you don't count at all. you're all the same (Auryn, 7 June 2001).

This statement interprets the self-reflective feelings of identification between Droolers and Michael as an illusory impossibility. Discounting a connection through similarity, the poster stresses the difference and distance between them in an effort to urge Droolers to conform to the norms of the community. However, Auryn's attempt to encourage Droolers to rethink their position served to attract responses that were in direct contrast to the anticipated reaction, with those who claimed to know exactly how Michael would react to the situation still maintaining their beliefs:

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[161] How does an object of fandom respond to drooling fans? Are they always considered to be "matter out of place?" When this type of behaviour was experienced by Ryan Ross, guitarist in Panic! At the Disco, the focus on his physicality was considered to be "disappointing and disgusting." For Ross, these fans failed to appreciate aspects that the band considered special, such as "the way we dress, the things we put into our stage show — some fans don't even realize that because they're just drooling...I feel like it taints the
music" (Montgomery 2006). While Ross complains about droolers, Justin Timberlake, with the release of his latest single Sexy Back, appears to take an opposing view by welcoming drooling and "seems eager to inspire a little more" (Sanneh 2006). Wrestler Shawn Michaels also embraced drooling attention from female fans and, uncharacteristically for a wrestler, acknowledged their interest by posing for a centerfold
in Playgirl magazine (Salmon and Clerc, 2005: 169). After actor David Duchovny expressed dismay at the online fans that drooled over him, Susan Clerc suggested that the object of fandom should limit their interactions with fans because their "interests as professionals doing a job and our interest as fans are often at odds." The artists should therefore not interfere as they are "not expected to approve or even understand" how fan communities respond to texts produced by the object of fandom (2000: 227).

Some of this stuff Michael would laugh at. And some of it he'd be really touched that some of us love him so much. But he would be upset by those things that are on the dearest michael thread. Especially the one by derek who was insinuating how he'd hurt Michael. That would scare Michael and he would be upset about that. Some people think that stuff is jokes...we can't trust everyone who posts here not that anyone is bad but there are folks that are really so obsessed that they would stalk Michael. I don't think anyone in the JMS fanclub would ever harm Michael. They only love him. But we still have to be careful (stipeeyes, 9 June 2001).

It is apparent from this statement that there is a tendency for Droolers to construct their appreciation of the object of fandom as "normal," and in contrast to the "obsessiveness" of stalkers. Stipeeyes works from the position that Michael would welcome the attention from Droolers to the extent that he would be "touched" by their behaviour, which they interpret as "love." As such, Droolers are encouraged to believe that Michael would support them rather than non-Droolers, who would "upset" and "scare" him. The claim that "we still have to be careful" can be interpreted as a call for vigilance from Droolers to combat the untrustworthy and potentially harmful "others." However, normative fans, in their attempts to use their subcultural power to wipe out drooling, characterised Droolers as obsessed, and in opposition to, normative R.E.M. fan behaviour:

It is virtually impossible to start a serious thread in here without someone coming in and drooling all over it...it is embarrassing. There is nothing wrong with a passing crush comment, but it is when it is constant, over the top and smutty...It is more than obsessive and often borders on the distasteful...it would be really nice if a sensible thread could be started without some people screaming and throwing their panties at it. If that doesn't happen we will have a forum that isn't about the artist, but a rather messy, depressing drool fest. And that is not what the Stipe conference is supposed to be about (DrinkTheElixer, 27 May 2005).

This poster makes a distinction between a "serious" discussion and "obsessive" emotion from Droolers. This again reveals an attempt to curtail the "over the top" feminised conduct from Droolers and transform it into an "unimpassioned approach" that conforms to normative masculine behaviour and more "detached," appreciative fandom. Referring to Michael as "the artist" is also an attempt to urge Droolers to approach him in a manner that appreciates his creative rather than physical qualities.

However, despite these attempts by non-Droolers to retrieve normativity, Droolers were resilient and continued posting in the same manner. This provoked the introduction of an additional set of guidelines to the forum that were this time composed in a more forceful and confrontational style. Droolers, as in the welcome note, were again urged to prioritize reason over emotion. In this respect, they were warned against too close an identification with Michael:

> Wish we didn't have to do this…we don't like rules and regs, BUT recent events have made it necessary to post GUIDELINES. Please use your own common-sense.
> 1.Could you ask your question/repeat your post to Michael's face?
> 2.Could you let your mum/kids/partner/HQ read it without embarrassment on your part or theirs?
> 3.Would you mind the same post being written about a family member/loved one of your own?
> 4. Does your post include the words "Michael does...", "Michael would...", "Michael thinks.." etc.? Michael is the only person privy to that information. At least provide a link to any interview you're referring to, and bear in mind that anything can change over time.
> 5. Do you really NEED to know the intimate details of Michael's life? Will it change your life to know these? (Maybelline Eyes, 10 June 2005).

These guidelines and continued requests for Droolers to reconsider their position by reflecting on what they have posted, and how it may be perceived by others demonstrate not only official persistence, but also an exercising of subcultural power. These are formal attempts to urge Droolers to evaluate and modify their behaviour to an expression that is more appropriate to the normative ideals of the fan community. These additional recommendations can be determined as an official intervention to encourage Droolers to read in the "right way."

The requirement to restore order was not as necessary in the Peter Buck and Bill Berry forums, due to the masculinised tone adopted by the posters there. Rather than issuing directives, reminders and recommendations were placed for members to continue their normative behaviour. This is evident in the Bill Berry forum. The welcome note does not reference drooling directly, and is void of any actual rules and regulations, but members are reminded to express opinions rather than indulge in the feminised glorification of drooling:

> This is the place to talk about R.E.M.'s drummer and his actions, past or present. He may not be with the band anymore, but you will find that people still treasure him and ponder over his well-being up to this day. Bill even has his own club – "The Tractor

Club" (new members always welcome), and you will stumble across Tractor Clubbers and their "Annual Party" threads from time to time. Those Annual Parties are the place to hang out, even get off-topic, and they usually involve a lot of chaos in Bill's virtual barn... Bill's forum is open to discussions, questions, polls and ponderings ... which of course have to do with ... (drumroll) ... Bill Berry! No glorification necessary, opinions welcome (Tessa, 23 May 2002).

In contrast to the Mike Mills and Michael Stipe forums where posters are urged to show respect and consideration for intimate details surrounding the band member, Bill Berry fans, in this welcome note, instead receive a less formal briefing that concentrates on encouraging social participation within the forum club.

The Peter Buck forum welcome note continues in the same relaxed manner, yet introduces a number of rules. However, these rules are introduced by the host in a less enforced manner than is evident in the Michael Stipe and Mike Mills forums:

[This is] a general debating place about anything concerned with Peter, from basic questions like how old is he or what are his family circumstances...from irreverent jokes to harsh cristicism, and from long musings about his musical capacities to unabashed drooling. Don't worry, someone always has a mop at the ready should the latter occur... In a nutshell: this is a pretty relaxed and laid back place...feel free to post here whatever you like, no one will flame you or make fun of you...Rules? Not very many...Try to be respectful about other people and their opinions. Be aware of the consequences if you're not!...And please, please do not post pictures where any of the band's families can be identified...don't take the rules as restraints, 'cos they're definitely not! (OneArpeggioPete, 12 July 2002).

It can be seen that the rules set out above are presented as recommendations rather than directives and demonstrate that a casual and serene atmosphere exists within the forum. This indicates less need for control and official intervention in this forum. The inclusion of drooling in this welcome note is to remind posters that the activity is in direct opposition to "long musings" about Peter's "musical capacities," which are topics of discussion integral to the established masculinised discourse of the forum. Drooling is again targeted as a pollutant that will be "swept away" from the ordered structures of the community upon emergence, a procedure of dealing with "matter out of place" as mentioned by Hall (2003: 236). Inherent in this statement is the indication that subcultural power can be used, if and when, required. For the following poster

who engages in a metadiscussion (Burnett and Bonnici 2003) with other members, an action to "sweep away" Droolers was the only way forward, due their non response to rational debate:

> Talking to the people posting this apparently doesn't have any effect; they just happily go on. and i certainly won't take that "if you don't like it, stay away"-attitude. i have said this 2 or 3 times already within the past week, but this is/should be a discussion forum, not a drool fest. is it SO hard to act/write with at least some common sense and respect for the bandmembers' personalities? maybe, just as a test, revamp all four forums into just one "people"-forum? (MeanCat, 17 November 2004).

As a solution to the problem of maintaining the "central values" of the community, the above poster recommended amalgamating all four band member forums into one forum. This viewpoint however fails to take account of the differences between each forum in terms of misreading and reading in the "right way," which is acknowledged in the following post:

> I would be very sad to see alot of what is in the 4 people's forums go, because there's some wonderfully creative and fun stuff there. I tend to frequent the Bill Berry forum, and to lose the Tractor Bar and the Poem thread would be such a shame...Would it be possible for those who wish to participate in the more gossipy and salacious type of posting to be able to sign up on a list that members could then PM one another. This way, those that wish to have a good gossip (and there's no harm in that) could do so in private and then people who want to post about meeting a band member...could do so publicly and we can all share in their joy.... (Green Lady, 17 November 2004).

For Green Lady, Droolers are viewed simply as gossipers, rather than fans to be deeply concerned about[162]. However, as Joanne Hollows suggests, "skills and competences employed in gossip are those associated with traditional definitions of femininity" (2000: 106). In this sense, it has been approached by scholars (Hobson 1982, Brown 1994, Sadiqi 2003) as a subcultural discourse with which women can resist patriarchy: "in asserting the value of gossip...women are insisting on their own adequacy, their own personal and social space, in the face of male dominated culture" (Tulloch and Moran 1986: 247-8). If this reasoning is applied to Droolers, the act of gossiping would work to resist the normative masculine discourse and thereby assist the survival of feminised readings in the community.

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[162] Catherine M. Murphy suggests, through an example of the introduction of 24/7 work hours in Silicon Valley, that what is construed as "matter out of place" to some, can be viewed as "matter *in* place" by others (2003: 117). As such, Green Lady does not regard droolers as out of place in the community.

Moreover, Green Lady's solution to the perceived problem to create a private discussion list on Murmurs through personal messaging where interested members could register and "gossip" in private, is a call for relegation and seclusion rather than integration. It is possible that this recommendation would introduce to the forums a system that works to separate fans within each band member conference and therefore widen the divisions between members. This scenario may still result in differing opinions and preferences between fans regarding what is, and what is not, acceptable discourse. The creation of a secluded area for drooling was also favoured by one forum host, who suggested establishing a chat room for those who wished to converse in this manner:

> I think the idea of maybe a chatroom could be set up by the drool pool and the people who get off on that kind of thing can engage in it without making the whole site look ridiculous. The problem is setting the bar. Where do you set it? (Sweet Fanny Addams, 17 November 2004).

The concept of change and re-definition of the forums was taken further by another host. It was suggested that a re-examination and clarification of the aims and objectives of the People Forums was needed in order to reflect values that were central to normative fan identity:

> What I think that we need is a re definition of what the band forums are for and about. That way the boundry stepping would not occur and the build ups to 'heated debates' would be less frequent. A lot of it is common sense, decency, privacy, respect and behaviour which are pretty basic rules of thumb. If users can be referred to the guidelines at the head of the forum when the mark has been over stepped - that stops the whole 'you are picking on me' scenario occurring again. The rules are there for EVERYONE (DrinkTheElixer, 17 November 2004).

Redefinition of the rules however may still lead to a situation where the individual is responsible for self-regulation and, it can be argued, without supervision from the forum hosts, "misreading" could still occur. Another member approached the problem from a different perspective that regarded a solution to be found within action from normative fan identity. She suggested suppressing Droolers through a collective implementation of subcultural power to inundate the forums with a more intellectual level of conversation:

> Discontinuing the people forums would be a crying shame, it would mean…letting the loons win. maybe there could be a concerted effort from everyone to keep the forums in question more above the waistline? i often find that a lot of people bitch about the state

these forums are in but don't really bother to post something better either. i think we should really rally together on this and try to flood these forums with intelligent debate (OneArpeggioPete, 17 November 2004).

While the above comments support action from a collective point of view, it is clear that the Droolers are not included in the call to "rally together", as they remain characterised as "loons." In contrast to this appeal for a show of collective strength, another member regarded the solution to be found at an individual level, which respected others and allowed members freedom to express themselves without constraints. Relegation of Droolers is again raised as a solution with the suggested creation of a "drool zone" within each forum, and a symbol in the form of a smiley to denote threads of a drooling nature so they can be avoided:

Can't those who don't want drool-fests just avoid the drooly-threads? Or does the drooling tend to ooze into previously uninfested threads?...Perhaps making special "drool-zone" threads would help, and hosts could move any over-the-top posts from regular threads to the drool zones....Let one of the droolers host the drool forum, mark it with a drooly-smilie, and let them go for it (In the Corner, 17 November 2004).

Drooling is again targeted as a pollutant that can affect previously uninfected areas. However while it is considered to contaminate the community, it is still allowed, in this recommendation, an avenue for expression with the formation of its own "drool zone." Following the debate from members concerning the most appropriate action to be taken against Droolers, it was decided in 2005 by the Murmurs Crew that individual band member conferences would be merged into one general forum entitled The Band. Within this, there would be a number of sub-forums within which members could discuss a range of issues pertaining to the group, such as musical equipment, song lyrics and composition, and R.E.M side projects. It was considered that this restructuring would restrict any attempts at drooling, due to the new focus on specific topics. This in turn, it was felt, would encourage more discussion on the dynamics of R.E.M. as a whole, rather than the previous narrow focus on each individual band member. It was also envisaged that the participating members to the forums would be more self-regulating in their behaviour. In this regard, it was anticipated that the differences in approach between fans that populated each forum would act to maintain a balance within the new conference, with the Peter Buck and Bill Berry fans acting to restrain and modify the perceived misreading by Droolers from the Michael Stipe and Mike Mills forums. In this regard, I argue that the structure of the People Forums

unwittingly reinforced drooling, the very type of behaviour the community was attempting to reject. Inspectorjason highlighted the peculiarity of this structural formation:

> I have always thought that it was a dishonor to the band and the music to devote conferences to each band member separately. It occurs to me that Murmurs.com is the only fan site I've seen that has conferences dedicated to separate band members (28 June 2001).

As such, "the matter out of place" was structured into Murmurs, which created an oppositional value system to normative practices. Thus, the decision to amalgamate the People Forums into one Band forum was a measure introduced to counteract drooling, and thereby redress the inclusion of contradictory elements within the community structure. This displays how a community itself can threaten, and then work to restore, normative discourse.

While this restructuring of the People Forums was implemented, a sub-forum entitled Dork Inside Edition[163] was formed to house any newly created drooling threads in an effort to limit the spread of drooling across the community. In order to seclude these posts even further, the forum was made subscriber only and was not visible to non-members of the Droolers Club[164]. Any thread considered as drooling was immediately moved to the new forum by the hosts, and users were prevented from creating new threads within. Any posts appearing within Dork Inside Edition were not accessible through the search engine, or qualified for members' post count statistics. This situation illustrates a course of action that can be taken against those who misread and fail to observe the ethos of the Murmurs community. Behaviour that fails to reflect the "central values" of the subcultural homology will ultimately not be tolerated. As Mary Douglas states, "...pollution behavior is the reaction which condemns any object or idea likely to confuse or contradict cherished classifications" (1966: 45). Caroline Fusco maintains that "any threat to order establishes and accelerates not only the (re)production of bodily boundaries but the (re)production of spatial boundaries and containment" (2004: 166). William James also outlines the response to a "waste element" that can be "sloughed off and negated, and the very memory of

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[163] The title "Dork Inside Edition" refers to a lyric from the R.E.M. song *Star 69*. The tagline for the forum that appears after the title is, quite tellingly, "something going on that's not quite right." This was set up by the forum hosts, and is a lyric from the R.E.M. song *Strange*.
[164] Any community members wishing to join the Droolers Club can initiate membership via their profile.

it, if possible, wiped out and forgotten" (1902: 133)[165], as is evident with the creation of Dork Inside Edition.

This approach was investigated further by Claude Lévi-Strauss in *Tristes Tropiques* (1955) where, as I highlighted in the Literature Review, he identified two strategies for managing Others in an effort to protect normative cultural identity in primitive societies: (1) the anthropoemic, which involves vomit-like rejection and (2) the anthropophagic, which attempts to suspend and normalise otherness rather than instigate forceful exclusion. Zygmunt Bauman argued that both strategies are "applied in parallel, in each society and on every level of social organization... [and] are included in the toolbag of every domination" (1993: 163). Therefore, I would argue both emic (the expulsion of drooling threads into Dork Inside Edition) and phagic (attempts to normalise drooling behaviour through discourses of rationality) strategies were used by Murmurs in an effort to control drooling.

I will argue further that this situation also fits with the concept of Michel Foucault's heterotopia. In the preface of *The Order of Things* (1966), Foucault presented his notion of "heterotopias" as discourse that can "desiccate speech, stop words in their tracks, [and] contest the very possibility of grammar at its source..." (xix). In his later work, *Of Other Spaces* (1986)[166], he developed the concept further to suggest that unlike utopias, which are "sites with no real place," heterotopias are "counter-sites," real spaces, within which "all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted" (1986: 24). Therefore, heterotopias provided alternative spaces to normative social interactions. Foucault argued that the places that conform to this principle are, by definition, "outside of all places," although, in reality, it is possible to identify their location, due to their difference to the culture in which they reside. In his critique of Foucault's concept, Benjamin Genocchio questioned the application of "heterotopia" as a real site and suggested a "strange inconsistency" in the use of the term (1996: 37). He viewed the concept as failing to adequately explain the separation between heterotopias and the wider spaces around them. In this sense, he argues that Foucault's case for heterotopias is

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[165] See also van der geest 1998, who recounts the Akan of Ghana's method of dealing with human faeces (for a discussion of this, see Bowie 2003:48-49).

[166] This work originated in 1967 in the form of a lecture. It was not until shortly before Foucault's death that these notes were made public, in a Berlin exhibition. They were then published in 1984 in the French journal *Archietecture-Movement-Continuité*, and in 1986 in English in *Diacritics*.

too reliant on "establishing some invisible but visibly operational difference which, disposed against the background of an elusive spatial continuum, provides a clear conception of spatially discontinuous ground" (1996: 38 – 39), concluding that that concept is "more of an idea about space than any actual place" (1996: 43). However, Foucault's classification of heterotopias into two main categories demonstrates that "actual places" can be regarded as heterotopic sites. The first category he termed "crisis" heterotopias, which are typical within "primitive" societies. They encompass "privileged or sacred or forbidden places, reserved for individuals who are, in relation to society and to the human environment in which they live, in a state of crisis." He cites examples of these such as adolescents, the elderly, and pregnant and menstruating women, all of which may have been isolated from social interaction with the larger community. However, Foucault stresses that these "crisis" heterotopias in modern times are vanishing and being replaced by heterotopias of "deviation." This second category of identification describes areas where "individuals whose behavior is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm are placed." These can include prisons, psychiatric hospitals and rest homes - places that "remove the abnormal individual from normal social space and which are governed by an internal spatial order" (Tonkiss 2005: 133). As such, they "are a way to embody and patrol the borderline between normality and abnormality" (Kohn 2003: 91). Both crisis and deviation heterotopias are marked by distinct boundaries and rules which separate them from the wider community. These can also include museums[167], libraries and cemeteries, which attempt to juxtapose and indefinitely accumulate time[168]. The creation of Dork Inside Edition, I suggest, was an effort to contain and impose boundaries on drooling. As such, it can be viewed as a heterotopia of deviation. However, as argued by Rhiannon Bury, these spaces should not be defined purely in terms of deviation, but should also be understood "in terms of resistance, inversion, subversion or perhaps simply a space in which active consent to normative practices is suspended" (2005: 17). Drooling as "matter out of place" was relegated to a heterotopic space that attempted to confine its resistance to normativity, "as a means of protecting the vulnerable margins and threatened borders of the body politic" (Williams 2001: 81). This displays how offending members can be relegated by the sub-cultural power held by normative fans: a "group ethos can

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[167] For an analysis on how Stonehenge, approached as a "museum without walls" is a heterotopia, see Hetherington (1996). Other studies on the museum as heterotopia include Bennett (1995), Delaney (1994),

[168] Other places which have been described as heterotopias are Las Vegas (Chaplin 2003), Princess Diana's crash (Elliot and Alfonso 2003), Greenwich Village (Banes, 1993), The Citadel-LA exhibition (Soja 1996), theatre (Wiles 1999 and Rehm 2002), the ocean (Steinberg 2001), hotels (King 2000), airports (Bode and Miller 1997)

also leave out or ostracise those who do not agree with the majority" (Gurak 1999: 247)[169], or they may be simply ignored: "to be able to produce a legitimate reading or interpretation of the text parallels the right of the member to make claims about textual meaning..." (Carruthers 2004). Nancy Baym writes that "over the long run, as practices become routinized, they become incorporated into the structure of the group" (2000: 141). Because the practices of Droolers were not routinized, they were not incorporated into the structures of the community, and this led to their ultimate rejection and heterotopic segregation. In this respect, I conclude that droolers demonstrate the reaction and impact that can occur when a type of behaviour arises within a fan community that appears to be a threat to the "central values" of the fans' subcultural homology.

In this chapter, I have examined the situations that arise when a group within Murmurs expresses itself in a distinct and sustained manner that is viewed by the community as oppositional to the normative culturally masculinised intellectual identity of an R.E.M. fan.

Drawing on Henry Jenkins (1992), I have shown that Droolers, through their engagement with the object of fandom and wider Murmurs community fail to read in the "right way" related to and determined by the normative fan identity. I suggested that it is this feminised misreading, alongside their attempts to exchange the wrong type of knowledge, which places them permanently outside the fan-cultural norms of the community.

Using the work of Mary Douglas (1966) I have shown how Droolers have been approached as "matter out of place" within the community. I suggested that this "matter out of place" was structured into the Murmurs community, through creation of the People Forums, which worked, seemingly paradoxically, to incite drooling. I have argued that this resulted in normative fans exercising their subcultural power to impose reason over emotion and restore order and normativity to the community. This situation, I have ultimately suggested, corresponds to Michel Foucault's (1986) concept of a heterotopia.

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[169] See also Back *et al.* for how football fans "police and limit those who can belong to and legitimately wear the team colours through the ever present normalizing gaze of the fan collective" (2001: 9). Crawford also observes "once within these [sport fan] communities, an individual's ability to progress...is often dependent on their ability to 'fit in' (or adapt to) the existing social norms of the group" (2004: 55).

I have highlighted the activities of Droolers and illustrated how they have been characterised as obsessed "others." Taking Joli Jenson's (1992) observations further, I have argued that fans have been negatively characterised not only by literature on fandom, but also by fellow fans within the community.

Droolers, I have argued, fail to reflect the "central values" of R.E.M. fans and the Murmurs community. Building on the work of Paul Willis (1978), I have shown that their inability to fit within the "ordered structures" of Murmurs' subcultural homology is the cause of their marginalization, rejection and final relegation within the community.

In order to examine another group who are opposed to the normative masculine intelligentsia of R.E.M. as a "thinking fan's rock band," in the next chapter I shall focus on what have been termed by the Murmurs community as Pointless Posters. In contrast to Droolers and Trobes who negotiate fandom, I now want to show how Pointless Posters instead de-emphasise their fandom through rejecting discussion on R.E.M. and related topics in favour of feminised off-topic, general and personal life conversations referred to by normative community members as "small talk." Comparable to Droolers, they challenge normative fan identity within the community and, due to their subsequent relegation, can also be viewed as being rejected into a heterotopia of deviance. However, I will argue that their treatment within this heterotopia, rather than instigating normalisation, actually worked to encourage the Pointless Posters' sense of self-importance, and thereby, the continuation of this non-normative behaviour.

Chapter Seven. Pointless Posters

In the last chapter, I suggested that the non-normative activities of Droolers demonstrated how a fan community can respond to behaviour that appears to be a threat to the "central values" of the fans' subcultural homology. In this chapter, I shall focus on the Pointless Posters in Murmurs, who also challenge normative fan identity within the community, but in a different way. In contrast to Droolers and Trobes who negotiate fandom, Pointless Posters instead de-emphasise it through rejecting discussion on R.E.M. and related topics in favour of feminised off-topic, general and personal life conversations. I will argue that "small talk" was used, and justified, by non-normative fans in terms of "phatic communion." I will also explore the process of this non-normative de-emphasis of fandom and argue that within the activity of "pointless posting" R.E.M. fandom is an assumed commonality, and is not therefore required to feature as the major focus for all discussions.

I will show how the wider community attempted to control this proliferation of non-normative discussion through creation of the Chit-Chat forum to house offending threads. Drawing on the work of Michel Foucault (1986) that I introduced in the previous chapter, I will argue that this forum can also be viewed as a heterotopia of deviance within the Murmurs community. However, whereas both drooling and Chit-Chat behaviour is publicly condemned by normative fans, unlike Droolers, members within the Chit-Chat heterotopia are given a sense of self-importance by the hosts. I will demonstrate how this positive presentation of non-normative behaviour to those within the heterotopia, and their subsequent withdrawal from surveillance, worked against the normalization of "otherness," and encouraged this type of non-normativity within the subordinated enclave.

Pointless posting as "phatic communion"

Although Murmurs was primarily intended for discussion based around R.E.M., in 1999 a new style of posting started to develop within the community that rejected normative discourse structure and soon became known as "pointless posting." This behaviour arrived in the community, not through design, but as a result of members' needs to find a location to express

off-topic discussions[170]. A forum used to facilitate an R.E.M. crew member question and answer session that now lay dormant was designated the perfect area for this behaviour. After a number of posters began to start threads in the forum other members soon joined in, and what was originally an area for R.E.M. discussion became dominated by off-topic discussions:

> a couple of crazy, mixed-up pointless posters, looking for a place to be their silly selves, started a series of wild and insane posts...about fake girlfriends and other way off-topic subjects, usually in chat form. Quickly, others joined in and [it] became a big party – until mean old Ethan (just kidding) threw us all out. But after some discussion, he gave us our own new pointless post haven...These Elvis Poses which we know and love today (madloop, 13 December 2002).

Therefore, the creation of a forum for off-topic conversations arose, not in an effort to encourage this form of behaviour within the community, but in order to contain it in one area and maintain a separation from the R.E.M. related discussions. The style of discourse held within These Elvis Poses was identified by the forum host as:

> any posts considered off-topic from the rest of the board – silly, misfit, illogical, train-of-thought (among other things) – which were for a long time (and sometimes still are) considered to be the black sheep of the Murmurs.com post family (madloop, 13 December 2002).

The reference to "pointless posting" being a "black sheep" in the community is an acknowledgment of its feminised inversion of normative masculine discourse. However, despite this, posts of this nature are tolerated. It is evident in this description that the "silly" and "illogical" style of posting bears many similarities to what has been termed "small talk" or "idle chat." Eggins and Slade argue that "motivated by interpersonal needs continually to establish who we are, how we relate to others, and what we think of how the world is, casual conversation is a critical linguistic site for the negotiation of such important dimensions of our social identity" (1997: 6). In this sense, "small talk" has been approached as a means of developing social bonds between individuals through "phatic communion". In *The Problem of Meaning in Primitive Languages*, Bronislaw Malinowski examines and attempts to understand the processes and effects of "free, aimless, social intercourse" (1923: 302). He further explains this as "when a

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[170] A similar occurrence was observed by Nancy Baym in the r.a.t.s. community, where "in some of the soap opera discussions, the acronym 'TAN' emerged as a subject line marker indicating tangential discussions, establishing a legitimized space for social interaction that is off topic" (1996: 49).

number of people sit together at a village fire, after all the daily tasks are over, or when they chat, resting from work, or when they accompany some mere manual work by gossip quite unconnected with what they are doing" (1923: 302). Malinowski devised the term "phatic communion" to describe this form of conversation as "a type of speech in which the ties of union are created by a mere exchange of words" (1923: 303). He emphasised that words in "phatic communion" were not employed to convey meaning, but rather, to initiate and develop social bonds. This was achieved through the "give and take of utterances which make up ordinary gossip" (1923: 304) such as "purposeless expressions of preference or aversion, accounts of irrelevant happenings, comments on what is perfectly obvious" (1923: 304). Therefore, he maintained that each utterance "is an act serving the direct aim of binding hearer to speaker by a tie of some social sentiment or other" (1923: 304).

Roman Jakobson approaches this discourse as "messages primarily serving to establish, to prolong, or to discontinue communication.... to attract the attention of the interlocutor or to confirm his continued attention" (1960: 337). Within his classification of six discourse function types, he develops and modifies Malinowski's concept as "phatic function" or a "set for contact" which "may be displayed by a profuse exchange of ritualized formulas, by entire dialogues with the mere purport of prolonging communication" (1960: 337).[171] However, "phatic communion" has not been viewed solely as a means to develop communication. John Lyons argues that "this felicitous expression... emphasizes the notion of fellowship and participation in common social rituals: hence 'communion' rather than 'communication'" (1981: 143). It is this aspect of phatic discourse that John Laver suggests Malinowski neglects, arguing that "[phatic communion's] function of creating ties of union, if that is indeed its principal function, is achieved by subtle and intricate means whose complexity does not deserve to be minimized by the use of such phrases as 'a mere exchange of words'" (1975: 216). He identifies three types of token used within "phatic communion": neutral, self-orientated and other-orientated, the use of which "by a speaker on a particular occasion is indexically significant for staking claims about solidarity and relative social status" (1975: 223). In this sense, phatic discourse or "Small talk" has been seen as not only "centrally about building and solidifying relationships" (Tracy 2002: 141) and working to "create team [sic] and establish rapport between [members]" (Holmes 2006: 91), but

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[171] Guendouzi and Muller also observe how phatic communion can be used to prolong conversation (2002: 23).

also as producing a "collective feeling of shared puissance, this mystical sensibility that assures continuity…" (Maffesoli 1996a: 207). Howard Rheingold stresses the importance of this type of conversation online as a vital method for getting to know fellow members: "in a virtual community, idle talk is context-setting. Idle talk is where people learn what kind of person you are. why you should be trusted or mistrusted, what interests you" (2000: 49), as such, it is a "sharing of identity" (Muhawl 1999: 280). Adler and Towne suggest three important functions of small talk: 1) identifying common interests that will lead to further discussions[172], 2) assessing friendship potential and 3) providing a secure area for self-disclosure[173] (2005: 294). Gossip has also been approached as a form of "small talk" in the sense that it is a form of "social comparison" that identifies commonalities (Keeler 2006: 47), helps present a "united front to outsiders" (Pilkington 2004: 255), and "develops feelings of trustworthiness" (Pan et al. 2002: 113). Deborah Jones approaches gossip as "intimate in style, personal and domestic in topic" (1980: 194). Within this, she identifies chatting as a particular form of gossip that involves "mutual self-disclosure" and therefore encourages intimacy between members. However, it can be seen that self-disclosure, even if an instigator of personal intimacy between members, is feminised discourse and therefore, non-normative in the Murmurs community. By contrast, masculinity has been approached as rejecting self-disclosure in favour of more "impersonal topics" (Coates 1998: 119 and 2003, Jourard 1974, Bograd 1991)[174].

However, "Small talk" has not always been approached in a positive manner, or viewed as a way of keeping individuals "close and connected" (Cameron 2001: 167). Justine Coupland stresses how this method of conversing has been approached as "conventionalized and peripheral… subsuming 'gossip,' 'chat,' and 'time out talk'," which is "supposedly minor, informal, unimportant and unserious" (2000: 1)[175]. Paul Simpson demonstrates this, by arguing that within phatic communion "only safe, non-threatening conversational topics are broached…even if this reduces them to making supremely obvious or inanely trivial remarks" (1997: 163). Heidegger

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[172] See Karen Tracy for an outline how advisors created links with students through small talk based on commonalities (2002: 29).
[173] Alder and Towne define self-disclosure as "the process of deliberately revealing information about oneself that is significant and would not normally be known by others" (2005: 305).
[174] Joan Pujolar i Cos argues that men do engage in self-disclosure and personal intimacy, but when this occurs, the behaviour is organised around events or objects that are external to them, such as sport, or other hobbies (1998: 91).
[175] The alt-tv.x-files newsgroup also approached "small talk" in this manner, regarding any off-topic, irrelevant statements as "drivel" or "dreck" (Ward 1996 in Reinking 1998: 104).

interprets "idle talk" as inauthentic discourse "that anyone can rake up; it not only releases one from the task of genuinely understanding, but develops an undifferentiated kind of intelligibility, for which nothing is closed off any longer" (1927: 169). Matthew Putsz, in his analysis of comic book fans, a culture which is normatively masculine, observes that "many listserv and newsgroup members want to limit posts that are off-topic, or do not fit into the accepted intellectual territory..." They decide "what can be talked about and, often by whom." This is achieved by rejecting any deviation into feminised discourse[176]: "many newcomers who do not quite fit are openly mocked by more experienced members. Others...are simply ignored and eventually move on" (1999: 196). As Jennifer Coates argues, "the talk associated with women is often given derogatory names: gossip, chit-chat, natter... [it] is seen as trivial at best..." (1996: 1)[177]. Therefore, how do individuals that engage in this form of discourse, given its non-normativity, justify its use? Is it perceived as "phatic communion"? In order to ascertain this, I will now explore how "pointless posting" was developed in the Murmurs community, and how members understood and validated this behaviour.

"Small talk is ruler": the development of pointless posting in Murmurs

An example of "pointless posting" can be seen in an extract from a thread entitled "do your shoes match?":

> lemon: "Do they? Are you wearing the same shoe on each foot, or did you wake up and put on two different ones? Oh, come on, everybody has done it........time to fess up......"
>
> ghamina: "I'm not wearing shoes right now... ahhhhh, free feet *wiggles toes*"
>
> lemon: "there is nothing like feet freedom......it's the greatest feet feeling in the world......."
>
> galforo: "As I'm in my job my shoes HAVE to match"
> (6 June 2002).

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[176] Putsz also notes how comic book fans on the commix-alternative listserv actively avoid discussion of mainstream comics (1996: 196). As observed by Joanne Hollows, "cult is naturalized as masculine and the mainstream as feminine" (2003: 37).
[177] See also Pilkington for an outline on attitudes towards gossip and how it is generally "downgraded or condemned by any community" (2004: 255).

It is evident that the initial post is constructed to encourage self-disclosure from other members, through relation of personal stories and statements. The rapid succession of posts is a particular aspect of feminised "pointless posting" dialogue. Jane Pilkington, in her study of gossip, found a similar style of discourse between participants. Within the female groups, she noted that whilst one individual spoke, the others were continuously involved: "it was rare for a speaker to talk alone for more than about 30-35 words" (2004: 257). As the conversations progressed, "the volume and speed at which the speakers spoke increased...and the length of turn of each participant was extremely short" (2004: 257.).

Some members of Murmurs objected to this non-normativity and considered this type of feminised discourse as an unwanted departure from the R.E.M. themed conferences, both in style and content. The contradiction of the forum's intellectual discourse was stressed by a normative fan in a thread "small talk is ruler", who expressed dismay at the popularity of these posts:

> I've increasingly noticed something funny about most forums in We Talk. If you post
> something lame and silly, or insult somebody, you'll get about 100 replies in 10
> minutes. But if you bother to elaborate an intelligent topic up for discussion, unless
> you're mainly known by people in general, it's hard to get people to notice it.
> Now, what should that tell us about the We Talk community?
> (redcl, 25 April 2002).

These comments differentiate between the masculine discussions of "intelligent topics," where response is seen to depend on status, and the "lame and silly" posts of feminised discourse, which is considered to receive immediate and widespread attention. This situation is deemed by the poster to not only be an indicator of quality versus quantity, but is also criticised as a threat to normative behaviour in the community. However, for some, "lame and silly" conduct was viewed as "phatic communion" due to its tendency to generate discussion between members and initiate social bonds. Rev Bingo maintained that this type of "pointless" discourse should not be demeaned, but rather applauded for its potential to act as a conversational stimulus within the community:

> There is a lot of pointless information given here and people treat it so seriously. Like
> "Ohmygod therer are so many posts i dont knwo what to do!!! Ahhh iam going nuts ..
> all this pointless and stupid information. You know what it is a break from life, it
> might be a humorous comment a story about someones life a political issue. It might

be nothing but someone is willing to share something and you know what .. that is the start of any type of communication... (Rev Bingo, 21 September 1999).

The above user attempts to highlight that what is often deemed as "pointless and stupid information" can often be an attempt at self-disclosure with others in the community, and should therefore not be classed as unnecessary and meaningless to the website. Nancy Baym shares a similar viewpoint by stating that the feminised act of self-disclosure can help "to replace the anonymity of the newsgroup with real people living real lives" (1997: 116). In this sense, feminine discourse in the form of "pointless posting" can be seen as providing a sense of "personal reality" of community members that may not be obtainable within normative masculine discourse. Baym concludes that this emotional "realness" is achieved because "these cues to personality fill in the identities of active participants so that shared knowledge goes far beyond [the fan text] and into other aspects of each other's lives" (1997: 116). An example of this style of conversing is apparent in a thread entitled "tuna fish," which displays how Pointless Posters engage with each other:

embark: "Is canned tuna fish cooked or raw?? I've always wondered this, please help..."

Pariah Shite: "I think it's cooked. It looks cooked. has that friable texture. YES, it must be!"

madloop: "i hate tuna."

monktbd: "tuna? mmmm reminds me of that weird tuna banana stuff i love to cook.... sounds weird tastes great..... hey! even my mum loves it!"

nearwildsam: "It must be cooked! It's not canned sushi. I used to like an open face tuna sandwich with cheese grilled in the toaster over...mmmmmm."

chasinglindsay: "i think tuna is yummy town. i used to eat a LOT of tuna sandwhiches back in junior/senior high--i'd bring one for lunch pretty much every day. for my 16th birthday, my daddy gave me a GIANT can of tuna. it's 4 lbs 2.5 oz. i asked him why he gave me that, and he simply said "you like tuna." hard to argue with that! i still have it! it's one of my prize possesions and sits on my desk by my computer at school and i'll be hauling it with me to UGA in august" (19 May 2001).

It is clear in the development of this thread how members' "real" personal life preferences and experiences can be related to, and exchanged with, others, based on a topic that is far removed from R.E.M. discussion and "quite unconnected with what they are doing" (Malinowski 1923:

302)[178]. Although the thread concerns what can be viewed as a "pointless" topic such as tuna fish, the posters use this to divulge information about themselves, such as their educational plans, familial situations and anecdotes, personal culinary tastes and hobbies. Even though this thread may include "purposeless expressions," these can work to bind the participants closer together. Another poster also recognised the potential for "pointless posting" to encourage social bonding and mutual self-disclosure:

> I quite enjoy the little slice-of-life stuff that gets posted. I am talking about silly things
> like smashing spiders, fishing glasses out of toilets or something as simple as "there is
> no one else on the pager! Whoopee!" A fun little bit can bring forth other great things.
> People can empathize and tell a story from it.... PP is good (Chrispy, September 1999).

Chrispy's declaration that the "fun little bits" within "pointless posting" act to initiate the exchange of personal "stories," to which people can respond and empathise with, is an acknowledgment of "phatic communion." His claim that this behaviour can deliver "great things" shows a belief that "small talk" or "pointless postings" is not always "small" or "pointless," but rather offers possibilities for creating ties and social bonding.

Considering that non-normative fans validate their use of "pointless" discourse through "phatic communion," how then, do they justify, and make sense of, their de-emphasis of R.E.M. fandom? To examine this, I shall now focus on how assumed commonality is understood and employed by these members.

Talk About the Passion: R.E.M. discussion and assumed commonality

> when you first visit We Talk you're amazed (and probably relieved) to find there are
> others as obsessed with REM as you are, and it's great. But as the months pass, it just
> gets tedious going over all the minutae of how blue exactly are Michael's eyes, and is
> he a saint, and what color your fave Nudie suit is, and all that. After a while you find
> you're remembering names of people, and the kinds of posts you can expect from
> them, and that's when the We Talk community stylee thing starts to take over from the
> purist REM stuff. (SweetFannyAddams, 8 September 2001)

The above description of the poster's personal experience of "pointless posting" supports Henry Jenkins' observation that, in a television programme fan community, due to the "shared set of

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[178] Michael G. Clyne also observes this amongst co-workers, who "develop phatic communion unrelated to the actual communication required by their jobs" (1994: 84).

references"[179] between members, "the common interest in the same program sparks conversations soon drifting away from the primary text that initially drew them together" (1992: 81)[180]. This "drifting away," I will suggest, is exemplified in the above post, which highlights how in Murmurs, over time, the object of fandom (R.E.M.) does not remain at the forefront of all discussions. Alexander Sidorkin's "three drinks theory," where he suggests three modes of discourse, offers an understanding of this process. He describes how conversations can begin with first discourse on a "common text, a shared experience" which "establishes a common set of references, a shared language for the following conversations" (1999: 75). This then progresses into dialogical second discourse where "individuals bring themselves to that common text." As such, "the idea is to enmesh the self with the text" and "to salvage whatever is left from a common meaning for individual sense-making." After this conversation has diminished, a third discourse of pseudo-conversation occurs which involves "talking nonsense and breaking logical connections" (1999: 76). This illustrates how discussions between fans can develop from an original focus surrounding the object of fandom to off-topic, feminised discourse, which centres on the self. When this occurs, Nancy Baym views off-topic conversations as not only "drifting away," but as replacing the object of fandom in terms of importance: "fan discourse can often work to create a specific kind of community that becomes more important than the object of fandom itself" (1998:6). I will argue that in Murmurs, although "pointless postings" can be construed as important "phatic communion" by those who engage in the activity, it is debatable whether this discourse becomes *more* important than the object of fandom. As I will show, this is because R.E.M. can maintain its position as a "primary text" through an assumed commonality, which is used by fans who engage in off-topic discussions, to justify their transgressions.

Gary Robson argues that "when committed fans talk about the bases of their commitments and feelings for the [object of fandom] they are clearly not talking about something that is external to themselves. They speak, rather, about something that is a constituent part of themselves" (2000:

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[179] Geraldine Bloustien also observes the importance of these shared references. She illustrates how a teenager "could visit almost any modern city, quickly locate where the Goths, the fly-girls, the skateboarders, or the anime fans hang out and find some shared set of references that enabled ready communication" (2003: xii).

[180] This "drifting away" can also be viewed in the Oddworld computer gaming community, where the off-topic discussion forum soon became the most popular (Schott 2006: 138). Louisa Ellen Stein, in her examination of a Roswell fan community's reactions to September 11th, also shows how members apply collective ideals surrounding the show to "experiences that move beyond the specific programs that they gather online to discuss" (2002: 473).

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138). They are in effect "committed to the ideals expressed by their favoured [object of fandom]" (Pullen 2000:53).This is also in line with Matt Hills' suggestion that online fan communities be seen as domains where the importance of, and interest in, the object of fandom is self evident and experienced collectively. They are spaces "in which what matters to the fan can be taken for granted as being of shared significance" (2001: 148). This observation is shared by Zweerink and Gatson in their study of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* online community *The Bronze*. They discovered that although fandom in *Buffy* brought members to the website, the focus of discussion did not always need to be placed on the show, as interest in it was assumed: "more and more of their conversation is about themselves as a community per se, not as a community of Buffy fans – that aspect is almost taken for granted at this point" (2002: 248). However, how is this situation received by normative fans, considering it is against the values of normative behaviour? In Murmurs, a user named Buck's Student created a thread entitled "Is this even a real fan site?," suggesting that if the community was made up of "real" fans, then the levels of R.E.M. discussion would be higher:

> Look around at the latest post. Notice anything? It is mostly a bunch of political
> threads, elvis poses, and why my life sucks. I posted a recent thread that was asking
> about peoples views on a couple of REM records. I got twenty-nine views and ZERO
> replies. I was confused and dumb-founded. Why didn't I get at least one reply? I mean
> if it sucks or is confusing, why won't anyone respond? I then looked through the
> recent treads and I noticed it was mostly political shit and tee-shirt lifting
> contests....Please, won't someone talk about their feelings on this?
> (10 September 2005).

This member, as a newbie in the community, confronts non-normative de-emphasis of R.E.M. within "pointless postings" and interprets the behaviour to indicate a lack of authentic fandom. This perceived lack of response which Buck's Student employs to measure fandom is in line with Crawford's claim that "the term 'fan'...has often been used as a benchmark to consider those who are deemed as having appropriate and legitimate patterns of interest [i.e. being a 'real' fan] and to disregard those who are seen to have far more trivial and 'uncommitted' patterns of involvement" (2004: 20). Thus, for Buck's Student, authentic fandom is based on commitment to the object of fandom, and Pointless Posters, with their rejection of R.E.M. discussion, are therefore classed as inappropriate and not "true" fans. This reasoning provoked a response from

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another poster who related a similar experience as a newbie, whereby her initial anticipation of discussion on R.E.M. over time "drifted away" to focus on her fellow community members:

I think Murmurs is born as a site dedicated to REM and allowing people who love the band to meet and discuss about the records, the concerts and so on related to the band. I can say that it was like this for me, at the beginning (I came into Murmurs searching for Stipe's photos on the web), but the more I was into, the more I knew people who are now my great friends. Now, when I join Murmurs, it's most of all to meet these persons, to talk about my day in the office, about the big facts of the day like a few time ago, the bombs in London, about my life that sucks and so on...I believe that for other people it's like this, so often it's more natural to talk, simply talk about whatsoever in their own lives... maybe paying less attention to the concerts of the 80's (marina, 10 September, 2005).

Marina's motivation to continue visiting Murmurs changed from an initial desire to access pictures of the band, to an engagement in feminised discourse about personal life, with people who she now considers "great friends." It is possible to observe that although her conversations no longer dwell on the object of fandom, but instead are focused on concerns of everyday life, she justifies this digression through an assumed commonality of interest in R.E.M. As Louisa Ellen Stein argues in her study of a *Roswell* fan community, "while [the object of fandom] had brought them together, friends should not be limited to appropriate subject matter" (2000: 12). Thus, for marina the premise that "everybody else here loves R.E.M. more so than any other band" is a vital thread that permeates the discussion of everyday life, even if it is an unspoken one. Her suggestion for members who discuss R.E.M. to "pay less attention to the concerts of the 80's" is an attempt to present masculine normativity in the same light as Buck's Student regards "pointless posting." This perception was shared by Dream Brother, who viewed masculine normative discussions of R.E.M. as repetitive and unexciting:

I'm a lot more likely to discuss R.E.M. on another forum that is not dedicated to the band than I am here. No offense, but its pretty boring discussing a band with only people who are huge fans of that band. Plus, I've been here now what, seven years? I don't think there's a single thing left to say about Automatic For the People that hasn't been said three thousand times in those years (Dream Brother, 11 September 2005).

Dream Brother's conscious de-emphasis of fandom by choosing to discuss R.E.M. in another, non R.E.M., community is a declaration of his non-normativity. It also ensures he would not converse with newbies such as Buck's Student, who arrive in the community and are eager to

discuss R.E.M. related issues that may have been covered numerous times. The following member also observed a lack of variety in normative R.E.M. discussions and expressed a preference to learn about fellow community members and their personal lives, rather than declarations of fandom:

> i still love REM.. i read some of the band sections sometimes but it's the same old
> stuff over and over again. i like the people here for the most part and would rather read
> about stuff in their lives than how much they love REM
> (Ebow The Girl, 8 September 2001).

I will suggest that the above member confirms her fandom and justifies her actions in rejecting posts concerning "love" for R.E.M., due to her already established belief that fellow community members are fans. Therefore, she *assumes* commonality with other Murmursians. It is possible to conclude that this assumption allows her to enter discussions on various topics with R.E.M. fans, rather than strictly discussing R.E.M. An inversion of expectation is therefore apparent as, for Ebow The Girl, a normative masculinised focus on R.E.M. produces the "same old stuff" from community members, which she considers to be less interesting than feminised disclosures about their lives. A similar viewpoint is shared by inspectorjason, who articulates the point further. He also diverted his attentions from R.E.M. related discussions to converse with, and about the personal lives of, fellow community members. He considers discussions purely on R.E.M. to be restricting in the sense that they do not encourage "phatic communion" through the exchange of more personal information concerning his community counterparts that can be found within feminised discourse. The driving force of motivation for his interaction in the community has been altered from a purist discussion of the band, to be replaced by discovering which fans share interests common with his own:

> I do not post very much in the R.E.M. conferences anymore...The reason that I post
> about other bands, movies, and books is because that is the best way to find out which
> R.E.M. fans have other things in common with me... I don't visit Murmurs to find out
> who else is an R.E.M. fan, because I know that everyone here is. I visit here so that I
> can find out who else likes The Cure or my other favorite bands, who else enjoys the
> same books that I enjoy, who else has the same philosophies that I do, etc. All of my
> best friendships here have been established because I found that I had something else in
> common with that person (inspectorjason, 8 September, 2001).

Inherent in the above post is an awareness of assumed commonality, which is revealed by inspectorjason's claim that everyone in the community is a fan. This awareness does not need to be proven in posts and discussions as, for this poster, visiting the website alone is an indication of fandom. His digression from normative R.E.M. discussions into a de-emphasis of fandom is driven by a need to identify, and converse with, like-minded people, with whom the "significance" of R.E.M. is a collective assumption. I now want to look at how the feminised non-normativity of "pointless posting", in the form of de-emphasising fandom and personal-life "small talk," became excessive and so offensive to normative fans that long-running threads of this nature were removed and placed in a specifically created forum named Chit-Chat. I will show how this forum can be approached as what Michel Foucault terms a "heterotopia," developing my use of this term from the previous chapter.

Chit-chat as heterotopia

In this section I want to return to Foucault's concept of the heterotopia, which I introduced in my analysis of Droolers. I will argue that the Chit-Chat forum, due to its non-normative state and exclusion from the main community, can also be viewed as a heterotopic site of deviance. I will show that the forum is a "counter-site" within the community to house those who have engaged in actions marked by their deviation from the required norms and values of the community. However, quite distinctly from Droolers, I will demonstrate how Chit-Chat members develop a sense of self-importance based on this deviation, as a result of hosts not communicating to members the negative reasons for the creation of the heterotopic space.

The Chit-Chat forum was introduced in 2001 to accommodate "pointless posting" threads that had developed into long-running discussions[181], or a dialogue between a number of people that did not invite participation from other posters:

> The danger of PP is that it leads to this chatting in posts. There are many problems I see
> in this. On the technical side, the reply/quote aspect of the chat posting fills the threads
> with large quotes of mostly sig file and one line of message. With the nature of chat
> posting to be a like a conversation, many posts accumulate and the bulky posts are a

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[181] As Coates states, within feminine discourse, topic change occurs gradually, "the discussion of a single topic can last for some time" (2004: 230).

hindrance. Chat posting also tends to be fun mostly for the ones involved. I, as well as others I have talked to, just skim it now and mark all read (Chrispy, September 1999).

Non-normative threads of this nature throughout the community were located and transferred to the forum by hosts who were unable or unwilling to halt or influence the flow of discussion. This action can be determined as a method of recognising and marking an "other" space which "has the effect initially of calling attention to its otherness, and then of bringing its otherness under control" (Chaplin 2003: 344). Members who wished to continue making contributions to a thread were still able to do so, but were obliged to access them through the Chit-Chat forum. This consolidation of the "other" has been viewed as reducing its power: "naming thus serves to remove power deriving from otherness...the other is only truly powerful when it remains unnamed" (Chaplin 2003: 345). Genoccio also argues that "it follows logically that the simple naming or theoretical recognition of that difference always to some degree flattens or precludes, by definition, the very possibility of its arrival as such" (1996: 39). This perspective can be applied to the Chit-Chat heterotopia where, previous to confinement, offending threads were dispersed through the community and allowed unfettered existence.

As "each heterotopia has a precise and determined function within a society," it is clear that Chit-Chat's purpose was to accommodate and segregate a type of feminised conversation, from all forums within the community, that was believed to contradict normative masculine behaviour in a manner that de-emphasised both intellectual debate and fandom. A defining feature of the Chit-Chat heterotopia is the suspension of normative practices, which is apparent in the following extract from a thread entitled "blah blah blah bored":

XxMaggotsxX: "we're bored come talk."

Randomchickhere: "heyhey ashely!"

XxMaggotsxX: "hey whats up nmhjc we're gunna get in so much trouble 4 this lol."

Randomchickhere: "nah uhu she didnt want us talking so we arent were typing."

XxMaggotsxX: "yea thats true she didnt want us talking and were not were typing being smatalikly like."

Randomchickhere: "haha you cant spell!!!"

XxMaggotsxX: "thats not funny your mean."

Sweet Fanny Addams: "U R all Dum use the chatroom."

Randomchickhere: "why?"

Sweet Fanny Addams: "Because you are boring the shit out of everyone else with this crap. Can someone move this to chit chat?" (20 May 2005).

The interjection from host Sweet Fanny Addams demonstrates the above thread extract holds the relevant criteria to be moved to Chit-Chat. Her comment "U R all Dum" parodies the posters' language, which rejects use of grammar, is constructed in text-speech, and therefore viewed as contradicting Murmurs' normative intellectual discourse. Furthermore, there is no clear topic of discussion in the thread to encourage participation from other users. It is rather a dialogue between two members. The social standing of Chit-Chat is denigrated by the following critical comments from normative fans:

Chitchat is what i like to call a boredom forum, a place to go when you have absolutely nothing better to do and your fingers move across the keyboard on autopilot. chitchat is …a trashbin (Astrid, Interview, 2005).

Chit-chat is the goddam Murmurs dustbin. Its where bad threads go to die!!!! (Bombalurina, 30 October 2005).

The above comments, which liken Chit-Chat to a trashbin and dustbin, indicate a view of the forum as suitable only for waste material. This construes Chit-Chat threads as low value and for those who function on autopilot, investing little thought in their contributions to threads. Other critical comments viewed the forum as being an area for the production and confinement of odd behaviour that did not, and should not, fit elsewhere in the community:

Chit-chat is extrememly cliquey and attracts some really strange exchanges. I tend to avoid chit-chat [it] makes me cringe (anonymous, interview, 2005).

[Chit-Chat] is like a forum that sweeps all the unconventional threads and topics under the carpet. (slennon, interview, 2005).

These perspectives however were not presented in the welcome note for the forum, which attempted to explain the transference of threads as an achievement to be celebrated. There was

little indication that threads had been moved because of non-normativity. Instead, the poster is seemingly encouraged to view the procedure as an honour awarded to very few members:

> Welcome! Has your thread been moved here and you don't know why? Read This!
> First off, I'd like to say...Welcome to Chit-Chat! This conference was created so that
> long, (and man do we mean long) threads would have a place to call their home,
> without pushing short, less chatty threads out of the way in their old conference. If
> your thread is suddenly here, then it's because the host of your conference deemed it
> worthy enough to wear the 'chit-chat' badge of honor...an honor that very few threads
> get! You can't start new threads in here, only respond to the ones that have been
> moved...remember... The sky's the limit in chit-chat! So post, post, post away!
> (PageantGirl 9 November 2001).

The composition of this welcome note conveys irony, in that it is in direct opposition to the original intentions behind the implementation of the forum. Rather than discouraging users from this type of behaviour, it instead works to create a sense of self-importance under an impression that only "worthy" threads are relocated to Chit-Chat. This is also validated by the reference to "short, less chatty threads" throughout the community, which are projected as in danger of being sidelined and requiring more room to develop. However, an important factor only briefly referred to in the welcome note is the restriction upon members to create new threads within the forum. Only hosts and crew members can start new threads, whereas others can respond purely to existing discussions. These restrictions imply that the hosts sought to not only contain existing Chit-Chat threads into one forum, but also to prevent the creation of other threads of this nature within. This procedure can be viewed as an effort to impose order upon non-normativity. Steve Connor argues that once a heterotopia has been identified and marked with boundaries, "it is no longer the conceptual monstrosity which it once was, for its incommensurability has been in some sense bound, controlled and predictively interpreted, given a centre and illustrative function" (1989: 9). Whilst this argument can be accepted as a valid interpretation of the structural and social aspects of Chit-Chat, it fails to take into account how the manner in which a heterotopia is presented to its members and the wider community can work counter to the intended outcome. Rather than being projected as a site to accommodate deviant behaviour, Chit-Chat was presented by the hosts through discourse that suggested inclusion in the forum was an honourable accomplishment. This enticing aspect of the welcome note encouraged counter-discourses which viewed inclusion in Chit-Chat as a measure of success and importance. In this respect, some threads appeared to be created with the prime purpose of being moved to Chit-

Chat, with titles such as "get this into Chit-Chat or feel my wrath." For these posters, being successful in Murmurs was dependent on achieving thread removal, which in turn was reliant on the assistance of comments from other community members. Although indicating subordination, if thread transference was not achieved, then this was considered a failure. This is evident in a thread entitled "I want one of my threads to make it to chit-chat":

> Does anybody want to help me out? Insult me, start your own little conversations,
> promote your own thread, whatever you wanna do in here. Just don't NOT reply and
> make me feel like an even bigger loser, ok? (Sluttylittleboy, 2 May 2003).

It is apparent that this post is resistant to normative discourse, due to the author's consideration of the content of replies as irrelevant, providing sufficient attention is attracted to ensure the length required to be moved into Chit-Chat. This is evident in his willingness to be insulted, as long as the thread acquired sufficient replies to be transferred. In this sense, post count superseded post content. Because of this, normative values and discourse did not come into consideration, and any contributors were encouraged to react in the same deviant manner, thereby increasing non-normative activity. Another Chit-Chat poster offered encouragement and reinforced further the neglect of post content by assuring success through repetitive posting:

> i am here dear..just keep posting..getting a thread to chitchat takes a lot of work and
>
> it is stressful. it can take weeks sometimes even months so dont give up
> (beccakay 3 May 2003).

This point of view was endorsed by Wim in the same thread, who considered the effort of repetitive postings over a long period of time to be worthwhile as "...once you get to chit chat it's so rewarding." This sense of achievement of arriving into Chit-Chat is made clear by Incka who created a special thread to celebrate the event and inform other users:

> Incka: "I got a thread into Chit-Chat."
>
> Stupidus: "You poor thing."
>
> Incka: "What? Poor? You should be congratulating me!"
>
> Stupidus: "I would prefer my thread to be deleted than end up in chit chat."

Incka: "May I ask what is so bad about chit-chat..."

Antti: "You're basically celebrating being inane and meaningless, maybe that."

Incka: "My thread isn't meaningless - It's the Guess The Song Game..."

Albatross: "it got into chitchat????? yay! it's gonna live forever!!!!!!!!!"
(16 November 2003).

It is apparent that Incka's elation surrounding his inclusion into Chit-Chat is not shared by Stupidus and Antti, who take a normative approach and commiserate with him, rather than celebrate and congratulate. Incka's reaction to this criticism is one of astonishment that displays a lack of awareness of his non-normative behaviour and subsequently how normative fans view Chit-Chat, which is evident in his request for clarification as to why the forum is viewed in a negative manner. I will suggest that the importance given to Chit-Chat by some members worked to disguise its non-normativity in favour of presenting inclusion within the forum as an achievement. Rather than view Chit-Chat discourse as "inane and meaningless," Incka instead sees value in his "Guess the Song Game" thread and fails to recognise that his actions are non-normative, a situation further compounded by Albatross offering celebration and support.

Due to the thread length requirement for removal to Chit-Chat, it was common to observe postings placed in rapid successions that were minimal in content. For aspiring Chit-Chat members, threads were not composed in order to encourage normative intellectual discussion, but rather to engage in a series of mini-dialogues that, over a length of time, would constitute a whole that was considered appropriate for removal into Chit-Chat. The minimalist aspect of threads created in anticipation of being moved to the forum drew criticism from some community members, who viewed the process as having a negative effect on conversation within the community as a whole:

Its a glorified Chat Room. People got lazy and think that a 5 letter word is a post. It treated the site like shit and I have continually blamed this as well for one of the problems on this site by pushing away good conversation for people that would rather add two words to a post and think they are brilliant. I am sorry but the point to a messageboard is to exchange ideas and to learn. The point to Chit Chatting is to chat...why not go to Chat rather than post it there? (Eric, interview, 2005).

Eric emphasises the deviance of Chit-Chat style threads which "think that a 5 letter word is a post," from Murmurs' normative discourse, which is to "exchange ideas and to learn." He observes that Chit-Chat threatens normativity, and cannot therefore be permitted to co-exist in the same forums. His recommendation that Chit-Chat users should restrict their activities to the Chat Room facility on Murmurs would ensure that their conversations were not recorded or permanently stored on the website. The removal of a thread into Chit-Chat was considered to bring shame rather than honour for another member, who regarded the forum to be frequented by 'unsavoury' characters:

It is the twilight zone. I have the shame of two of my threads being hijacked and dragged into there. I don't like it much to be honest...there are alot of distinctly odd posting going on in there, which seems virtually unchecked. Alot of sexual inuendo lots of immature behaviour from the adults that post in there. I am as immature as it gets, don't get me wrong, but I fall short of pages of one word replies over weeks upon weeks and eating pretend food. I think that it attracts some very unsavoury posters to be honest with you. It isn't a good representation of Murmurs and how it should really be (anonymous, interview, 2005).

The reference to Chit-Chat as a "twilight zone" creates an impression that the behaviour contained within the forum is out of the ordinary, full of misfits and therefore, non-normative. It is recognition of an "other" space that inverts the values of how Murmurs "should really be." This situation endorses the proposition that heterotopias engage the "displaced, marginal, rejected or ambivalent," which forms "the basis of an alternative mode of ordering that has the effect of offering a contrast to the dominant representations of social order" (Hetherington 1996: 159). How then, does this contrast continue? Does it, due to the ordering nature of a heterotopia, proceed to exist alongside normativity, or does normalization occur? Using an example of how further discipline was imposed on the Chit-Chat heterotopia in order to conceal its existence and attraction to members, I shall now move on to argue that its "otherness" was not normalized, but rather consolidated.

Being one of the "cool cats": Murmurs' secret world

Foucault stresses that "a society, as its history unfolds, can make an existing heterotopia function in a very different fashion..." (1986: 25) This is apparent in the development of the Chit-Chat

heterotopia, where, following an increase in members, the Murmurs Crew decided that it would be made subscriber-only and therefore inaccessible to non-members. The main purpose of this action was to isolate further unwanted discussions by concealing them in order that they are viewed and contributed to only by those who have subscribed to the forum[182]. This corresponds to Michel Foucault's suggestion that heterotopias "presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable" (1986: 26). In this sense, entry to the site is not unrestricted: "either the entry is compulsory...or else the individual has to submit to rites and purifications." Chit-Chat demonstrates both aspects of "opening and closing." Although thread movement to the forum was compulsory, entry to Chit-Chat was open, even though it was now restricted to those who joined the Chit-Chat Club.

Sarah Chaplin states that when a heterotopia is established in a community and the "other" is under control, "gradually any trace of otherness is reduced...making it disappear by rendering its otherness similar to what is already known" (2003: 344). I will argue however that the increased discipline imposed on Chit-Chat, whilst able to confine deviance within the heterotopia, did not secure a transformation of "otherness" into normative behaviour. The introduction of the new subscribers-only measures, and the manner in which they were projected in the new welcome note for the forum, demonstrates a glorification of Chit-Chat members, which caused further segregation from the rest of the community. Rather than convey the action as a disciplinary move, it was presented by the forum host as one that transformed Chit-Chat into an important and even more "exclusive" club within Murmurs:

Posting at Murmurs or How to Be One of the Cool Cats Here! Since you have to subscribe to even see the chit chat forum nowadays, this is the most perfect way to start a sweet clean new chit-chat thread!! 99,9% of Murmurs doesn't know what we're talking about. But since you're reading this, it means you're part of the finest elite available! Oh yeah, even better, there is NO way for them others to read any of the posts here! So, post here to acknowledge you're a valuable part of the Murmurs elite. Post all your Murmurs tips, secrets, gossip & whatnot and help us stay ahead of ordinary members Pack. We chit-chat, we're hidden away, but we will take over WeTalk one Day (Rem-fan.com, 14 March 2005).

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[182] In addition, on 13 March 2005, Chit-Chat threads were filtered from the "latest threads" section on the murmurs.com homepage, and also from the "new posts" facility within the community.

In this post, normative fans in Murmurs are referred to as the "ordinary members pack," whilst Chit-Chat members are "part of the finest elite available[183]." In this sense, normative discourse is presented by the host as homogeneously inferior to Chit-Chat, which is projected to eventually become the dominant group that will "take over We Talk one day." Therefore, it is not envisaged that the "other" will assimilate into normativity, but rather, that normativity will assimilate into the "other." This is contradictory to Chaplin's claim that normalisation will occur, once order is maintained over the "other".

The prospect that wider community members, who were not subscribers, could not observe Chit-Chat discussions and activities gave cause for celebration amongst some posters. Their exclusion was interpreted as a means of offering security in a site away from the wider community, thereby relieving the pressure of having to conform to normative behaviour:

I love it here! It's like been locked away inside another world. A way to escape when things all around seem like madness. People here are so wonderful, you can say what's on your mind and people will answer with love and kindness, cheeky ways and fun. Kind of like being locked away in someone's diary. We know what's going on - but they don't! (anonymous, 14 march 2005).

I've always loved Chit-Chat, but I'm glad it's more of secret thing now. You can post (almost) anything you like and practicaly nobody knows!! It's great!!! (anonymous, 14 March 2005).

Within these comments there is a suggestion that the new confinement of the forum offered the users freedom of expression that was not permittable before. I will argue that this situation parallels the model of discipline and surveillance used by Foucault in *Discipline and Punish: the birth of the prison* (1977). Using the example of the Panopticon, a central tower used by prison guards to monitor the movements of prisoners, Foucault outlined how its arrival in the nineteenth century transformed acts of discipline. Whereas previously, in the Middle Ages, the public demonstrations of torture placed the body as a target to deter criminals, the focus then shifted "to a sense of self that is always subject to viewing by authority – and which therefore must forever engage in the measuring, grading, and censoring of behaviour" (McGrath 2003: 7). The constant gaze of the panopticon was intended to encourage this self-regulation: "never sure when they are

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[183] On 9th April 2005, a poster named Crestfallen inquired to the location of the forum in a thread entitled "where is Chit-Chat?" In response to this, the host remfan.com stated "Chit-chat's gone e*l*i*t*e."

being watched by someone in the central tower-or even if there is anyone in the tower at all-prisoners come by degrees to watch themselves..." (Ransom 1997: 47). Thus, I will suggest that in Murmurs, the Panopticon can be represented by the surveillance of hosts and crew members, who continuously monitor and enforce discipline against the community members. However, with the further seclusion of the Chit-Chat heterotopia as subscribers-only, members within it are freed from this constant surveillance and self-regulation, and feel they can effectively "say what's on their mind" or "post anything they like." As such, members could act non-normatively and engage in feminised discussion without fear of persecution. Because of this, resistive elements are still extant in the community, even though they are confined to a deviant heterotopia. This contradicts Crawford's argument that "the panopticon gaze may not reach into every facet of everyday life, but the key to panoptic discipline is that this is normalized and carried with the individual outside the scope of the gaze" (2004: 109). This situation, while contributing to a sense of being isolated from the rest of the community "inside another world," also worked to increase feelings of bonding within the heterotopia. The move to subscribers-only established inter-relationships that were perceived by the members to be more immediate and lasting than those developed in other forums:

I've been a member of Murmurs for nearly four years however its only in the last five or six months I really started to post and that coincides with me joining the Chit-Chat group. There doesn't appear to be too many members and everyone seems to know each other more personally than I expected. I have talked to one member a couple of times on MSN Messenger and I can't imagine doing that with any other members of the community (slennon, interview, 2005).

It is possible to argue that social bonding within the Chit-Chat forum occurred due to the transition to a subscriber-only forum, which worked to further isolate members from the main group. This allowed a tighter integration and the development of social ties through feminised discourse. In accordance with the replies from respondents below, it is perceived that due to the lower number of participants than in the wider Murmurs community, an almost familial atmosphere is created, where members feel the bonds of friendship in a protective environment:

To a very good extent, with the long-lasting threads everyone gets to know each other, new members are instantly befriended and everyone is so friendly in general, and talk so much, that it's almost like a big family, if that makes sense! (That's Me, interview,

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2005).

Therefore, the move to subscribers-only worked to increase feelings of "phatic" communion. "Small talk," as feminised discourse, is seen to have produced a situation where subscribers to Chit-Chat heterotopia not only develop friendships, but relationships they consider familial. These sentiments are also expressed by the following poster:

Chatting is rewarding in chit chat as there are days when everything seems wrong. Life is hard, and the days just seem to drag on. Work can get you down and everything around you seems cold and hard. Posting on here everyone and I do mean everyone has a warm hearted smile for each other. We are like a huge extended family that care for and look out for each other. Someone is always here, when there's no-one around you (angel hair, interview, 2005).

For Susan Clerc, this familial "safeness" is one of the integral qualities that members of a close-knit forum value (1996: 44). Thus, the Chit-Chat heterotopia has "functioned in a very different fashion," counter to its original intentions, in terms of reinforcing non-normative behaviour. Instead, the feminised discourse that prompted the creation of the heterotopia stifles any potential for normalization, due to the familial "safeness" it encourages between members that seemingly cannot be found within normative masculine discourse. It can be seen that the lack of surveillance and control over how offending threads are developed within the heterotopia, alongside the projection that members within are important "cool cats," also creates an atmosphere of familial bonding and low pressure to produce normative posts. Therefore, members are encouraged to continue with feminised "pointless posting" in this manner, an activity which ultimately ensures their "otherness" is not transformed into normative masculine behaviour.

In this chapter, I have examined how behaviour in Murmurs that both rejects normative discourse, and de-emphasises fandom, is justified by non-normative fans, but approached by normative members as an "other" space to be segregated within the community. Using the concept of "phatic" communion, I have shown how feminised "small talk" or "pointless posting" has been used and justified by non-normative fans as an instigator and cultivator of social bonding and intimacy.

The non-normative de-emphasis of fandom within "pointless posting," I have highlighted, is justified through an assumed commonality. Building on the work of Henry Jenkins (1992), I argued that although these fans may "drift away" from the main fan text, the assumption of R.E.M. fandom between community members allows it to maintain a prominence, even without being at the forefront of discussions.

Drawing on Michel Foucault (1986), I have further shown that the Chit-Chat forum was created to house long-running, non-normative threads and have argued that it can be viewed as a heterotopia of deviance. Within this, I have stressed how the deliberate evasion of communicating to members the negative reasons for its creation acted as an instigator of self-importance and as an encouragement of non-normative behaviour. I examined the development of the Chit-Chat heterotopia and, using Michel Foucault's (1977) concept of surveillance and discipline, argued why normalization did not occur in this instance.

In this part of the thesis, I examined through Case Studies how three non-normative groups within the Murmurs community (Trobes, Droolers and Pointless Posters) negotiate normative fan identity. Within this, I showed the methods through which normalization is attempted and how Murmurs negotiates different types of fan behaviour that appear to be a threat to the Liberal intelligentsia "central values" of R.E.M. fans' subcultural homology. In Chapter Five I demonstrate how the spoiler-evading activities of Trobes resulted in their subcultural distinctiveness from the rest of Murmurs and worked to create their own temporary forms of inverted fan cultural capital within the community. However, due to this distinctiveness being temporary, Trobes, I show, were able to successfully re-integrate into the community once the reasons for their actions have ended. Chapters Six and Seven then move on to consider Droolers and Pointless Posters who are also distinct from the rest of the community, but whose distinction from fan-cultural norms is permanent. Both groups I argue are non-normative in a different way to Trobes, in that they contravene the normative masculine intelligentsia approach to R.E.M. as a "thinking fan's rock band" and as a consequence of this are confined to what Michel Foucault (1986) terms a "heterotopia" of deviance.

In the next chapter, I shall move on to conclude this thesis by drawing together and discussing the findings from each chapter. I will reflect on the approach and methods used within this study and assess the implications surrounding the unique position from which the cyber-ethnography was conducted. Lastly, I consider areas of enquiry surrounding online communities and fan cultural norms uncovered by this study that can be developed for future research.

Chapter Eight. Conclusion

In this thesis I have assessed through a cyber-ethnography the negotiation of normative fan identity by R.E.M. fans in the Murmurs online community. In order to undertake this, in the previous chapters I examined not only the manner in which normative identity is constructed in the community, but also the activities of three non-normative groups (Trobes, Droolers and Pointless Posters), determining how Murmurs negotiates different types of fan behaviour that appear to be a threat to normative conduct. In this concluding chapter, I will now draw together and discuss the main findings of this thesis, offering a reflection on my approach and unique position, the method used and its implications, and a suggestion of areas for future research.

Life and How to Live It: the processes of negotiating normativity in Murmurs

In the process of this cyber-ethnography, of utmost significance in terms of contributing to the field of literature relating to online communities and fan cultural norms, is both my identification of five key practices that must be complied with to achieve normativity in Murmurs, a generalised finding that can be applied to other communities, and my discovery that normative fan identity within Murmurs is constructed and reinforced through the "central values" (Willis 1978) of the R.E.M. fans' subcultural homology. These homologous values promote a masculinised Liberal intelligentsia communal identity, encompassing political and cultural awareness, humanitarian and environmental concern, and an expressive appreciation of art, music and literature. I demonstrate how the object of fandom as the "thinking fan's rock band" reflects these "central values" and the manner with which they are explicitly communicated to community members through the Code of Conduct and Rules and Regulations. However, by showing that the adoption of normative behaviour in an online fan community is not a given, three of my case studies (Chapters Five to Seven) analyse different types of resistance to normativity in the community that contravene these "central values" and examine the subsequent attempts at governance by the Murmurs hierarchy to reintroduce normative standards. This examination of oppositional identities within an online fan community offers new insight into the negotiation of fan cultural norms than previously offered in academic literature. As I argued in the Literature Review (Chapter Two), fan identity is not consistently singular in an online fan community (as claimed by academics such as Licklider 1968: 40, Latif 2005, Lea and Spears 1992, Wellman and Guila 1999: 186, Wilcox 2005, Synder 1996: 92, Fernback 1997: 41, Gurak

2004: 27), nor does a common interest in the object of fandom produce absolute community cohesion. The purpose and original contribution of my study has therefore been to stress that the use of theories such as Benedict Anderson's (1991) "imagined communities" to understand online communities (Rheingold 1993, Jones 1997: 17, Jordan 1999, Fernback 1999, Lévy 1997, Tepper 1997: 47, Mallapragada 2000, Bell 2001, Mitra 2001, Jancovich 2002, Lysloff 2003: 40-41, Gajjala 2004) has resulted in the production of a limited account of oppositional intra-communal identities. This thesis has worked to challenge this inadequacy and provide an original account of relations of power that can arise in an online fan community through negotiation of the Other and maintenance of normative cultural identity.

As Matt Hills argues, a vitally overlooked factor of the application of Anderson's theory to online fans is the "common affective engagement" they experience, which is not accounted for in Anderson's model. His suggestion that online fan forums, due to their common affective tie, should instead be approached as "communities of imagination" which "constantly [threaten] to fragment" (2001: 154) is more in line with this study. Indeed, this thesis has shown that Murmurs is undoubtedly not "a safe space where fans, in conversation with other fans, avoid the anxiety of face-to-face conversations and express themselves freely" (Prandstaller 2003:24). I found that academic studies have offered limited accounts of challenges to conformity in this manner, most specifically with regard to oppositional identities within a fan community, and resistance to attempts at normalisation (Gurak 1999: 247). In this way, non-normative fan identity has mainly been construed as deviant, with few attempts to ascertain the reasons for this conduct, or to explain how these fans use their non-normative practices to challenge normative subcultural power. In relation to this, I have shown that insufficient attention has been paid to how, and the methods through which, normative fans can use their subcultural power to attempt to instigate either normalisation, or more severely, segregation through confinement. This thesis has stressed that the way forward is to revise these assumptions and inadequacies in accordance with an attempt to understand the non-normative fan position, and the methods with which fans respond to and/or resist community norms.

In order to be able to understand the non-normative R.E.M. fan position in Murmurs, I decided that the most appropriate starting point was to undertake a case study (Chapter Four) to

determine what constituted normative standards in the community, and how they were enforced. My research identified that in Murmurs normativity can be achieved by members through strict compliance with five key practices: reading in the "right way," assuming the correct gendered discourse, participating in the exchange of knowledge with other fans, maintaining a focus on the object of fandom and complying with the subcultural homologies in play. Indeed, I suggest that these observations can be generalised and applied to other online fan communities in order to understand how members construct and engage in normative behaviour. In Murmurs, however, engagement in all five practices leads to a commitment to a value system that can be characterised as a Liberalist masculine intelligentsia. Drawing on Henry Jenkins's application of de Certeau's "strategy" and "tactics" to fandom (1992), I discovered that this normative behaviour in Murmurs is governed through strategies of power employed by the community's hierarchy. However, I found that these strategies did not always have the desired outcome. For example, I demonstrated that the Ignore User strategy worked to uncover contradictions within the Liberalist homologous values aspired to by Murmurs, such as the tensions between equality and freedom of speech (Fish 1994: 34 and 2005, Kernohan 1998: 103, Carter 1987, Alexander 2005: 147), and the difficulty of protecting these "central values," while seeking to observe Liberalist ideology. I also showed how two other strategies, Reputations and User Notes, were successfully delegitimised through tactical resistance by community members on the basis that they subverted subculturally homological values. My argument demonstrates that this occurred because, in their surveillance of the community, the strategies ensured implicit norms that contradicted Liberalist values of equality were made explicit and visible, and in turn exposed within the community what Michel Foucault would term "governmentality" ([1978] 1991, 1982 and 1988. See also Allen 1998: 179, Bratich *et al.* 2003: 5, Sterne 2003, Lupton 1995, Inda 2005, Gilleard and Higgs 2000, Miller and Rose 1990, Rose 1996, Baddley 1997: 64, Loader 1997: 12). The findings in this chapter also alerted me to the consideration that non-normative community members are not powerless, but rather can tactically resist attempts at normalisation, gaining strength and a reaffirmation of identity through the perceived differences between themselves and normative fans[184]. In order to examine this further, I undertook three case studies

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[184] Bird 2003: 68, Okely 1983: 34 and Dollimore 1986: 522 also touch upon the power possessed by non-normative groups.

(Trobes, Droolers and Pointless Posters) that examined non-normative fan groups in the community and the resultant responses their activities drew from normative members.

The first group I examined, Triskaidekaphobics (Trobes, Chapter Five), is identified as non-normative due to its temporary spoiler evading activities concerning the then forthcoming R.E.M. album. Trobes' pursuit of pleasure (the "first listen") worked to disrupt the exchange of knowledge with other members and resulted in their precise cultural distinctiveness from the rest of the Murmurs community. This distinctiveness was exemplified by their inhabitation of a trobe forum within which they could hold discussions in isolation from non-Trobes. It seemed apparent to me immediately that this situation affected not only trobe relationships with other members, but also their accumulation of fan cultural capital, which is dependent on the acquisition and exchange of knowledge surrounding the object of fandom (Fiske 1992: 42, Hobson 1989, Jenkins 1992: 7 and 2006: 125, Thomas 2002: 89-91, Kibby 2000: 96). However, I determined that it was precisely this situation that allowed Trobes to create a temporary form of inverted fan cultural capital that was distinct from the rest of the community. As Trobes held a different form of fan cultural capital to other Murmurs members, I felt it important to consider how this would impact upon their reading of the specific R.E.M. album once it was released. I argued that they alternate between the definitions made by Fiske (1992:46) with regard to "excessive" and "ordinary" fan readers. Their lack of current information regarding the new album (held by "excessive" readers), coupled with their ability to recall and use longer-term historical, cultural and musical knowledge of the band to apply to the "first listen" placed them in a different position to "casual" fans or "ordinary" readers. This, I argued, is significant as it indicates that they exist between subject positions of non-Trobes and "casual" fans and are in essence a different, though temporary, fan interpretive community. This temporality not only dictates the dissolution of their subcultural distinctiveness, but also allows a process of re-unification between Trobes and non-Trobes, and re-integration within the community once the need for their non-normative actions has expired.

Droolers and Pointless Posters, the second and third groups under study (Chapters Six and Seven) are non-normative in a different manner to Trobes. Whereas Trobes hold no knowledge concerning the recent activities of the object of fandom, Droolers and Pointless Posters instead

hold the *wrong type* of knowledge in that their feminised readings are in direct opposition to the normative masculine intelligentsia approach to R.E.M. as a "thinking fan's rock band." Because the Murmurs community regards masculinised readings as normative, this feminised approach fails to correspond with what Murmurs constitutes as the "right way" to read as a fan, which is, in essence, what Henry Jenkins has described as knowing the "expectations and conventions of the fan community" (1992:88). Investigating this feminised approach further in the case study on Droolers (Chapter Six), I argued that their unwillingness to uphold demands from other community members to read in the "right way," challenges the claim by Jenkins that fans are always "responsive" to the demands of fandom, such as "expectations about what narratives are "appropriate" for fannish interest, what interpretations are "legitimate," and so forth" (1992: 88). I showed how persistence in using feminised readings, and consequent resistance to normativity, resulted in Droolers being regarded as what Mary Douglas ([1966] 2002: 44) terms "matter out of place" (see also Kristeva 1982, Sibley 1992 and 2003: 38, Lupton 1999, Douglas 1972, 1996 and 2003, Smith and Davidson 2006, Carroll 1990, Prince 2004: 93, Joyce 2003: 82 and 2002: 110, Grosz 1994, Miller 1997 and 1983: 369, Fusco 2004 and 2006, Hall 2003, Delaney 2004: 40, LeBesco 2004, Thompson 1997, Malkki 1995, Stephens 1995, Morley 2000: 143, Murphy 2003). I demonstrated the paradox that resulted through the creation of the People Forums, which effectively structured Droolers, the "out of place" matter, into the Murmurs system. Despite this structuring, Droolers were characterised as obsessed "others," and subsumed by application of subcultural power by the community hierarchy that ensured their eventual forced relegation within Murmurs into the Dork Inside Edition forum, corresponding to what Michel Foucault (1986) terms a heterotopia (see also Foucault 1966 and 1982, Lefebvre 1970, Genocchio 1996, Tonkiss 2005: 133, Kohn 2003, Bury 2005, Williams 2001, Chaplin 2003, Farrar 2008: 26-29, Hetherington 1996, 1997 and 1998, Bubandt 1997, Harvey 2000, Soja 1996, Smethurst 2000). Drawing on Joli Jensen's (1992) study on fan characterisation (for further interpretations of this, see Brown 2001: 65-68, Thomas 2002, Barker 1993, Cavicchi 1998: 8, Williamson 2005), I took her argument further by showing that fans can not only be negatively characterised within mass-media coverage, but, of equal importance, also by other fans themselves. I argued that Droolers, due to their failure to reflect the "central values" of R.E.M. fans and the Murmurs community, do not fit within the ordered structures of subcultural homologies and as such, this is the cause of their relegation and rejection.

In contrast to Droolers and Trobes who negotiate fandom, Pointless Posters (Chapter Seven) instead de-emphasise it through rejecting discussion on R.E.M. and related topics in favour of off-topic feminised, general and personal life conversations. I showed that these non-normative fans used and defended "small talk" in terms of "phatic communion" (Malinowski 1923, Eggins and Slade 1997: 6, Jakobson 1960: 337, Guendouzi and Muller 2002: 23, Tracy 2002: 141, Holmes 2006: 91, Maffesoli 1996a: 207, Rheingold 2000: 49, Adler and Towne 2005: 294). I also explored the process of this non-normative de-emphasis of fandom and argued that within the activity of "pointless posting" R.E.M. fandom is an assumed commonality, and is not therefore required to feature as the main focus for all discussions. I showed how the wider community attempted to control this proliferation of non-normative discussion through creation of the Chit-Chat forum to house "deviant" threads. I argued that this forum, as was evident with the Dork Inside Edition for Droolers, can also be viewed as a heterotopia of deviance within the Murmurs community. However, whereas both drooling and Chit-Chat behaviour were publicly rejected by normative fans, unlike Droolers, members within the Chit-Chat heterotopia were given a sense of self-importance by the hosts. Arguing against Chaplin (2003: 44) I demonstrated how this positive presentation of non-normative behaviour to those within the heterotopia, and their subsequent removal from panoptical surveillance (Foucault 1977, McGrath 2003: 7, Ransom 1997: 47), worked in opposition to the normalisation of "otherness," and thereby allowed this form of non-normativity to flourish within the subordinated enclave.

It can be seen that these case studies show that although Murmurs is an online community for fans of R.E.M., there is no singular fan identity, but rather oppositional types of difference that challenge conformity to normative behaviour. However, reflecting on the problems I encountered in the analysis as a whole, most significant was the conflict between the different theories applied in this study, the use of post-structuralist concepts, but with a rather rigid and singular approach to Murmurs as a community. For example, Derrida rejected the term and concept of community, stating: "I don't much like the word community, I am not even sure I like the thing..." (Derrida quoted in Caputo 1997: 107) due to it involving being "fortified on all sides, to build a 'common'...' defence'...as when a wall is put around the city to keep the stranger or the foreigner out" (1997: 108). In this sense, Derrida placed the term "sous rature," or in its

translation, "under erasure," a concept also used by Heidegger (1956) which involves the crossing out of a phrase in that it becomes both affirmed and denied, or "simultaneously present and absent" (Wright 2004: 34), dictating "both that the concept is inaccurate and that it is necessary" (Derrida, 1976: xiv. See also Morrin 2006). Jean-Luc Nancy also placed community under erasure, but put more of an emphasis on the necessity of the term by arguing that "Community is given to us with being and as being, well in advance of all our projects, desires, and undertakings. At bottom, it is impossible for us to lose community" (1991: 35). However, Will Straw objects to the use of the term community in studies of popular music, arguing that it "presumes a population group whose composition is relatively stable – according to a wide range of sociological variables – and whose involvement in music takes the form of an ongoing exploration of one or more musical idioms said to be rooted within a geographically specific historical heritage" (1991: 373). In this sense, I could have placed Murmurs as a community "under erasure," allowing for a less singular and unified view of the research field, but still retaining the necessity of the concept of community.

In addition, alternative approaches to the study of fandom could have been employed in this thesis, rather than approaching the community as a subculture. The diverse and oppositional identities within Murmurs may have been captured in a less rigid way, allowing the various styles of fandom and "the greater heterogeneity now routinely identified within stylistically and/or musically demarcated groups" (Bennett 2002: 462) to be studied. For example, Andy Bennett argues that subculture as a term "is deeply problematic in that it imposes rigid lines of division over forms of socialisation which may, in effect, be rather more fleeting, and in many cases arbitrary, than the concept of subculture, with its connotations of coherency and solidarity, allows for" (1999: 603). To account for this, Bennett applies Maffesoli's (1996b) concept of tribus in a study of young people involved in contemporary dance music in Britain to argue that "those groupings that have been theorised as coherent subcultures are better understood as a series of temporal gatherings characterised by fluid boundaries and floating memberships" (1999: 600) rather than "'fixed' as the term subculture implies" (1999: 605). He terms these gatherings as "neo-tribes" (see also Bennett 2004, 2005a: 45 and 2005b, Osgerby 2004: 130, France 2007: 143-144, Parsons & Maclaran 2009: 93-94, Laughey 2006). However, Keith Kahn-Harris questions the neo-tribal framework in that it "leaves out almost as much as a subcultural

framework," concluding that "the concept is of little use as an analytical structure, since it is essentially a description of a form of sociality and affect that arises from such things as dancing in nightclubs and going on protest marches" (2007: 18). He views them as being "temporary, affective alliances based around temporary shared sensibilities," and in this sense, refraining from helping us understand "the texts and institutions that particular social formations create" (2007: 18). Indeed, Maffesoli's concept of tribus was "less a question of belonging to a gang, a family or a community, than of switching from one group to another" (1996b: 76). Other frameworks used in place of subculture are 'scene' (Straw 1991 and Cohen 1991) and 'taste culture' (Lewis 1992). Peter Webb also rejects these approaches for being too descriptive and vague (2007: 29), and instead suggests the term "milieu," which he feels "more fully illuminates the notion of a network that has particular density in terms of connections, relevancies, typifications, commonalities and aesthetics" (2007: 30) within music cultures. However, as Ken Gelder argues: the "post-subcultures model turns away from a sense of subcultures as distinctive social groups...as it abandons subculture to 'lifestyle' and atomised individuality, it paradoxically ends up underwriting *only* the 'unspectacular': as if social difference is now so fragmented and diffuse that the very notion of it has effectively dissolved away" (2005: 14). Hesmondhalgh also maintains that "the concepts of scene and tribe are not, ultimately, useful ways to conceive of musical collectivities in modern societies, whether of 'youth' or of any other group" (2005: 22) and suggests instead 'genre' as a way forward (2005). Future studies using these different theories to understand negotiations of normative identity by fans in an online community could be undertaken, examining the fluidity of the adoption of this behaviour.

The gendered readings adopted by community members could also have been accounted for in a more post-structuralist manner. Although I employed Judith Butler (1990) to understand how normative members of a community adopt and "perform" the correct type of discourse in order to maintain conformity to the normative cultural identity, an approach that incorporated the post-structuralist concept that identities are multiple, negotiable and fluid (Baxter 2003, Gardiner 2005) may have been beneficial to the study. A less singular view of gender identity may have then been achieved, accounting for more fluid and changeable positions by community members, rather than binary divisions, which may have broadened the insight into how they negotiate communal norms.

With these observations in mind, I shall now move on to reflect on my experiences of conducting the cyber-ethnography, the method used by this study, focusing on my unique position in the field and the issues that arose during this period of investigation.

Perfect Circle: reflections from a cyber-ethnographic insider

As an R.E.M. fan, member of the Murmurs administrative crew, and therefore an agent of subcultural policing, I assumed a unique position to study "the Other" within the community, in the form of resistant, non-normative fans. Being an ethnographic "insider" has been of immense benefit to this study, most significantly in terms of the responses I received from community members to my requests for completion of questionnaires and interviews. This was evident in the immediate reaction from the considerable number of members who displayed an instant eagerness to help me, and become involved in my research. An explanation for this may be that, due to the combination of my official position and number of years spent in the community as a fan and member, other members were more willing to invest trust in me than they would an outsider coming into the community (Baca Zinn 1979, Gerrish 2003: 83). Due to my position as Crew member, I was also able to access the administrative areas of the community that would not have been available to an outsider. The discussions within these areas worked to alert me in advance to specific occasions of non-normative behaviour that were to be policed and governed by the Murmurs hierarchy through strategies of power.

However, perhaps partly as a result of its uniqueness, my position as ethnographic "insider" within the field was not without problems and became a cause for continual critical consideration. This was evident in the power struggles I experienced between what I considered to be my duties as cyber-ethnographer, member of the Murmurs administrative crew, and an R.E.M. fan[185]. The process of trying to fulfil and balance the demands and performances of identity required by all three roles permeated all undertakings of this cyber-ethnography. I experienced particular tensions between my commitments as a crew member and cyber-

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[185] See also Kate Gerrish for an account of "the tensions in [her] dual role" as both researcher and nursing colleague" (2003: 78).

ethnographer in the community. For example, I was expected as an agent of subcultural policing in the community to continually engage in the enforcement and governance of normative behaviour. However, when issues arose concerning the three non-normative groups I was investigating for this thesis, I had to give great consideration that my comments and recommendations did not compromise either of my roles.

This power struggle was also particularly noticeable to me when undertaking participant observation as, due to my access to administrative areas of the community as a crew member, I had to make demanding ethical decisions concerning the inclusion of any sensitive information that may have made a positive contribution to this thesis, but would have compromised my official role in the community. This occurred most specifically with regard to the case studies on Droolers and Pointless Posters (Chapters Six and Seven), where, in these private forums, hosts and crew members discussed the creation of both heterotopias. In this respect, I decided to refrain from including any direct quotes from the Crew member forums, and instead focused on material placed within the public areas of Murmurs. I acted in this manner in an effort to avoid compromising the administrative team and to preserve the credibility of my official position in the community.

This decision ensured that I was forced to shift my attentions from the private Crew forums to instead observe dialogue between the subcultural "police" and other community members. As a result of this, I was able to gain an insight into how community members not only negotiated normative behaviour, but also how they negotiated each other's identities on the basis of this, a prospect that I considered would not have been achieved by focusing too closely on the administrative areas.

However, on reflection, my choice not to include extracts from interactions from these private areas limited the scope of the analysis. By focussing purely on interactions conducted in the public domain of the community, I placed constrictions on the expanse of material I was able to gather and analyse as part of the cyber-ethnography. Therefore, this decision, in order to fulfil my role as a Crew member, on occasion, shaped the analysis to come from a position of authority in the community rather than ethnographer. The implication of this on the conclusions

drawn in the study is that by not incorporating confidential Crew forum interactions certain elements of negotiation and tension within the normative areas of Murmurs may have been neglected.

The notion of receiving trust from other members also posed a dilemma in terms of accurately representing their behaviour without invalidating their investments in me as an "insider". As Campbell observes, "there are obvious methodological challenges to conducting [research] with individuals with whom the researcher is already acquainted, particularly in regard to negotiating the researcher-researched relationship" (2004: 39). In addition, due to my shared fandom with community members, I experienced towards them the "high degree of responsibility and accountability" described by Henry Jenkins (1992: 7). To counteract these challenges I invited feedback from some members, in order to gain an insight into their thoughts and feelings towards the manner in which they were represented. As such, I supplied these members with relevant chapters and incorporated their comments back into the main text or footnotes. I believe that this was beneficial to the study, especially in the case of madloop, who, in the case study of the Trobes (Chapter Five), felt that while he was happy with my analyses of the group and specifically his contributions to discussions, he was occasionally presented in a manner that interpreted his comments to be taken from a "serious" standpoint, when in fact he was being light-hearted. He stressed that "while I did mean everything I typed, there was always a bit of humor and almost a self-effacing/tongue-in-cheek quality to it. Not sure if that comes through in your paper" (Interview, 2007).

This situation alerted me to ethical questions concerning accuracy and representation, as highlighted by Lyn Thomas who argues that "there is a conflict between the researcher's desire for accuracy and the need to avoid 'shaming' the respondents" (2002: 180). I felt that my "insider" status worked to increase this ethical concern due to my long standing friendship with some of the individuals I was representing in the study. Representing these members in an accurate way proved extremely testing with regard to remaining true to my research and avoiding "shaming" these participants. In addition, the online field can also be problematic in this manner as "internet communication removes previously assumed embodied cues that contribute vital information utilized in understanding what is meant by what is uttered" (Markham 2004: 361). In

other words, "whilst non-verbal cues such as eye-contact and body language are crucial ways to create rapport in face-to-face interviews, [the cyber-ethnographer] must rely on different kinds of paralinguistic cues" (Moisander and Valtonen 2006: 58. See also Kivits 2005, Campbell 2004: 46, Markham 1998 and 2004). These cues include "emoticons (smiling or frowning faces) and the use of capitals and exclamation marks to connote emotions [and] points of emphasis" (Maclaran *et al.* 2004: 155). However, as Annette Markham stresses: "for many users these emoticons or verbal expressions may not completely satisfy one's need for embodied knowledge" (2004: 361). As David Crystal also points out:

[Emoticons] have to be consciously added to a text. Their absence does not mean that
the user lacks the emotion conveyed. In face-to-face communication, someone may
grin over several utterances, and the effect may be noted. In Netspeak, a 'grin'
emoticon might be added to just one utterance, although the speaker may continue to
'feel' the relevant emotion over several turns ([2001] 2006: 37).

In this sense, if the online individual does not attach these cues throughout a text, the audience, or in this case, myself as cyber-ethnographer, could misconstrue the intended meaning or performance. As Abercrombie and Longhurst argue, "critical to what it means to be a member of an audience" is the idea of performance, being "a kind of activity in which the person performing accentuates his of her behaviour under the scrutiny of others" (1998: 40. See also Schechner 1988 and 1993, Sandvoss 2003: 42-43, Cavicchi 1998). Madloop is therefore performing to "an audience of [his] peers" (Brooker 2005: 285), with an awareness that "other fans will act as a readership for speculations, observations and commentaries" (Hills 2002: 177). However, my understanding and representation of madloop's posts and interview responses interpreted them in a more serious manner that conflicted with the "playful" performance he was engaging in. As Markham argues, "the choices we make to attend to, ignore or edit these [online texts] have real consequences for the persons whose manifestations are being altered beyond and outside their control [and may] thus misrepresent a participant's deliberate presentation of self" (2004: 370. See also Markham 2005). This displays the power an ethnographer can wield when analysing and presenting online texts:

The relationships we have with respondents ooze power...and therefore must be
handled sensitively. The privilege of "insider status" is open to abuse if groups are
misunderstood or misrepresented, while the potential for appropriating marginal

voices is ever present (Bell and Valentine 1995: 26).

Therefore, reflecting upon these challenging issues of power, trust and representation that existed alongside my status as an insider, I can determine that interactions with participants in the community were, to some degree, limited and constricted by my desire not to compromise long standing relationships. My caution when representing the participants that I was already acquainted with may have influenced the direction and scope of the analysis in terms of confining my enquiry to one that did not disrupt or threaten the good relations I had with them. The implications of this on the conclusions drawn from the study is that although I tried to remain impartial as a cyber-ethnographer, on occasion, I may have been too sensitive in my selection of threads and posts analysed, thus allowing in these instances my insider role to be positioned at the forefront of the enquiry.

In addition, my insider status may have also shaped the conclusions in terms of influencing me to focus and select non-normative groups that I was familiar with, at the expense of achieving a more diverse analysis of the community. As Mason discovered: "the intellectual problem for the researcher is what to observe and what to be interested in . . . [and] how to tackle the questions of selectivity and perspective in observation, since any observation is inevitably going to be selective, and to be based upon a particular observational perspective" (1989: 67-68). For example, an ethnographic outsider may have attempted a more broader analysis, having no pre-conceived knowledge of the community and its norms, instead learning this information through immersion in the research field. However, it is debatable how valuable this would be, set against the detailed knowledge and experience my role as an insider delivered.

The power struggle between the roles within my unique position may also have had resultant effects on the analysis, with participants experiencing confusion over "my true role" (Armstrong 1993: 30) and the "contradictions present in the insider/researcher role" (Bennett 2002: 463). For example, at R.E.M. concerts on the 2005 European tour, on a number of occasions, some Murmurs members at the pre-show meetings would ask me if I would be analysing the events taking place as part of my study, or if I was there to just enjoy them as a fan. In this sense, they were confused over which role was taking precedence for me. As Bennett elaborates, this situation "serves as a pertinent illustration of the remaining and unavoidable presence of barriers

between the researcher and the researched, even in those cases where the insider knowledge of the researcher plays a major role in facilitating access to the field and the forming of field relations" (2002: 463).

Therefore, in the course of this study the very qualities that made my unique position a privileged one, such as increased trust from fellow fans, a high volume of respondents, feedback from other users and access to the administrative areas of the forum, also demanded a critical duty of responsibility against misrepresenting both the community, R.E.M. fandom and my role as cyber-ethnographic "insider", all of which brought critical challenges and consequences to the analysis. Moving on from this, I shall now consider themes and arguments surrounding online communities and fan cultural norms uncovered by this study that can be developed for future research.

The Great Beyond: areas for future research

While undertaking this cyber-ethnography, and as I argued in Chapter Three, I found that there were a number of methodological issues that were not accounted for when traditional ethnography is transferred and applied to a virtual setting and therefore which also demand further attention. Firstly, the different roles and demands of being an ethnographic "insider" within cyber-ethnography (Rheingold [1993] 2000, Gatson and Zweerink 2004) is a prospect for future research. As I have shown in this chapter, although being an ethnographic "insider" in an online fan community is a seemingly advocated position in terms of receiving trust and high levels of response from members (Baym 2000: 24, Wheaton 2000, Campbell 2004, Correll 1995 and Jenkins 1992: 6), how to approach the virtual field (Hine 2000: 21), represent online texts, engage with participants already known to the researcher and address the power struggles that may arise surrounding the researcher's fandom and position in the community is a complex procedure. For example, Radhika Gajjala found, in her cyber-ethnographic research on the SAWnet discussion list, although being an active participant, and therefore an "insider" with an established relationship with participants, once her researcher role was announced to the community, she "became somewhat of an 'outsider'" (2004: 30). This demonstrates the difficulty of "balancing" the different demands and performances of identity required by being both a recognised participant and ethnographer in the cyber-field.

The process of coping with the rich abundance of data that can be found within the online field can also prove problematic (Jenkins 2006: 117, Baym 2000: 26, Bury 2005, Hills 2002: 173-174, Lindlof and Shatzer 1998), as can the consideration of when or whether to employ face-to-face interaction (Turkle 1995, Kendall 2002, Fornäs et al. 2002: 38, Hine 2000, Taylor 1999, Heath et al. 1999, Miller and Slater 2000: 21-22, Bell 2000: 197, Hakken 1999, Press and Livingstone 2006, Campbell 2004: 44-46). Thus, the notion and application of cyber-ethnography needs to be modified in order to incorporate these factors that are not accounted for in traditional ethnographic techniques (Hills 2002: 174). Further research is therefore required in order to assess the different demands cyber-ethnography places on the researcher and the way with which this "traditional theory" can be approached "untraditionally" (Rice and Williams 1984: 80) to account for its application to the virtual field.

As the purpose of this thesis is to explore how normativity is negotiated within Murmurs, the most appropriate starting point for future research concerning fan cultural norms would be to seek to apply or relate the five key practices uncovered in this study (Chapter Two) that determine normative behaviour in Murmurs, to other online fan communities. This generalised finding would not only inform us how normative identity is constructed, navigated and maintained across a range of online fan communities, but also what constitutes non-normative behaviour for fans in a particular community. Therefore, this could be a crucial tool for future research concerning online fan-cultural norms.

However, areas within the five "normalising" practices themselves could also benefit from further investigation. In terms of assuming the correct gendered discourse, an examination of readings that I interpret to comply with this behaviour, yet remain non-normative due to their contravention of other homologous "central values" within a community could be undertaken. Indeed, another case study that could have been conducted within this thesis was an examination of the activities of members who engage in masculine discourse, yet are non-normative because they contravene the Liberalist homologous values of the community by voicing support for Republicanism and George Bush. To re-stress Liesbet Van Zoonen's argument: "fan groups and political constituencies resemble each other when it comes to the endeavors that make one part

of the community" (2005: 53). In alignment with this, rejection of Liberalism is viewed in Murmurs as a breach not only of intellectualism, but also the subcultural homology in that the "central values" of R.E.M. are misunderstood and not "resembled." I elected not to devote a case study to Republican R.E.M. fans on the basis that these individuals, although non-normative, were not actively or directly targeted for processes of normalisation. As there was no hierarchical debate or direct action surrounding their position in the community, I instead opted to focus on three groups that were engaged in more direct relations of power and subordination with the hierarchy surrounding their contravention of fan communal norms. The consequences of this decision not to examine these Republican fans imposed certain restrictions on the thesis in that it confined the analysis to specific relegated sub-groups, at the expense of exploring the underlying tensions which can also permeate normative interactions in the community. A focus on these masculine, yet non-normative members of the community would have increased the scope of the thesis in terms of making an important contribution to understand how and why these tensions occur, and their resultant impact on the community.

Further examination of how the non-normative can be structured into a community by the hierarchy could also be undertaken. As I argued in Chapter Six, by creating the Band Member forums in the community, Murmurs unwittingly reinforced drooling, the very type of non-normative behaviour it was attempting to reject. A consideration of this could be applied to other online communities to understand how an oppositional value system to normative practices may be rejected but at the same time introduced and reinforced by the community structure and the subsequent measures taken to redress the inclusion of these contradictory elements.

There are also a number of issues concerning the segregation of the non-normative into a heterotopic site that require further attention. As I showed in Chapter Seven, the exclusion of Pointless Posters into the subscriber-only Chit Chat forum did not ensure that "gradually any trace of otherness [was] reduced" (Chaplin 2003: 344), but rather the opposite occurred, with members being encouraged to continue with feminised "pointless posting" without surveillance from the community's hierarchy, a situation which ultimately ensured their "otherness" was not transformed into normative masculine behaviour. This demonstrates further investigation is required into the processes that need to be introduced once non-normative members of an online

fan community are placed in a heterotopia of deviance, if normalisation of these "unsettling juxtapositions" (Hetherington 1996: 158) is to be achieved.

An examination of social network sites where R.E.M. fans come together could also be undertaken. For example, there are a number of R.E.M. fan groups on Facebook, Last.fm and Myspace, with each housing an official R.E.M. presence[186]. An analysis of how the online norms are transferred to this field, as an embedded everyday activity (Livingstone 2009, Wellman et al 2003, Bakardjieva 2003) could be conducted, examining any alterations that may occur during the transition. In addition to this, there is scope to go beyond the notion of a discrete online community, to explore the cultural connections participated in by the World Wide Web, which are "threads of meaning-making" (Hine 2008a, 2008b: 266 and 2000: 62, Marcus 1998) that stretch "across diverse spheres that have been occasioned by computers" (Hine 2006: xi).

As I have demonstrated, the key contribution of this thesis to the field of literature relating to online communities and fan cultural norms, is both my identification of five key practices that must be complied with to achieve normativity in a community, and my discovery that normative fan identity within Murmurs is constructed and reinforced through the "central values" (Willis 1978) of the R.E.M. fans' subcultural homology. By exploring this, I have shown that normative behaviour in Murmurs is not a given, nor does a common interest in a fan object produce communal cohesion. Instead, I argued that oppositional identities within one online fan community can occur, and challenged the assumed existence of a consistently singular, or cohesive, identity in an online fan community. In this manner, as I have argued throughout this thesis, it is imperative that any future studies of this kind take into account that while normative cultural identity is seemingly created and reaffirmed through interactions with the Other, the opposite can also occur with the Other gaining affirmation of its own identity. As D.B. Willis proposes, instead of "seeing strangers and the strange as anomalies to be rectified or as temporary," we should instead position them "on equal footing as engaged participants in the making of new cultures" (2006: 67-68). However, it must be remembered that the prospect of all fan community members being on an "equal footing" has little place in the collision of

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[186] On Facebook there are official R.E.M. member profiles (not updated or created by the band themselves) that fans are encouraged to add as their friends.

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A. ABOUT YOU
Please circle the appropriate category:

Name	

Age (Years)	Under 20	20-30	30-40	40 plus

Gender	Male	Female	

Each day I am online	less than one hour	1-2 hours	3- 4 hours	5- 6 hours	more than 6 hours

B. R.E.M. AND MURMURS
Please circle the appropriate response:

I am an R.E.M. fan	Absolutely true	Almost true	Somewhat true	Almost untrue	Absolutely untrue

My initial reason for joining Murmurs was for:	Absolutely True	Almost true	Somewhat true	Almost untrue	Absolutely untrue
R.E.M. news					
R.E.M. Discussion					
Discussion with R.E.M. fans					
Social relationships					
General discussions					

I visit the following sections:	Very Often	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Foyer					

REM					
Announcements					
City Hall					
Life					
Everything Else					
Back Alley					

I visit Murmurs	Frequently	Daily	Weekly	Occasionally

I am a member of the following clubs:	
Triskaidekaphobics	
John Michael Stipe Club	
Mike Mills Crush Club	
The Tractor Club	
The Church of Peter Buck	

Other (please specify)...

My discussions on Murmurs always focus on REM	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

I am an accepted member of the community	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

I use the following	Very Often	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Murmurs chat room					
Murmurs Journal					
Murmurs News page					
Murmurs buddylist					
Other REM online communities					
Other REM newsgroups					

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I have developed social relationships through Murmurs	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

I visit non -R.E.M. related online communities	Very Often	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never

I have other things in common with Murmurs users besides REM	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

Being a Murmurs community member is more important to me than being an REM fan	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

Many Thanks! Any other comments?

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1. Why did you decide to join this particular community?

2. In what ways does Murmurs meet your expectations upon joining?

3. What motivated you to start posting or chatting?

4. Describe your level of involvement in Murmurs.

5. To what extent do your discussions on Murmurs focus on REM?

6. List the common interests you have with other members of Murmurs.

7. In what ways have you developed social relationships on Murmurs?

8. To what extent do you feel part of the Murmurs community?

9. What other elements of the community do you enjoy being involved in, other than d REM?

10. Rank in order the three most important things that keep you involved in Murmurs.

11. Do you spend any amount of time in other online communities? If so, please state your reasons for joining.

12. To what extent does Murmurs act as a substitute or addition to your 'real life' com involvement?

13. How do you feel you are perceived within the community?

14. To what extent do you feel it is necessary to be an REM fan to post on Murmurs?

15. How would you describe Murmurs to someone who has not experienced it?

Finally, would you be prepared to answer any follow up questions to help me with my Thank you!