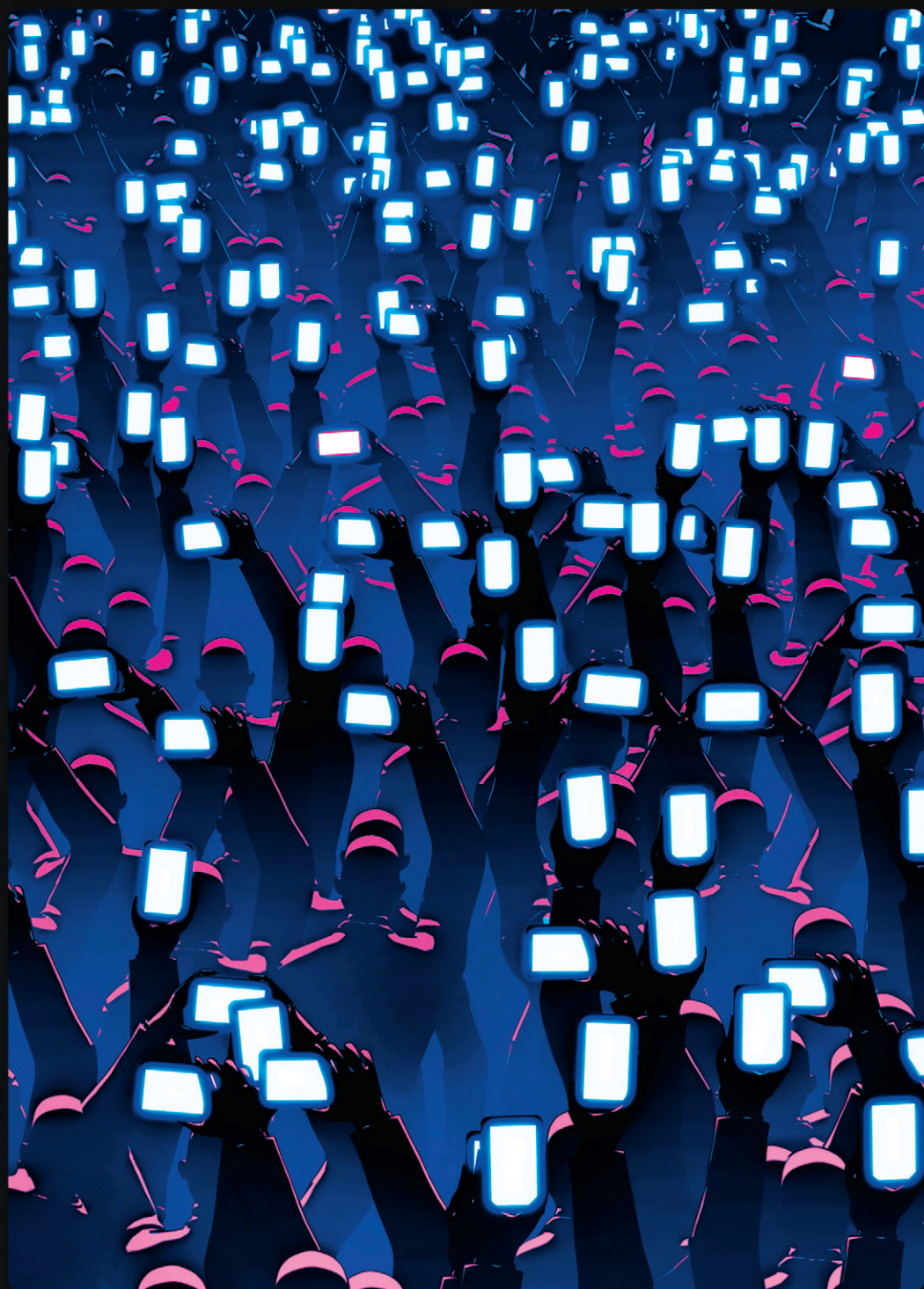


BEYOND FANDOM

The Dark Side of Social Media Discourse



Edited by NATALIE LE CLUE

Beyond Fandom

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Beyond Fandom: The Dark Side of Social Media Discourse

EDITED BY

NATALIE LE CLUE

Cape Peninsula University of Technology, South Africa



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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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CarrieLynn D. Reinhard earned her PhD in Communication in 2008 from Ohio State University, where she worked with Brenda Dervin to learn her sensemaking methodology. She has since applied that approach to understand audiences, media reception, and fans. She wrote *Fractured Fandoms: Contentious Communication in Fan Communities* in 2018. Her current research focuses on the intersections of religion, politics, and fandom from a sensemaking perspective.

Sophie Sandberg is an educator, street artist and founder committed to combating gender-based violence. She created the popular initiative, Catcalls of NYC, which raises awareness about street harassment using colourful chalk art. Since starting Catcalls of NYC in 2016, she has reached hundreds of thousands of people on social media and inspired the international youth-led movement Chalk Back, consisting of 600 ‘Catcalls of’ sites spanning 6 continents. Sophie has spoken about her activism at various universities, such as Pennsylvania State University, George Washington University and New York University, given talks at international conferences, and presented on panels organised by Vital Voices Global Partnership and the United Nations Girls’ Education Initiative. She holds a Bachelor of Arts in Gender and Sexuality Studies from New York University and a Master of Arts in Arts Politics, also from New York University.

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This collection would not have been possible without the valuable contributions of each and every author. Their insightful work has been integral to bringing this book to life, and I am truly grateful for their dedication to exploring the complexities of fandom and social media.

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Introduction

Natalie Le Clue

Cape Peninsula University of Technology, South Africa

Abstract

The evolving landscape of social media and the digital space illustrates a transformative shift in behaviour and communication online. These digital environments often exhibit cyclical toxicity that permeates online discourse, necessitating a focused examination. For instance, [Le Clue's \(2023\)](#) study demonstrates the concerns surrounding the functioning of online communities and reveals an alarming, unchecked spread of toxic rhetoric, intolerance and hateful speech. The significance of the research conducted for this collection lies in its potential to offer insights into the impact of contemporary communication. The rapid evolution of social media demands a nuanced understanding of its effect on society, and this collection addresses this need through a thorough study of digital landscapes. By situating fan communities at the forefront, this research not only aims to meticulously investigate the broader impact of social media on contemporary society but also seeks to prioritise an in-depth exploration of the dynamics inherent to fan practices within these digital spaces. This focus allows the collection to capture the complexities of how online fan communities function, communicate, and influence the evolving digital landscape. By centralising fan studies, the collection provides a crucial lens through which to understand the capability of fan practices to shape the trajectory of online communication. Through this dedicated exploration, the collection seeks to contribute a valuable perspective that enriches our understanding of the nuanced relationship between the dynamics of social media and the behaviours of fan communities.

Introduction

This collection of chapters explores the societal impact of social media and its outsized influence on changing communication norms (Le Clue, 2023) by offering

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a nuanced exploration of the role played by fans. The constant connectivity of social media, which cultivates a dynamic digital landscape, centres around shared interests and ideologies. It is acknowledged that these environments characteristically proffer a sense of belonging but are also microcosms for the unrestrained spread of toxic practices.

To understand how the ubiquitous nature of these platforms interacts with and shapes fan engagement, the collection offers an opportunity to gain deeper insights into the characteristics that typify these environments and the potential hazards that pervade them. This collection aims to contribute towards a more extensive consideration of contemporary online communication by explicitly highlighting the darker side of social media discourse. In the following chapters, contributors address various aspects of this issue and offer a range of perspectives and case studies. In Section 1, *Line Nybro Petersen* writes about the vital topic of the increasing cultural authority of fans and accentuates that fans set agendas by shaping digital practices, attracting media attention, and mobilising communities around specific topics. Following this is *Norena Abdul Karim Zamri and Nur Nasliza Arina Mohamad Nasir's* work, broached through a Malaysian sociopolitical perspective, which investigates the dynamics between digital hate speech and othering. This theme continues with *Renee Ann Drouin's* look at the toxic undercurrents of video game culture by highlighting the tensions between gamer communities, creators, and the challenges faced by developers. *Anthony Dannar* broadens this scope by examining how reactionary fan practices infiltrate broader cultural and political spheres through the emergence of reactionary fanboy auterism, where the creative practices of fan culture are co-opted to amplify hate-driven ideologies. In contrast, *Kania Arini Sukotjo* narrows the lens once more to consider toxicity within fan communities themselves, particularly through the phenomenon of 'shipping' and its impact on fan dynamics and creator interactions. The final chapter in this section, by *Simone Driessen and Bethan Jones*, shines an essential spotlight on the darker side of fannish play, specifically offering a recognition that fan practices and behaviours are presenting an opportunity to understand the blurred lines between politics, entertainment and fandom and how fandoms can drive real-world change.

Section 2 of the collection considers ethical reflections and identity considerations for which *Sophie Sandberg* writes about the impact of the online 'manosphere' on grassroots feminist organising and as an example of toxic fan culture. The next chapter by *CarrieLynn D. Reinhard* shifts towards addressing the challenges of toxic practices and behaviours by equipping fans with tools to navigate and resolve conflicts within the online communities. This is followed by *Kaela M. Joseph, Tanya Cook and Alena Karkanias*, who turn to the ethical complexities of fan speculation about celebrity identities and consider how these practices reflect broader cultural dynamics and the lingering gaps in queer representation. The final chapter in this section, by *Emilie Buckley and Carol Stinnett*, builds on previous discussions on fan influence by discussing the complex relationship between media portrayals of celebrity weight loss, fan identity, and body image.

The final section of the book focuses on fan communities and the cultural dynamics that underscore it. *Dania Shaikh* studies the rise of anti-fandoms and their increasingly influential role in shaping fan experiences, particularly through the use of fanfiction tags to police content and behaviour within fan communities. Following this, *Natalie Le Clue* analyses how the blurring of fandom and politics in African contexts influences and amplifies toxic behaviours and how it is reshaping online fan cultures in politically charged spaces. *Yang Xinye* concludes the collection with an examination of how the Chinese *Axis Powers Hetalia* fandom navigates ideological tensions, fan wars and community rules and sheds light on the complexities of fan identity and discourse.

It is increasingly evident from several studies in this collection that the virtual and real worlds are becoming more intertwined where behaviours, ideologies and practices flow seamlessly between the two. This challenges the efficacy of maintaining a distinction between the virtual and real-world environment and suggests instead that they function as interconnected and mutually influential spaces. Recognition of such a convergence is essential as it calls for greater attention to the dynamics of fandoms and their broader societal implications, given the increasing relevance of these spaces.

A collection such as this one is necessary as it offers a vital understanding of how the toxic dynamics of fans and fandoms impact and influence not only communication practices but also the broader societal landscape of our increasingly digital interactions. Further, by scrutinising and investigating how harmful behaviours flourish in these online environments, we can begin to uncover the mechanisms that allow these practices to thrive and identify their potential implications in both virtual and real-world settings.

Reference

Le Clue, N. (2023). The new normal: Online political fandom and the co-opting of morals. *Convergence*, 30(1), 347–357.

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Section 1

Digital Discourse Dynamics

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Chapter 1

The Cultural Authority of Fan Play and the Toxic Turn

Line Nybro Petersen

University of Copenhagen, Denmark

Abstract

This chapter argues that fandom has an emerging cultural authority as a consequence of their presence and practices on social media platforms. Fans have the potential to be agenda setting in several ways: (1) they shape the participatory practices that other users engage in and (2) through their playful, and entertaining, practices, they grab the attention of broadcast media and are able to mobilise around particular topics and get other people to join them. Fan studies have so far primarily acknowledged fan communities role in shaping the contemporary political culture, but fans' cultural significance extends to the spread of conspiracy theories on social media. Deploying forensic play, a re-imagining and broadening of Mittell's original concept of forensic fandom, as a primary interpretive strategy, fans play is central to the collaborative efforts to construct, develop and maintain conspiracy theories. This became clear with the emergence of the QAnon conspiracy theory on 4Chan, which originated from users engaging in live-action-role-playing and forensic play as a dominating interpretive strategy. While conspiracy theories developed through the playfulness of fan practices can be highly entertaining and humorous, they are also often the foundation for hate speech, harassment and threats of violence and extremist viewpoints.

Keywords: Fan authority; fan play; conspiracy theories; cultural authority; networked communities; forensic fandom

Introduction

This chapter addresses fan communities increasing cultural authority (Furedi, 2013; Sennett, 1980) as agenda setting in contemporary participatory culture (Petersen, 2022). Elsewhere, I have argued that fans' practices have increasingly come to dominate and shape our contemporary digital environment and that fans' ability to be agenda setting in modes of participation is a consequence of fans' play (Petersen, 2022; Petersen & Sundet, 2019). First, fans skilfully navigate and appropriate digital affordances and platforms and engage in fan play, and second, they are, as a community, experts on their object(s) of fandom. The issue of fans' cultural authority is relevant for our understanding of how fans practices, and especially toxic fan practices, can be impactful in shaping domains outside the cultural scope of fandom itself (Dannar, 2024; Le Clue, 2024; Petersen et al., 2023). As such, this article considers two primary questions: (1) how might we understand fans' cultural authority as online communities engaged with playful practices? And, (2) how does fans' playful practices contribute to the contemporary spread of conspiracy theories on social media?

Fans, I argue, are agenda setting by (a) shaping the types of digital practices that non-fans engage in on social media, (b) by grabbing the attention of broadcast media, thus shaping cultural production and news stories and (c) as a consequence of fan communities' ability to mobilise around particular topics and activate others to join them. This, however, is also the case with the type of fan practices that lead to the spread of conspiracy theories both in and outside of fan communities (Marin, 2021, Wildt & Aupers, 2023). While fans' conspiracy theories concerned with the sexual preferences of One Direction members or the existence of a secret episode of the BBC Sherlock TV series may seem rather harmless and part of day-to-day entertainment and gossip in fan communities, similar interpretive strategies and forensic play modes (building on Mittell, 2009, 2012) are put into play as online communities 'investigate' the conspiracy theory that the princess of Wales is in a coma or that Tom Hanks is part of a satanic cabal torturing children in order to drink their blood. The latter conspiracy theory is part of the Qanon conspiracy theory that has had enormous consequences both for democracy in the broadest sense but also catastrophic consequences for individuals around the globe caught up in those beliefs (Petersen et al., 2023).

The Cultural Authority of Fandom

The question of fan power shaped early fan study debates as Fiske considered the 'cultural economy' (1992) of fans by positioning fans as engaged with discourses of resistance to the hegemony of the cultural industries (see also Sandvoss, 2005). Fans, for Fiske, are inherently subversive as a consequence of their appropriation of media texts and idols as they 'subvert the meaning of those imposed on them' (Sandvoss, 2005, p. 13). Fans' readings of texts would often stand in opposition to the cultural industry's 'hegemonic cultural values' (Sandvoss, 2005, p. 14). Fandom, then, was understood as a form of cultural resistance against dominant discourses despite the obvious asymmetry in power relations between cultural