

Online and Offline Fan Communities

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While it may seem that participating in a media fandom is becoming a more recognized, if not actually socially acceptable or lauded, use of time, it seems unlikely that media fandom will ever be a mainstream or normalized behavior. In part this is because fan communities often do not want to be mainstream, and revel in the self-image of being anti-corporate and outside the norm. This attitude, possibly more than any other issue including copyright, will remain a huge obstacle for corporations who attempt to gain control over fan activities, whether online or not.

The attempt by the Williams brothers to artificially create a fanfiction writing community online with the disastrous 2007 launch of FanLib.com illustrates the resistance on the part of fans to getting too close to the corporations which own the intellectual properties that interest them. FanLib survived its extremely rocky beginning, but the expected numbers of users and writers never materialized and FanLib folded in August of 2008, barely a year after it was created. In many fandoms there was absolutely no movement towards using FanLib and a great deal of hostility and resistance to perceived corporate outsiders attempting to co-opt fandom's traditional non-profit and grassroots functions. Scorn was heaped on the site and the Williams brothers, who created it. Livejournal accounts were set up, such as "life_wo_fanlib" to monitor the site and actively campaign against it. Those groups declared victory when the announcement came in August, but FanLib was not the first and won't be the last corporate entity that attempts to capitalize on "fans."

FanLib initially promoted itself through contests done with the blessings of the copyright holders of the source texts, such as *Star Trek* and *The L Word*. The contests were really the only successful parts of the site, but the seeming collusion between FanLib and the corporate media entities actually fuelled suspicion of the site. Some fans expressed fears that FanLib was a trap, set out to lure fanfic writers into posting their derivative works only to gain access to their identifying information, which would lead to being sued for copyright infringement. (When FanLib had no plan in place for handling complaints regarding copyright, it only furthered the impression that the Williams brothers had no understanding of the milieu they were trying to co-opt.)

Contests sanctioned by the copyright holders drew members to FanLib, although it is open for debate whether to classify those members as "fans" or not on that basis. The mere act of trying to win a contest is not sufficient to make a "fan." Though the creators attempted to lure well-known fanfic writers in existing fandoms to the site by an ill-planned e-mail strategy, few took the bait and many (myself included) actively campaigned against using FanLib for that reason, with the result being that mostly writers very new to fandom or otherwise disaffected or alienated by existing fandoms were the ones who ended up with FanLib accounts. Could FanLib and any similar companies that may come in the future represent a new generational split for online fandom?

A generational split already occurred in fandom with the arrival of the Internet, separating those who became involved in fandom when it required far more effort and energy to join in than clicking on a mouse from those who came after. That split appears in fannish discourse in terms

of seniority in much the same way the broader culture assigns higher value to elders who were physically present for significant events ("I remember when we only got 4 TV stations"; "I remember getting the original Trek 'zines in the mail"). But those same elders from the pre-Web era remain in many cases, having transitioned into the online realms and by their presence, they have helped acculturate new fans coming in via the Internet, thus sustaining the anti-corporate, rebellious ethos of earlier fandom by passing the attitude on to newcomers.

What FanLib, even in failure, may represent is a split that will separate the traditional members of fandoms from an even newer generation, one that never passes through the social process of joining a fandom and never learns the history of fans versus corporate owners. Although not everyone goes through this process when they join a fandom, the pattern is significant and a key to the stability of practices across different fandoms. But if "fans" (at least in name) begin joining online fan groups not only without learning the folkloric history of all fandom but never having any chance to even hear it because the people who could share it are simply not present, this could bring fan communities into a new and confusing era where not all fans mean the same thing when they identify as a member of a "fan community."