<u>New Media Technologies: New Ways of Viewing Television?</u>

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According to Nicholas Abercrombie and Brian Longhurst, fan studies were concerned with "the way in which sectors of the audience were active in response to dominant forms of mass media" (1998:121). Traditional scholarship into fandom has always been associated with audience resistance to the texts, particularly to the messages believed to be encoded in them. Resistance as such allows fans to overcome the ideology as promoted by these texts and convert the messages, if there is one, into new meanings as they see fit through discussions, fan-written fiction, artworks and the like[1]. The other axis of thought identifies fandom as a banal practice where fans are pathologised as socially inept individuals fulfilling a psychological and social lack, with the distinction between these two concepts – fandom as resistance and fandom as some form of pathology - not usually unambiguous. These observations were made in the space of fan conventions, which usually occurs annually, while affording fans face-to-face contact, are, according to Matt Hills, "restricted to specific times and places, and which therefore function as ritually bounded spaces separated off from fans' everyday lives" (2001:148)

However, the emergence of the Internet as a social phenomenon has greatly influenced the ways in which fandom is practiced. If anything, it collapses the idea of a myth where the practice of everyday life is separate from fan practices, where the non-fan identity is disconnected from the fan. Hills argued that online fan communities "erode the sacred/profane separation which underpins fan cultural identity by allowing fan expression and fan identity to leak out into, and potentially permeate, the fan's everyday life" (2001:148-9).

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[1] Henry Jenkins and Camille Bacon-Smith both provide good examples of these in their studies on *Star Trek* fandom.

In their 1995 book, *Soap Fans,* Harrington and Bielby proclaimed that electronic bulletin boards marked the "public emergence of fans as fans" (169). In an article dated from the same year, Henry Jenkins applauded the wealth of data that becomes available to the researcher with the emergence of this particular communication medium that fans use to congregate and build their various communities relevant to, and inspired by their choice of television, filmic or literary texts. As Jenkins testified:

> computer net groups allow us to observe a self-defined and ongoing interpretive community as it conducts its normal practices of forming, evaluating, and debating interpretations. These discussions occur without direct control or intervention by the researcher, yet in a form that is legitimately open to public scrutiny and analysis (1995:52-3).

On top of these discussions, fans also use the Internet, through a series of inter-connected hyperlinks on their websites and their discussion and/or fan fiction[2] communities to support and distribute an array of fan-produced materials such as fiction, poetry and artworks. My initial objective was to explore the changes brought on by this 'public emergence' of fans as testified by Harrington and Bielby; by exploring online fan communities of popular television texts such as those of *The X-Files, Buffy, the Vampire Slayer,* and *Angel -* all of which have a considerably large and active fan-base on the World Wide Web. However, the discovery of a new BBC programme, of which I will go into greater detail later, made me realise that when a specific fandom or fan culture is being studied since the popularization of new media technologies, they are done so within the context of computer-mediated-communications, such as Usenet newsgroups, public discussion forums and message boards.

Debates surrounding the impact of new media technologies, or computer-mediated-communications as some scholars prefer to call it, have gotten

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[2] Works of fiction, written by fans for fans, based on characters from a television, filmic or literary text. Fans treat this practice as a testimonial of their love for the text and the characters that had inspired them to be experimental with their creativity.

considerably complex. Online fan communities no longer merely serve as convenient sites of research for fan scholars, or critics. Instead they offer an insight into a fan culture that is immensely multi-layered and complex, as well as riddled with personality conflicts between the more dominant members of the community or fandom – something which results in what I like to call, the 'cult of the fan leader'.

While there are still many avenues in online fan communities left for us to explore, especially with regards to issues such as those of fan social hierarchy, I want to turn to other possible options within the context of new media technologies that fans can make use of, and are indeed exploring when performing their fan identities. I want to focus particularly on the phenomenon of online journals, or 'weblogs' or 'blogs' as they are usually known, especially those provided by LiveJournal.com; and an interactive TV programme called 'Pure' produced by the BBC for fans of shows like *24* and Steven Spielberg's *Taken*. What do these so-called 'new' spaces contribute to the practice of fandom, particularly in the fans' experience of viewing their favourite or preferred texts? And will these new spaces allow researchers to look beyond the congregation of fans on newsgroups and public discussion forums as spaces where fandom is also performed? This paper will hopefully attempt to explore these already available options for fans of television texts who are actively involved in online fandom.

<u>From fan conventions to discussion forums</u>

The emergence of the Internet as a convenient and accessible communication medium appeared to have move fandom into the realm of cyberspace. That is not to say fan conventions that serve as vital meeting points for fans in the pre-Internet era have completely died out either – as witnessed by massive conventions geared towards cult and science fiction fans taking place every summer in the UK attended by renowned fantasy and science fiction

authors, and cast and crew members of shows like *Smallville, Buffy, Angel* and *Enterprise.* Online fan forums and message boards in this case, become places where convention organisers advertise and promote their events, thus allowing them to cover a larger base of fans both online and off[3]. As one fan, Raven testified, "before [the Internet], if you didn't know fandom existed, you pretty much found it by accident. Sometimes even if you knew it existed, unless you know where to look you still couldn't find it. I remember knowing as early as 1966 that conventions existed, but it wasn't until I saw a small article in TV Guide about a New York Star Trek convention that I found access to them". What the Internet offers fans and convention organisers alike, it seems is a centralized space where communities can be formed or stumbled upon, and contact between fans can be made and retained.

For researchers, on the other hand, as Jenkins pointed out, "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" (1995:52). Recent academic works on fandom have used online fan communities as research space for data-gathering and the users as research subjects. This is clearly evident in the works of scholars like Bacon-Smith (2000), Lancaster (2001), Hills (2002) and Brooker (2002). While the emergence of this so-called 'new' space brings about new debates surrounding the fan interpretive community, what does this computer-mediated-communication mean to the fans?

Carrie-Anne explained, "the Internet has made fandom more acceptable. … Now, if you like some obscure show, chances are there's a newsgroup for it. It's made fandom more obsessive but also less antisocial and geeky, in that you don't have to devote time and money to…the extent of going to conventions and stuff". Raven, again, replied that the Internet has made fandom "a tighter knit community and much more accessible than it used to be". Bear also agreed,

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[3] Websites for UK conventions include: http://www.sector14.co.uk and http://www.starfury.co.uk

writing that before discovering online fandom, he tortured his friends "who weren't that interested in the show anyway. … But the Internet provides an outlet where you know people are going to be interested in whatever you say about their 'little scifi show'".

Most, if not all of the interviewees agreed that without the Internet, it would be more difficult for them to have found the communities and friendships they have formed since becoming involved in online fandom. However, this does not mean that I am keen on painting a utopian notion of fan communities online. If anything, I would argue that the Internet has brought certain issues like fan social hierarchy and the oftentimes problematic roles of the more dominant and outspoken members of fandom into the foreground; and these are issues that need to be dealt with in greater depth[4].

Some of the fans I interviewed are also aware of this particular aspect of fandom, as they have revealed to me how fortunate they felt at being spared the trauma of being ignored or made to feel unwelcome in certain fan circles. One fan, who requested anonymity, wrote: "There is a strong bias that a new [fan] must not have anything interesting to say, and a new [fiction] author probably isn't any good. [I have been in communities where] the listmom[5] is condescending and resistant, and the list members are not very welcoming". As Amy diplomatically puts it, "certain segments of the…fandom are very cliquish, but others are not. You just have to float around until you find a group that appeals to you".

Enter weblogs

So, fans 'float around' their specific fandom until they discover a community that appeals to their sensibilities, taste and interpretations of the text.

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[4] For a more extensive argument, see MacDonald (1998) and Hills (2002). Unfortunately, this section of fandom has thus, so far eluded academic criticism or exploration. Asides from MacDonald and Hills, not much work has been conducted in relation to the less utopian notions of fandom and fan communities.

[5] As most community leaders are women, this is an affectionate and widely accepted form of addressing the leader (and oftentimes, the 'creator') of a fan community.

But what happens when the ordinary fan, looking for a decent community in which he/she can participate in lively and constructive criticisms becomes disillusioned with the constant power struggles and fragmentations that plague a lot of the fan communities online, but still wish to be a part of fandom? Some claimed that weblogs, or specifically LiveJournal holds the answer, as exemplified here by a particular entry:

> LJ has some spectacular advantages, being a very, very
> weird hybrid of the personal journal, usenet, mailing lists –
> the power structure per LiveJournal belongs solely to the
> owner. The owner is God. They can write what they want,
> kill comments, encourage comments, kill threads, and make
> all worship them, and all without leaving their LJ. Comments
> can be delivered to your inbox, you are moderator of your
> world. The freedom of usenet, the power of mailing list mode-
> rator, with the journaling aspects thrown in for good measure
> (seperis, LiveJournal, 7th March 2003)

A long discussion follows this particular entry, of which some comments suggested that the structure of LiveJournal allows for a wider participation by a variety of people, or fans who would otherwise be lurkers[6] in newsgroups or discussion forums. One of the comments to the above entry read: "If you're got an LJ you can construct your identity in a way that legitimises your right to comment. You don't have to tell your life story to establish authority: that ever-handy link to your name lets anyone who's even vaguely curious into your 'public' persona" (innle, 7th March 2003), that is, to the particular user's journal; ergo, to the person's personal thoughts and their user information.

For those unfamiliar with the phenomena, weblogs are, to put it simply, online personal journals. They can exist independently, or as an extension of a personal website. Visitors to the blog have the option of leaving comments that respond directly to a particular journal entry. LiveJournal goes further by allowing the user to have a list of friends - fellow 'LiveJournallers' whose recent

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[6] Internet users who observe discussions in newsgroups or discussion forums without participating, and more often than not, without the knowledge of the other members.

entries will immediately be updated in the user's 'friends' page. Journal entries can also be locked and made accessible to those only on the user's friends' list, and of course, the important link to fandom – the community features of LiveJournal. Communities can be formed, and LiveJournal users can join fan-based communities that allows them to keep updated with the latest postings, because community journals are updated on the user's friends page too. There could be others, but I know of one particular *X-Files* community that have extended from Yahoo Groups to LiveJournal, allowing community members with LiveJournals to further keep in touch.

In a private email discussion, one fan wondered to me: "In one sense, I wonder if the turn to weblogs doesn't perhaps partly indicate a frustration with web-based fandoms? That is, I notice that, for myself…I'm tired of people interfering with my enjoyment of a show. I recently discovered the joys of *Buffy*. I've gone to great lengths NOT to read *Buffy* sites and such, just because I'm really enjoying the show and I don't want to know what other people have to say. I don't want to be involved in all the politics…that sort of feeling". When I pointed out that one of the major criticism for weblogs is the danger of descending to narcissism, the fan responded: "could it be not just narcissism, but also a kind of turn back to private enjoyment of the show? Or, put differently, I wonder if it's harder for the fandom personalities that tend to dominate web-based conversations on a given show to collate in weblog form? On discussion lists, … there are often a handful of posters whose words are essentially gospel truth; in contrast, weblogs seem to have a greater amount of autonomy/individuality. It might be narcissism, but it might also point to the limits of community".

So it now appears the fan can still maintain their 'public' fan identity but remain detached from specific fan communities and the politics that comes attached to them if they choose to. As has been argued constantly, the journal belongs solely to the user who creates it, and they can choose to interpret the

show anyway they want to in their personal journal entries. Likewise, fans can also choose to maintain their fan identity by participating in fan communities *and* keep the journal as an outlet for the frustration they may feel from their interaction with other fans. Instead of just having the fan community as an outlet for their fandom, they now also have their weblogs to perform their identities as fans.

Perhaps it is with this somewhat transitory position of the fan in mind that we now turn to the BBC programme that I had mentioned in the introduction earlier.

Interactive TV: *Pure 24*[7]

Pure 24, a show produced in a news magazine format, is described on the BBC's official *24* website[8] as "a new kind of interactive TV show" (BBC website). The half an hour show is broadcast live every Sunday night following a new episode of *24* on BBC3, BBC's new interactive channel and features interviews with cast and crew members – usually phone interviews from the LA set – and local celebrity fans and analysts. The live audience are encouraged to discuss the show and speculate about upcoming plotlines, moderated by a bright-eyed and perky, young female host.

Audience members are invited to email, phone or text in their speculation and thoughts of the current episode, character developments and overall direction of the show. Throughout the show, the email address and phone numbers (both for fans to call or text in with their mobile phones) continually flash on the screen. The weekly changing live audience, who watched the episode together in the studio, will also be invited to participate in the discussions. Asides from that, emails and text messages will also be read by the

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[7] *Pure Taken* (for Steven Spielberg's critically-acclaimed science fiction mini series) is also produced by the BBC in the same format. Both *24* and *Taken* were highly anticipated and critically acclaimed shows in the UK. It remains to be seen if this type of programming will be produced for other critically acclaimed American television shows showing in the UK.
[8] http://www.bbc.co.uk/24

host, giving the analysts and live audience a chance to respond to each other's analysis and debate their theories.

What is important to note is that *Pure 24* works very closely with the *24* website and message board on the official BBC website where fans have a chance to sign up as an audience member of *Pure 24.* While the *24* message board does not resemble a fan community as such whereby fans can log in and discuss the show at all hours of the day since the boards are moderated and are only open at specific times, in an almost similar way to that of weblogs, it offers fans a different experience of fandom, if you will. Perhaps without the burden of politics as experienced by fans who are more actively involved. The moderation of the message board by a 'third party' (in this case, the BBC) may very well curb the dominance of one, or a few fans whose opinions dominate those of others. Even if such incidences occur, the presence of a moderator may limit the extent of flame wars[9] that plague a lot of the web-based fan communities. That is not to say that the dominance of one or a specific group of fans' interpretation of the text does not occur in this scenario. However, to determine if such fragmentation and dominance that commonly plagues other web-based fan communities do happen, a more extensive research beyond the scope of this paper is needed.

What *Pure 24* and the BBC message board offer for fans is an outlet for them to discuss, interpret and speculate about the show without really having to make a commitment to the community as we saw happening with the *X-Files* fans we encountered earlier. Rather, they are almost similar to the fans who turned to LiveJournal, who used the weblog as a space within which they can perform their fan identities but remain detached from the muddled politics of fandom.

Conclusion

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[9] Large scale war of words that occur online, often due to difference of opinions.

What I have tried to explore in this paper, albeit briefly is the sort of 'new' technologies that fans are turning to in further exploring their identities as fans. As a new kind of interactive TV programme, *Pure 24* encourages and depends on audience participation and interaction. Does this in any way alter the way fans view the show, particularly those who choose to participate in the programme, whether as part of the live audience, or as fans who call, email or text in their questions, speculations and theories? While fans who have turned to weblogs such as LiveJournal view their move as a turn back to a private enjoyment of the show – one devoid of other voices who tries to tell them how to view the show and interpret the text. Can this also contribute to a different way fans choose to view certain shows?

Technology is constantly evolving, and as scholars, we should perhaps keep an open mind towards this important factor – that while fans may continue to remain active in their participation of online fan communities, they may also constantly be looking for other outlets to perform their fan identities. Perhaps at the end of the day, rather than considering these technologies as 'new', we should instead view these various technologies such as weblogs and interactive TV programmes as technologies that further complement the various practices of fandom just as the Internet had when it first emerged.

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