

Chapter 1

Fandom, Negotiation, and Participatory Culture

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News of the demise of the audience, much like the death of the author, has been greatly exaggerated. Recall Jay Rosen's (2006) description of "the people formerly known as the audience," whom he characterized as "the writing readers. The viewers who picked up a camera. The formerly atomized listeners who with modest effort can connect with each other and gain the means to speak." Rosen was certainly not alone in celebrating a not-yet-achieved emancipation of the spectator from the constraints of the mass media era. Here's Clay Shirky (2005): "Every time a new consumer joins this media landscape, a new producer joins as well, because the same equipment—phones, computers—lets you consume and produce."

Some of this anticipated shift has happened. More than 300 hours of videos are posted on YouTube every minute, many of them coming from amateur, semi-professional, non-profit, educational, activist, religious, and governmental producers producing media for noncommercial purposes but also involving content from commercial producers that has been appropriated, remixed, and recirculated, often at the hands of their most dedicated audiences.

Rosen asked, "If all would speak, who shall be left to listen?" Well, so far, we are still spending much more time listening (and watching) than speaking, though we may do so across a broader range of media platforms. Prioritizing production behaviors and separating them off from the other things audiences do overlooks the ways that curating, sharing, and discussing media content are themselves active practices that create meaning and context, even if they do not necessarily "produce" new kinds of media texts. In this changing realm, broadcast networks still have an enormous capacity to set the cultural agenda, determining which stories, performers, and topics engage the public. But conversations on social network sites also have an expanding capacity to set cultural and political priorities, often reframing and critiquing, making demands upon broadcast content, and increasing the visibility of some clips as users circulate them across their range of online connections (Jenkins, Ford, and Green 2013).

Those working in the media industry tend to imagine audiences primarily, if not exclusively, as markets for their products. As Ien Ang (1991) notes, the actual people watching television are "invisible" to media companies, a mass "hidden behind the millions of dispersed closed doors of private homes, virtually unmanageable and inaccessible to the outsider" (30). The industry's imagined "audience" consists of individual consumers, each making independent decisions about

what to watch—an audience that can be predicted based on demographics, counted through various audience measurement tools, commodified, and sold back to advertisers. Coming together via social media has increased the visibility of media audiences, making it easier to identify others with shared interests and coordinate their activities in pursuit of common cause. At the same time, today's media audiences are more fragmented and dispersed, making it harder for broadcasters to anticipate viewer loyalty and harder for Madison Avenue to calculate who is seeing their spots and under what conditions. Media audiences are thus at once more networked and more dispersed than previously imagined.

For the past two decades, fandom studies have provided us with an alternative set of models and concepts through which to understand media audiences—stressing their active participation within their own networked communities, foregrounding their own creative transformations and ideological negotiations with mass media texts, and imagining ways they speak back to texts, producers, and fellow fans, asserting their own agenda about what kind of popular culture they want to consume. This chapter will stake out a particular perspective on fans, informed by Cultural Studies writings about negotiation and framed by contemporary debates about participatory culture. And in order to illustrate this model, I will be describing how fandom is helping to work through contemporary debates around diversity and inclusion, race and gender in American society.

Negotiated Readings

From the start, Cultural Studies research assumed that media audiences were not simply markets and that a range of social and cultural factors, not just personal whim, determines what media we consume, under what circumstances, and with what consequences (Tulloch 2000; Brooker and Jermyn 2003). Stuart Hall's (1973) essay "Encoding, Decoding" (reprinted in 1980) argued that there could be no simple mapping between the ways producers encoded messages and the ways consumers made meanings; meaning-making takes different shapes depending on viewers' social positioning. Hall argued that social and semiotic codes (often, unexamined assumptions) inform choices about what content to produce, circulate, consume, and reproduce. For Hall, popular texts do not speak univocally:

If the forms provided by commercial popular culture are not purely manipulative, then it is because, alongside the false appeals, the foreshortenings, the trivialization and short circuits, there are also elements of recognition and identification, something approaching a re-creation of recognizable experiences and attitudes, to which people are responding. (Hall 1981, 513)

Hall rejects, on the one hand, the idea that the people are simply dupes of a powerful media industry and, on the other, what he describes as the "heroic alternative," a "whole, authentic, autonomous" popular culture outside "cultural power and domination." Rather, Hall writes: "Popular culture is one of the sites where this struggle for and against a culture of the powerful is engaged: it is also the stake to be won or lost in that struggle. It is the arena of consent and resistance. It is partially where hegemony arises, and where it is secured" (518).

Hall (1973) describes the ways different consumers relate to mass media messages. Some read them fully within the terms of dominant ideology; others resist or reject them outright; but many will negotiate, taking them apart and taking part in them in equal measure because they are imperfectly aligned with their experiences. Writes Hall:

Decoding within the negotiated position contains a mixture of adaptive and oppositional elements: it acknowledges the legitimacy of the hegemonic definitions to make the grand significations (abstract), while, at a more restricted, situational (situated) level, it makes its own ground rules—it operates with exceptions to the rule. (1973, 102)

Audience researchers (Morley 1980) who tested Hall's model through focus group interviews found that many more actual readings are negotiated than dominant or oppositional; diverse audiences have to retrofit media content to the contours of their lives. Such audiences have agency, but they do not have autonomy; various forms of power shape what meanings they can assert. These readers, viewers, and listeners embrace textual elements they recognize and value, but they also encounter problematic aspects that produce a discomfort that has to be addressed before they can claim ownership over these representations. Each of us is positioned somewhat differently in relation to dominant representations, negotiating different identities and identifications within ourselves, as Hall (1992) notes, but those whose gender, class, racial, and sexual identities fall within dominant groups find it easiest to forge identifications with mass media texts; they are the recipients the producers anticipated, while others have to fight for inclusion into the community of readers who are able to relate meaningfully with a particular story and its characters.

Let's consider an example: Alanna Bennett (2015) posted an illustrated story on *BuzzFeed Community* which described her experiences growing up as a mixed-race Harry Potter fan who felt a strong attachment to the character of Hermione:

Hermione wouldn't and couldn't deny her intellect; she was bossy, she had big bushy hair, and she had best friends who loved her even when she was a pain in the ass—and who frequently needed her to save *their* asses. She was also a Muggle-born, navigating a world that looked down on her for the situation of her very biology and culture.

Alanna found Hermione a point of identification on some levels, but her connection with this character was not fully authorized:

I'd dress up in Hogwarts uniforms for Halloween but avoid going overtly as Hermione because I knew I could never get my hair like Emma Watson's. I could never get it white-girl bushy ... My hair was a whole different kind of frizzy. I loved her so much, but it took me a long time to accept that I could never *be* her.

Here, performance in its everyday forms—from quoting a line from a television episode to impersonating an on-air personality to designing a Halloween costume—represents a creative extension of the reading process, a way readers take media content and make it their own. Bennett notes that Hermione as described in J.K. Rowling's books is much more racially ambiguous than in the Warner Brothers movies, but cultural norms still left her having to negotiate another space for herself in the fandom: "There's nothing there to indicate she didn't look just like me, yet I always pictured a white face under that bushy head. I always pictured her not-me." It is the nature of white privilege, however, that characters are sometimes assumed by white audiences to be white ("me"), even when they are explicitly marked as people of color ("not-me") in the source material. For instance, white fans protested Rue's blackness in *The Hunger Games* films, even though the books *explicitly* described her race (Williams 2015). What Bennett struggles to achieve as a black woman comes easily, even thoughtlessly, to some white readers who never considered any other possibilities for Rue's identity.

Hall (1973) imagined negotiated readings as occurring within the heads (or at least within the living rooms) of individual audience members, however shaped they might be by their access to certain cultural codes and knowledge. Hall certainly recognizes that reading is socially situated but he has less to say here about the ways it is also socially negotiated. Bennett was performing this process of negotiation via *BuzzFeed Community*, in part because she wanted to open up dialogue with other fans around issues of representational politics. Not unexpectedly, some responded that she was doing damage to their own conceptions of this character (even if they shared many

of her goals). Here, we need to think about negotiation differently—not in terms of how an individual negotiates their relationship with a text but rather how community members negotiate interpretations (and rules for forming interpretations) among each other. Even in a context where diversity of representation is a goal, people have different ideas about what are appropriate ways of achieving that goal.

Negotiation-based models allow us to complicate some basic assumptions that get made about fans: that they are an adoring audience that has little emotional or cognitive distance from favored texts, which sometimes has been the consequence of introducing a second term, the antifan, into our model of media audiences. Embodying Hall's concept of reading as negotiation, fan culture is often motivated by a complex balance between fascination and frustration, affirmation and transformation. Because cultural materials fascinate fans, they sustain their interests. Because they are also frustrating, fans actively rework them. Bennett's story is powerful because it builds on aspects of the character that interest other fans (including the book's discussion of her "mudblood" status), but she also shows how the character is personally meaningful to her. Understanding fandom, then, as a form of negotiation suggests a continuum of possible relations to popular texts, as well as an ongoing process of negotiation with changing meanings that reflect changing times, rather than fixed positions and binary oppositions between fans and antifans.

Interpretive Communities, Subcultures, and Imaginative Publics

The cultural studies of media audiences is interested primarily in the collective dimensions of meaning-making: all of us make idiosyncratic meanings and personal associations as we consume media (a character may remind us of our fourth grade teacher; a setting recalls a place we used to live), but the meaning-making process becomes culturally significant when those meanings are shared by a larger group. In reader-response theory, clusters of people who make meaning of a text in similar or related ways are described as "interpretive communities." Such interpretive norms (Rabinowitz 1985) might include rules of notice that give priority to certain aspects of narratives, rules of signification that determine what meanings can be ascribed, rules of configuration that shape the reader's expectations about likely plot developments, and rules of coherence that shape the kinds of extrapolations readers make. Bennett illustrates some of these interpretive norms when she debates differences in how Hermione is depicted in the books and the movies and how much weight we should ascribe to each. Members of an interpretive community do not always reach the same conclusions, as you will have noticed if you have ever spent time in an online discussion forum. These spaces place a premium on original insights or distinctive contributions. But they work best when there is some consensus about what kinds of interpretation are plausible. Fandom studies research helped to anticipate this focus on networked patterns of consumption and interpretation. Even before there were digital networks, fandom's interpretive communities came together around the desire to discuss favorite media texts. Fandoms developed distinctive patterns of interpretation, modes of social interaction, and forms of cultural production which emerged from the community's shared passions and interests.

In everyday speech, the word *fans* has a broad meaning, used loosely to describe anyone who forms an intense affective bond with a particular property, whether or not they share those feelings with anyone else. Sometimes, being a fan means nothing more than pressing a "like" button on some Facebook page. Fandom, on the other hand, refers to those who claim a common identity and a shared culture with other fans. News representations often define these fans in relation to singular texts (for example, "Trekkies," or the preferred "Trekkers" in the case of *Star Trek*), but, in fact, a fandom is better understood as a more expansive subculture, whose members engage with a broad array of different media objects but who share traditions and practices built up over many years.

Historian Michael Saler (2011) has described the ways that the letter columns for pulp science fiction, mystery, fantasy, and horror magazines in the early twentieth century functioned as “public spheres of the imagination.” In those pages, people invested in these genres, and their imagined worlds, engaged in heated debates around technological change (in the case of Hugo Gernsback’s *Amazing Stories*), race and racism (in discussions of H.P. Lovecraft), or colonialism (in the case of Arthur Conan Doyle’s adventure stories). Debating these issues through imaginary “as if” worlds gave participants sufficient ironic distance to grapple with topics that might be too loaded in a more immediate context. Saler’s phrase, “public sphere of the imagination,” flies in the face of efforts by cultural scholars and political theorists to draw a sharper divide between audiences and publics. In Daniel Dayan’s account (2005), audiences are produced through acts of measurement and surveillance. Meanwhile, publics often actively direct attention onto messages they value: “a public not only offers attention, it calls for attention” (52). Publics, Sonia Livingstone (2005) tells us, are ‘held to be collectivities, more than the sum of their parts, while audiences by contrast are merely aggregates of individuals’ (25). Publics, Dayan asserts, are defined around “shared sociability, shared identity” (46). Fandom might be described as an audience that thinks and acts like a public, conscious of its own “shared sociability, shared identity,” “calling for attention” by advocating for particular kinds of stories.

Let’s consider another (much more heated) example of fandom working through its collective and personal reactions to the diversification of American culture—in this case, the exchanges surrounding the announcement that black actor Michael B. Jordan would be playing the part of Johnny Storm (the Human Torch) in a 2015 feature film based on Marvel’s *Fantastic Four*. Some fans were shocked by the casting decision, relying on arguments about the character’s origins and previous depictions to push back against changes they feared were motivated by “political correctness,” as Ken Warren’s *Daily Kos* piece illustrates by highlighting some comments on *Variety*’s piece about the casting announcement:

Why do they keep casting black people in roles that were made and written in the comics as white people ... NOWHERE in Fantastic Fours history has any of them EVER been black ... the comic geekks [*sic*] like myself that know the true history of comic series are up in arms over the discrepancies in these movies. (Comic geek, quoted in Warren 2014)

Here, fan expertise was often placed in the service of white male entitlement; textual fidelity was used to push back against casting decisions that might allow more diverse audiences a point of identification in the story. And white male fans assume that they have the authority to speak for fandom as a whole—indeed, that there may be no fans who think differently than they do.

Because such exchanges were taking place online, rather than behind closed doors, the discussion became increasingly visible, gaining mainstream media attention. Writing in *Entertainment Weekly*, Jordan (2015) himself responded:

To the trolls on the Internet, I want to say: Get your head out of the computer. Go outside and walk around. Look at the people walking next to you. Look at your friends’ friends and who they’re interacting with. And just understand this is the world we live in. It’s okay to like it.

If the news media focused on fans who felt that the producers had gone too far, other fans with different backgrounds and perspectives felt that the producers had not gone far enough, commenting on the decision to cast white actress Kate Mara as Johnny’s sister as a lost opportunity to bring even more diversity to the series. Others appealed to real-world trends to ground the casting choice. Writes online commenter skyhawk1: “These are times of bi-racial generation, blended families, adoption so why should it matter if Johnny Storm is black?” (comment in response to

Bricken 2014). Such responses reflect a hunger for a popular culture that reflects the demographic diversity of American society or perhaps even global culture, which invites fans of color into the conversation rather than forcing them to negotiate a place for themselves from the sidelines.

Such discussions across diverse fan forums revealed uncomfortable truths about where the United States was at in terms of its acceptance of racial and ethnic diversity, bringing different cultural histories into conflict. For many young and privileged fans, such exchanges might have been the first time they were being asked to rethink their taken-for-granted perspectives about race and representation. However, while fandom may constitute a public, fandom may also constitute a “mob” (Butsch 2011). I do not want to romanticize the quality of discourse within fandom: backlash against gender and racial diversity has often reached horrific intensity, including rape threats and online harassment, and sadly, has often been expressed by people claiming to speak as and for fans (see discussions of #Gamergate and Sad Puppies in Chapter 27 in this volume).

Fandom as Participatory Culture

My 1992 book, *Textual Poachers*, introduced the term *participatory culture* as a means of describing how media fandom operates. Fandom was *participatory* in so far as fans formed alternative interpretations that were often expressed through unauthorized cultural productions (fanfiction, remix videos, songs, artwork, costumes)—this mode of engagement contrasting with pervasive stereotypes about spectator culture. *Poachers* discussed five core dimensions of fandom: (1) as a particular mode of reception; (2) as a particular set of critical and interpretive practices; (3) as a base for consumer activism; (4) as an art world which supports particular forms of cultural production; and (5) as an alternative social community. Networked communications have made each of these aspects of fandom more widely accessible to the general public, but they have also broken down any simple relations between these different levels of engagement. A casual fan might adopt the community’s modes of interpretation (perhaps by reading recaps on a popular blog) without feeling a strong affiliation with its social norms or might encounter one fan text (a fan remix video on YouTube) unmoored from the larger tradition that inspired it.

Subsequently, I developed a fuller definition of participatory culture which stresses the ways such communities can be understood as sites of informal learning (Jenkins et al. 2009): a participatory culture is characterized by low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement; strong support for creating and sharing creations with others; some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices; members who believe that their contributions matter; and members who feel some degree of social connection with one another. (They care what other people think about what they have created, even if what they are creating are only “meanings” and not yet expressive artifacts.) Media fandoms are simply one of many different kinds of participatory culture communities (Makers, Gamers, Modders, Vidders, Collectors, Subbers, etc.) that have flourished within a networked culture. Engaging within a participatory culture requires and fosters skills and knowledge, and it provides a safe space with which to experiment with new passions or activities. If more people today are producing media, they are often doing so in part because of the scaffolding that participatory culture offers them; without such a community, they often would lack an audience for what they produce. In other words, participatory culture predates the digital, but the emergence of digital networks altered the ways that participatory culture operates, allowing people who might not encounter each other otherwise to have meaningful exchanges and creating a context where forms of expression flow quickly and broadly, both within and between social networks.

Early writers (as assembled in Hellekson and Busse 2014) described fanfiction as a form of “women’s writing,” at a time when those same writers (Joanna Russ 1983, for example) were calling out the various mechanisms by which women’s writings were being suppressed or marginalized (Merrick 2009). Fanfiction writers self-published, routing around many of those traditional gate-keepers; the early fanfiction writers were overwhelmingly female and were consciously producing their stories for the entertainment of other women, often reworking genre conventions to foreground their common experiences as women in a patriarchal society or reimagining masculine characters to rethink how romance might operate on the basis of greater equality.

Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse (2006) tell us that fan stories emerge from collaboration and conversation among fandom’s community of readers:

Every fan story is in this sense a work in progress, even when the story has been completed. To create a story (or, indeed, almost any other fan artifact; we just speak of stories here for convenience), some writers compose and post the story, with or without beta-readers who critique, read and help revise on various levels, including spelling and grammar, style and structure, and canonicity and remaining in character ... In most cases, the resulting story is part collaboration and part response to not only the source text, but also the cultural context within and outside the fannish community in which it is produced ... However, when the story is finally completed and published, likely online but perhaps in print, the work in progress among the creators shifts to the work in progress among the readers, and a whole new level of discourse begins. (6–7)

Read in this way, fan artifacts are collective expressions, the byproducts of the social negotiation of meanings and the subcultural production of fantasies, but they are also intended as provocations for further elaborations. No fan story expects to speak with the same level of authority ascribed to the source text; it is not unusual for the same fan to write radically different versions of the same characters, as they work through possible explanations for what makes them tick.

At a time when our scripts for thinking about race and gender are being called into question, as genre conventions are being rethought and reworked to pave the way for what many of us hope can be a more diverse media culture, these writing processes seem especially effective at encouraging reflection about what kinds of stories we want our culture to tell. Lori Kido Lopez (2012) has provided us with a detailed account of how protests around the “white-casting” of characters from *The Last Airbender*, a series noted for its portrayal of a multiracial society, built upon the various mechanisms of fandom’s participatory culture. Close analysis of “appropriated cultural practices, architecture, religious iconography, costumes, calligraphy, and other aesthetic elements from East Asian and Inuit culture” led many fans to expect a much more racially diverse cast for the live-action feature film adaptation than emerged. Almost all of the core roles were cast with white performers. Lopez documents how fan opposition coalesced through online forums; how fan writers, artists, and video-makers began to generate and share resources to educate the community about the history of race-based casting decisions; how they formed partnerships with other activist groups who were concerned about employment opportunities for Asian-American actors; and how they showed up at screenings, often in costumes, to call out the producers. In short, Lopez argues, fandom provided the scaffolding these young people needed to be able to take their first decisive steps as political activists (as part of what became known as the racebending movement).

The racebending movement is simply one of a number of examples of recent cases where discussions that began within fandoms inspired participants to take stronger public stances on social justice issues, often tapping into the infrastructure fans have developed to sustain their cultural interests or deploying skills they had acquired through their cultural productions.

Neta Kligler-Vilenchik (2013), for example, has documented the “mechanisms for translation” by which organizations such as the Harry Potter Alliance, Imagine Better, and the Nerdfighters have helped their members to forge connections between key issues within fictional worlds and real-world concerns. So, for example, when one of the leaders of the Harry Potter Alliance came out as “undocumented,” he produced a video to help educate other fans about the immigrant rights movement. He used his inability to travel across state lines to attend a Harry Potter convention to dramatize how the lack of official identification hampers mobility for many undocumented youth, and the organization developed a campaign around the launch of *Man of Steel*, which called attention to Superman’s own immigration narrative and asked fans to reflect on what made someone an American. Abigail De Kosnik (2016) discusses writing challenges, such as one conducted by a group called *dark_agenda*, which encouraged fans to write stories focused on “chromatic” characters or rethinking how established white characters might experience their world differently as people of color. These practices, she argues, constitute an alternative archive where different characters gain visibility as fandom seeks to “answer the erasure, exclusion and diminishment of characters of color” (169).

Such questioning may lead to full-scale mobilization or cultural production, but it may also be integrated into the discussions that have long been central to fandom as a “public sphere of the imagination.” As part of Fandom Forward, a new outreach program intended to forge alliances with other fandoms, the Harry Potter Alliance released a study guide in late spring 2016, encouraging fans to engage in reflection and conversation about representations of gender, disability, and political engagement within the extended Marvel Universe (Jenkins 2015). Fans were encouraged to reflect on the kinds of microaggressions Agent Carter encounters from the white men in her workplace and to consider ways fan women are sometimes excluded or marginalized within fandom itself. Fans were invited to take a range of actions, from taking a stronger position in online forums where diversity casting is discussed to “changing the script” by creating their own artworks or writing their own stories where different racial or gender assumptions shape the depiction of these characters: “What would *Agents of SHIELD* have been like with May as director of SHIELD? What about the Avengers with Black Widow in charge? Captain America with Peggy Carter instead of Steve Rogers ... Imagine your favorite piece of Marvel media with the major male and female characters switched.”

The Fandom Forward study guide also flags the Hawkeye Initiative, where feminist fans have been critiquing the ways female superheroes get depicted in comics, often in contorted, subordinate, and sexualized positions (Scott 2015). These fan artists apply their creative skills to redraw these same images, recasting the male protagonist Hawkeye in the position occupied by the female characters in the originals. This ongoing discussion of gendered representations within comics meant that this fan community was prepared to mobilize when, for example, a proposed cover for Marvel’s *Spider Woman* comic deployed an artist previously known for his erotica to depict the superhero slithering along the rooftop with her behind sticking up in what might best be described as a primate self-display behavior. The public outcry, in this case, was strong enough that Marvel withdrew the cover. Earlier feminists would have described such activities as “consciousness raising” and “movement building,” that is, they increase the awareness and commitment of these women to feminist causes and help them to acquire the skills and networks required to act upon those beliefs when needed.

These various examples show how the different layers of fandom *Textual Poachers* described work together as fans grapple with the politics of diversity: at the level of affective investment and identification with particular characters (Bennett’s complex investment in Hermione), at the level of interpretive practice (The Race-Benders’ strong conviction that “Aang Ain’t White”), at the

level of fan cultural production (the various efforts to “change the script” in terms of how gender and race impact superhero characters), within the context of their social community (the ways that a shared identity as a fan may help defuse tension), and toward the cause of fan activism (advocating for alternative stories that might more fully support their desires and fantasies). Yet, these same mechanisms can be deployed in more reactionary ways—to block efforts to expand the canon or rewrite genre conventions in order to promote a multicultural agenda. Fandom is a conflicted space and does not speak with a single voice; there are also diverse fan communities, not simply because of different tastes and interests, but also because of different norms, values, ideologies, and practices.

In what sense is participatory culture participatory?

All cultures are participatory to some degree, but different configurations of culture invite or facilitate different degrees of participation. So, for example, in a traditional folk culture, many are allowed to participate (e.g., through crafts or folk dance), skills are passed along informally between members, and there is less focus on personal authorship. By contrast, mass culture refers to culture that is mass-produced and distributed for mass consumption; the means of production are highly concentrated, and most people are consumers but not producers and thus have little say about what kinds of culture are produced. With the emergence of digital tools and platforms, there are more opportunities to produce and share culture, suggesting a return to something closer to the logics of folk culture ... with some differences. While folk cultures were heavily grounded in relatively stable face-to-face communities, much of today’s participatory culture (including fan culture) takes place in highly fluid social contexts, where people come and go voluntarily, where content flows easily beyond the community where it is produced, and where mass culture often provides the raw materials for media producers.

Participatory culture can thus be understood as a relational rather than an absolute term: forms of culture may be *more* or *less* participatory. Our traditional ideas about media audiences operate within a mass culture model and involve limited degrees of participation beyond deciding what to watch, whereas networked audiences embrace a broader range of different ways to participate, including sharing and curating, critiquing, lobbying for, and promoting certain kinds of content, as well as various forms of media production, all of which shape their media environment. These emerging practices explain why some have begun to imagine a blurring of the lines separating producers and audiences.

There is not uniform agreement about how we might distinguish between what constitutes desirable or undesirable forms of participation or, say, when participation becomes so minimal that it is no longer appropriate to apply this concept. Chris Kelty et al. (2015) proposed seven different dimensions around which we might assess participation: (1) opportunities for informal learning; (2) involvement in decision-making and goal-setting; (3) control or ownership over resources; (4) the voluntary status of the activities and thus the ability to refuse or exit; (5) a commitment to supporting individual and collective voice; (6) shared norms or measurements for assessing the quality of each other’s participation; and (7) some shared affective experience. Because of its long history, members within fandom have developed fairly well-articulated norms, designed to insure diverse and multiple forms of participation. There is a particular strong alignment between the different forms of participatory culture Kelty and his team flags and the five core dimensions of fandom I identified in *Textual Poachers*.

By contrast, Web 2.0 companies adopt a rhetoric of participation, offering a varied set of tools and platforms and competing terms of participation designed to court and capture audience engagement, but these projects often fall far short of the ideal in terms of their commitment to

shared governance or collective ownership of resources. Fan communities have been early and vocal critics of Web 2.0 practices they feel delimit the full range of participation they have traditionally enjoyed.

Because so many commercial interests have adopted a rhetoric of participation, critics of the concept fear that embracing participatory culture involves accepting the inevitable cooptation of these cultural expressions into the underlying logics of neoliberal capitalism (see, e.g., Butler 2016; and Jenkins 2016a). Critical theory provides us with useful tools for understanding the various ways that corporate interests profit from our participation, from the translation of fan culture into “user-generated content” to various forms of data-mining, central to Web 2.0 business models, but often at the cost of dismissing any prospect of meaningful participation. On the other hand, there is a tendency to romanticize participatory culture as somehow more authentically grassroots than other forms of cultural production. Here, we may want to return to Stuart Hall (1981), who talked about popular culture as neither defined entirely as a market category (that which sells the best) nor entirely as an expression of bottom-up forces (that which comes from or belongs to The People). Rather, Hall told us, “The danger arises because we tend to think of cultural forms as whole and coherent: either wholly corrupt or wholly authentic. Whereas they are deeply contradictory” (513).

Fandom is not autonomous; its products are not in any simple sense “authentic.” For starters, fans are responding to products that are mass-produced and distributed for commercial profit, and they intervene in those practices to generate forms of culture that more fully address their own fantasies, desires, and interests. As fan activities migrate into new media platforms, their activities are also often taking place within commercial contexts, where their attention is commodified, their data are extracted and sold, and their texts are claimed as the intellectual property of the host companies. Fans as negotiating readers (rather than purely oppositional ones) embrace and reproduce many aspects of the core ideology shaping the media properties that are the objects of their fascination, but their frustration also leads them to critique and rework these popular fictions to make them more appropriate vehicles for their fantasies.

At the same time, fandom may become a force of resistance to some of those commercial logics, with fans mobilizing rapidly to challenge corporate decisions that run counter to their perceived interests (e.g., the pushback to the *Spider Woman* cover). Early on, media companies issued cease-and-desist letters to stop unauthorized use of their content, seeing fan cultural production as another form of media piracy. Fans countered, arguing that what they created might legally be classified as transformative works, which altered the original for the purposes of critical commentary. Such issues as copyright reform or net neutrality look different when, as Yochai Benkler (2007) suggests, they are viewed through the eyes of someone who can and does participate and not simply someone who consumes products being sold to them. Even forms of cooperation or collaboration between media companies and their fans can be short-lived, depending on the “good will” of the corporate rights holders, as *Star Trek* fans discovered when CBS and Paramount issued a set of “guidelines” for fan filmmakers that would prohibit many long-standing practices and provided no explicit acknowledgment of the rights of fans to “fair” or “transformative use” of shared cultural resources (Jenkins, 2016b).

Increasingly, media companies have discovered that there is money to be made by soliciting and sustaining audience engagement, while also asserting ownership over what fans produce. Francesca Coppa, a spokeswoman for the fan advocacy organization, the Organization for Transformative Works, described the shift in the struggles her group has had to address across its six years of operations:

In the past, I found myself arguing for the legitimacy of our works; now, I find myself arguing against their exploitation. The commercial ownership of the infrastructure means that money has now complicated fandom's gift economy, and like it or not, we now need to think about who should benefit. (as part of roundtable dialogue in Banet-Weiser et al. 2014, 1073)

What Coppa describes as “fandom’s gift economy” refers to the ways fan cultural production has historically been motivated through logics of social exchange. Fan productions are read as a labor of love and as a gift shared with fellow fans, rather than understood as intellectual property (Scott 2009; De Kosnik 2013; Turk 2014). Corporate media seeks to reframe fan gifts as “user-generated content,” now viewed as a means for making money, either because it can be sold to other consumers or because consumer attention can be sold to advertisers. The term *user-generated content* fits within a logic of commodity culture, where the creativity of fandom gets exploited as a form of free labor (Carpentier 2011).

In what sense is participatory culture a culture?

Participation involves some form of collective experience. We participate *in* something - a shared activity, some kind of community. So, when we describe audiences in relation to participatory culture, we are drawing attention to the shared production and exchange of meanings and in the case of fandom, the production and exchange of artifacts built upon mass media content. Culture, Raymond Williams told us in 1958 (republished 2011), is “ordinary,” the total way of life for a particular set of people; cultural norms and values get expressed through, embodied by, and reaffirmed by routine activities, as well as innovative and expressive practices. Culture is not simply what gets produced by those working within the media industry or what gets taught within elite educational institutions. Contemporary popular culture includes texts produced and exchanged by media audiences (such as the race-bent Hermione or the altered comic book covers generated by the Hawkeye Initiative). These texts may, on the surface, seem ephemeral (of the moment, not likely to persist over time) and are often unauthorized, but they are also highly generative, in so far as they provoke significant conversations, become vehicles by which different people share their fantasies, assert their identities, and negotiate change in their cultural environment. Rather than map the contents of the culture (as a set of fixed relationships), Williams argued, we should seek to understand the logics by which materials and practices come in and out of cultural prominence and the ways different forms of cultural production impact each other over time. Understanding fandom as a participatory culture invites us to think more deeply about how cultural materials get produced, evaluated, circulated, and exchanged within a community that has come together around shared passions and interests.

In what ways is it problematic to think about contemporary media audiences through the lens of participatory culture?

The frame of participatory culture helps to explain some fundamental aspects of how media audiences—and especially media fandoms—operate in an era of networked computing. But, there are a few words of caution we need to consider before applying this concept to all contemporary media audiences:

1. Most of us, much of the time, are still involved in consuming culture produced by others. Whatever other changes are taking places in terms of extending access to media produced for non-commercial purposes, we are still often “the people known as the audience,” and only sometimes not.
2. Fan activities remain subcultural practices; today’s media consumers may consume media in the context of various social networks, but a much smaller number participate within a fandom. Many of the mechanisms of Web 2.0 works to individualize, personalize, and localize

- consumption, pushing us back towards a conception of the audience as an aggregation of eyeballs. If social media has made it easier for networks of media consumers to find and engage with each other, it has also made it easier for media companies to quantify and measure individual consumption (Andrejevic 2007).
3. Many are still excluded from meaningful participation as a consequence of lack of access to core technologies (the digital divide) or lack of access to skills and knowledge, mentorship, cultural capital, and opportunities needed to meaningfully participate in the most sophisticated kinds of audience practices (the participation gap) (Jenkins, Ito, and boyd 2015).
 4. While many fan communities explicitly embrace the ideals of democracy and diversity, many of them are far less inclusive than they imagine themselves to be. Fandom studies is increasingly investigating the mechanisms of exclusion by which the fan communities define who belongs and who doesn't (Stanfill 2011). While fans have shown the capacity to organize and mobilize to promote their favorite media properties, to defend their own practices against regulation and constraint, or to promote a variety of charities and political causes, we are also seeing these same mechanisms allowing more reactionary fans to organize backlashes against those whom they see as threatening traditional forms of privilege, especially that enjoyed by male fans in the areas of comics or computer games.
 5. If their networked capacity empowered some fans to take collective action, fans often also underestimate and belittle their own capacities. Mechanisms of fan-shame (Zubernis and Larsen 2012) limit the degree to which fans feel authorized or entitled to speak in defense of their tastes and values. Many of the same discourses which seek to expand the concept of fan to include any and all consumers marginalize or exoticize more hardcore fans as taking things too far, as not having a proper sense of proportion, and therefore as falling outside the mainstream.

All of this brings us back to the idea that participatory culture is a relational rather than absolute term. As such, we should be talking not about *a* participatory culture (as if a fully participatory culture had already been achieved) but rather a *more* participatory culture. *More* people are able to participate in the creation and circulation of media than ever before, but we should remain concerned about mechanisms that limit or discourage participation. People have *more* capacity—collectively and individually—to produce and share media, but there are also important struggles being waged around the terms of their participation, especially over how much control participants have over governance, how much ownership they have over shared resources, and who profits from their activities. Such limitations matter as we think about, for example, the ways fans are lobbying for a more diverse and inclusive model of popular culture.

And all of this forces us to rethink Rosen's claim that we are now "the people formerly known as the audience," because whatever else networked audiences and fan communities are becoming, they are *also* still audiences, and much of the work they perform starts with the kinds of things audiences have historically done—assessing and interpreting pre-existing media representations or advocating for alternatives. Yet, we cannot adequately account for these audiences and their activities by looking only at the ways readers relate to texts or producers; we also have to factor in the ways they relate to each other, the ways their debates and cultural productions change the context in which media texts get received. Insofar as that process is occurring more and more in public, these actions can impact the ways those texts are read by fans and non-fans alike. And, through their ability to take their concerns public (as, e.g., fans did in response to *The Last Airbender*), fans put pressure on cultural producers, who now depend on their engagement and loyalty for their profits, to respond (as Jordan did to critics of his casting in *Fantastic Four*). Our focus here on participatory culture requires us to be ever more nuanced in describing the rapidly changing relations between media producers and audiences, but for that very reason, we need concepts like fandom and audiences to identify the competing or conflicting interests at play.

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