

FLOW Conference position paper for "Online and Offline Fan Communities"

Lisa Schmeiser, independent TV critic and recapper for Television Without Pity

Title: "Hurrah for Heartless Capitalism!"

Let us all be grateful that the Berlin Wall fell, capitalism reigns o'er the land and we have corporations. Without them, the vibrant television fan cultures we know and, er, know in the 21st century wouldn't be flourishing as they are today.

Consider: Capitalism is responsible for two of the conditions that fandom requires. First, without the imperative to bolster and expand different demographic demesnes, new and fan-worthy shows would not be made. Second, without market-driven benchmarks, networks would not cancel shows. Few things work in fandom's favor like cancellation. While *Star Trek* is the classic model for this, consider also these franchises: *Family Guy* (revived twice), *Futurama* (now living on in movies), anything Joss Whedon has been involved in for the past ten years, and the frantic efforts of anyone who watched *John from Cincinnati* to try and justify that show as a tolerable excuse for *Deadwood*'s demise. (They are all wrong. There are no acceptable excuses for axing *Deadwood*.)

Without capitalism, corporations and cancellations, you wouldn't have the sense of shared mission and outsider cool that successful fandom communities require. Many fandoms work in seeming opposition to corporate interests -- they want companies to do things that are not in the best interests of the bottom lines. Online, fix-our-show and save-our-show petitions are only slightly less prevalent than deposed Nigerian heirs in need of a bank deposit slip.

An interesting and related phenomenon: the reactionary fan community. When corporations set up or buy fan-based sites, everyone who participates is hyperconscious of The Man's presence. Subsequently, the first time there's a conflict between the community hosts and the community members who perceive that their investment in said community is neither understood nor appreciated, there is usually an exodus to a new, created-by-the-community-for-the-community site. These sites are vital to a vibrant fandom -- while community members may come for the agita, they usually stay for the

camaraderie that inevitably rises. These oppositional sites (look for them on LiveJournal especially) and forums provide fans with deeper and more meaningful opportunities for community participation and critical media analysis. Who can possibly object to smarter and more engaged TV viewers? Other than the networks, I mean.

Moreover, reacting against The Man often produces new modes of creative appropriation. Consider the Facebook Flair application. It lets you create virtual "pieces of flair" for whatever fandom stance floats your boat. People have appropriated the *Office Space* joke to advocate or denigrate other corporate-produced media -- and none of the companies that came up with the original sources of media are getting compensated for it. This is wholly fan-based -- but would not have arisen were it not for several corporations either creating the media or letting fans use their product to create alternative communities.

The advantage of working in opposition to corporate-controlled fandom spaces is that it helps retain the vestiges of community values. The Internet dilutes the purity and exclusivity of any underground or community. This raises the question: is it a community if anyone can join? A fan community with oppositional origins and its own subculture restores some of the exclusivity and that, in turn, reinforces fans' sense of community investment.

Finally, oppositional communities are the best situated to bridge generational gaps. There is a shift afoot among TV consumers. People are no longer content to be passive entertainment consumers. They want to insert themselves into the narrative and get a more deeply immersive entertainment experience. Witness the decline of movie-viewing for MPORGs, or the plethora of creative fan communities. Oppositional fan subcultures -- be they online or off -- are better situated to foster a sense of participation because they are wholly created and maintained via fan participation. Compare that to the canned "play this game online!" or "read this character's blog" nonsense that companies use to try and bring eyeballs to their community sites.

In fact, if your corporate taskmasters have ordered you to develop or sustain a TV-related community, my heart goes out to you. No fan likes being perceived as a tool of The

Man, and few will invest time in being one. Alas, such are the rigors of the market.