

“#IHateThisShow!”: Anti-Fandom in the Digital Age

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The growth of “anti-fan studies” in recent years can be simultaneously viewed as a necessary intervention into historically utopian constructions of fan community/culture, and as part of a broader effort to de-emphasize affect within fan studies. As Jonathan Gray and others have noted, anti-fandom is equally affective, but its negative charge, coupled with anti-fandom’s discursive links to (and spatial positioning within sites of) television criticism, lends it an air of objectivity. If first wave fan scholars strived to characterize female fans as critical consumers negotiating their relationship to mass media texts, anti-fandom makes these ties to critical consumption highly visible, safely resituating affect in an explicitly analytical frame. Though they may be equally subjective and emotional in response, this realignment allows anti-fan expressions and studies to evade the feminizing connotations of television consumption broadly, and fannish affect specifically, that fan studies has always been forced to speak back to.

For the purposes of this conversation, I think it’s important to further demarcate two forms of anti-fandom. The first, what I’m provisionally calling “anticipatory anti-fandom,” is characterized by a pre-existing, paratextual, or immediately negative responses to a media text, and the performance of those responses across a variety of enunciative platforms. Anti-fannish responses to series such as HBO’s *Girls*, which began well before the first episode aired and compounded throughout its first season run, would fall into this category. A second category of anti-fan engagement, “acclimated anti-fandom,” occurs when a pre-existing fan base shifts their polarity based on specific authorial or textual shifts, in the vein of fans’ (specifically, shippers’) backlash against Josh Safran and season 4 of *Gossip Girl*. I’d like to consider both of these forms through the intersecting temporal and gendered qualities of anti-fandom.

The temporalities of anti-fan practices, and hate watching in particular, frequently involve liveblogging/livetweeting during an episode’s initial broadcast. This suggests a form of fannish participation that is deeply desirable to the television industry, despite the promotional paradox it represents. Both fan and anti-fan discursive practices temporally privilege watching a show live, but anticipatory anti-fandom is more closely bound to broadcasting temporalities in its primary modes of textual production, namely liveblogging and/or episodic review and commenting. If acclimated anti-fans might be characterized by their transformative interventions, rectifying textual elements through the production and circulation of their own texts, then anticipatory anti-fans play an ironically [affirmational](#) role. No matter how biting their commentary, anticipatory anti-fans affirm the significance of creator and text above all, and de-emphasizes time shifting as a digital spectatorial practice. Though I believe there’s a great deal of slippage between affirmational and transformative modes of fan engagement, anticipatory anti-fandom may represent a form of fannish affect that is both industrially and academically sanctioned.

Though scholars, myself included, have touched on the gendered nature of specific anti-fan performances, contemporary anti-fan practices deserve to be broadly considered in

these terms, particularly because anticipatory anti-fan expressions frequently extend beyond the text or its creators to critique other fans of the property. At best, these fans are painted as willfully uncritical, all squee and no substance, too overwhelmed by affect to engage with problematic textual elements (see: *Glee* anti-fandom). Acclimated anti-fans are also frequently feminized, their criticisms rooted in affective notions of betrayal, and linguistically romanticized through discussions of “breaking up” with a particular show. Coming on the heels of recent debates around the continued use/significance of the term “aca-fan,” which many read as reflecting a perceived scholarly discomfort with the fandom’s affective, feminine connotations, the appeal of anti-fandom is clear. Because anti-fandom, and anti-fan studies by extension, filters fannish affect through the more traditionally acceptable (and “objective,” “masculine,” etc.) lens of media criticism, it also potentially represents a more explicitly feminist (or broadly politicized) mode of fan expression that has long been the core impulse behind the celebration of fans.

The anti-fan response to HBO’s *Girls* offers a particularly interesting test case to consider these claims, in large part because this instance of “hate watching” was concurrently rooted in feminine and feminist critiques. Todd VanderWerff, of [The AV Club](#), posited that the anti-fan response to *Girls* says a great deal more about the masculine values attached to the notion of “good TV” than it does about the quality of the show itself. Extending that argument, I would suggest that anti-fandom might expose some of the masculine connotations of what it means to be a “good fan” within media convergence. Just as many of *Girls*’ anti-fan analyses circulated around questions of privilege, I wonder if anti-fandom (whether instituted in spheres of media criticism, or informally conveyed through social media) exerts a certain privilege as a form of fannish discourse, a privilege that is frequently coded as masculine.