

Boosting Elvis: A content analysis of editorial stories from one fan club magazine

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Abstract

There is a tendency in fan studies research to ignore the offline and contingent activities and concerns of organized fan cultures. After introducing the community of English-speaking Elvis Presley fan clubs, this article presents findings from a study of 240 editorial stories from one fan club magazine written over the course of a decade. Results show that under the banner of supporting the memory of their hero, fans participate in a diverse and vibrant living culture and they pursue a wide variety of activities. In order to understand their practice of 'boosting' (Barbas 2008), the empirical results are framed with a discussion of Durkheim's (1912) theory of religion. I argue that keeping Elvis's memory alive, for fans, means actively maintaining the magnitude of the fan base.

Keywords: Elvis Presley, fandom, living culture, boosterism, Durkheim, religion.

Introduction

For over twenty years, fan studies have been a way to explore audience participation with a media text... The evolution of fan studies, however, has reached a critical moment: traditional studies of media fandom in the digital age seem inadequately equipped to describe and analyse what I call the 'philosophy of playfulness' we can observe in fans' use of today's digital technology. (Booth 2010, 1-2)

What are the specific, historical concerns of fan communities? In the 1990s, various ethnographers explored such questions.¹ Since then, with few exceptions, book-length accounts of offline fan communities have been much less prominent. Perhaps this is because those who are interested think they can find out so readily, since broadband adoption normalized the Internet alongside other forms of media in the first decade of the new millennium. During this time, like many other people, fans began to use the net more and more as a medium to communicate. As the above quotation from Paul Booth's book *Digital Fandom* (2010) demonstrates, there is therefore a tendency to perceive the online

environment as a radically changing and constantly restructuring fan phenomena. Aside from occasional studies of fan practices such as cosplay (see Gunnels 2009 and Mead 2010), there is now an equal tendency in fan studies to ignore the activities of organized fan cultures *offline*.

By presenting findings from a study of 240 editorial stories from one Elvis Presley fan club magazine written between the start of January 2000 and the end of December 2009, what follows will look at the concerns of one specific fan community. The data is presented in two ways: as a brief history and as a content analysis of key themes. While it shows that Elvis fans form a thriving social network who like to know about the latest releases, their interest in the star's posthumous media exposure and indicators of his popularity indicate that Elvis fandom takes a particular form. To address this I introduce the idea of 'boosting' from the work of Samantha Barbas (2008). Boosting can take a range of forms: writing to a film studio, 'liking' a Facebook page, buying a record so that it will chart. It indicates that the Elvis fan community has a collective desire to raise the public profile of its hero in order to keep his fan base growing. In order to situate this practice of 'boosting,' the empirical results are then framed with a discussion of one mechanism from Émile Durkheim's classic theory of religion. Durkheim (1912) suggested that each ordinary individual has the capacity to feel excited by his or her connection with a totemic figure precisely because such a figure is widely valued as a personification of the collective. I therefore argue that keeping Elvis's memory alive equates to maintaining the magnitude of his fan base.

Looking at music fandom in the period between 2000 and 2010 means asking how much has changed. Undoubtedly the Internet *has* radically increased the visibility and accessibility of fan communities, as it has allowed much wider access to fan networks, accelerated the speed at which information travels, provided new means through which people can communicate, blurred the line between public and private life, and augmented the means and metrics by which fame is propagated. By storing a vast accumulation of posted comments in an open and accessible form, the Internet has acted as an archive that helps to make fan communities much more visible. Scholars have done much to understand fandom online (for example, see Baym 1999 and 2010; Cochece, Delaney and Kettler 2011). However, at worst there is now a tendency to assume *very little is the same* as in the pre-Internet era, that *all* fans have easy access to the Internet, and that little of interest happens in fan culture offline. Against the prevailing logic, this article argues that some of the principal elements of music fandom have essentially stayed the same in the Internet era. These elements include a fascination with music, some romantic and folk ideologies, an emphasis on the star system, a tendency of fans to form social communities, to pursue shared concerns and follow characteristic practices. For many fans, the net has offered new and better ways to more easily *do what they previously did before*.

The relatively limited understanding of fan activity offline is part of a much wider blindness. I was recently commissioned to write a textbook on media fandom (see Duffett 2013a). As part of this brief, the introductory chapter had to include a history of the phenomenon. When it came to writing the history, I realized that I was mostly discussing

shifts in the media, not its audience. In the face of a general absence of empirical studies, I could mainly write about fans where they made an impression on public life and its record, the media. Events like 'Beatlemania' or the crowd scenes at Rudolph Valentino's wake in 1926 were easy to discover. What was patchy and often missing was a sense of the communal life of ordinary fans. With a few exceptions, the data was lost to history. Despite the efforts of ethnographers such as Erika Doss (1999) to understand audience hood *in situ*, media fans still remain at their most visible primarily when they enter the public sphere. Music histories tend to focus on performers or their works, perceiving fans primarily as isolated listeners or crowds assembled to enjoy live events. Although waves of public grief for recently deceased stars have received scholarly attention, there is a tendency in the academic literature on celebrity to ignore the ways in which fan communities continue in the decades following their star's demise.² It is important here to distinguish such communities (groups of actual fans who regularly interact with each other) from fan bases (imagined communities that represent the total of those interested in the artist). Even in the pre-Internet era, of course, informed by media representations highlighting the adulation received by celebrities, the general public always knew that fan bases existed. What they – and researchers – knew less about was the actual operation of such communities: their historical trajectories, sociological activities and cultural concerns.

Though he died over three decades ago, Elvis Presley still has a vast fan base, a portion of which is organized into fan clubs. The culture of the Elvis fan community is known as the "Elvis world." In *The Elvis Encyclopedia*, author Adam Victor notes, "It has been estimated that in 2006, there were as many as 600 active Elvis fan clubs around the world, with an active membership exceeding half a million" (2008, 157). In the USA, these clubs grew in number during the 1980s and 1990s, but have struggled more in the last decade. The American Trilogy Elvis Presley Fan Club, for example, was established in 1990 and is based in St Louis.³ Another club, the Universally Elvis Fan Club, has been operating for some time in the Memphis area. Its website explains, "it was about time for a more professional fan club to open in Elvis' home town."⁴ There are hundreds more organizations dotted across different States; typically they are regionally-based and unaligned. In contrast, the UK is dominated by one club that has a relatively centralized command structure with local branches in different places. According to the Elvis Information Network:

In the late 70s the Elvis world was characterised by a... reasonably consolidated group of fan clubs in Britain under the loose control of Todd Slaughter's 'Official Elvis Presley Fan Club of Great Britain and the Commonwealth'. It must be noted that for a long time Slaughter's club had (possibly still has) influence with both Sony and EPE. Much of its influence today could well be characterised as a case of "smoke and mirrors" given apparent fractures in its organisational structure and shrinkage in its membership base. The Slaughter grouping/club is today a shadow of its former self as dissatisfactions with its operations has gradually seen the arrival and rise in influence of competing

organisations in England including 'Elvisly Yours' (Sid Shaw) and 'Essential Elvis' (Andrew Hearn). The advent of the Internet has further eroded Slaughter's once formidable power base. Official membership of the Slaughter club is known to have dropped very significantly from the 20,000 claimed in the 1980s. Sid Shaw's long running legal battles with EPE, and indirectly Slaughter, are legendary.⁵

It is hard to obtain figures for the Official Elvis Presley Fan Club of Great Britain's current membership. However, perhaps because some of the oldest members - many of whom have liked Elvis since the 1950s - are not online, the club's Facebook page currently has just 1903 likes.⁶ At least in the scope of their aims, several other UK clubs are also now national in status. In contrast, Australia has far fewer clubs and they have formed alliances. According to the Elvis Information Network, in the late 1990s a handful of Australian clubs came together under the title of the Coalition of Australian Elvis Fan Clubs.⁷ In the absence of a singular national fan organization, the idea was that Elvis's record label Sony Music Entertainment could still have one point of contact with the whole country.⁸ The oldest club in the country is the Elvis Presley Fan Club of Victoria. In 2002 it signed a sister agreement with Official Elvis Presley Fan Club of Australasia, which was itself founded in 1965 and is recognized by Elvis Presley Enterprises (EPE), the corporation that still oversees and licenses Elvis's image as an intellectual property asset.⁹ Similarly, the New Zealand-based Memories of Elvis Fan Club has been thriving since 1990 and explains, "We correspond with other fan clubs around the world, swap news with pen-pals, surf the net visiting Elvis web sites, and publish a quarterly magazine which is crammed with articles, pictures and other Elvis interest."¹⁰ Music researcher Adam Victor lists hundreds of fan clubs based in different American states, over twenty in the UK and ten clubs in Australian, as well as a range of clubs from more than forty other countries (Victor 2008, 157-161). There are therefore a large number of Elvis fan clubs of different sizes in the English-speaking world.

Methodology

The study selected a prominent English-speaking fan club and conducted an analysis of the editorials from 61 editions of its club magazine over the decade-long period January 2000 to December 2009. This magazine is only available to members and is not sold to the general public.¹¹ As part of the annual subscription, it is provided exclusively to club members for 'free' and carries advertising for media products. The magazine is therefore not just a niche publication, but in some ways a semi-private one: only available to club members, written by fans for fans, and, in theory, legally protected. The title of the club has been kept anonymous here and no editorial quotations have been used, primarily because the study aims to provide an empirical indication of the *general* behaviour of fans in the Elvis world over this period, not a focus on the peculiarities of one club in particular. Keeping the club's identity anonymous may compromise the reproducibility of the study, but my hope is that

other fan researchers will offer similar analyses of a range of fan club material to complement other methodological approaches.

During the period under scrutiny, the magazine in question was circulated to thousands of Elvis fans on a bi-monthly basis.¹² The same club leader stayed in the post throughout the decade. Each issue contained one editorial section written by them which varied between one and eight stories in length, each story being one or more adjacent paragraphs devoted to the same topic. The study found that the magazine's 61 editorials contained references to 240 separate stories. Since they were written by one person, these stories could not necessarily express the views of other club members or those in other clubs who might have disagreed with his or her chosen priorities. While perhaps not speaking for everyone in the club, however, the leader still had a social duty to comment on concerns that circulate in the Elvis world. Each successive five year anniversary after Elvis's death in 1977 has represented a commemorative occasion for fans, so to choose a calendar decade is arbitrary in relation to the fan community. However, the period from January 2000 to December 2009 is useful as for the sake of discussion. Just as we talk of "Elvis in the 1960s" so we can talk of the cultural activity of his fan base in the 2000s – the era in which broadband became normalized.¹³ Two frameworks are employed to describe the contents of the data source over this period: a historic approach will demonstrate chronological developments and a content analysis will trace thematic patterns.

Results

Because the study aims to explore Elvis fandom as a contextualized and contingent social process, not a timeless and absolute category, attention to history is very important. Access to the club magazine over a decade-long period allows us see how the club actually responded to specific moments. Discussing the ways in which historians understand the world, Keith Jenkins and Alan Munslow (2006, 6) distinguish reconstructionists, constructionists and deconstructionists. Broadly speaking, reconstructionists are empiricist historians who believe that the facts speak for themselves. In contrast, constructionists *embrace theory as a tool* for helping to discern the shape of the past. Deconstructionists understand the historical record primarily as a linguistic and discursive construction. As a data source, the club magazine has left it behind in a bi-monthly record that actively constructs its own, ongoing history. My approach here is to use that record to reconstruct the flow of club activity during the era. This section therefore plots how the editorial stories changed as the decade progressed. It offers a summary of one specific period in the history of Elvis culture as seen one place in the fan community.

In the year 2000, editorial stories reported that the 'Elvis In Concert' spectacular was touring internationally. It featured the singer's old band mates performing live, synchronized with footage of the icon that was displayed on a giant video screen. The 1970 concert documentary *Elvis: That's the Way It Is* enjoyed a re-release on DVD early in the year and the club got new premises and a new website. In 2001, stories in the February and April issues discussed the re-release of 'Suspicious Minds' as a single along with a greatest

hits package. Those in February and August also highlighted a disco party event for fans. Towards the end of the year, fresh stories were run welcoming overseas members and announcing the release of 'If I Can Dream' as a single. At the start of 2002 the editor explored his decades as club leader, as well as the annual gathering of fans at Graceland for Elvis's birthday celebration (held annually on January 8th). That summer, club magazine editorials contained stories about a new single, 'A Little Less Conversation' (an Elvis remix by JXL), which ignited public interest beyond the Elvis world. As the year 2002 drew to a close, the editor celebrated a nationally prominent impersonator and applauded the club's rising membership total.

2003 began with the club leader reporting on Christmas television coverage and questioning the promotional actions of EPE. In the spring the editorial stories mentioned a new Elvis musical and in the summer, the release of a new four CD box set from BMG, *Elvis Close Up*. The club also ran a summer contest with a trip to Las Vegas as its prize. The October issue editorial had a more somber tone, as it was reported that Elvis's first record producer, Sam Phillips, had died at the end of July. The year ended with new hopes that Sony BMG would promote Elvis's music. In 2004 the new year saw various campaigns and reports of re-issues, including new gospel and Sun Records compilations, plus packages based on some classic performances. A summer 2004 editorial contained the news that Graceland had organized the release of a special promo version of Elvis's first single, 'That's All Right.' Later, in October, it was reported that Al Dvorin, the band leader who had coined the phrase, "Elvis has left the building," had died earlier in the year.

At the start of 2005, editorials in the club magazine asked fans to help with the Indonesian earthquake and tsunami disaster. They also discussed a recent high profile business deal which meant that Lisa Marie had sold off Elvis Presley Enterprises to CKX Inc: a new parent corporation created by the Broadway Media Producer Robert Sillerman. Back in December 2004, the *Memphis Commercial Appeal* had reported that Lisa Marie would receive around \$50 million in cash, \$22 million in stock, \$25 million to cover the operating debts of EPE and retain Graceland plus 15% ownership of the new holding company. Many fans were concerned about what would become of Elvis's public profile. As Alan Hanson explained in retrospect on his blog, "It was certainly a sweet financial deal for Lisa Marie, but fans were worried about how Elvis's image would fair in the hands of a money-first wheeler-dealer like Sillerman."¹⁴ In April, the editor reported that an Elvis tune was being used as the campaign theme for the UK prime-ministerial candidate, Michael Howard. In the summer the club leader celebrated the Graceland-endorsed release of *Elvis by the Presleys*, a DVD documentary featuring Elvis's home movies. One story in a magazine editorial section encouraged fans to listen to some weekly Elvis-themed national radio broadcasts. In December it was announced that the glam rock veteran and long-time Elvis fan Suzi Quatro had recorded a tribute song called 'Sing With Angels' backed by some of Elvis' original musicians.

2006 began with editorials celebrating Elvis tribute artists, noting the 50th anniversary of the release of Elvis's national breakthrough single, 'Heartbreak Hotel,' and that Lisa Marie

had entered into her fourth marriage. In the summer, the club lamented the passing of Elvis's assistant Charlie Hodge and announced that the magazine was to be printed on eco-friendly paper. Another editorial story appeared towards the end of the year remarking on the explosion of vinyl releases for Elvis record collectors. 2007 began in a rueful mood as the editor recalled trips that the club ran to Las Vegas to see Elvis play live in the 1970s. The summer was a special time because it marked the 30th anniversary of Elvis's death along with the coordinated release of a series of singles to celebrate his life and career. The year ended with a discussion of the club's international connections. 2008 started with a touching obituary for the president of a Japanese Elvis fan club, Taz Akazawa, who had been a strong campaigner for Elvis. Another editorial announced that the club was putting on a spectacular entertainment and social event. In the summer, the traditional visits to Memphis and Las Vegas were promoted, as well as the release of a new CD box set commemorating Elvis's *1968 Comeback Special* TV show. Towards the end of the year, editorials continued to promote various radio broadcasts.

At the start of 2009, an editorial story explored album releases that were being promoted by the Sony Elvis collector label Follow That Dream. In the summer another editorial story explained that it had been 40 years since Elvis conquered Las Vegas and yet another announced that the club was helping to create a DVD documentary about fans' visits to Memphis. Towards the end of the year, the leader created a commentary piece about copyright and reported the passing of Lisa Marie's ex-husband, the iconic Michael Jackson.

The summary shows that particular themes came to the fore at certain times. Key themes included attention to record and movie releases (including repackages), to Lisa Marie and the promotional activities at Graceland, and to human-scale social connections with various people - from Elvis's friends to other club leaders and ordinary club members - who were known to the Elvis fan community.

To make a non-chronological study of themes in the data, the rest of the study will present the results of a basic content analysis. Kimberley Neuendorf (2002, 1) defines this method as "the systematic, objective, quantitative analysis of message characteristics." She later adds, "The goal of any quantitative analysis is to produce *counts* of key categories, and measurements of the *amounts* of other variables" (14; emphasis in original). Because it is based on pre-existing, unsolicited data, content analysis is a relatively unobtrusive and non-reactive technique: unlike, say, with experiments or multiple choice questionnaires, the research subjects are, in effect, unaware that they are being observed and the raw data already exists prior to the research process (Krippendorff 2004, 40-41). However, no analysis is fully inductive. Content analysis is partly an interpretive process which rests on the construction of data categories. One potential disadvantage that commentators often discuss is the apparent permeability of the method to pre-existing theoretical concerns:

Content analytic references may be hidden in the human process of coding. They may be built into analytic procedures, such as the dictionary in computer-

aged text analyses or well-established indices. Sometimes, especially after complex statistical procedures have been applied, inferences appear in the analyst's interpretations of statistical findings. (Krippendorff 2004, 36)

At worst, the very conceptual structures that a content analysis imposes on the data can obscure interpretations which might arise inductively through the analysis (see Gray 2009, 501). Researcher biases do not, however, always have to be understood as a departure from the false possibility of objectivity. Under the right circumstances they can actually be seen as *the grounds for* a productive engagement with the data. Researchers who are close to the source material may be in a better position to inductively translate the concerns of writers that they investigate. At best, a sensitive and methodical interpretation of the data can help to preserve categories and *maintain* directions that are already followed by the source itself (Krippendorff 2004, 41).

The present study neither offers statistical tests nor relies on pre-existing inter-coder reliability measures to clarify its objects, so it does not claim the mantle of quantitative scientific objectivity. My own window on the Elvis world began in 1995 when I started inductively studying Elvis fandom. Since then I have regularly read the fan magazine in question, made research visits to Memphis and to several week-long Elvis conventions. Participating in this community has allowed me to understand the way that it expresses its concerns. My career in media research has sometimes been a question of finding the theoretical frameworks that do least violence to what fans are saying in an effort to represent their ideas. This does not mean that understandings discovered in this way are final or that the academic project must stop at that point. Instead, it means treating research subjects with a basic dignity and respect that has occasionally been missing from academic critiques.

One of the most common issues with content analysis is that the accuracy of its results depend on consistently defined units of analysis and a clear expression of one semiotic meaning from the data (see Janis 2009, 359-361). Editorial stories were the unit of analysis. It could be argued that putting such stories into different categories on the basis of their perceived contents is a more meaningful version of content analysis than counting the number of times that particular words appeared. Rather than using the most significant story from each editorial, the analysis was conducted by separately considering *all* the stories expressed.¹⁵ Furthermore, unlike many content analysis studies, the research on the fan club editorials was not designed to hypothesize any causal correlation between different variables but simply to compare their numeric quantities. The study therefore represents a relatively inductive, thematic, *summarizing* content analysis, an exercise in which "the material is paraphrased, with similar phrases bundled together" (Gray 2009, 501). Compared to, say, inferring humour or honesty from the surface of a text, the meaning of the sentences defining each story was relatively clear. Rather than entering all the data into an automated system that tallied words or measured the length of paragraphs, the researcher used personal judgment to decide when each paragraph broached a new and

different topic. Various categories of story soon began to suggest themselves: there were originally 29 such categories. Any category that had only one or two entries was then amalgamated into the miscellaneous category. 17 categories then remained:

Table 1: Categories of Story Content in Fan Club Magazine Editorials

Record releases:	45 entries
Vacations:	32 entries
Events:	19 entries
Misc:	18 entries
DVD:	16 entries
Concerts:	16 entries
Comment:	14 entries
Radio:	13 entries
Club:	12 entries
Year (p)reviews:	12 entries
Record sales:	11 entries
Obituaries:	8 entries
Television moments:	7 entries
Anniversaries:	5 entries
ETAs:	4 entries
Graceland:	4 entries
Magazines:	4 entries

If the miscellaneous category is excluded, It is evident here that the top five categories of editorial story were record releases, vacations, short events, DVD releases and present-day concerts. The data suggest other clusters too. One category of entries acts as a reminder that, even when a star is dead - given sufficient demand - a stream of media products are still released. A second cluster highlights the organizational nature of the club (opinionated comment pieces, club news). A third cluster of editorial stories refers to Elvis's continuing media exposure (radio, television, magazines, Graceland promotions, record sales). A fourth relates to a nostalgic dimension of the Elvis world (anniversaries, obituaries, year previews and reviews). The fifth and final category relates to the Elvis world as a *living culture* where people meet face to face (vacations, events, concerts, Elvis tribute artists).¹⁶ These various categories can themselves be clustered thematically, as **Table 2** shows:

Table 2: Clusters of Story Content in Fan Club Magazine Editorials

Living Culture: 71 entries

Vacations:	32 entries
Events:	19 entries
Concerts:	16 entries
ETAs:	4 entries

Stream of products: 61 entries

Record releases:	45 entries
DVD:	16 entries

Media exposure: 39 entries

Radio:	13 entries
Record sales:	11 entries
Television moments:	7 entries
Magazines:	4 entries
Graceland:	4 entries

Club organization: 26 entries

Comment:	14 entries
Club:	12 entries

Nostalgia: 25 entries

Year (p)reviews:	12
Obituaries:	8 entries
Anniversaries:	5 entries

Misc: 18 entries

Misc: 18 entries

When the data are grouped into such categories, although certain kinds of activities might have been predicted (such as the nostalgic and parochial, club-related activities), it becomes clear that they are less prominent in the data than the living culture around Elvis, the steady stream of music product releases, and promoting or exploring Elvis's posthumous media exposure. Perhaps more interesting is that the number of stories devoted to more expected categories of editorial output was relatively low. Comment pieces made up just 6% of the total, club news 5%, obituaries 3% and club anniversaries just 2%.¹⁷ This is particularly interesting, since perceptions of Elvis culture tend to see it as a nostalgic enterprise rather than an active, present-day venture. The largest cluster in the data showed the *living culture* of activities around Elvis Presley: events organized by the community of fans who meet face

to face and offline. By far the largest topic here - second only to record releases as an individual subcategory – was the mention of various Elvis vacations, which made up 13% of all editorial stories.

The fan club has a tradition of running regular trips to Memphis for its members once or twice a year, sometimes adding Las Vegas and / or Hawaii to the tour itinerary. These Elvis-themed breaks allow fans from different places to socialize on a face to face basis and get to know each other over the course of several days. Organized relaxation and ‘pilgrimage’ tourism is therefore a prominent feature of the Elvis scene. This prominence of tourism and Elvis-themed holidays suggests that much more research needs to be conducted on the Elvis heritage industry (see Duffett 2013b). The club sponsored and promoted a variety of events which also fit in the ‘living culture’ category, including talks, conventions and disco dances. Editorials would often mention favoured events more than once in anticipation as a way to build up the visitor count, and afterwards too, as a way to report on how things had gone. This lack of correlation between the number of events and the number of editorial stories also held true for concerts. Between them, single-day fan club events, live shows and Elvis tribute artists made up 16% of all stories.

Those who research Elvis culture have tended to highlight the activities of impersonators as an indication that Elvis’s iconicism provides a resource that can be creatively used by fans to express and explore their social identities (see, for instance, Spigel 1990; Habell-Pallan 1999). However, partly because many fans believe that it takes the glory away from Elvis and casts his phenomenon in a bad light (see Duffett 1998, 158), impersonation was the least-discussed topic in the living culture category.

Discussions of the growing stream of recordings available to fans included speculation on release dates and whether Elvis’s label was adequately promoting the material. Indeed, the most common type of all stories was the record release piece, with 19% of the entire total (forty five of 240 stories) discussing when new albums or singles were available to the public.¹⁸ This is not surprising since much more of Elvis’s music has been released since he died than when he was alive. Particularly prominent in the music release category were the regular, specialist CD releases for the Elvis collector’s label Follow That Dream. Yet the editorials would also discuss repackaged mainstream releases like the greatest hits album *Number 1s*. Such products offer no new material, yet they are important in maintaining the star’s public profile, a concern that was in evidence in five further editorial stories exclusively devoted to the topic of record sales.

Editorials talking about media exposure ranged from club-sponsored programming to alerting the fans about upcoming broadcasts. Meanwhile the miscellaneous category included references to awards, charities, musicals and members of Elvis’s entourage, but it occasionally concerned matters less immediately connected with the club. It included one appeal to fans after a natural disaster and even contained a story about credit card security.¹⁹ Also, 5% of all stories were connected with radio shows, a fact that was hardly surprising given that the club leader presented his own show on various stations.

These various clusters of data do not necessarily reflect the impact of different stories. Perhaps the most significant comment piece came in February 2003 when the club leader began to question EPE's stance. The fan club has cordial relationships with both EPE and Elvis's label and frequently passes on news from these organizations. However, its leader felt it appropriate to question the corporate direction of EPE and whether it had fans' best interests at heart. At that point EPE was going through one of its more draconian phases and asking clubs for lists of their members, requesting that they did not use Elvis's name when advertising Memphis heritage tours, and asking them not to hire impersonators. In attempting to protect their revenue streams, the corporation had misjudged the balance between policing and promoting their intellectual property, and fans were caught in the middle. It was the latest episode in an ongoing struggle between EPE and the clubs. Back in 1996, Sean O'Neal had reported:

Instead of viewing fan clubs as promotional tools, EPE has looked at them as potential licensees. If a fan club wants to go to Graceland and participate in Elvis-related activities, it has to conduct its affairs according to EPE's wishes. Many fan clubs grudgingly go along with the estate; others make no attempt to do so. EPE's licensing policy has created a lot of enemies among fan club presidents. (O'Neal 1996, 115)

Discussion and Conclusion

Much of the last two decades of discussion about the fan community has focused on various forms of organized social resistance or amateur production (see, for example, Hellekson and Busse 2006; Jenkins 2011). Special academic attention has been given to practices that fit both of these concerns – for example fanfic writing – while other practices, like autograph hunting or collecting, remain relatively unexamined. The concern for fans as creative non-conformists comes from established research traditions in cultural studies, audience research and sociology that aim to contest the popular image of fans as the subjects of mass consumerism. What they frequently ignore, however, is the ordinary business of fan communities, leaving out questions of what such communities do from month to month.²⁰ Consequently, when mainstream audiences do hear about such fandom there is a tendency for it to be presented as a nostalgic activity (an inability to let go) rather than an organized living culture.

By taking an inductive approach to the question, the key concerns and talking points of the Elvis fans community have become clear: going to social events, listening to recorded products and viewing broadcast media. Fans often speak of doing things for Elvis's memory. In that sense they adopt a very distinct approach. The editorial challenge to EPE is one indication of a particular perception of the club's role in relation to the legacy of its hero. Henry Jenkins and others have discussed how fans can lobby media organizations to maintain the production of their favourite television shows or keep particular fictional characters on air (see, for example, Jenkins 1992, 128; 2006, 91). For Jenkins, lobbying is a

resistant activity that reflects a basic politics that is inherent to fandom: “In fact, fan activism has been part of the picture from the very beginning – if we mean by this, fans mobilizing to assert their collective interests in relation to the cultural industries themselves.” (2011, 214) However, there is an argument to be made that this type of activity is not entirely in opposition to the media industries: stars (as reliably lucrative assets) and fans (as their unofficial publicity agents) can generate more sales with less costs than other regimes of production. Consequently we need to understand much fan lobbying as a kind of active collusion that is broadly financially advantageous to the media industries even though it may not be culturally supportive of the specific projects of record labels and studios at particular times.

Elvis fans co-ordinate their promotion of their star’s performance in order to raise his public profile. The club adopts this approach in part because Elvis was a populist artist and his fans aim to stop him fading from the spotlight. Discussing the early years of Hollywood’s Golden Age, Samantha Barbas (2001, 116-123) reported a fan club practice that she described as ‘boosting.’ Boosting is a process in which fans collectively organize themselves to support the public profile, career and popularity of their chosen star. It is often connected with building the reputation of little known actors or musicians:

As moviegoers generally agreed, it took talent and charm to make a star... But publicity, fans realized, was not always deceptive. Without a healthy dose of positive press, even the most skilled and deserving actor would never gain the following needed for stardom... Fearing that their favourite actors would meet a similar fate, many early film fans used their knowledge of Hollywood to assist their idols with their precarious careers. In 1914, one of Florence Lawrence’s fans wrote a string of letters to studio executives demanding more prominent roles for the actress. (Barbas 2001, 117)

Barbas’s account of fan activity reflects action, rather than activism. She implies that fans’ desires are often tangential to specific industrial directives. There is nothing inevitable about *their* hero becoming a chosen star, but, ultimately, they nevertheless still support a broader industrial aim: the manufacturing of stardom. Fans can therefore function as a kind of resuscitating or scout audience, promoting their idol’s talent in the face of relative indifference from the public and industry. For Barbas, this activity is not marginal to fan clubs, but central:

Boosting, as it turned out, was a perfect club activity. Simple and inexpensive – most campaigns required only pens, paper, stamps, and sometimes theatre tickets – it could be conducted year-round. Moreover, it was appropriate at nearly any stage in an actor’s career. Stars at their peak, fans reasoned, needed as much publicity as one[s] whose career was just beginning. (2001, 118)

Elvis Presley has always been an artist whose success is measured by his popularity. One of Elvis's earliest national record reviews, in a 1955 edition of *Billboard*, called him a purveyor of "some of the best folk blues. *This guy sells all the way.*" (Ennis 1992, 236; emphasis mine) His career reflected a 'folk' performer who rapidly emerged from the Southern working class and 'sold all the way'; in other words while keeping one foot in Memphis, Elvis *bought in* both ideologically and geographically (in Hollywood and Vegas) to the media mainstream. In that realm, success is measured by indicators such as chart positions and audience ratings. Elvis Presley was not just a focus of attention (a famous celebrity) or a popular person (loved by many and sold to them); his image was also *populist* in so far that it was premised on conspicuously including notions of his popularity. The sheer size of his fan base and phenomenal strength of public support for him became a central part of his representation as a singer. Beyond all the audience counts, chart positions and record shipping figures, this dimension of Elvis's image was reflected in the title of his RCA albums, notably the 1959 compilation *Elvis's Gold Records 2: 50,000,000 million Elvis Fans Can't Be Wrong* (RCA LPM2075). Currently it is encapsulated by things like the 'Hall of Gold' (previously called the trophy room) at Graceland, and the reams of graffiti on the wall outside the mansion (see Alderman 2002).

How does mass popularity connect with fan support? Elsewhere I have both contested the idea that Elvis was, in any 'sacred' or substitutional sense, a 'religious' icon (see Duffett 2003). I have also argued that in studying populist stardom, *one* mechanism from Durkheim's theory of religion may be fruitful (see Duffett 2012). The French sociologist examined the social ecology of Australian clans engaged in totemic religious practices for his 1912 book *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (2008). Tribal societies were based, according to Durkheim, on a fundamental distinction between the sacred and secular. The contagious essence of the sacred is embodied by totems: venerated foci of attention that can be material objects or people. For a piece on concert marketing, I recently summarized Durkheim's schema:

Each totem functions to mediate the emotional force of the social collective... In a key moment, which Durkheim calls "effervescence", each emotionally-heightened crowd member experiences a life-changing jolt of electricity as they subconsciously recognize a personal connection to the totem. The energy boosts his or her levels of individual strength and confidence... [but] social electricity only exists in so far that individuals feel it. The process is based on shared assumptions, perceptions and experiences. Nothing literally leaps between people, yet those [audience members] involved feel an intense and undeniable human chemistry. (Duffett 2012, 22-23)

While Durkheim's dichotomy between the sacred and profane seems of little use in analyzing commercial music culture, his specification of the mechanism of effervescence, I

suggest, reveals a lot about how some popular musicians achieve their stratospheric status as celebrities:

This unusual surplus of forces is quite real: it comes to him from the very group he is addressing. The feelings provoked by his speech return to him inflated and amplified, reinforcing his own. The passionate energies he arouses echo back to him and increase his vitality. He is no longer a simple individual speaking, he is a group incarnate and personified (Durkheim 2008, 158).

This can be connected to P. David Marshall's (1997) observation that rock musicians are, especially in their most prominent representations, associated with how well they can command live crowds. Marshall (1997, 158) notes:

Elvis Presley's characteristic roll of the hips and snarl carried on the tradition of expressing individuality in performance... The mode of address, unlike in a play or film, is constructed to be direct... The directness of the address of the musical performer has always constructed the relationship between [the singular] performer and [massified] audience at a very personal level.

On the next page Marshall explains why this matters: "The concert is therefore [generally] not an introduction to the music for the fans, but a form of ritualized authentication... The fan is demonstrating his or her solidarity with the artist's message and with the rest of the audience." (1997, 159)

Applying Durkheim's notion of effervescence to the Elvis phenomenon means noticing how much his popularity matters to his fans as a means to extend their own thrills. If they now fear a loss, it is not of Elvis the human being – he is already dead – but rather of his fan community, the entity that boosts their own effervescent pleasures. Whenever possible, fans therefore use their enthusiasm to raise Elvis's public profile. This is particularly interesting in relation to Elvis's posthumous industrial position as an absent but lucrative recording artist. To compare, it is worth recalling some of Daniel Cavicchi's excellent ethnography of Springsteen fandom, *Tramps Like Us*:

Talking about fandom as dependent on, resistant to, or in negotiation with the music business only gives the business an importance in daily lives of Springsteen fans which it simply doesn't have... Fans constantly work to devalue the role of the music business in their fandom: first, by creating a specific, shared understanding of Springsteen as a 'common man,' who has a life apart from the one promoted by industry marketing; second, by developing a number of complex tape-trading and ticket-searching methods which decrease the significance of record company products and services. Both

activities help make the music business more of an absence than a presence in daily life. (1998, 63)

From Cavicchi's perspective, Springsteen fans therefore celebrate their icon as a folk hero and effectively relegate any concern for the music industry. In contrast, in Elvis's story, the culture industry – whether represented by Colonel Parker, Sun Records, RCA or Hollywood – is understood as playing a key role in Elvis's story, at different times influencing whether the star was effectively promoted or catastrophically mismanaged. Consider, for example, the shrewd but limited marketing offered to Elvis by Sam Phillips or the way that Colonel Parker promoted his mass marketing as a movie star. Fans have an understanding of how various agents in the music business have helped or hindered their hero towards fulfilling his potential to be recognized as both a commercially popular and creative artist. It is not at all the case that they see Elvis simply as an individual and his handling by the music industry as a matter of financial exploitation alone.

A good example of the wider perception circulating amongst fans is the popular understanding of producer Steve Binder, a figure who played the key role in facilitating Elvis during the creation of the *1968 Comeback Special*. Among Binder's other ideas, the producer suggested that Elvis should publically recreate a dressing room jam for the studio audience. Adam Victor (2008, 42) explained, "Binder brought a breath of fresh air to the King's creative world." As such, Steve Binder is often celebrated by fans for engineering a situation where the star could be shown at his raw, feral and most exciting. As one fan said of Elvis in the *Comeback Special*, "That's him as he *should* be seen." (see Duffett 1998, 217)²¹ What is interesting here is that fans view Elvis's talent as something that could best be realized with the help of another creative agent working inside the media industry. Twenty years after the show, Colonel Parker, who had been somewhat at odds with Binder, said, "I don't think there was any producer who could ever get talent out of Elvis like Steve." (Victor 2008, 42). This emphasis on the *collaborative* presentation of Elvis as media icon has continued after his death, as fans still explore ways in which he can better be promoted and see themselves as having agency in that process. Indeed, although Sony and EPE still promote Elvis, fans see the singer as vulnerable because he is no longer there as an individual with the agency to raise his own profile. Erika Doss (1999, 56) found that "just carrying on where Elvis left off" was a widely held fan club motto referring to the way that clubs raise charitable donations, but it also applies to raising Elvis's public profile. According to Barbas, one of the most appropriate times for boosting was when a performer's career "was in transition; in particular, when he faced a chance at promotion." (2001, 119) Since other artists are now contesting Elvis's commercial dominance, his posthumous career is understood as such a transitional time.

As generations and media technologies change, to his fans, Elvis appears in danger of fading from the mainstream. Working within the common context of keeping his memory alive, they are constantly mobilizing and finding ways to support him. For film and television fans, such activity has often meant writing letters to studio heads. In the Elvis world,

lobbying can just as often take place *through* consumer power: collectively buying a new single, for instance, to float it to the top of the charts. One recent example was a fan club magazine editorial story encouraging fans to 'like' Elvis's Facebook page. Therefore, although the technology has changed, the transformation wrought is partly one of infrastructure and metrics rather than psychological mechanisms. Fans are still pursuing a traditional process, but they are doing so in a new medium with new tools.

Attention to the content of editorial stories from one fan magazine reveals that a range of activities took place from the start of 2000 to the end of 2009 when Elvis fans were not prominent in the spotlight of public attention. Club literature reflected their concerns to maintain a living social culture, enjoy Elvis's music, and support his public profile. I have suggested that boosting remains a significant area of concern. In its club proclamation, the Universally Elvis Fan Club of Memphis (*not* the club whose magazines were under scrutiny for this study) lists four specific aims: to return Elvis to number 1, to bring him back into the public eye, to promote Elvis as a humanitarian and to "be aggressive" towards all negative media by correcting or campaigning against them.²² This charter is, I think, not aberrant, but typical of many Elvis fan clubs. As Samantha Barbas has claimed, "no situation sparked more aggressive boosting than when studios seemed to ignore, mishandle, or otherwise jeopardize the career of their honored celebrity." (2001, 120) If such concerns can occasionally encourage clubs to question Elvis's record label, EPE and Graceland, more often the same imperative to take care of Elvis leads to a form of *collusion* between these various entities. According to Derek Alderman (2008, 50), speaking in an article on fans' efforts to save Elvis heritage, "Fan clubs represent particularly important mechanisms for defending and validating Elvis's reputation." Despite the wider public embrace of Elvis in various kinds of national heritage and other signs that he reigns supreme as a music icon, despite even his posthumous comeback tours and frequent assaults on the charts, his fans can still feel that he is in danger of slipping from public view.

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Notes:

¹ Examples of 1990s fan ethnography include Bacon-Smith (1991), Jenkins (1992), Cavicchi (1998) and Doss (1999).

² Not least because of the media attention attracted by Graceland's status as a public monument, Elvis fandom has been exceptionally visible. Before the mass uptake of broadband, Gilbert Rodman contrasted the visibility of the average Elvis fan with a typical female devotee of another artist (Barry Manilow) by saying, "... she can't assume that the general public will recognize either the existence of the fan community to which she belongs or the depth of its collective feeling for the star at its centre" (1996, 128).

³ See the American Trilogy Fan Club website [WWW document] <http://americantrilogy.com/> [visited 03/06/12].

⁴ Taken from the Universally Elvis Fan Club page: [WWW document] <http://jordans-elvis-world.com/UniversallyElvis/> [visited 03/06/12].

⁵ Taken from the web page of the Elvis Information Network: [WWW document] http://www.elvisinonet.com/spotlight_mostcontroversialarticle.html [visited 02/06/12]

⁶ See the OEPFC's Facebook page: [WWW document] <http://www.facebook.com/pages/The-Official-Elvis-Presley-Fan-Club-of-Great-Britain/205392662813567> [visited 05/06/12].

⁷ See the web page of the Elvis Information Network: [WWW document] http://www.elvisinonet.com/spotlight_mostcontroversialarticle.html [visited 03/06/12].

⁸ A note on record labels: after releasing several EP's on the Memphis independent Sun Records, Elvis signed to RCA and in 1956 had his first hit with the major label. Many decades later when RCA's holding company General Electric sold its controlling share, Elvis catalogue came under the wing of the German corporate group, Bertelsmann AG, who released it through Bertelsmann Music Group (BMG). In 2004 BMG merged with Sony to form Sony BMG. Four years later Sony acquired a controlling share and now the material is released through Sony Music Entertainment.

⁹ Taken from the website of the Elvis Presley Fan Club of Australasia; [WWW document] http://elvisclub.org/about_us.asp [visited 04/06/12].

¹⁰ See the Memories of Elvis Fan Club page: [WWW document] http://elvis_nzl.tripod.com/ [visited 01/06/12].

¹¹ The last regular magazine to achieve that mass public circulation in the was the Official Elvis Presley Fan Club of Great Britain's magazine *Elvis Monthly*, which was taken off the shelves due to low circulation figures early in 2000.

¹² The additional (sixty first) copy of the magazine was a special edition.

¹³ In August 2000, 51% of US households had a computer, 42% had the internet and 4% had broadband. By the end of the decade 72% of households had a computer, 69% had the Internet and 64% had broadband. In other words, as the decade progressed, 27% more households installed the internet, but broadband uptake rose amongst those who had net from 10% to 93% (Blank and Strickling 2011, 1).

¹⁴ Taken from the Elvis History blog: [WWW document] <http://www.elvis-history-blog.com/EPE.html> [visited 02/06/12].

¹⁵ Unfortunately, evidence of the practice of using subheadings was inconsistent from one issue to the next. Some – but not all – of the editorial stories were written with subheadings.

¹⁶ I am using the term “living culture” in the same way as Raymond Williams (2006, 39) here to mean the activities of people that fall beyond much of the usual historic record.

¹⁷ The anniversaries category mainly commemorated milestones in the club's history. News about ‘death week’ at Graceland was counted under the vacation category.

¹⁸ Another 7% of all stories came from the second most popular constituent of the ‘stream of products’ category: the Elvis DVD release.

¹⁹ Criminals now knew, the story explained, that many Elvis fans used the digits of their hero's birthday (01-08-35) as a PIN number.

²⁰ Occasionally, fan research has discussed the internal organization and factional politics of club organizations (see Johnson 2007).

²¹ This comment is interesting as it highlights Elvis fandom as what Jenkins (2006, 55) has called a moral economy. Also see Fraser and Brown (2002).

²² Taken from the Universally Elvis Fan Club page: [WWW document] <http://jordans-elvis-world.com/UniversallyElvis/proclamation.htm> [visited 03/06/12].