

Fans, Geeks and Nerds, and the Politics of Online Communities

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The progressive, utopian rhetoric of the Internet's first moments has largely diminished in the face of uneven access across various "digital divides," corporate media consolidation, and on-line monitoring and surveillance systems. Yet there are some interesting counter-trends associated with what this essay discusses as online "fandom" or "communities of appreciation," and the recent upsurge in anti-globalization activism has demonstrated how cultural communities can modulate into political ones.

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FANS, geeks and nerds—overlapping but not identical social and cultural categories—have long been vilified in the mass media with "get-a-life" stereotypes and marginalized by images of social, sexual, and economic impotence; however, they may be staging a comeback. Recently, Hollywood films like *High Fidelity* and *Galaxy Quest* have presented less pejorative versions of music and science fiction fans (respectively); a *Spin* magazine cover story has affirmed that "geek rock" is here to stay and the "Freaks and Geeks Issue" of *Bust Magazine* celebrated "geek chic"; and the ever-expanding dominance of the digital domain has necessitated a massive reconsideration of "the nerd," and what he might be up to in his garage. It is no accident, for instance, that PBS titled its plucky, optimistic documentary cum paean to the rise of Steve Jobs and Bill Gates, *The Triumph of the Nerds*. Bizarrely but aptly welding together Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*, in all its unabashed fascist boosterism, with moronic mid-80s campus romp *The Revenge of the Nerds*, in which the geeky stock figures finally get even with the football players and cheerleaders who torment them, PBS's documentary suggests that, after all, the geeks may really be inheriting the earth, and woe betide those who aren't keeping up.

Of course the "geeks" currently running the show aren't doing it from their garages any more, and the Microsoft anti-trust trial has revealed, as if there remained any doubt, how fully and ruthlessly corporate today's high-tech robber barons are. And in a moment when the lines between Microsoft's "campus" outside Seattle and our own corporatized campuses seem increasingly blurry—not only because of the increasing visibility and influence of everyone from Microsoft to PepsiCo on campus, but also because of academia's adoption of brutal, corporate-style labor relations—it's become much easier to see the online world as simply another site of globalized commodification and popular stupefaction than to see the brave new electronic frontier envisioned by some of its geeky progenitors. The apparently endless process of media consolidation under current regimes of global capital accumulation, which McKenzie Wark (1991) suggests we call not "post-Fordist" but "Sonyist" (p. 44), offers little hope for the kinds of personally or politically liberative potential once routinely associated with what we used to geekily call "cyberspace." And in the wake of the recording industry lawsuits against music

downloaders (a subject I'll return to in a moment), even the *cultural* liberation offered by the Internet may seem destined to be an unfulfilled promise.

And yet, for all these very real indicators that, even on the *upside* of the digital divide, your DSL may not set you free, there are some interesting counter-trends emerging, associated with what I will discuss as on-line "fandom," or "communities of appreciation." The linkages between fandom and the high tech world run deep, and not just because, according to the media stereotype, every computer nerd knows all the words to a Monty Python sketch or two, and Captain Kirk's cabin number on the USS Enterprise. John Perry Barlow's famous transition from Grateful Dead songwriter and Deadhead extraordinaire to cyberspace guru and founder of the Electronic Frontier Foundation was mediated, he says, by his prior participation in a "virtually physical town," "the mysterious, nomadic City of the Deadheads" (1995, p. 52). And from the earliest days of dial-up bulletin boards and the WELL (an early cyber-community whose very name—the Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link—suggests the funky utopianism of its moment) on through the Usenet to today's proliferation of cyber-groups of various kinds on the Web, fans have flocked to the on-line world to find people who share their passions and pursuits.

Today, communities of appreciation are forming at a startling rate, around every possible hobby, avocation, cultural pursuit, and so on. And I would submit that people who would not be caught dead at a "fan club meeting" are being irresistibly interpellated into such communities by the sheer ease and pleasure of participation. To take one not-quite-randomly-chosen example, those who enjoy hunting animals, an activity traditionally understood as solitary and masculine, have their choice of 1064 different, often specialized e-groups on Yahoo's Groups page alone (as of May 2005), where they can easily find others who share their passion for, say, taxidermy, or squirrel hunting. And while it may rightly be objected that participation in such groups does not necessarily constitute "fandom," in my admittedly limited sampling I've found remarkable similarities at both the discursive and affective levels between the conversations on, for instance, Gunsmithing-L and the Hounds of the Internet, a Sherlock Holmes fan e-mail list I enjoy. In a related project to this essay, I explore the overlapping and vexed worlds of fannish and academic criticism of the Sherlock Holmes stories, in order to make an argument for a new kind of academic engagement with the expanding world of what we might loosely call "literary fandom," from the Sherlockians to lunch-hour book groups at nearly every workplace to Oprah's "Book Club of the Air." Beginning from the old adage in literary academia that we enter grad school as fans and leave as critics, I argue in that essay that a repressed relation to our own fannish origins prevents us from engaging successfully with the ways that most people read. Here, at the risk of stretching the concept of fandom beyond coherence, I want to suggest that behaviors and attitudes traditionally understood as "fannish" have expanded much further, into far-flung social and geographic regions, as a result of the growth of on-line communities.

Lawrence Grossberg (1992) has argued that fandom constitutes an "affective sensibility" through which fans construct "mattering maps" of the cultural world, with which to determine where to invest time, money, and self. Of course everyone's relation to culture is affective, and we all map the cultural world one way or another, but what makes fandom unique in Grossberg's account is that fans redefine their identities with relation to those maps, "divid[ing] the cultural world into Us and Them" (p. 60). Such divisions, Grossberg points out, are much clearer and sharper when the "Us" perceives itself as a persecuted or at least unjustly ignored minority—the "imagined community" of Sherlock Holmes or *Star Trek* fans has much clearer boundaries than the fans of the latest hit sit-com. And fandoms generally rewrite their marginal status as socio-cultural superiority—in Grossberg's terms, their map of the cultural field is the "true" one—hence, among some science fiction fans, non-fans are known as "mundanes."

I appropriate Benedict Anderson's well-traveled idea of the nation as "imagined community" somewhat reluctantly, as it has already been stretched far beyond its original applications.¹ But it's worth considering the connections between Anderson's story of the contributions of 18th century print-capitalism, the novel and the newspaper, to the formation of the "deep horizontal comradeship" of modern American and European nationalism, and the contributions of global, electronic print and image technology, especially the Internet and e-mail, to new kinds of "imagined communities" (1991, p. 7). Few at this point would dispute that a transformation in literacy and communications and, more arguably, in the social field itself, parallel to (if not exceeding) that instantiated by the proliferation of print in the European eighteenth century is currently underway. And anyone who has been a regular participant in an e-mail group with dedicated, passionate fellow-travelers has seen the fascinating ways in which individuals arrive at a kind of "deep, horizontal comradeship" with the imagined collective, often forming powerful cathexes with other group members and with the group itself. The strength of those bonds can be quite invisible until a dispute arises among group members that threatens the existence or unity of the group itself—both the oft noted venom that marks such angry e-mail exchanges *and* the passionate pleas for tolerance and efforts to bridge differences are suggestive of participants' profound affective investments in the group. Following 9/11, a *New York Times* article detailed the collective, on-line and face-to-face mourning, "scattered across at least a dozen states and three continents," for a member of the Opera Forum e-group who died in the attacks, and suggested that the many similar stories around the web reveal that "the seemingly superficial bonds forged in cyberspace are often turning out to run deep" (Harmon, 2001, p. G1).

While the members of the Opera Forum or the Gunsmithing list may not be ready to go to war on behalf of their "imagined community" (though some of the postings from the latter group suggest that they might), there are other interesting links to Anderson's paradigm. The shift to a notion of "simultaneity in homogenous, empty time" crucial to the establishment of modern nationalism is at least accelerated in the "hyper-simultaneity," or, in Paul Virilio's term, "instantaneity" of the web (1995)—from Anderson's image of people across the nation imagining themselves simultaneously opening their morning newspapers (1991, p. 25), we modulate into a world in which someone in one's community is *always* "logged on" and time zones are nearly irrelevant. And of course the consolidation of national print-languages is echoed in the evolution of languages and jargons on-line, both in the polyglot varieties of web-speak common to broad sectors of on-line communication and in highly specialized, quickly evolving discourses unique to individual communities. Here it's worth noting that just as those outside the language communities of the new European and American nations were all the more likely to be conscripted by them to build the infrastructures and fight the wars, so are those on the wrong side of the "digital divide" both in terms of access to computer technology and web connections and in terms of literacy in the dominant web languages, particularly English, all the more likely to be the ones assembling the circuits in globalization's *maquiladoras*.

For all that our participation in global communities of appreciation may be seen as simply a symptom of, or pleasant side effect of, or even agent of global capitalism, there are a number of other sides to the story. For starters, even in the most obviously commercialized of settings, like the customers' book, music, and movie reviews on sites like Amazon, one finds a kind of communal, pluralistic resistance to corporate packaging and marketing of culture that complicates a Frankfurt School-style picture of popular media stupefaction. That that resistance is repackaged and sold back to the fans faster than you can say "Alternative music" does not, for me, entirely negate the rebellious energy of its moment, particularly when we link it to the broader rebellion of the growing on-line cultural "free-for-all," in a weirdly literal sense, that

seems barely abated by the recording industry's lawsuits. Altogether unabated, of course, are fan exchanges of the fruits of their own cultural production, not only in the obvious case of "spinoff" cultures like fan fiction written about characters from a mass media product, but also in a thousand other ways, from boatbuilding fans swapping canoe plans to digital music mavens e-mailing each other break beats.

Every bit as challenging to the guardians of copyright as the straightforward examples of media piracy being prosecuted by the RIAA are the manifold challenges to the coherence and stability of the cultural products being protected, from the Open Source and Copyleft movements to the infinite scrambling and remixing of audio and video. In the music world, remixes and mash-ups have moved from the analog adventures of hip hop DJs and avant-noise experimentalists Negativland to the desktops of anyone who wants to play around with the music they've bought, borrowed or stolen. When DJ Danger Mouse took the vocals and beats from Jay-Z's *Black Album* and set them to instrumentation sampled from The Beatles' *White Album*, what he dubbed *The Grey Album* quickly became one of the hottest downloads around, especially after receiving positive record reviews in *Rolling Stone* and many other publications. This of course quickly led to legal threats by Sony, EMI and Capitol, which in turn led to "Grey Tuesday," a day of on-line protest in February 2004 on which, according to organizers, 100,000 people downloaded *The Grey Album*, and hundreds of websites featured related art and activist projects in resistance to corporate media. As you might expect, alongside the record labels' efforts to clamp down on remixes and mash-ups are efforts to cash in on the trend—later in 2004, David Bowie and the Audi corporation challenged us to win a free car by producing the best mash-up of an earlier Bowie song with one from his new album. But such efforts seem little more than a pragmatic recognition that the labels are losing the war, that the fans whom Henry Jenkins (1992) dubbed "textual poachers" a decade ago are now "digital poachers" in ever-increasing numbers. For every Napster shut-down or RIAA lawsuit, the on-line world of media fans, like some Hydra with thick glasses and bad haircuts, seems to spawn 10 new high-tech ways for fans to get or make what they want, without always paying Sony.

As resistance to the Borg of global late-capitalism goes, fan cultures and media piracy seem like tame stuff indeed. Or, to return to the previous metaphor, if such resistance is a contemporary head on Linebaugh and Rediker's "many-headed Hydra," then it would seem to be relatively politically toothless (2000). But then of course there's a good deal of more active resistance both organized through and conducted on the Internet. One of the first and most interesting cases is the Zapatistas' use of the web to weave what's been dubbed "the electronic fabric of struggle" (Cleaver 1998), both to disseminate information from the on-the-ground struggle in Chiapas, defying the Mexican government media controls and creating alongside the thousands of observers who have gone to Chiapas tens or hundreds of thousands more virtual observers, and to enlist the allegiance of leftists worldwide in the cause of the EZLN. The latter function has proven particularly interesting in complementing the Zapatistas' canny use of a range of cultural media and genres to carry their messages. Marcos's famously literary communiqués, with their interwoven political and aesthetic appeals, have found a perfect medium on line, where we gather, translate and trade them avidly—even fannishly.

More recently, e-mail and web organizing have crucially enabled the upsurge of activism in resistance to globalization and neo-liberalism. It's worth noting that demonstrations since Seattle have themselves taken on a more "web-like" character and logic—no longer the march down Pennsylvania Avenue to the White House, the new demonstrations feature a thousand different nodes: a street blockade here and puppet theater there, organized labor on one side of town and the Black Bloc on another. Both alongside such demonstrations and independently of

them, a new category of on-line activism and civil disobedience has also emerged, popularly known as “hacktivism” (though this term irks many practitioners). During the January 2002 protests against the World Economic Forum (WEF) meeting in New York, Ricardo Dominguez’ Electronic Disturbance Theater group distributed software to over 50,000 web-users who joined a “virtual sit-in,” as their computers repeatedly loaded the websites of the WEF and some of its primary corporate constituents, eventually causing the WEF site to crash (Shachtman 2002). As a look at the e-zine *The Hacktivist* (www.thehacktivist.com) suggests, a wide variety of approaches and activities get lumped together under this term, from actions linked to political demonstrations and campaigns, to more generalized resistance to corporate control of media (including relatively apolitical actions that correspond to popular expectations of “hackers”), to progressive elements in the “new media” and “net.art” communities. Their interventions remain sporadic and limited in scope, and advocates of electronic civil disobedience almost universally maintain that their actions are meant as a supplement to more traditional, “on the ground” struggles. Nevertheless, they suggest an interesting opening for application of the global character of the web, in resistance to corporate globalization.

Perhaps more significantly, the Internet has made a global circulation of independent media reporting and analysis of current struggles possible, a phenomenon that has become much more visible since September 11. If the Gulf War I belonged to CNN, then the “war on terrorism,” for many of us, has unveiled a new potential for the Net, to provide both mainstream and alternative media, in both “push” and “pull” modes. More than ever before, over the past few years I’ve actually been grateful for the inundation of e-mail, sent to me directly or to the various lists I’m on, circulating the responses of journalists, academics and others. I’ve actually found it weirdly comforting to receive some article from *The Nation* or *The Guardian* for the fourth time—the circulation of these analyses has begun to take on a talismanic quality (in addition to their more obvious function), reminding me that despite the increasingly hollow-sounding mainstream media insistence on a national consensus, the community of people resisting the current U.S. wars and policies is more than imagined.

To say that our circulation of our favorite responses to U.S. imperialism, or our favorite passages from Subcommandante Marcos, has a fetishistic quality suggestive of fandom is in no way to denigrate the importance either of the works themselves or of our engagement with them. Just as the computer has enormously complicated the distinction between work and play, much to the consternation of countless employers, so too has an “affective sensibility” percolated out into cultural and political work of all kinds, infusing that work with the potential for fannish kinds of pleasures and affiliations. I’m aware that this may sound a bit misty-eyed and utopian, if not altogether wrong-headed, and that my enthusiasm for on-line communities risks indulging in what Carlos Alonso (2001) has dubbed the “Internet sublime” (p. 1299). So let me suggest via a final, more grounded and local example how I think that fannish pleasure can enable political engagement.

I’ve been a fan of detective stories since I was a kid. For the past seven years, I’ve taught a sophomore-level literature class for non-majors on detective fiction, with the usual emphases on both aesthetic and political questions raised by the genre, as it evolves from white guys writing stories about white guy detectives and, often, Other criminals, to stories written by those Others. However, even as I was sharing my fannish enthusiasms with my students, along with my political critiques, I was always bothered by the ways in which most crime and detective stories, whether in fiction, film, TV cop shows or the 11 o’clock news, narratively reinforce the pervasive idea that the conviction of the “bad guy” is the “end of the story,” at a moment in our nation’s history when we are incarcerating our citizens in larger numbers and for longer times

than ever before. It was in part to counter this misconception that, four years ago, I added a bunch of prison writing to my syllabus, and created a “service learning” project at the local jail, in which small groups of students sit down with small groups of inmates, whom we provide with a syllabus and the books for my class, for a series of meetings to talk about literature, and its relation to their lives. After four years of conducting my own reading groups with inmates, and reading my students’ and the inmates’ journals about their reading groups, I’ve discovered that a strange process of community-building frequently emerges from this activity, in ways that are centrally enabled by the groups’ common engagement with the books. Again and again in student and inmate journals, participants record the experience of sitting in their cells or dorm rooms, reading the material for their next meeting, and wondering what so-and-so on the other side of the razor wire is going to make of, for instance, the Flitcraft story in *The Maltese Falcon*, or Sherlock Holmes’ latest exploits. In finding that their “imagined community” of fellow readers and fans increasingly includes a group of people with whom they initially thought they had nothing in common, both students and inmates come to see themselves and their peers differently, and in turn, to see the system of social distinctions and discriminations, of choices and inheritances, that has produced their current identities and addresses, differently. And in the end, such consciousness cannot help but be political...

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ⁱ For one response to this proliferation, see Aijaz Ahmad's critique of Anderson's paradigm as applied to Indian nationalism (1992, pp. 290, 342 n.3).