Transparency and reciprocity: Respecting fannish spaces in scholarly research

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Judith Fathallah

Abstract

Accountability to participants is a topic of some debate within fan studies. Whilst working with people requires informed consent, it may be legally defensible to freely quote any fanwork found online. Reflecting on my research experience, this article argues for a responsibility to ask permission from fan creators before sharing their work in academic and other contexts. An ethics of transparency is beneficial not only to fans, I argue, but to the development of fan studies and its continued dialogue with fandoms.

Most of us approaching fandom academically consider ourselves fans, and as such, may become accustomed to traversing back and forth across fannish and academic spaces with a degree of ease. Moreover, as fan studies gains in prominence, these spaces are beginning to converge in productive ways: not only have fans been producing meta longer than fan studies has been a subject, but The Archive of Our Own and Fanlore are maintained by fannish academics and academically minded fans. *The Journal of Transformative Works and Cultures'* Symposia section welcomes essays from fans writing outside the academy, some of

whom choose to employ their fannish pseudonym (see e.g. zvi LikesTv 2009; Versaphile 2011). Nonetheless, I want to argue that as academics situated within institutions, we have a responsibility of transparency and to the fans whose works we quote and whose subcultures we are sometimes guests in. This perspective has developed over the duration of my Ph.D. research (Fathallah 2013), and its adaptation into a monograph on fanfic (Fathallah forthcoming).

When we quote fanfic, or comments, or screencap manips, we might believe that as a textual analysis our project poses no risk to fans, and we therefore need not seek permission to quote them. Moreover, we have no legal obligation to those quoted: if we are quoting text that has been made public domain by its author, we need not abide by the Data Protection Principles even concerning sensitive information. But ethics must account for experience as well as law (Ess and and the Association of Internet Researchers Ethics Working Committee 2002: 4). We know that fan texts are intended for limited circulation within particular communities, and thus I believe there are ethical considerations in quoting it. Bringing fanfic, fanart and the like to academic and/or outsider attention, removing it from its initial context of publication and republishing it within an academic milieu for a different audience is an exercise of power which we are afforded by our institutional context, and which earns us cultural capital as scholars. The fans we quote may not have such securities, and may have personal reasons to protest such republication. They may not wish their online handle(s) to be associated with the quoted text, or linked to their other personas, except in the context which they have published it.

Therefore, my ethical policy has always been openness with fans whose work I quote. Informed by Christine Hine (2000: 73), my usual practice is to send informal messages asking for permission to quote from fanfic or other fan activity, using the handle linked to my

LJ and A03 accounts, full of my own fannish production. I give my name and institution, describe the project, and ask how the author would like to be cited should permission be given. I believe this goes some way towards redressing the inherent power imbalance in 'politics of knowledge production' (Sultana 2007: 376) between the 'knower and the known' (Adkins 2002: 340). I offer to share a draft of my work with quoted fans. Given that my book quotes hundreds of works, this is a laborious process, but I believe it is a necessary one that researchers must make time for. The response at every stage of research has been overwhelmingly positive, and many fans make a point of thanking me for asking (c.f. Freund and Fielding 2013; Busse and Farley 2013). I would estimate that 95 per cent of respondents grant permission, but as Kozinets observes, the fact that a handful do refuse argues for the duty to ask (1997: 471). The vast majority of fans opted to be referenced by screen name, though a few requested anonymization and about an equal number asked me to use their real name. I have respected their wishes. Admittedly, it is not always possible to contact a fan author: journals are abandoned and usernames changed. In these cases, I have generally considered it safe to quote text precisely as it appears in archives, given that these works are already severed from users upon whom they might reflect.

Moreover, I believe an ethics of transparency and responsibility has benefited me as a researcher. Several times, fans have offered useful comments and perspectives on shared drafts, which have been incorporated into my work with appropriate credit to them. Less tangibly, I have access to friendslocked communities and other spaces that depend on my good reputation as a responsible researcher. Fans are increasingly aware of the academic discussion of fanfic, and if a researcher is perceived to have breached community trust, he or she may well find future access and cooperation compromised.

Finally, I believe that academics who study fandom owe a degree of reciprocity to the community (c.f. Fetterman 1998: 143). As noted above, many of us are active fans, and I have found no good reason to separate my identities has a fanfic writer and researcher. True, I have a pseudonym, but my LiveJournal throughout my Ph.D. contained a sticky link to my institutional page, and I frequently discussed the project in blog posts. Producing fan texts, however, is far from the only form of reciprocity possible: the gift culture that fandom is often conceived as thrives on reviews, responses, blog posts and comments, and the expression of appreciated for all of the above. It is true that, as Hine has noted, becoming a researcher as well as a participant heightens one's awareness of one's self-presentation (2005: 21), but there is no reason that heightened awareness should equate to deception or falsity. In my experience, reciprocity to the community has mainly been a process of becoming more conscious and conscientious about practices I was already engaged with, which has benefited me as a researcher.

In sum, then, I have found the fan communities I engaged with eagerly receptive to my projects, and appreciate of an ethics of transparency. Fans have appreciated being asked for permission to quote and engaged in useful ways with shared drafts. Reciprocity to the community, moreover, has maintained my good standing as a responsible academic and improved my practice as a researcher. There is no doubt that such measures as these outlined have been time consuming; but, for the sake of studying fandom ethically and effectively, I believe it has been research time well spent.

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