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Online and Offline Fan Communities

In the world of media convergence, the ways in which people interact with each other are changing, and consequently, the status of fan culture is ever-evolving. In the realm of fanfic (def: "literary works that borrow the settings, plots, characters, and ideas from all forms of popular culture"), which is the area that I focused on in my qualitative fan study, most of its communities have moved online, and this has resulted in the transformation of its culture in several ways. Firstly, the Internet has opened up a new world that allows fans from all over the world to congregate and form an ever-growing global community that was never before possible. Case in point, Katta, a veteran and active fanfic writer whom I interviewed, asserted:

"Back in the days of mailing lists, people gathered together as fans of one particular thing... Nowadays with Livejournal and such places, it's easier to find areas to be multi-fannish and geek out... [The Internet] opened up possibilities."

Secondly, the expansion of online fan communities solidifies fan culture by making it easier for fans with common interests to find each other. As Elphabathedeliroius32, another interviewee from my study, echoed, "online fan communities are full of people who all share common interests and become friends." Thirdly, with easy online access, fans are encouraged to not only embrace but also partake in fannish activities. For example, most of the fanfic writers that I interviewed are active in multiple fandoms, and this is something that was uncommon before the digitization of fan communities. Lastly, the growth of online fan communities gives fans the sense of belonging, and makes them feel less marginalized in society than in the pre-Internet era when fannish activities were often confined by financial or geographical constraints.

Granted, many fans who participate in online fan activities do not get to meet each other in person as the result of globalization. Nonetheless, meaningful and long-lasting friendships do stem from online interactions via fan websites (e.g., www.fanfiction.net), and some of these cyber friendships even "consolidate" when online fans organize domestic or even international trips to visit each other (as was mentioned by my interviewees). In many aspects, while the Internet has transformed the ways in which traditional fan activities are carried out, online and offline fan cultures are still more interrelated than they are separate in general.

Copyright issues have generated heated discussions over the years. Media conglomerates have indeed been trying very hard to crack down on copyright infringements (however that is defined

by the industry), although corporate censorships seem to have less of an impact on fanfic communities. Evidently, at least within the fanfic communities that I came across, fanfic writers still publish stories based on anything and everything that sparks their interests. Moreover, there are seldom cases where fanfic publications were pulled off the Internet as the result of legal battles. It is noticeable, however, that many fanfic writers are aware of copyright issues, as they often include disclaimers similar to the example below in their fanfic publications:

"Disclaimer: The Time Traveler's Wife and all related characters and concepts are not mine. Obviously. I also don't have any money, and so don't sue me."

In a time where mass media dominate most, if not all, cultural outlets, fanfic is one of the ways in which fans resist passive media consumption, and become active in manufacturing personalized contents that suit their own interests. For their heavy reliance on commercialized media content, fan and fanfic communities' future could be in peril should media conglomerates wish to enact copyright laws. While I do not know enough about how free speech factors into fan or fanfic creations (though I would be interested in learning more about it), I also do not see any reason for either an immediate or full-scale crackdown by the media industry. After all, fannish activities (e.g., fan video, fan music, and fanfic stories) can easily be considered free advertisements for the canon (def: original books, movies, video games, television programs, etc. that fans base their creations on), and this is something that media conglomerates should be happy rather than worried about. Summarily, I surmise that the future of online and offline fan communities will remain largely unaffected by the issues raised in the roundtable response question.