

'Wandering off into soap land': Fandom, genre and 'shipping' *The West Wing*

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Abstract

Previous work on media audiences and fandom has emphasised how fans routinely engage in practices which enable them to read or 'poach' (Jenkins 1992) various meanings from texts, or use fan objects to perform identity work. This paper focuses on these issues through a case study of fans of the US political drama series *The West Wing* (NBC, 2000-2006) who support a specific onscreen romantic relationship. This focus on so-called Josh/Donna 'shippers' extends previous work on fan shipping (Felder 1999; Scodari 2003; Scodari and Felder 2000; Kalviknes-Bore and Williams 2010) by considering this fan activity within the genre of drama television. Furthermore, the paper also uniquely examines the responses of both shippers and non-shippers when the source text comes to an end – in this case, through the cancellation of *The West Wing* in 2006. Thus, whilst following previous work which has examined how shippers and non-shippers often clash over their opposing interpretations, the paper also seeks to contribute to existing studies of shippers by considering the impact of the cessation of the fan object on fan's discussions of identity, gender and genre.

Key words: Fandom, 'shipping', *The West Wing*, gender, genre, television.

As previous work has shown, media fans engage in a range of activities including interpreting and re-reading chosen texts, collecting merchandise, and attending relevant events such as sports matches, music gigs and conventions (see Bailey 2005, Gray *et al* 2007, Harris and Alexander 1998, Hellekson and Busse 2006, Hills 2002, Jenkins 1992, Lewis 1992, Sandvoss 2003, 2005). Indeed, such media consumers continue to be of importance to media and cultural studies since

studying fan audiences allows us to explore some of the key mechanisms through which we interact with the mediated world at the heart of our social, political, and

cultural realities and identities [...] [and enables] understanding of how we form emotional bonds with ourselves and others in a modern, mediated world (Gray *et al* 2007:10).

For some fans this 'interact[ion] with the mediated world' is facilitated through a fan practice known as 'shipping'. This term is 'short for "Relationshipippers"' (Scodari and Felder 2000:240) and refers to fans' support for fictional romantic relationships in texts such as television shows, films, or novels. Examples include the characters of Mulder and Scully in the television series *The X-Files*, or the opposing fans of Team Edward and Team Jacob in the recent *Twilight* saga. For these fans, their fandom is often strongly based around practices which support this, such as re-reading texts for scenes or dialogue which support their ship. The fan practice of shipping has been examined in previous work within the field, focusing on science-fiction and fantasy texts such *The X-Files* (Scodari and Felder 2000) and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Kirby-Diaz 2009), soap opera (Harrington and Bielby 1995) or so-called 'teen TV' such as *Dawson's Creek* (Hills 2004: 62). This article seeks to contribute to academic understandings of 'shipping' within fandom of 'quality' drama such as *The West Wing* which focuses on political issues and storylines.

Given the show's emphasis upon political issues, this article's aims are two-fold. Firstly, it examines how shipping within *TWW* fandom creates fan debates over the 'appropriate' and 'proper' ways to appreciate and discuss a quality television text which is focused on political issues. As Bird (2003:141) points out, melodramatic texts are often deemed to be vulgar and manipulative and often associated with the feminine and shipping has often been perceived as a culturally feminised fan practice due to its associations with romance, love, and emotionality. It is thus possible that any insinuation that 'quality' drama programmes are connected to these activities may tarnish those genres, correlating them with culturally feminised, and often devalued, notions of love and romance. Furthermore, the gender politics of fandom continue to be debated and despite much work on the positive ways in which female fans can use their fandom (Bacon-Smith 1992, Bury 2005, Leogrande 2010, Penley 1992), many fan communities continue to be subject to differences in how male and female fans respond to both the fan object and to one another. In many fandoms any perceived feminisation of a fan object is dismissed by male fans who remain keen to maintain the boundaries of 'appropriate', often masculinised, fan discourses (Bury 2005, Jenkins 1995, Williams 2011). The article thus examines the debates that occur when some fans seek to maintain the 'purity' of the drama genre and defend it against elements from less culturally valued genres such as soap opera. Secondly, the paper seeks to contribute to academic work on shippers by considering how these fans respond to the cessation of the text which features their favoured romantic relationships. Although Harrington and Bielby concede that fans may be disappointed when favoured onscreen relationships break up (1995:148), prior work on

shippers has not looked at the reactions of these emotionally involved fans when they are threatened with the cessation of their favoured text. Thus, this paper seeks to rectify these theoretical omissions through a case study of fans of a quality television drama and by focusing attention on responses of shippers and non-shippers to the cessation of the text.

Methods

The focus of this article is fan responses to a 'ship' portrayed on the American political drama series *The West Wing* (NBC, 2000-2006); the relationship between Josh Lyman (played by Bradley Whitford) and Donna Moss (played by Janel Moloney). The paper uses as its source empirical data gathered from the online fansite *Television Without Pity (TWP)* a US-based fan site for numerous shows. At the time of first analysis (in 2006) the forum was an unofficial site although it was purchased in 2007 by the Bravo part of the NBC group, the company who produced and screened *The West Wing*. At the time of analysis, *The West Wing* forum was split into four areas; (1) 'General Gabberly' for general discussion, (2) 'The First Family', for chat about the President and his family, (3) 'Staff and Government Types' which includes discussion of other characters and relationships and, finally, (4) 'The Steam Pipe Trunk Distribution Venue', for all other discussions. After the series finale, *The West Wing* discussions were moved into the general Drama forum where its four subforums were collapsed into one thread which can be accessed at

<<http://forums.televisionwithoutpity.com/index.php?showtopic=3143108>>. The original forums can be accessed as read-only pages at

<<http://forums.televisionwithoutpity.com/index.php?showforum=598>>

I opted to analyse fan postings at *TWP* rather than at other fansites as it is a prolific site which has attracted some academic attention (see Andrejevic 2008, Gray 2005, Ross 2008) and which offers opinions from devoted fans but also those defined by Gray as 'anti-fans' (2005). Thus, analysis of this large site offered a wide range of fan opinions and debates. Jonathan Gray notes that posters at *TWP* are 'aware of speaking potentially to thousands and already reasonably anonymous; and the performative nature of much *TWP* commentary itself belies an awareness of (or even a desire for) a considerable audience' (2005:847). Despite this, in keeping with online research ethics, I have referenced via assigned pseudonyms when citing online quotes, referring also to the thread name and post number, a form of what Bruckman (2002) calls 'light disguise'.

TWP's large size results in a high volume of postings, forcing me to 'select and process materials from the endless flow of information and commentary' (Jenkins 1995:52). To restrict my sample I selected threads devoted to new episodes of the show from the seventh season premiere on September 25th, 2005 until the airing of the series finale on May 14th, 2006 (the show's cancellation at the end of the seventh season was announced on January 22nd, 2006 (Licht 2006)). I also analysed the thread dedicated to the series' cancellation. During this

period, I archived twenty-two threads, totalling almost 2,000 pages of postings. I chose to analyse episode threads as they enabled me to follow the temporality of the site itself, archiving the threads on a weekly basis after new episodes aired. It is in the episode threads that fans demonstrate their devotion via 'just-in-time fandom' (Hills 2002:178) and the immediacy of their postings, creating a demarcation between those who have seen the episodes and those who have not. Such threads also attracted fans with divergent investments in specific characters or relationships, providing a space where fan distinctions could be identified.

Alongside my analysis of postings, I conducted online questionnaires, posting messages at various unofficial *TWW* sites to ask for respondents and received twenty-three completed surveys to analyse. These sites were *Bartlet4America* <www.bartlet4america.org>, a Yahoo Group dedicated to discussions of the Josh/Donna relationship named *J/D Talk* <<http://tv.groups.yahoo.com/group/JDtalk/>>, and at a Live Journal community, *Full Lid* <http://community.livejournal.com/TWW_full_lid/>. A request to the moderators of the *TWoP* site to post regarding my research was unsuccessful, due to an apparent site policy forbidding the forums to be used for the solicitation of research (LaurenS 2006: personal email communication) whilst similar efforts to post at the UK broadcaster Channel 4's forums were denied due to concerns about the posting of non-official links and email addresses at the site (C4-Communities 2006: personal email communication). I received 23 completed questionnaires from fans of *The West Wing*. The exact response rate is unknown as many online posters completed these within online threads. Therefore it is impossible to know exactly how many posters may have read my request for respondents or read the entire questionnaire and opted not to respond to it.

Despite lurking to analyse online postings, I had to announce my presence to the fan communities I studied to recruit questionnaire respondents. However, since I was not a recognized member of the online fandom I contacted the head of each community, seeking their permission to solicit respondents by posting a request for interested fans to email me or asking them to complete the questionnaire within an online thread. Moderators often have the power to create permanent (or 'pinned') threads on forums to ensure that important messages do not get lost amongst the volume of postings and each contact agreed to pin my request to encourage its visibility. Although it has been questioned whether single members can be presumed to speak for the entire community (Reid 1996:170; Walther 2002:209) I felt that approaching forum administrators would grant me greater legitimacy, proving that I had the endorsement of the community figureheads and encouraging fan participation. As with my analysis of postings, consistent pseudonyms are used throughout this research in order to protect the anonymity of respondents.

After downloading the relevant online threads and receiving completed questionnaires I began coding these using the qualitative software programme NVivo. Each post and questionnaire was coded according to key themes such as identity, 'shipping', gender, quality, community and hierarchy, and the distinctions made regarding the show itself and other fans. Coding these using the NVivo qualitative software meant that I could call up all quotes on a particular theme then examine these for further patterns and commonalities. After entering the data and coding it through the programme, I was able to select relevant sections of fan discussion in order to identify commonalities and themes across my data sets. Where quotes have been used these most typically illustrate common fan discourses or topics of discussion, and there are usually two or three quotes offered in order to illustrate the prevalence of these themes. However, quotes are also offered to demonstrate divergent or opposing fan views or to illustrate that some fans did not adhere to the dominant discourses of their particular interpretive communities.

Finally, despite my status as a 'scholar-fan' (Hills 2002) I was not an active participant at *Television Without Pity*. It has been suggested that involvement with a studied community encourages a belief that fans will be represented fairly in the resultant research and encourages them to participate (Baym 2000:24). However, being a fan does not necessarily allow one access to a fan community and the requisite tale of how such contact was achieved is characteristic of many studies:

[one must have] negotiated access, observed interactions and communicated with participants. These descriptions set up a relationship in which the ethnographer has an extensive and sustained experience of the field site that the reader is unlikely to share (Hine 2000:46).

I thus assumed the role of a 'lurker' when analysing postings. Lurkers have been characterised as 'parasitic, as invasive' (Hills 2002:173) or 'leeches', taking from communities without offering their own input (Paccagnella 1997). Furthermore, it has been argued that failure to reveal one's status as a researcher poses ethical problems (Hine 2000:23) and that lurking 'plac[es] the ethnographer at one end of the participant observer continuum [...] to whom all is accessible, without needing to enact a subject position' (Beaulieu 2004:147). However, lurking is accepted (and even welcomed) within many online communities (Baym 1995:51; Hills 2002:173; Menon 2007:356) and has been undertaken by some scholars (Gray 2005; Leaning 1998; Schaap 2002). Indeed, I argue that lurking is a valid research form as it is a method that non-intrusively fits into the research environment since we should

concentrate on methods that seem in tune with the world in which we exist rather than seeking to satisfy a set of abstract and possibly theoretically inapplicable ethical

codes. Non participation observation [...] fits the local environment better than interviewing or any other method (Leaning 1998: online).

Having outlined the methodological and ethical issues pertinent to this research, the article firstly outlines the context of the Josh/Donna (J/D) relationship within the text before examining how the writers/producers of the show such as Aaron Sorkin (the series' original creator) and John Wells (the executive producer and the figure in charge of the show for seasons five-seven) worked to both encourage and limit fans' shipping practices. I will then move on to examine how fans' shipping of the relationship allowed them to perform identity work, arguing that media fandom is a key avenue for this type of negotiation. This discussion pays particular attention to dynamics of gender and sexuality, suggesting that shipping might function as a way for (primarily) female fans to display levels of attraction to both male and female characters. Finally, turning more explicitly to the ways in which the cancellation of *TWW* impacted upon online fans at *TWoP*, I examine the discursive battles between those who supported the ship and those who did not, considering how their battles over 'proper' *West Wing* were not just issues over what was appropriate subject matter for the show, but which might also demonstrate fan anxiety and discomfort over the programme's impending cessation.

'Please do hold your breath': Josh/Donna in text and paratexts

For those readers who are not acquainted with *The West Wing*, the Josh/Donna relationship consists, for the first five seasons of the show, of an employer (Josh)/employee (Donna) interaction, although the two characters were routinely depicted as having a closeness that superseded that of other senior White House staffers and their assistants. After suffering life-threatening injuries in a terrorist attack at the end of the fifth season, Donna leaves the White House in season six to work on a Presidential campaign, in direct opposition to Josh who also departs to work on a rival campaign. After Josh's campaign is successful, Donna is absent for the first few episodes of the show's seventh season after Josh rejects her application to work for the Democratic 'Santos for President' campaign. Eventually, she is hired on the campaign, casting Donna's character in a much more responsible role than she played at the White House and significantly altering the dynamics of her relationship with Josh. By the end of the series finale 'Tomorrow', the characters work as the Chiefs of Staff for the President and the First Lady, respectively, and are clearly in a happy romantic relationship.

This was a hugely popular ship in *TWW* fandom and, when news of the show's cancellation broke in January 2006, many shippers experienced a sense of optimism at the news, primarily as they felt that the only hope of a J/D romance was at the point when the shows' demise was assured. This was alluded to by several of my questionnaire respondents:

I really believe that if the series had not been cancelled then Josh/Donna and CJ/Danny would not have been finalized. TV relationships post-hook up have never been good. The banter would not have been the same and I would not have enjoyed it as much. Plus, everyone knows that Josh/Donna and CJ/Danny was going to finally happen (Ginnifer).

I would have liked to see how Josh and Donna handled working together at the high level positions they were in and their relationship. But I also think that if there was another season left after this, we wouldn't have seen them get together this season at all (Amy).

Indeed, it was widely reported that 'after Sorkin left, the series' new behind-the-scenes commander in chief, John Wells, told [Janel] Moloney [who played Donna] that whenever Josh and Donna got together, the show would be over' (Avins 2006:1). Executive Producer John Wells confirmed this in tertiary materials, stating that 'one of the great things when you know the show is ending [is that] you can actually do stuff that you probably wouldn't do if you thought the show was continuing' (Ausiello 2006: online). Thus, as described above, the show ended with the couple united and working at the White House as Chief of Staff and Chief of Staff to the First Lady. Whilst J/D shippers had often been opposed to the producers' and actors' intentions (Porter 2004), their position appeared to be vindicated with the consummation of the relationship in the final episodes of the show.

This recalls ships in other fandoms when producers often simultaneously encourage and restrict fan activities via the employment of what I have termed '*authorial duality*', which both encourages loyalty to a show 'whilst paradoxically cautioning against fan expectation that their desires be sated' (Williams 2010: 282). For example, 'producers/writers often simultaneously encourage *and* deny the impact of fan protests and campaigns' (Williams 2010:282), whilst actors may endorse fan readings of shows whilst also deferring to producers' comments (Hills and Williams 2005:356-358). Subsequently, 'Such encouragement/restriction of fan activities thus ensures fan loyalty *and* enables producerly control over shows in the televisual medium in which authorship is often precarious' (Williams 2010:282). For example, *The X-Files*' creator, Chris Carter encouraged shipping via subtext whilst simultaneously enforcing a preferred reading of the text through tertiary material. Although 'textual analysis of *The X-Files* examining narrative structure, generic conventions, character versus plot orientation(s), and their relation to gender demonstrates how shippers' readings are invited, if not embraced, by the series' authors' (Scodari and Felder 2000:239), Carter continually maintained extra-textually 'that Mulder and Scully would never become romantically involved. For years, the series teased shippers and other fans with near-kisses, undercover marriages, and intimate gestures' (Silbergleid 2003: online).

Similar maneuvers can be seen throughout the seven years of *The West Wing's* production. For instance, before he left the show after season four, creator Aaron Sorkin encouraged fans to hope for a romantic resolution to the J/D storyline, urging them 'I *want* you to hold your breath. Please *do* hold your breath!' (No author 2001), whilst the actors themselves suggested in tertiary materials that 'I've always been ready to move further with our relationship, and I'm just waiting for the pages to come down [from the writers]' (Porter 2004: online). Even as the show drew to a close, the actors who played Josh and Donna continued to offer extra-textual commentary on the relationship and in a 2006 interview they added further to the fan support for the pairing. Bradley Whitford commented that 'In our relationship, I was always the hotshot Washington kid who needed a lot of ego to function, and people assumed I was in charge--when the truth was I couldn't have done anything without her' and Janel Moloney admitted that 'I *decided early on that this was a passionate, deep love relationship* where my character was mad, head over heels in love' (Riely, 2006, my italics). Here, Moloney offers her own interpretation of the ship, suggesting that those who had similarly read the J/D relationship as romantic had been correct all along (see Hills and Williams 2005: 354-5). Such authorial duality on the part of writers and actors here endorses fan's textual readings and implies that their assertions that Josh and Donna's relationship was 'more' than just that of a boss and an employee are warranted through the narrative. However, until the end of the series, the text itself was able to continue to avoid canonical depictions of the relationship, thus enabling producers to ensure viewer's continued watching of the programme whilst endlessly deferring the satisfactory resolutions that they require.

Such dualities provide fans with evidence to back up their readings of specific relationships. Indeed, the eventual narrative dominance of the J/D ship allowed supporters to claim that they had potentially influenced the narrative of *The West Wing*, and such claims can be attempts by fans to assert power over fellow fans by privileging their own textual readings, enabling them to establish 'the 'informed' exegesis for their subculture of fans [and] establish and control an important reading formation' (Tulloch 1995:150). If fans can argue that their interpretations of the text were 'correct' and have been incorporated and, thus, legitimated by producers, this increases their 'discursive power' (Tulloch 1995). Of course, from the production point of view, this also benefits writers and producers, not only enhancing economic gain by allowing a product to appeal to a range of fragmented viewers with varying points of interest in the show, but it also allows them to portray a potentially reciprocal relationship between themselves as creators, and fans as consumers, and further ensuring fan loyalty. Indeed, whilst the often productive identity work which fans engage in through practices such as shipping cannot be denied (see below), fan participation in an economically driven industry is also a reason for producer's propagation of multiple textual meanings.

Ultimately 'fandom is an effect of the culture industry; it is commercial culture's adoring and irreverent offspring, not its nemesis' (Gwenllian-Jones 2003:173).

Having outlined the textual portrayal of the Josh/Donna ship and also highlighting the somewhat contradictory manner in which it has been discussed by producers, writers, and actors involved in *The West Wing*, I wish to turn to more specific discussion of my audience research data. The paper firstly discusses how the practice of shipping allowed some J/D fans to perform their self-identities by intertwining their own histories and experiences with narrative events, or using on-screen happenings to work through issues in their own lives. After exploring this, and how this might intersect with issues of gender and sexuality, the paper moves on to more specifically consider the impact of *The West Wing's* cancellation on shippers and how the impending cessation of the programme impacted upon their debates with non-shippers over issues of genre and what constituted 'proper' or 'true' *West Wing* episodes.

Shipping, limerence and self-identity

Although, as discussed above, J/D shippers often found their desires for favorable narrative developments thwarted by producers, many of them did use their support of the ship to negotiate self-identity. The issue of why certain members of media audiences form such close attachments to onscreen relationships has been examined by Harrington and Bielby (1995) who argue that the psychoanalytic concept of 'limerence' may explain why fans appear to 'fall in love' with on-screen relationships. The concept of limerence derives from a psychoanalytic framework which draws on Winnicottian theories of object-relations and the 'transitional object'. Such objects offer a third realm between the inner and external worlds; an 'intermediate area of experiencing' (Winnicott 2005:2), a space which is 'neither inside nor outside but in between [the self and the outside world]' (Bateman and Holmes 1995:42). Such work has been utilised to consider fan/object relationships via the notion of transitional objects or fandom as a transitional realm (Hills 2002; Sandvoss 2005). As Matt Hills summarises, Harrington and Bielby usefully apply the concept of the transitional object to soap opera fandom, considering how soap is 'used creatively by fans to manage tensions between inner and outer worlds' (2002: 105). Although psychoanalytic analyses of fandom can be persuasive (see Hills 2002 and Sandvoss 2005), it is not my intention here to offer such an account of the J/D shippers or other fans of *The West Wing*. Rather, I wish to examine limerence's use in understanding such fan attachments before considering how this approach is limited in how far we can use it to understand fan practices such as shipping.

Harrington and Bielby's interest is in how fans are often unable to articulate the reasons behind their attachments and they suggest that 'A fan's inability to articulate why he or she is hooked on a soap couple is likely to sound similar to that person's inability to explain why he

or she is in love with another in real life' (1995:137). These fans are not deluded, nor do they believe that the on-screen romance is 'real', but rather they identify with the emotions and developments they see on the screen. By recognizing emotions displayed onscreen some viewers become heavily invested in the characters who embody and perform these. However, Harrington and Bielby's work cannot fully account for fan attachment to onscreen relationships since it fails to allow for the impact that the act of 'shipping' has on the fan. In their argument, this is a one-way street with the fan in love with the 'couple's state of love for each other' but with no room for consideration of the 'rewards' fans may get from this investment. Furthermore, although acknowledging that the pleasure fans gain from embedding themselves in the onscreen romances may replicate a real-life inability to explain one's romantic attachments or inclinations (Harrington and Bielby 1995:138), the potential entwining of narrative and 'real life' events remains unexplored here. In fact, mediated objects often contribute toward a persons' sense of self-identity and may become inextricably intertwined with their reflexive narratives of the self.

For example, Anthony Giddens has argued that individuals are constantly forming and renegotiating a 'reflexive project of self' (1992:139) which is increasingly influenced by the media as people 'draw on mediated experience to inform and refashion the project of the self' (Thompson 1995:233). As in previous studies such as McKinley's (1997) work on *Beverly Hills 90210* or Nick Stevenson's (2009) recent study of life-long fans of David Bowie, supporters of the Josh/Donna relationship frequently appeared to reflect the argument that 'people use media to validate and support specific identities, a general sense of self' (Snow 1988:204). Identification as a shipper gives one a very specific subcultural identity within *TWW* fan cultures, labelling one's investments in the show and signposting to other fans the importance of interpretation of those canonical events which support a pro-J/D reading of the programme. Fans who identify as long-term shippers (e.g. those who may declare that they 'spotted the signs' of a potential J/D relationship from the early seasons) may also begin to construct a self-narrative to relate the story of their engagement with the onscreen journey of the characters, and intertwine elements of their own life experiences with narrative events (e.g. drawing on one's own encounters with office romances to inform readings of the text). For example, one female poster comments that watching the J/D romance develop made her 'really happy and yet at the same time it made me really miss my husband (he's deployed at the moment) so...that was nice and sad all at the same time' (Post #267 'Transition'). Similarly, a questionnaire respondent admitted to using the ship to work through issues in her own life;

I know that I once imagined writing a JD story in which I could exorcise a few demons from a past romantic relationship. I guess that might have had something to do with seeing myself in the characters – but I suspect it more had to do with my own desire to say things that I hadn't had the opportunity to say (Lene).

Furthermore, for many shippers the character of Donna is central to their support of the J/D relationship, allowing them to negotiate issues of identity often related to gender and the role of women. *TWW* has been accused of privileging a 'charmed male circle' of characters (Smith 2004: online) and of marginalising Donna by casting her as 'a contrast for Josh and a source for witty banter when he mulls over political problems' (Garrett 2005:189). However, in contrast to Garrett's reading, Christina Lane asserts that Donna is characterized as 'intuitive and confident: she provides a voice of reason in the midst of chaos' (2003:34) and that she becomes increasingly central within the narrative. From textual analysis of numerous scenes, Lane concludes that the 'program's narratives suggest that [Donna] anchors the office's sense of moral duty, and its visuals increasingly supply her with the power to share her knowledge throughout the office complex' (2003:35). However, both Lane and Garrett are writing before the change in the series narrative which saw Donna depart the White House and assume higher-level positions in two Presidential campaigns in seasons six and seven, and it is this character development that shippers often discussed. Thus, those who applauded the more assertive, pro-active and politically motivated Donna of seasons six and seven articulated this as a pleasure in watching the character grow:

[I'm like] Donna, [I've] watch[ed] her grow and change over the years and gain self-confidence and lost some naivete (Christine).

I'm more educated than Donna and haven't had the career issues she had, but I can relate to her questioning of herself. It might be endemic to a lot of working American women (Wilma).

I've always thought that I was kinda like Donna. A girl thrown into a place of work and trying to soak in as much as possible. She did as much as she could (sorta... really just after she left the White House) to improve her status and worked really hard (Shona).

However, in addition to identifying with Donna, these predominantly female shippers also declared their attraction to Josh:

I fell head over heels for Josh (the character, not the actor, although I think Bradley Whitford is immensely talented). Josh was everything I'd ever wanted in a friend and or potential partner (Wilma)

The Josh I love is really back. Though I cannot think of anything I'd rather watch than Bradley Whitford slowly kissing someone (I don't really care who, to be honest), I

think I liked that scene about "the cold" more, because it's exuberant, physical Josh I really love (Post #227 'The Cold').

It can thus be argued that shipping occurs within a liminal space between admiration and desire, in which identification with female characters must be counterpoised with an affirmation of (assumed) heterosexuality, displayed by resolute support of romantic relationships with male characters. However, paradoxically, attractions to male characters must also be justified, often via a sublimation of libidinal attraction into a desire for a romantic narrative with female characters. The cultural dismissal of female fans who express attraction to male characters or actors is well documented from the early Matinee Girls who went to theatres for the actors rather than the plays themselves (Jenkins 1992: 12) through to the more recent examples of the actors Leonardo diCaprio (Nash and Lahti 1999) and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* actor James Marsters (Hills and Williams 2005). Indeed, such ideas about female fans continue to dominate on an international level as the cultural construction of fans of the recent books and films of the *Twilight* saga (Click 2010) and discussions around Japanese and Korean fans of melodrama (Hayashi and Lee 2007) indicate. Those who demonstrate such desires are often dismissed as 'fangirls' who are characterized as hysterical, excessively emotional, and as obsessive and who, en masse, threaten to 'whip each other up into a hysterical frenzy, their expression of desire reduced to fits of crying and screaming' (Bury 2005: 205).

Given that overt declarations of libidinal attraction to male characters/celebrities are devalued, shipping can provide a way for fans to avoid the potential derision or dismissal this may result in. Shipping can, thus, be considered as an act predicated on the mutual reinforcement of two discourses which must be either articulated or warded off. Identification with female characters and possible accusations of inappropriate (queer) desire for these *and* any association with culturally feminised 'drooling' over male characters can be subsumed into the supporting of a ship featuring both characters. As Busse and Hellekson point out, Constance Penley's (1992) work on slash suggests that 'for heterosexual readers, slash allows females to have and be either and both of the characters' (2006:19). In shipping, however, the acceptance that one may desire and want to be both of the characters may not be embraced in the same way that sexually ambiguous slash fiction allows. Given its emphasis on romance, shipping instead allows fans to distance themselves from culturally unacceptable sexual 'deviance'. It also counteracts the possibility of fan attachments simultaneously being too heterosexual/too queer by neatly converging attractions to both male and female characters into one fan object which is culturally accepted via its validation of normative heterosexual relationships.

However, whilst the primarily female J/D shippers often used the relationship to negotiate their own romantic lives or personal issues this was not welcomed by all fans of the show who posted at the *Television Without Pity* site. Indeed, for some this was an unacceptable reading of the show which had to be discursively closed down and limited by fans who preferred to emphasise the political storylines of the show. Such fan distinctions and value judgments are by no means limited to *The West Wing* (see Clerc 1996, Jenkins 1995, Scodari and Felder 2000, Stein 2008, Williams 2011), but of interest here is how the impending cessation of the show might have impacted on how such debates played out within this online fan forum.

'Not proper West Wing': Gender, genre and textual endings

I have outlined how the act of shipping might allow primarily female fans to perform identity work and to use mediated texts such as *The West Wing* to formulate reflexive narratives of the self. Given the dismissal of a focus on romance both outside and within fan cultures (see above), female fans who are attracted to male characters/actors might find shipping offers a route for the enjoyment of fantasy and identification. In this section, I examine how shippers of the Josh/Donna relationship responded to the cancellation and ending of *TWW* given their intense emotional attachment to these characters and their fictional relationship. In addition, I consider the responses of those who were not supporters of the relationship and the discourses they employed to limit the interpretations of the shippers.

Although for fans who are attached to an on-screen couple's state of love for one another, 'infatuation is almost inevitably accompanied by heartbreak from a breakup' (Harrington and Bielby 1995:148) this usually occurs when ships break-up onscreen, and there has been little examination of the responses of fans whose ship endures but who can no longer witness its unfolding due to the cessation of the text. In contrast with shippers of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, who supported either a Buffy/Angel or Buffy/Spike pairing (Kirby-Diaz 2009:69) or *Twilight* fans' opposing teams of Team Edward and Team Jacob (Kalviknes-Bore and Williams 2010), J/D shippers faced few battles with opposing groups who supported alternate partners for Josh or Donna. Indeed, the only genuine opposition came from fans who preferred a relationship between Josh and his one-time girlfriend, feminist activist Amy Gardner (played by Mary-Louise Parker).

More prominently, J/S supporters clashed with those who vehemently opposed the romantic development of this relationship and this intensified as the show neared its final episodes. Such hostility echoes that within *X-Files* fandom between those who supported the Mulder/Scully ship and those 'Noromos' who did not (Scodari and Felder 2000). For some fans, emphasis on the J/D ship was not 'proper' *West Wing*, referring to it as the 'Josh/Donna 'The Young and the Horny' daytime drama' (Post #47 'The Last Hurrah) or a potential '*West Wing*: Tahiti Edition' (Post #130 'The Last Hurrah') following the couple on their holiday. For

these fans, such emphasis upon romance violates generic expectation that the show centres on political issues rather than personal ones. Such distinctions are not uncommon in fan studies – indeed, work drawing on the theories of Pierre Bourdieu (1984) and his ideas about distinction and capital have formed a significant chapter in work on a range of media texts from horror film (Jancovich 2000) through to music subcultures (Thornton 1995). Bourdieu's work

on processes of cultural distinction allows us to consider any given fan culture not simply as a community but also as a social hierarchy where fans share a common interest while also competing over fan knowledge, access to the object of fandom, and status (Hills 2002:46).

Thus, in addition to forming a community of interest where fans can discuss their fan objects, such communities do often operate hierarchies which privilege certain types of fan over others.

Some fans did not divide so clearly into those who emphasized storylines based on politics and citizenship or shippers who seemed to prioritize characters and relationships, gaining pleasure from combining both aspects of the show. For example, some shippers were able to bring together their love of the Josh/Donna ship with an appreciation of the liberal gender politics which the show displayed (see fan comments on Donna above), whilst many fans of the political aspects of *The West Wing* also identified with, and enjoyed, the characters. However, my interest here in how fans responded to the end of the show, coupled with an emphasis on issues of fan distinction, means that my analysis necessarily constructs an opposition between two fan responses/practices. Whilst, as noted, some fans do not fit neatly into this binary opposition, detailed examination of those fans that enjoyed *both* the political storylines and the characters and relationships falls outside the scope of this article.

One of the key distinctions operated at *Television Without Pity* was the dismissal of elements of the text deemed to be too 'soapy' and, therefore, too feminine. One poster argues that pro-J/D writer Deborah Cahn 'has a real tendency sometimes to wander off into soap land' (Post #156 'Institutional Memory'), whilst another pleads that the J/D relationship not be 'drag[ged] this out so that it resembles some kind of third rate soap opera' (Post #67 'The Cold').

Another fan comments that

I am looking forward to more politics not an additional "Legally Blond" [sic] episode [...] the show is about politics first, people second [...] The remaining time left for this series is so precious, and I sincerely don't want *Days of our Lives* (Post #180 'The Cold').

Although these fans devalue the soap genre, the possibility of *TWW* as a 'prime-time soap opera' has been considered by van Zoonen, who argues that the show displays soap narrative hallmarks such as 'a core location, the focus on a community of people trying to get by, the emphasis on the human side of public affairs, the multiple storylines, and [...] the core tension between two 'families', Republican and Democrat' (2005:118). However, for non-shippers, comparison with soap opera is to be discursively avoided, and alignment of personal, character-based stories with the feminised and culturally devalued continues. Indeed, soap opera has long been seen as a 'woman's genre' given its emphasis upon personal relationships and interactions, verbal interaction and its open-ended storytelling techniques (Brown 1994). This anti-soap opera discourse can thus be seen as indicative of a wider battle within this *TWW* fan community between the personal and the political, with specific strategies employed to denigrate culturally feminised readings of the text, since there is 'a common association of the feminine with vulgarity and excessive emotion' (Bird 2003:141).

Indeed, the personal versus political discourse can be clearly aligned with feminised and masculinised readings of the text, which is not uncommon within fan cultures. For example, as Susan Clerc notes, fans of *The X-Files* clearly engaged in such divisions as 'men used the character interactions to illuminate the plot and referred to outside information to solve narrative problems; women used the plot to illuminate aspects of the characters' internal lives and worked within the universe established by the series' (1996:41). Furthermore, as Scodari and Felder note, many fans opposed the possibility of a Mulder/Scully romance as they 'worr[ie]d about the show drifting into the realm of soap opera' (2000:241). Such gendered divisions can also be seen in Jenkins' discussions of *Twin Peaks* (1995) and *Star Trek* (1992) fans, and are alluded to in MacDonald's work on *Quantum Leap* fans and the fact that male posters disliked discussion of attraction to characters, onscreen relationships or the posting of real-life events and stories (1998:148).

However, in addition to the genre-based anti-soap opera sentiment, other discourses were deployed to argue against the validity of the J/D ship as the show neared its end. Fans comment, variously:

I don't buy into [Donna's] new role, and I'm totally offended that Josh would have a relationship with her which is unprofessional and possibly unethical (Post #266 'Institutional Memory').

I'll skip commenting on the Josh/Donna crap because I find it to be exactly that, modified by "boring" (Post #101 'Election Day Part One').

I personally would rather not see Josh and Donna on the beach canoodling. I almost get a little squeamish seeing them “together”, almost like a brother and sister (Post #75 ‘The Last Hurrah’).

Whilst these fans offer different reasons for their dislike of J/D, each works to discursively position the ship as ‘wrong’ and to attempt to enforce the dominance of their fan interpretation. By variously suggesting that the ship violates moral and ethical boundaries, is tedious, or is nauseating (even discursively aligned with incestuous behaviour due to some fans’ reading of the J/D relationship as familial rather than romantic) such fans seek to impose their textual readings and to imply that those who support J/D are misguided. Given that the final season of *TWW* itself officially sanctioned the relationship, non-shippers could no longer rely upon the ambiguity of producers’ statements as ‘evidence’ to verify that the ship existed only in the minds of shippers.

However, given that these fans were aware that their fan object was coming to an end, why did it remain so important for them to compete over textual interpretations and to struggle to enforce certain reading practices? As I have argued above, mediated objects can be instrumental in identity formation and the creation of self-narratives, allowing individuals to develop ‘reflexive narratives of the self’ (Giddens 1991). When objects which allow such identity work to be carried out cease to continue, there might therefore be potential instability caused by the move from what I term an ‘active’ to a ‘dormant’ fan object which needs to be warded off. One way to limit the possible rupture of identity caused by the object’s cessation is by reassuring oneself that the fandom of that object was legitimate, and that the time and emotion invested in it was worthwhile. Thus, it may be that, whilst fans routinely clash over interpretations (Tulloch 1995), engaging in continual battles for textual authority, this may become intensified as the end of a fan object approaches.

The following quotes indicate some of these anxieties. The first poster pleads that pro J/D shippers be allowed both ‘closure’ and ‘fun’ at the end of the series and given a satisfactory ending to the relationship. The argument that not fulfilling this request would be ‘cruel’, ‘unfair’ and ‘mean-spirited’ indicates a level of trust between fans and producers and a desire for the show’s finale to satisfy their request and provide a sense of resolution. For these fans, failing to do so would indicate a breach of trust between fan/producer and fail to provide closure and the inability to ‘move on’ after the end of the show:

Any ending for the show without a Josh/Donna union would be unduly cruel for all the fans that have not invented this romance out of thin air but, rather enjoyed and followed the insane amount of clues and innuendoes dropped by the writers over the past 6 seasons [...] for the show to end without resolving that 7 year thread would be

unfair at best, and mean-spirited at worst. This is it, this is the end. Let the audience have its closure and fun (Post #unknown 'It's official...').

Do I want Josh and Donna to get together? Absolutely. In spite of it all, I believe that John Wells owes us that (Post #117 'It's official').

This need for 'closure', and the associated alignment of one's interpretation of a text with the officially sanctioned canonical events, enables fans to ward off anxiety about the move from active to dormant fan object, reasserting the validity of their reading of the text and avoiding any potential disjunction between their own understandings and the object itself. Thus, for example, J/D shippers had continually asserted that their reading of subtextual hints to suggest a romantic relationship would be vindicated. As the show approached its finale, these fans were eager that the show depict romantic developments and lamented the possibility that this would not take place;

I thought it was a good episode, but y'all, I am so sad. We've got a finite number of episodes left and I'm not seeing any development in the Josh/Donna relationship. I'm doubting at all we're going to get it. They haven't had a conversation that wasn't about work in months (Post #42 'Duck and Cover').

If they don't get together now, I think I will have to hunt down Wells and annihilate him (Post #24 'The Cold').

Just want to third, fourth or fifth the sentiment that if Josh and Donna do not end up together, I will set fire to someone's house (preferably not my own). Oh, also, I'll be in on the setting-fire-in-front-of-John-Wells' house business (Post #65 'It's official...').

However, even when narrative events such as the first J/D kiss ('The Cold') or their first night together ('Election Day Part 1') endorsed the interpretations of J/D shippers, other fans continued to argue against these developments. The reappearance in the last few episodes of the character of Amy Gardner – who had dated Josh in seasons three-five – prompted debate, with one fan opining that 'I know I'm in the minority here and am prepared for the snark and flogging to come... but I rejoiced in the previews when they showed Ms. Amy Gardner. I can only hope Josh comes to his senses in time' (Post #259 'The Cold'). A questionnaire respondent reiterated the view that it was the end of the series that led to the canonisation of the J/D ship, noting that 'really the producers decided to cater to the fans as the show concluded, Donna and Josh could never really be together, besides Josh belongs with Amy' (Victoria).

However, such interpretations were quickly dismissed by J/D shippers who suggested that 'Amy's return may push Josh towards Donna even more' (Post #262 'The Cold') and 'I have a feeling Amy comes back like Joey came back; she's moved on. I just don't see Amy being an issue for Josh and Donna anymore' (Post #262 'The Cold'). If *TWW* had ended without explicit canonical depiction of the J/D relationship, these fans face greater threat to their sense of self-identity than those whose interpretations of the text proved correct. Thus, whilst the reignited fan debates regarding the validity of the J/D relationship or arguments over Donna versus Amy may seem superfluous given the impending end of the series, it may be that such deliberations actually become even more pertinent as there remains only a finite time frame in which fans can be vindicated.

It is also worth pointing out that not all non-shippers were so passionately against the onscreen resolution of the J/D relationship. In the online thread devoted to the series' cancellation (titled 'It's official: West Wing to conclude Sunday May 14') many non-shippers sympathised with the desires of the supporters and their wish to have the storyline concluded:

I don't want to see Josh and Donna together either, except to satisfy the shippers, who have been mercilessly teased for years (Post #113).

... I truly hope Josh and Donna get together for all you shippers out there... (Post #83).

This suggests that, although there were some divisions between pro-J/D fans and non-shippers, for other online posters the ending of the show prompted a sense of camaraderie and a sense of being magnanimous about hoping that each fan got the ending and resolution that they wanted. Another reason why some non-shippers were willing to accept the J/D storyline was articulated though what can be described as the 'lesser of two evils'. As one poster summarises:

While I agree that I tired of the soap feel, I'd still rather see them and the other characters in whom I have invested 7 years of my life, plus rewatches of tapes and marathons of the DVDs. I know some people have grown attached to the "new guys", but enough is enough with only 3 episodes left, there was no reason to waste it on the team work between St. Matt and Ernie [two characters introduced in season six] (Post #57 'The Last Hurrah').

Here, whilst the poster is not a J/D fan, seeing their relationship and characters on-screen is preferable to 'wasting' precious screen-time on newer characters whom this poster is uninterested in. Again, as in many of the other fan comments, the emphasis on there being

only a finite amount of time left for the show is clear. Anxiety about *TWW*'s impending cessation is again expressed here.

This emphasis upon resolution for many of the characters can also be seen as part of a wider textual strategy on the part of producers to reward fans for their investment in and support of the show. Beyond the apparent reward gifted to J/D shippers, elements such as the return of the character of Sam Seaborn (Rob Lowe), a cameo appearance by original series creator Aaron Sorkin in the series finale and the textual resolution of other onscreen relationships are interpreted by many fans as gifts from the production team. Thus, the end of the show can be seen as a textual strategy to reward fan loyalty and devotion. Several fans viewed elements of the series finale in this way, commenting that some of their favourite aspects of the series finale 'Tomorrow' were the inclusion of a gift from the former Chief-of-Staff Leo to President Bartlet in an early episode, which was made even more poignant given that the actor who played Leo, John Spencer, had suddenly passed away during the filming of the show's seventh season and whose demise was written into the show. They comment;

I also loved and (I lost it) when the gift (which we all knew what it was) was revealed as the one Jed gave Leo in season 3 "Bartlet For America" (Post #38 'Tomorrow').

Anyone that is a true Wingnut knew what the package was (Post #31 'Tomorrow').

It ended exactly as I always though the series would end. [...] We all knew it was the napkin. That doesn't matter. It was the perfect way to close shop (Post #34 'Tomorrow').

In these comments, posters suggest that 'real fans' would have been most rewarded by the finale, as they would have guessed the contents of the gift for Bartlet. Other fans more explicitly likened the events in the episode to a 'thank you' from producers, noting that they 'gave us the episode that any real fan has already seen multiple times. But it was truly a gift' (Post #82 'Tomorrow') and that 'This episode was just a kiss on the lips to the loyal viewer, beginning to end' (Post #95 'Tomorrow').

Such wider textual rewards indicate that, whilst the resolution of the Josh/Donna relationship was a central part of the show's finale for many fans, for some, elements related to a range of storylines were more important. Indeed, whilst shippers' interpretations and responses continue to be of interest, it cannot be presumed that their readings are the dominant ones within fan cultures nor that their views are shared by fans who choose to value different aspects of the text. Within fandom of *The West Wing*, as with a range of media texts and

objects, there are divergent viewpoints which do not necessarily cohere as 'an officially constituted reading formation' (Tulloch 1995:145).

Conclusion

This article has sought to contribute to work on media fandom and, more specifically, fan practices which focus upon relationships and romance. By moving away from the genres of cult television or soap opera which normally engender such practices, the paper has examined how some fans of 'quality' drama such as *The West Wing* read the programme, not in terms of its representations of politics, but through their support of a relationship depicted on the show; the Josh/Donna relationship. In examining how such support allows fans to negotiate issues of gender and sexuality and how this links to identity work, the paper has sought to contribute to existing studies which consider fandom as an important arena for the construction of self-identity within modern mediated society. Furthermore, in demonstrating how the demise of a text which depicts a particular ship might impact upon the fandom which surrounds it, the paper also forms one of very few considerations of fans' preparations for, and responses to, the end of fan objects. Despite fan debates the relationship is granted textual, canonical legitimacy. Thus, this culturally feminised interpretation of the show is privileged whilst those who consistently lauded the political elements over the personal ones find their readings disavowed. In this light, then, debates between shippers and non-shippers, and their subsequent arguments over what constitutes the 'proper' text of shows such as *The West Wing*, might be seen as, not only clashes between fan ideas of appropriate generic expectations and storylines, but as potentially indicative of anxieties towards the cessation of the text itself.

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