

Research ethics in fan studies

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Abstract:

This article engages with the ethical and privacy issues involved in conducting research into fan communities both online and face-to-face. Drawing on the authors' experiences with ethnographic research into the LiveJournal fan 'vidding' community and interviews conducted with authors and fans of 'genderswap' fanfiction, this article addresses some of the practical problems associated with ethics in fan studies. The authors discuss problems that arise in establishing researcher and participant rapport, maintaining confidence and confidentiality, and maintaining the researcher's participant/observer status while discussing options for methods that will aid fan researchers in the future.

Keywords: Fan studies, fanfiction, fan video, ethics, online research

Dianna Fielding: I conducted twenty six interviews with authors of genderswap fanfiction. Genderswap is a specific genre of fanfiction that explores how characters would change, or stay the same, if they were either born a different gender or sex, or experienced a sudden change in physical sex. My research focussed primarily on why genderswap authors create these works, which often deal with issues of gender that are considered deviant. Interviews were conducted online through instant messaging services, in person, or over webcam.

Katharina Freund: I conducted a two-year ethnographic study of the fan vidding community, which is primarily based on the social-network and blogging site LiveJournal.com. Fan vids are a type of 'visual fanfiction' (according to one vidder), where footage from a favourite television series or film is edited to music in order to further explore character motivations or relationships. My research focussed on how vids may be understood as artefacts of fannish responses to televisual texts. I conducted participant observation, interviews, and focus groups both online in vidding spaces on LiveJournal and also face-to-face at vidding conventions.

Methods

KF: I utilised ethnography as my primary methodological approach in this research, as I was interested not only in the vids themselves but also in the inner workings of the vidding community. As vidders consider themselves generally private, I believed an approach which focused on immersion and interpersonal relationships would best suit the project. Obviously, though, immersion is somewhat more complex when you are conducting research both online and face-to-face. While traditional anthropology required the researcher to spend extended periods of time ‘in the field’, the tenets of participant observation have been successfully applied in the digital sphere by several researchers, such as [Kendall](#) and [Boellstorff](#).

This approach has been critiqued by some fan scholars, such as Hills for lacking in critical engagement. He notes that some ethnographic studies of fandom have failed to address certain discursive gaps in fan-talk and that it focuses on ‘socially-licensed and communal justifications’ without critique (Hills, 66). I argue, though, that in ethnographic research it is precisely these emotional, subjective, and personal aspects that are the most valuable from an anthropological perspective. The social justifications provided by my participants in interviews revealed key tensions and gaps in their community.

DF: My primary method was interviews. These interviews were supported and directed by an extensive content analysis of slash and genderswap fanfictions conducted prior to the interviews. Fanfiction authors are generally portrayed as private people, as Katharina notes, and thus online contacts and interviews were generally employed. My thoughts were that participants would be more likely to engage in an interview if it could occur online, without necessitating an in-person or phone interview. Most interview participants did wish to conduct their interviews online.

The interview method was chosen because, in general, studies on fan authors lack this level of examination. Many previous studies have relied on reading fanfiction without directly accessing fan authors (e.g., Allington; Salmon and Symons). While reading fan authors’ works is important, a researcher cannot accurately determine fan authors’ opinions or intentions without speaking directly to them. The semi-structured interview also serves as open structure within which authors can share what they wish, without being constrained by the number of survey responses possible. Past researchers (e.g., van Eeden-Moorefield, Proulx, and Pasley) have also found that online research can function similarly to face-to-face interviews, and may even have some benefits that face-to-face interviews do not have, as Katharina also found.

Establishing Rapport

DF: Most of my participants were contacted first through private messages on fanfiction hosting websites, or through online fan studies mailing lists. At first, only a few authors responded to my requests for an interview. Most of those who responded immediately were also scholars interested in fan studies. From there, the gradual process of snowballing began to develop. Most asked for specifics about my IRB (Institutional Review Board) ethics approval, or asked if I too was a fan. I had several contacts who later asked not to participate because they would have to sign a consent form. They did not wish to share their name, even though only I would see it. The majority of authors were never met face to face.

KF: As I was undertaking a long-term study, I had the benefit engaging with the community online before approaching anyone directly for interviews. I encountered the same reticence a Dianna and many of my early participants were also fan scholars. My first experience face to face with fans at a convention was a mix of awkwardness and enthusiasm: vidders were interested in my project and most were keen to participate but at the same time wary of my presence. Luckily, this early convention attendance opened doors for me at other events: I was told directly by convention organizers that I was only allowed to attend as I had been 'vetted' by attendees of the first convention.

DF: A long term study might benefit from more time. I only had three months to conduct my interviews before moving on. If a long term study could take place it would offer participants more time to respond and to consider their participation. I received a few responses after I had already stopped taking interviews. Because I had begun the process of examining my data, I had to either turn these individuals away or direct them to an online survey I was conducting. In addition, branching out to conventions or other fannish stomping grounds would benefit future researchers. Seeing a participant face to face might allow them to feel more comfortable.

KF: I found this to be the case in many respects, as I was able to respond to questions quickly and provide reassurance to participants. At the same time, online interview participants often were very open about sharing information that they may not have felt comfortable doing in a physical setting and I was often able to view personal information on their LiveJournals which they may not have been aware of.

Confidentiality and Confidence

DF: The majority of my interview participants were excited to participate. A few knew their rights as research participants, and knew to confirm that I had IRB approval. After confirming that I had IRB approval, many asked specific and pointed questions about how

their interviews would be used. When I explained my interests stemmed from a history in fandom, and a desire to present an accurate picture of fandom, most participants seemed to be more comfortable speaking with me. However, after contacting me and speaking with me extensively, one individual did decide to withdraw from the process because they did not wish to sign the consent form and give me their name. I did provide my physical address in case participants did not wish to send their consent forms over email.

All of my participants were offered the chance to create their own pseudonym, or for me to create one. Not surprisingly, many fans were creative in their choice of names. Some chose to use their real name or their online alias, and a few asked me to create a pseudonym for them. Many of my participants had fun creating their own pseudonyms, or hearing my creations for them. This pseudonym portion of the interview generally took place when the participants signed the consent form, and I confirmed their choice at the end of the interview. Many wished to wait until the end to decide whether they would use their real name or a pseudonym.

KF: Many of my participants were also reticent to provide their real names and asked to see my ethics approval from the University, but no one refused to participate after being informed about the project and their rights as participants. An issue that was of some concern was that my participants were happy to give consent for interviews and ‘friended’ me on various social media sites, but did not realise the extent of their personal information that I had access to once they did so. While much of the vidding community was easily accessible through open LiveJournal groups and thus accessible by researchers, one participant remarked, ‘When we write on LiveJournal, we write for ourselves and for each other in an assumed private environment.’ As noted by Reid (1996), even when they sign consent forms participants often do not think through the possible consequences of inclusion in academic research and what researchers may be able to access under the umbrella of consent.

Generally speaking, it is considered acceptable for researchers to utilise data from ‘real world’ public spaces if the participants have the ‘reasonable expectation’ of being overheard, among other considerations ([see boyd and Crawford, 2012](#)). In this case, while the community was acting in the public view much of the time, they were not under the ‘reasonable expectation’ that a researcher would (or could) be observing them. I thus asked for express consent for nearly every quote that I used in my final dissertation (except for some public announcements and Wiki pages).

Participant Observer

DF: Although I have been a fanfiction author for eight years, my real name and online pseudonym are not always connected. Many authors asked me to provide my online alias before they would agree to be interviewed. One individual, after signing the consent form and logging on to begin our interview asked that I show I was a fanfiction author before we

continue. My online alias was enough, and the interview went very well. This may have functioned as a proxy for meeting me in person. Either way, this illustrates that I cannot be separated from my history as a fanfiction author. Indeed, scholars who lack a history in fandom may suffer for it. Although I never posted any genderswap fanfiction online it was a genre that interested me well before these interviews.

I found two main difficulties with this dual-role. First, the researcher must remain silent on their opinions of various aspects of the fan community in order to facilitate true comments from interview participants. If the researcher praises or disparages a work of fanfiction openly, they may unintentionally lead the participant to respond in a way they otherwise would not. Second, many of these authors seemed to feel reserved when I was in 'researcher-mode'. This was emphasized when, after I had told them I had asked my final question, many would engage me in casual conversation and speak (or write) in a tone very different from the way they had been presenting themselves previously. It is important to note that fan authors may put on different faces for researchers, academic-fan researchers, and simple fans. All data should be viewed in this light.

KF: I had a similar experience balancing my position as a casual fan and an academic. Going into the field, I felt I should maintain a professional academic demeanor and avoided mentioning my fannish interests. I felt much more welcomed into the vidding community when I presented myself as a fan, 'one of them', who just happened to be conducting research into fandom. I was asked directly, as Dianna was, about my fannish background, if I was a vidder or a fanfiction author, what fandoms I participated in, and what my online aliases were. I never represented myself inaccurately, but did find interviews much more successful when I made an effort to engage with the fannish interests and gossip of my participants. Dianna is right in noting the impact this balancing of roles can have on the data itself: I think it is important for researchers to be open about their fannish backgrounds, and critically evaluate how their role in the community may have impacted their research.

Conclusion

Both authors agree that time is one of the most important factors in studying fandom and fan participants. By taking the time to build a strong rapport and a solid relationship, the researchers were able to reassure their participants. In addition, both agree that each researcher must evaluate the ethics of a study on a case-by-case basis. The ethical considerations of an ethnographer are not necessarily the same as an interviewer. In addition, internet research complicates fan research by both removing and adding opportunities. The rapport established by a face-to-face relationship is not always possible; however, internet researchers have access to a larger pool of fan authors from which to draw participants. Future researchers should consider the delicate position of fan authors before, during, and after they conduct their research. Fan authors may deal with delicate issues related to gender, sexuality, confidentiality, and the law. In order to conduct ethical

and useful research of fan authors and other fan producers, scholars should consider all of these factors.

Bibliographic Notes:

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