

Interview: Paul Booth (20th, April 2016)

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In the introduction of *Fan Phenomena: Doctor Who*, you mentioned that this book was about the multitudes of fandoms, fan work and fan discussions that *Doctor Who* has generated. But, most importantly, you underline the especial role of emotions: the emotional attachment people can feel for a TV show. For me, these are two key ideas to explain any TV fandom. Keeping this in mind, what does it mean for you to be a fan of a TV show nowadays? What kind of characteristics do you think define them the most in terms of emotional connection with the TV shows (personal involvement) and cultural practices (social engagement)?

Being a fan of a TV show today is in some ways very similar to being a fan of a TV show in the past, but in other ways is remarkably different. Today fans have access to multitudes of new technologies to interact with the show and its producers, to create new art and fan work, to meet other fans, and to become aware of a greater variety of fan work than ever before. What this means is that fans today have a greater access *to fandom itself*—so that fans aren't just interacting with the program that they're fans of, but also with different fan audiences. The specific fan practices of one fan community (e.g., making vids, or writing fiction, or creating GIF sets) are now often available for any fan communities to see, acknowledge, or emulate. There is a greater sharing of fandom and fan resources, so that fans of one program (say, *Doctor Who*) can learn about others (for instance, *Supernatural*) through shared fan creations (like *SuperWhoLock*).

Fandom has also become much more mainstream today—or, at least, it's more visible to people outside of fan cultures. News outlets cover fan conventions, television programs feature fans as major characters, Comic-con is major business, and fans are running some of the most profitable and culturally significant franchises in the business (including Marvel's Cinematic Universe, *Star Trek*, *Star Wars*, and *Doctor Who*, to name just a few). But this comes with significant consequences as well; namely, these versions of the “professional fan” reveal only a slice of different fan identities, and manifest just one type of fan reaction. It is notable that of the major professional fans in the industry today, all are male, all are white, and all are cis-gendered. It hardly paints a portrait of fandom today, which is more prismatic in its identity.

Which all brings me back to look at the second part of your question, which is what characteristics define fans – personal involvement or cultural practices. In some ways, this is a question that has guided my research into fandom for many years – is fandom more of an *identity* or more of a *behaviour*? Is it what we are or what we do? Clearly, these two things can't be easily separated from each other, as what fans *do* is influence by who fans *are*, and vice versa. In fact, in my research I've begun to look at specific practices that we might define as fannish without necessarily knowing if the participants are fans—for instance, using social media sites like Polyvore to create outfits of television characters. This is certainly an activity that we might call fannish, but we don't know if the people participating would call themselves “fans.” Oppositely, I'm

not sure we can say that everything fans do is fan participation. How do we define the type of “enunciative productivity” defined by Fiske (1992, where he writes about fans speaking to other fans about the program) when it’s typed out and put online? Is that textual productivity? A digital productivity, as Matt Hills (2013) considers? Or is it something else?

I think most of what fan scholars see and study is cultural production, and that has guided fan studies research for the past three decades. However, a turn to studies of personal identity would be much warranted in fan studies scholarship. There have been some studies already – Sandvoss (2005) and Zubernis and Larsen (2012) have looked at fandom as a type of personal identity, and I think there is real value there in exploring these different ways of conceptualizing fandom. As fandom becomes more mainstream, and more popular, and more accepted, I think more people are identifying as fans without necessarily participating in the traditional behaviours that fan studies has assumed fans do.

That all being said, in my scholarship I’ve tried to look outside this binary (identity/behaviour), as any binary discussion ends up limiting the scope of analysis. I have tried to “think otherwise” (Gunkel 2012). Fandom is both more than an identity and more than a behaviour, and a focus on topics outside of this reductive structure will only enable more productive scholarship moving forward.

***Doctor Who* and *Star Trek* are two transmedia phenomena which have last for years (more than fifty!). What adds “time” in the configuration of a fan identity?**

The timeframe of a particular program can significantly affect the fandom as a community and fan identity of individuals. Television programs that have a long history—over fifty years, in the case of *Doctor Who* and *Star Trek*—have both a nostalgic fandom as well as a familial fandom. In my research, I’ve found that fans are often introduced to a show like *Doctor Who* through their family—a parent or an older sibling who loved the show when *they* were younger who introduces it to the newer fan. This is how I was introduced to many of the shows that I’m a fan of! The fandom become generational, in this case, as parents, grandparents, and children can all bond over similar shows—and, I think, it also contributes to a more familial feeling at conventions as well, as fans are used to interacting in a family-like way with other fans of the show. Fans become like a family.

There is also a nostalgic air to these long-running shows. Obviously, television programs change over time, and so watching an episode of *Doctor Who* from the 1960s is very different from watching one today – it is an entirely different style of television making, acting, cultural background, etc. In *Doctor Who* fandom the common saying—taken from the former producer John Nathan-Turner—that “the memory cheats” indicates how nostalgia can play a role in understanding fan attachment. Are the episodes as good as you remember in the past? Probably not, but that doesn’t mean one doesn’t have an emotional attachment to them as well. I think every fan of a franchised series has a particular episode that they love but that isn’t highly regarded in the fandom—the beauty of nostalgic fandom is that we can reflect on our emotional connection to the media from times past.

But there is also an inherent difficulty with being a fan of a long-running television show as well—catching up with the history. Many newer fans that I’ve interviewed about *Doctor Who* and *Star Trek*—and even shows like *Supernatural*—have commented on the onerous task of trying to “catch up” on older episodes. This is made even more difficult with *Doctor Who* fandom, as many of the older episodes don’t even exist anymore (or, rather, they exist in audio form). In an era where we’re more likely to marathon watch an entire season in a few days, it can seem impossible to catch up on fifty years of history. But this is where fandom becomes very important—fans can help other fans negotiate this tricky terrain as different episodes become more valuable to watch and experience than others. Fans can recommend some “must see” episodes and which ones others can skip.

At the same time, the transmediated nature of many of these long-running texts also presents unique challenges and opportunities. What do fans do when faced not just with fifty years of television program, but a host of novels, comics, DVD-extras, films, video games, and many other outlets that have been released? In many cases, it’s nearly impossible to catch up on the backlog. But this also means that every fan that appraises their own fandom with a series can approach it with a variety of backgrounds—with many ways to “get into” a series, there are always opportunities to share with other fans.

Time plays another important role in fandom of television programs as well—and that’s the time that fans devote to showing their fandom. This relates back to the previous question, but digital technology has made the “time” of being a fan much more easy to negotiate – it doesn’t take much time to look up some fan thoughts on Tumblr or Storify, for example. But fans’ devotion can be measured in many ways, and the time it takes to create original memes or GIFs, or to travel to conventions, or to spend with younger fans, has an effect on the fandom as well.

Science fiction TV has developed great and intense fandoms like *Doctor Who*, *Star Trek* or *Battlestar Galactica*. Why is this genre so likely to generate such deep fandoms?

There are a lot of theories as to why science fiction develops strong cult audiences. Matt Hills, for instance, argues that science fiction tends to have a “hyperdiegesis,” or a vast narrative too large to be represented within the bounds of a single media text. Think of *Star Wars* with its universe of planets and political history that spans far beyond the seven (and counting) movies. Or *Star Trek*, with a detailed canon history so vast it is hard to conceptualize! By following along or learning about the nuances of his hyperdiegesis, viewers of the show become invested, and this investment becomes fandom.

Sara Gwenllian-Jones offers another explanation for why these shows tend to generate fan audiences, and that’s the virtual reality they create—science fiction tends to show us a world that is like but also unlike our own in significant ways. That fans see this world as “possible” means that they can imagine themselves there, and then can identify with it, generate fan audience behaviour. Of course, it’s not just science fiction that can be

conceptualized as building “virtual realities,” but sci-fi is known for this type of narrative construction.

There are other important considerations of science-fiction as well. Sci-fi focuses on the relationship between technology and humanity, and for fans this is often a central concern. But more importantly, I think the underlying messages of science fiction—of the importance of humanity in an ever changing world, and the critical role that ethics, morality, and emotion can play in our future, appeals to a fans’ sense of self in the world.

To me, I think fans and science fiction television work well together because they are both doing similar things. At its best, science fiction is about imagining different possibilities – science fiction tells us about our world through the lens of changed technology. Are we headed in the right direction or wrong direction? How do our choices affect the consequences of our lives? Who are we (and who can we be) in a world of changing conceptions of “human”? Science fiction presents us a world that reflects possibility and imagination.

I think fandom does this as well, and especially the type of fan activity that has been investigated by fan studies scholars of the past thirty years. Participating in fandom allows us to see possibilities within television texts that we hadn’t considered; writing fan fiction allows us to actualize those possibilities. I don’t mean to say that all fandom is happy-go-lucky, rosy and cheerful! Far from it—fans can be argumentative, angry, and antagonistic. But in the moment of communion and connection with other people, fandom shows us human communication; and in the creative work of fans, fandom presents imaginative possibilities that the original text didn’t permit.

All this being said, it’s important to reflect that there are many fans out there who are not fans of science fiction, and many viewers of science fiction who may not consider themselves fans—so it’s impossible to view this as a simple binary!

Regarding *Doctor Who*, you have discussed in your essay “The changing faces of *Doctor Who* fandom: New fans, new technologies, old practices?” that digital practices influence but do not monopolize fan practices. Which aspects of their digital practices are relevant? Why offline activities are still so important to generate fans identity as a group in our convergence culture?

In that article, my co-author Peter Kelly and I interviewed over 100 fans at a local *Doctor Who* convention to find out how the practices of fans today might differ from the practices in the past. We were curious to investigate a common assumption—that is, whether or not fans today are somehow *different* from fans in the past. What was useful about the case study was that *Doctor Who* is such a long-running television program that there are people from all ages who attend. The convention, Chicago TARDIS, has over 1000 guests, from young people who have only just started watching the Matt Smith or Peter Capaldi eras, to people who have been around since the beginning. (Most of the more seasoned attendees grew up in the States so their first exposure to *Doctor Who* really came in the 1970s when it was shown on PBS.)

What our research showed was that the majority of fans—young or old, male or female—continued to practice offline fan activities more often than they practiced fan activities online. Or, rather, a more accurate way of stating this would be that they used digital technology to augment their fan practices, rather than relying on it entirely. This was surprising to us, because a common assumption among many scholars (not just of fandom, but of media in general) is that people have shifted to using digital technology exclusively. What our research showed is that fans still meet in person, still trade ‘zines and DVDs, still have discussions, and still watch the program with others. They might use social media to organize events or create “meet ups” but the technology was always incidental to the actual face to face meeting itself.

Although our article didn’t really discuss it much, I think the reason offline activities are so important for generating fans’ group identities is because social interaction is so important to fan communities in general. One can certainly be a fan alone—there are so many armchair fans who may watch the show on their own and never really discuss it with others. But *fandom*—that is, the community of people that come together to share in the excitement and joy of their favourite television program—by definition has to be social. Fans like to come together in ways that are more intimate than technology allows. This isn’t to say that digital technology isn’t embraced by fans—and especially fans without traditional mobility or easy access to face-to-face encounters, digital technology has truly opened up the world of fandom (as I’ve discussed in *Digital Fandom* as well). But for many fans, face-to-face is the best way to interact with others about their favourite text.

Finally, I’d add that for many fans, fandom is still something to be hidden. While mainstream culture may have embraced some aspects of fandom, they have not embraced all. There are still many fan groups and fandoms that continue to be ridiculed and mocked—especially female fan groups, feminine behaviour, fandom of non-mainstream cult texts, fandom of culturally-inappropriate texts, or fandom of taboo texts. Slash fandom, for instance, is rarely condoned in mainstream culture and often can be regarded as highly improper. Fans of these sorts of maligned texts and practices may have very good reasons for wanting to meet in person—they can create a safe space for their fandom rather than making it de facto public when it goes online.