Editorial: Fandom and Controversy

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Introduction

In 2005, *American Behavioral Scientist* published a special issue on Fandom, which contained work that continues to resonate and influence the study of fans and their practices today. The new collection of articles offered here presents a follow-up to that foundational issue. It contains perspectives on fan cultures which respond to the changes that have happened in the over-fifteen years since the 2005 issue, and acknowledges the complex cultural, social, and political landscape that we currently occupy. For instance, there have been developments in digital and social media platforms including the rise and, in some cases, decline of sites such as Facebook, Instagram, and Tumblr alongside emerging platforms such as TikTok. This shifting digital landscape continues to impact upon fans' communication, creativity, knowledge and organizational and civic power (Bennett, 2014). This new issue of *American Behavioral Scientist* showcases voices from both established and emerging scholars, offering work that addresses these key concerns from a range of perspectives. Its focus is on the

relationship between fandom and moments of fissure or controversy, and it also pays attention to how this intersects with the increasingly prevalent role of celebrity in contemporary society and the current political and cultural moment.

The concept of media fandom "refers to loosely interlinked interpretive communities, mainly comprising women and spanning a wide range of demographics in terms of age, sexuality, economic status, and national, cultural, racial and ethnic backgrounds, formed around various popular cultural texts" (Pande, 2019, p. 2). The study of such fandom practices and behaviors has often been viewed by Fan Studies scholars as a series of 'waves', with the first of these emerging in the early 1990s and characterized as the "Fandom is Beautiful" era (Gray et al., 2007). In this period, research "focused largely on fans and fan cultures as communities who worked together to help democratize the meaning-making in popular culture discourse" (Linden & Linden, 2017, p. 37) but was also seen to be "reinforcing a binary distinction between fans and "normal audiences"" (Sandvoss et al., 2017, p. 9).

Some scholars have pushed back against the critique inherent in the description of this first wave of work as the 'Fandom is Beautiful' era, arguing that an increasing commodification of fan practices risks eroding the interpersonal connections and community that have long been at their core; "it is important to remember that fandom is made of people, and that fandom is beautiful, because fandom's in danger of being owned: our work, our communications, our relationships to and with each other. Fandom is more than its economic/revenue potential" (Coppa, 2014, p. 80). However, others have noted the need to revise our histories of fandom and fan studies, questioning whether it is "possible we got a narrative of "fandom is progressive" because the particular academics who founded fan studies were themselves progressive—they chose those texts, joined those communities, and that was what was available for them to see" and "what has fan studies missed starting where it did, and what can we see if we use the tools of fan studies without a belief in fundamental progressiveness and

good faith?" (Stanfill, 2020, p. 126). Such questioning offers challenges to often overly positive characterizations of fandom and enables new genealogies and paradigms to emerge to "both augment and complicate our understanding of much of the vocabulary of fan studies and definitions of fans and antifans" (Wanzo, 2015, para. 1.6).

Anti-Fandom, Toxic Fandom & Reactionary Fandom

Since the 2005 issue, much work has built on concepts such as 'anti-fandom' (Gray, 2003) where "hate or dislike of a text can be just as powerful as can a strong and admiring, affective relationship with a text, and [antifans] can produce just as much activity, identification, meaning, and 'effects' or serve just as powerfully to unite and sustain a community or subculture" (2005, p. 841). As Gray argues, antifans are not necessarily "against fandom per se…but [are those] who strongly dislike a given text or genre, considering it inane, stupid, morally bankrupt or aesthetic drivel" (2003, p. 70). The concept of anti-fandom has been drawn on to understand attachments to celebrities (Claessens and Van den Bulck, 2014), music fandom (Williams, 2013), and sports team rivalries (Theodoropoulou, 2007). Accordingly, when revisiting and revising the concept of anti-fandom in 2019, Gray reasserts the importance of different modes and forms of anti-fandom including hate-watching, competitive anti-fandom, bad objects, disappointed anti-fandom, antifans anti-fandom, and whether anti-fandom is fleeting or deep (2019). As he notes,

> we should expect anti- fandom to at times be productive, progressive, and nuanced, to tell us
>
> about audiences' hopes and expectations for the media writ large, and hence to be a key site for

understanding why, how, and when the media matters to us and why, how, and when it doesn't. (2019, p. 40)

Increasingly, too, "explorations of race, class, sexuality, and nationality, among other identity categories, are crucial areas of investigation for future work in anti-fan studies" (Click, 2019, p.12) as anti-fandom has become increasingly intertwined with factors such as gender (Jane, 2014) and race (Martin, 2019) and had demonstrable impacts on democracy and political participation (Sandvoss, 2019). As part of this ongoing move towards anti-fandom, often negative stereotypes of certain types of fans have emerged and been circulated to denigrate and dismiss those with opposing viewpoints or from specific demographic groups. Ysabel Gerrard's article in this special issue investigates these issues by analyzing 'teen girl' fandoms of three popular television shows: *Pretty Little Liars, Revenge,* and *The Vampire Diaries*. Gerrard demonstrates that gendered discourses such as 'fangirls', 'groupies' and 'shippers' are often used to mark controversial fan behavior but are ultimately unoriginal forms of gender based fannish distinction that continue to prevail unless extraordinary circumstances and events disrupt these established discourses.

Alongside the broadening of understandings of anti-fandom, the concept of 'toxic fandom' (Proctor and Kies, 2018) has been used to map and understand increasingly hostile responses to media franchises such as *Star Wars* and *Ghostbusters* (Jones, 2018b). This has been particularly linked to a form of 'toxic geek masculinity' (Salter and Blodgett, 2017; Blodgett and Salter, 2018) where typically male fans have opposed wider inclusion of women, characters from ethnic minority groups, or non-heteronormative characters. In some cases, such "anti-fan discourse is increasingly being used as a sort of metaphorical fig leaf for preexisting prejudice and bigotry" (Jane, 2019, p. 43) and as an outlet for previously held political and cultural viewpoints. Although, as Matt Hills cautions, "It is frequently unclear whether trolls engaged in putatively 'toxic' activities are long-term fans, newbies entering fan spaces purely for the purposes of provoking, or, indeed, whether these might not be fans at all, but

social actors attempting to instrumentally use fandom to publicize their own agendas" (2018, p. 105), the term has gained some currency within fan studies, highlighting the need for sustained research into the uglier or darker sides of fandom (Broll, 2020).

Venturing into these darker, and uglier, elements of fandom in a special issue of *Television and New Media*, Mel Stanfill argues that concepts such as anti-fandom and toxic fandom do not go far enough in helping us to understand how increasingly "reactionary politics manifest in fandom or take fannish forms" (Stanfill, 2020, p. 129). Proposing and developing the concept of 'reactionary fandom', the "issue's premise—that we must move beyond seeing the intersection of fandom and politics as always and inevitably progressive—has important convergences with recent work contesting narratives of fandom as inclusive" (Stanfill, 2020, p. 128) and challenges the 'fandom is beautiful' histories discussed above. It is in the context of such critiques of the overly progressive origins of the study of fans and the increasing awareness of the darker sides of fandom that this issue appears. And whilst controversies within fandoms can be seen in the examples above, such as cases of toxic fandom related to texts such as *Ghostbusters* or *Star Wars*, this issue also focuses on what happens within fandoms of controversial figures, especially those within the realm of contemporary celebrity.

Celebrity, Fandom & Controversy

Although fandom can often involve admiration and pleasure towards a person or text, there are also moments where disappointment, shame, and displeasure occur (Jones, 2018). In the past decade accusations of sexual harassment and assault surrounding celebrities such as Michael Jackson, Kevin Spacey, and R. Kelly have caused some fans to re-evaluate their attachments to famous figures and celebrities. Central to this has been the impact of the #metoo movement which has seen digital media and participatory cultures, spaces where fan cultures have typically thrived, been mobilized to draw

attention to abusive and violent behavior in sectors including the music industry, television and film, and theatre (Fileborn and Lowney-Howes, 2019). Despite this, some fans wrestle with their connections to celebrity figures who have been involved in such scandals (Jones, 2018). Simone Pereira de Sá and Thiago Pereira Alberto's article in this special issue focuses on these tensions and complexities, specifically through the lens of Morrissey and his endorsement of the far-right For Britain party. Exploring the idea of 'canceling' the musician engaged in by some of his fanbase, they examine how fans negotiated this based on their expectations constructed through their experience with his career through time, with some questioning "Was he really always like this?" and "How did he become this person?".

However, in contrast, others have sought to maintain their fandom for celebrities when they are engaged in controversy, offering justifications and solidarity to their object of fandom in the face of these controversial moments. Philipp Dominik Keidl's article in this special issue, which focuses on fan reactions to the Michael Jackson documentary *Leaving Neverland* (2019), is an example of this. The documentary featured allegations and testimonies of sexual abuse by Jackson. Keidl's study discusses the circulation of fan created counter-documentaries and videos in response to the documentary and argues that these fans enforce a "media tribunal" against Jackson's accusers in an effort to defend the musician.

Finally, Abir Misra's article in this special issue similarly focuses on how fans can try to protect and defend a celebrity involved in a controversy. Exploring actor and television personality Shah Rukh Khan and his fandom in India, the study focuses on discussions surrounding the 'Muslimness' of Shah Rukh Khan and how it was often placed under scrutiny and debated. Misra's analysis argues that Shah Rukh Khan's fandom created a discursive 'Eulogistic Buffer' that insulated and aimed to protect the celebrity from reactionary and right-wing islamophobia.

Fandom, Controversy, and the Political Moment

As many of the pieces in this issue demonstrate, fandom and controversy in all its forms is clearly linked to shifts within the wider current social and political landscape. Although these landscapes may differ across global contexts, they offer a range of unique challenges that impact on how we understand the discourses and practices of fandom. As the United Kingdom deals with the consequences of Brexit and leaving the European Union, as Europe itself negotiates its future, and as the United States deals with the challenges of the post-Trump cultural landscape, the political and the personal intersect like never before. This issue sought to offer cases and examples from beyond the default imagined fan who fits into the 'norm [of] white, middle class, cisgender, and [Anglo-]American' (Pande 2016, p. 210). Issues related to controversy, celebrity, or politics are not limited to Western countries or the Global North and, as fandoms become increasingly transnational and transcultural (Chin and Morimoto, 2013), our theoretical frameworks and approaches, as well as our examples and case studies, need to diversify.

The emerging overlaps between fandom, controversy and the political moment have been seen in the use of fannish language to describe key politicians, such as those who support the former UK Labour Leader Jeremy Corbyn as Corbynistas (see Hills, 2017; Sandvoss, 2017; Dean, 2017), fans of a previous Labour Leader Ed Miliband which led to the so-called Milifandom (Hills, 2015; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019; Sandvoss, 2015), or the emergence of young female fans of former UK Prime Minister Theresa May, referred to as Mayllenialls (Smith, 2017). The increasing celebrification of politics perhaps reached its nadir in the star status of Barack Obama (Sandvoss, 2012) and the election of Donald Trump to the office of President (see Negra, 2016). The approaches of Fan Studies have been employed to understand loyal supporters of the ex-President (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019), whilst the tools of online fandoms such as

forums, social media, memes, and hashtags have been employed by a range of groups with varying

political viewpoints and agendas (Sandvoss, 2013; Booth et al, 2018; Wilson, 2018).

Perhaps the most prominent example of this can be seen in the conspiracy theories of the

QAnon movement, as discussed by CarrieLynn D. Reinhard, David Stanley, and Linda Howell in this issue,

and the insurrection at the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021, where pop culture icons such as the logo for

Marvel's comic book character *The Punisher* were displayed alongside far-right images and Confederate

flags (Avila 2021). Reinhard, Stanley, and Howell's study explores the discursive online activities of

QAnon community members, arguing that allegiance to a political party can operate as a fandom, with

affective activation and community engagement evident at the core of the conspiracy theory. They

demonstrate how the movement works to radicalize "normies" through the exploitation of these forms

of fan activities.

Andrews (2020, p. 2) describes the current moment as one of "digital dissensus", the "current

period in politics, where the liberal consensus of the 1980s onwards has collapsed and the internet and

social media have become forums for noisy debate and extremist voices". In this vein, Renee

Middlemost and Renee Barnes' article explores the role of anti-fandom in the creation and distribution

of political memes, using a case study of the Facebook group The Simpsons Against the Liberals (the

conservative ruling party in Australia). They found that the community is bound by its anti-fandom

towards the Liberals and argue that the practices of appropriating and remixing content, affective

investment, and community collective identity formation was fostered through the othering of the

Liberals evident within the memes.

However, modes of engagement differ and not all moments of controversy are so explicitly

linked to the political. As Andrews (2020, p. 3) points out, whilst "Politics fandom, […] is a way of

understanding the attachment and forceful emotional response to politics and politicians, […] politicised

fandoms explain the power of networked fans in activism". Indeed, existing fandoms continue to

mobilize political and activist efforts (Jenkins, 2012; Hinck, 2019) to combat human rights violations and

respond to natural disasters. Other fan groups often find themselves thrown into unforeseen

controversial political moments, as in the juncture of singer Ariana Grande fans with narratives around

international terrorism after the bombing of her concert in Manchester, or the co-option of Taylor Swift

by members of the alt-right (a political stance that Swift has vigorously rejected). However, as Simone

Driessen's article in this special issue argues, in her examination of how Taylor Swift fans negotiate the

musician's political revelations and her transition from popstar to celebrity politician, the political stance

and message of a celebrity must be consistent with their persona and brand to be most effective.

CONCLUSION

The papers contained here offer a snapshot, impacted upon by a particular political landscape

and cultural moment that has, in many ways, already passed. An issue developed just twelve months

later, for instance, would surely have had the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic at its core. What, then,

might another issue of *American Behavioral Scientist* look like in another fifteen years? What debates

and practices might those who study fan behavior and attachments be focused on in 2035? What new

controversies may have taken precedence and what new kinds of fan behavior might have become

prevalent? It is, of course, hard to predict. But as political landscapes continue to shift, and as

relationships with figures in the public eye, such as politicians and celebrities, change due to

developments in social and media platforms, the opportunities for new moments of fissure and

controversy remain likely. Fandom isn't, as Francesca Coppa (2014) reminded, us all bad. Fans continue

to gain a sense of connection and community from their activities and practices. But as the authors in

this issue, and many others, continue to remind us; we need to pay attention to moments of unease,

conflict, and controversy if we are to fully understand fandom today and in the future.

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