

Towards a theory of producer/fan trolling

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Abstract:

Drawing on theories of internet trolls and trolling to contemplate how media producers and/or fans are often perceived to be intentionally inciting negative responses, my goal is to forward more general theory of fan toxicity as emerging from the feedback loop between creator, text, and fan. Accordingly, this article explores how toxic fan/producer relationships emerge from the intersection of industrial attentiveness to representational diversity, producerial imperatives to connect with and court fan communities, and growing concerns around fan 'entitlement.' Utilizing Kristen J. Warner's (2017) concept of plastic representation, this article hones in on an array of representational controversies (from 'queerbaiting' to fan proxy characters to fan edits that function as an attempted injunction against shifting industrial approaches to representational parity) to consider what these instances of 'trolling' reveal about the potentially performative nature of 'toxic fan practices.'

Keywords: trolling, toxic fan practices, queerbaiting, fan edit, plastic representation

When theorizing toxic fan practices, we more often than not focus on overt expressions of misogyny, racism, homophobia, and xenophobia (or some combination thereof) within fan communities. 'Toxicity' in this context is thus commonly, albeit problematically, positioned as an invasive and poisonous force within otherwise progressive fan cultures and communities, or perhaps simply an exposure of these always already present biases. Importantly, this term implies both the potential for memetic or viral 'infection' of fan communities, as well as lingering aftereffects and potential harm to fandom itself. Fan objects can be a point of provocation for toxic fan subcultures, from the unwelcome reboot of a nostalgically beloved media property to the embrace of representational diversity as an industrial strategy. Alternately, toxic fan practices can be weaponized as a form of intra-fannish identity policing, part of broader subcultural efforts to mock or marginalize particular subsets of fans on the potentially intersecting basis of age, race, gender or gender identity, sexuality, ability, class, nationality, religion, and so on. In either case, toxic fan

subcultures tend to be identified by instances of coordinated harassment on social media platforms against content creators, celebrities, and other fans. Because these conceptions of toxic fan subcultures are intimately bound up with the rise of toxic technocultures and platforms (Massanari, 2015), and the ongoing industrial privileging of white, cis het, male fan identities, it is impossible to extricate a discussion of toxic fandom from an array of broader sociocultural conditions and rising concerns surrounding the toxicity of geek masculinity (Kendall, 2002; Salter and Blodgett, 2017). This article begins to unpack the inevitable slippages, and subsequent difficulty delineating between, toxic fans and internet trolls, as both modes of digital performance and subcultural identities that appear to frequently cross-pollinate.

Drawing on theories of internet trolls and trolling to contemplate how media producers are often perceived to be intentionally inciting negative responses from fans, and vice versa, my goal is to forward more general theory of fan toxicity as emerging from the feedback loop between creator, text, and fan. In considering the ludic properties of these feedback loops that often result in mutual animosity between media creators and fans, as well as fans and other fans, we can move beyond conceptions of fan toxicity as always already emerging from the prejudices or predilections of small segments of a given fan community by situating them within evolving (para)textual and discursive networks, as well as the performative and provocative dimensions of trolling. Utilizing Kristen J. Warner's (2017) concept of plastic representation, this article hones in on an array of representational controversies, from 'queerbaiting' to fan proxy characters to fan edits that function as an attempted injunction against shifting industrial approaches to representational parity. However, the analysis of producer/fan trolling that follows has broader applications for future study of toxic fan subcultures as well as toxic fan/producer relationships, and the ways in which these instances can be problematically written off as purely performative, and not underpinned by institutional bias and white, straight male privilege.

From Fantagonism to Trolling

In one of the earlier theorizations of how discord is sown and performed within fan communities, Derek Johnson (2007) offered the term 'fantagonism' to describe the 'ongoing, competitive struggles between both internal factions and external institutions to discursively codify the fan-text-producer relationship' (287). Johnson's term implies a deep emotional investment on both sides, with both producers and fans struggling for affective and creative ownership over a shared media text. Conversely, trolling is predicated on a sort of performative detachment, describing someone whose 'real intention(s) is/are to cause disruption and/or to trigger and exacerbate conflict for the purposes of their own amusement' (Hardaker 2010: 237). This emphasis on disruption and conflict is one core reason why I believe a consideration of the ways in which fans ascribe trolling to producers, as well as how fans themselves might be viewed as collectively trolling content creators, might help us better theorize how these relationships can so easily turn toxic. A key point that seems to frequently be lost in considerations of toxic fan practices is how commonly

these performances are perceived to be, or received as, just that: calculated efforts to upset and provoke an emotional response from a targeted group. The detachment that characterizes trolling may well be absent, and this in no way excuses these acts, or mitigates their potential harm, but it is worth acknowledging how frequently instances of fan toxicity are written off or summarily dismissed as an exercise in trolling rather than genuine displays of fannish discontent and/or bigotry.

For example, coverage of the social media harassment of *Ghostbusters* reboot star Leslie Jones in 2016 overwhelmingly characterized her attackers as ‘trolls’ in headlines, and commonly used the terms ‘fan’ and ‘troll’ interchangeably in their coverage. This not only avoided a more substantive conversation about misogynoir in fandom, but also (however unintentionally) marked these moments of ‘fantagonism’ as potentially performative and thus more easily distanced from a consideration of systemic sexism or racism within fan culture. This discursive conflation of the terms, or the implications of marking these instances as the work of ‘toxic fans’ or ‘trolls,’ without considering the potential overlap between these categories as well as their unique functionality as subcultural identities, is a mistake fan scholars should not replicate.

In moving towards a theory of producorial trolling that also leaves room for a consideration of fans as trolls, it is productive to hone in on three core qualities of trolls and trolling: humor, organization, and identity. Trolls are commonly characterized as ‘doing it for the lulz’, meaning that what centrally motivates their provocations is a desire to incite a response in their target. This derivation of ‘lol’ or ‘laughing out loud’ is characterized by Whitney Phillips (2015) as ‘a particular kind of unsympathetic, ambiguous laughter’ (24). Phillips thus positions ‘lulz’ as an essential component of trolls’ ‘emotion firewalling’ (35), but also notes that this logic is frequently utilized to obscure the fact that these provocations and the resulting ‘humor’ that is extracted are disproportionately at the expense of marginalized groups and identities (25). When we further consider that trolls frame ‘the lulz’ as a form of ‘pushback against any and all forms of attachment’ (Phillips 2015: 25), it becomes readily apparent how fans (as the most affectively attached of any audience segment), and minority fans in particular, might make ripe targets. Or, conversely, it reveals why fans might more readily or easily ascribe trollish intent to the narrative decisions and promotional statements of content producers, who have a long and documented history of both mistreating marginalized characters and pathologizing the most active and affectively invested fan audience segments.

Because trolling is frequently a collective, coordinated act (Phillips 2015: 76), it is also important to consider from the outset the organizational properties of trolling, and how these do or don’t map onto fan/producer relations. In this capacity, fans are far more easily aligned with broader scholarly understandings of trolls, which emphasize their use of subcultural social media platforms to coordinate campaigns. In the case of trolls, this frequently occurs on sites like 4Chan or Reddit, which are rarely (or at least rarely visibly and vocally) populated by content producers and industry insiders. In the case of fan-as-troll, instances of ‘piling on’ a particular creator or actor more commonly occurs via social media

platforms like Twitter and Tumblr that are mutually occupied by industry and fandom. Though, as William Proctor (2017) has noted, it is often difficult to differentiate between actual fan vitriol on these sites and more general internet trolls capitalizing on controversy for their own disruptive purposes (1134), fans are comparatively more likely to be branded as trolls, and/or have their collective action coded as ‘trolling’, both due to their sheer numbers as well as their relative anonymity. In the case of producerial trolling, the media industry provides its own powerfully coordinated apparatus through which fans might be trolled. In addition to the text itself, there are the paratextual promotional networks ranging from interviews, to talk show appearances, to personal social media accounts, that a media producer might utilize.

Where theoretical applications of trolling to producers and fans begin to break down is when we consider the centrality of anonymity to trolling identities and actions. This point obviously applies very differently to fans (who are relatively more capable of anonymizing themselves) and content producers like showrunners or directors or actors (who are not only identifiable and visible, but frequently occupy an elevated space of celebrity), but I don’t believe this precludes a consideration of either group as trolls. Internet trolls may offer compelling evidence that when ‘rendered anonymous by the absence of social cues we would be meaner to one another than we would ever be in person’ (Baym 2010: 55), but both producerial and fannish trolling emerge from an inverse set of conditions. Namely, accusations or perceptions of trolling are certainly predicated on specific actions, but they are equally a byproduct of the inevitable *lack* of anonymity between media producers and fans in digital spaces.

It is also vital to remember throughout the analysis that follows that while ‘troll’ is a relatively nascent, born digital identity, ‘fan’ as a distinct and far more flexible identity category both pre-dates the digital and has become increasingly contested (or in some fans’ view, co-opted) within digital space. Moreover, because trolling is fundamentally ‘a game about identity deception’, in which a ‘troll attempts to pass as a legitimate participant, sharing the group’s common interests and concerns’ (Donath 2002: 45), much of the toxicity within fan/producer relationships is founded on either fans or producers being viewed as attempting to ‘pass’ in the other’s role. When fans are framed as trolls, it is because they have become too aggressive in their affective claims to textual ownership, manifested in actively attempting to sway or collectively criticize particular representational choices. Producers are situated as trolls when they, for either industrial or personal reasons, insert themselves into fan communities of practices or actively attempt to contain particular forms of fannish reading.

At the center of this characterization of media producers and/or fans as trolls, and the resultant toxicity that emerges from these perceived instances of one ‘side’ trolling the other, are negotiations of power within a post-Web 2.0 digital media landscape. As Jason Wilson, Glen Fuller and Christian McCrea (2013) note in the introduction to their special issue on ‘Trolls and The Negative Space of The Internet’ for *The Fibreculture Journal*:

To admit that you are trolling shows that you hold a target — a forum, a discussion or a user — in far lower esteem than the target holds itself [...] You aggrandise yourself as a puppeteer, maintaining control over your own passions while asking the other to question the bearings of their affects: ‘u mad?’. You remind them of values that preceded them, which you stand for, and propose to reinforce. The troll is proprietorial of particular forums, or even of the network as a whole. The troll looks to repel incomers, to deter the masses, or at least introduce a tiny break-flow into the circuit of discourse. (9-10)

In other words, instances of producerial or fannish trolling reveal a great deal about each groups’ esteem for one, but also function as part of broader efforts to reassert power and/or align one camp with the other’s distinct understandings of ‘appropriate’ affect. Thus, we might consider examples of producerial trolling as both reflecting the desire for analog authorial control, and revealing an effort to instill fans with ‘values’ that reinforce these desires. Likewise, we might approach instances of intra-fannish trolling as part of broader proprietorial boundary policing efforts that have accompanied the mainstreaming and attendant diversification of fan culture. This particular form of intra-fannish trolling aligns with both broader territorial trolling efforts to retain subcultural authenticity and claim digital space as their own (Coleman 2012: 110). As I will address in more detail below, the fact that these examples tend to be (or, at least, are widely perceived to be) perpetuated by white, cis/het men and are commonly directed at directed at fangirls, fans of color, or queer fans, both resonates with broader troll demographics and the rise of ‘PC culture’ as an impetus to troll.

While I focus on a limited array of examples below, we might equally apply this theorization of producers and/or fans as trolls to instances of progressive representational decisions. Consider, for example, J.K. Rowling’s 2007 post-canonical announcement that Albus Dumbledore was gay (Tosenberger 2008) and the subsequent refusal to explicitly represent (e.g. canonically confirm) Dumbledore’s sexuality in the forthcoming *Fantastic Beasts* film sequel, or the perceived racist outcry from some *Star Wars* fans in response to the inclusion of a #blackstormtrooper in *The Force Awakens* (see Proctor in this themed-section), both of which emerge out of increasingly toxic feedback loops between media creators, texts, and fans. Below, I mobilize Kristen J. Warner’s (2017) discussion of plastic representation, or instances of representational diversity that ‘feel—in an affective sense—artificial, or more to the point, like plastic’ (33) to consider multidirectional forms of fan/producer trolling. Importantly, this concept of plastic representation lets us speak to both fannish responses to instances of producerial trolling (such as when fans protest what they perceive to be hollow or insincere attempts by industry to speak back to fan critiques surrounding issues of representation), and well as instances of fan toxicity and trolling that revolve around predominantly white, male fans complaining about women and minorities invading their most beloved franchises.

Sinking Ships: On Queeringbaiting and Producorial Trolling

Approximately halfway through the 2016 pilot episode of the CW's neo-noir teen drama *Riverdale*, based loosely on Archie Comics, it happens: they are dressed in shorts and knee socks at a cheerleading tryout, and have just been dressed down by resident mean girl and unimpressed team captain Cheryl Blossom about the lack of 'heat' and 'sizzle' in their routine. Veronica whispers to Betty, 'don't freak out, just trust me...' and proceeds to pull her blonde bestie in for a tender kiss. As the pair pulls away from their hotly anticipated sapphic smooch, Cheryl rolls her eyes, deflating the sexual tension with a single line of dialogue: 'Check your "sell by" date, ladies. Faux lesbian kissing hasn't been taboo since 1994'. Cheryl's closing jab winks at the audience, simultaneously proclaiming the show's progressive politics (affirming that lesbian kissing is normative, even dull or commonplace, within *Riverdale*'s contemporary small town diegesis) and foreclosing any fannish expectation that the pair might become canonized as a romantic couple (through the pointed 'faux' designation). And with that, *Riverdale* attempted to sink the Betty/Veronica (or 'Beronica') ship before it could even properly leave the port.

The fan practice of 'shipping', short for 'relationshiping' to indicate a fan's preference or desire for a particular romantic character pairing that may or may not be realized in the text itself, has long been a source of friction between content creators and fan communities. This has especially been the case with homoerotic slash (M/M) or femslash (F/F) pairings of characters that are canonically represented as straight. Though the relationship between media producers and fans has long been 'charged with mutual suspicion, if not open conflict' (Jenkins 1992: 32), the past several years have been marked by increased toxicity, most actively compounded by accusations of 'queerbaiting'. This term, which is broadly used by fans to describe any 'tactic whereby media producers suggest homoerotic subtext between characters in popular television that is never intended to be actualised on screen (Brennan 2016: 1), has become a growing point of concern and subject of fan scholarly analyses, journalistic think pieces (for example, Bridges, 2014), and fan meta-criticism (such as Bridges 2016). Notably, shipping is also a source of conflict and toxicity within fandom itself, leading to various forms of intrafannish boundary policing and infighting (see, for example: Hadas, 2013; and Gonzalez, 2016).

This brings us back to Betty and Veronica's kiss. Later in the same episode, a game of spin the bottle at a party is underscored by the song 'Boyfriend', by Tegan and Sara. This scene, which effectively launched the hetero-romantic coupling of Veronica and Archie, which momentarily creates a rift between the two female friends, seems to have carefully selected this soundtrack as ironic counterpoint. Contra the song's lyrics, which tells a tale of a woman who has never dated another woman before, and accordingly wavers between treating her like a best friend and her boyfriend, underscoring this particular moment (as opposed to the kiss itself) seems to suggest that fans shouldn't read too closely into the 'faux' lesbian kiss. Tegan and Sara Quin, lesbian twin sisters who are also active LGBTQ rights activists, have noted: 'we've all been in that situation where we really like someone and we want to make it official and they're not ready, that's what ['Boyfriend'] is about'

(Quin in Stutz, 2016, n.p.). The creators of *Riverdale* similarly knew that many fans would want to ‘make it official’ between Betty and Veronica, and these two scenes in the pilot appear deliberately composed (via the interplay of shot composition, dialogue, costuming, and soundtrack choices) to simultaneously endorse and contain these readings. Moreover, they appear to be designed to overtly troll Beronica shippers, and mock their affective investment in the pair’s potential romantic coupling.

Because queerbaiting might ‘refer to situations where those officially associated with a media text court viewers interested in LGBT narratives—or become aware of such viewers—and encourage their interest in the media text without the text ever definitively confirming the nonheterosexuality of the relevant characters’ (Ng 2017: n.p.), moments like this one on *Riverdale* don’t exclusively speak to those fans who are predisposed to watch television programming through ‘slash goggles’. Julie Levin Russo (2007) initially defined ‘girlslash goggles’ as ‘a visual machinery that interfaces with television’s contradictions, excesses, gaps, and fragments’, enabling fans to ‘see lesbian desire where it might otherwise be invisible’. Writing a decade later, in the wake of both a growing array of lesbian and bisexual characters and fan activism surrounding the frequently poor treatment of those character by producers, Russo (2017) revised:

Today’s debates over the wearing of slash goggles seem to take them as corrective lenses: to their proponents, they’re a fix for the myopic heteronormativity of mainstream representation; to their detractors, they’re blinders that excuse a lack of LGBT visibility.

The representational visibility of queer characters may have increased as the television industry has been forced to court progressively fragmented audiences (Himberg 2014), but Russo’s ‘corrective lenses’ allegory speaks to a different form of fragmentation within television fan culture. This fragmentation may be simultaneously critical of the media industry’s representational strategies and fans’ tactics for evading them, but it elides the anxieties that arise when media producers attempt to don their own pair of ‘slash goggles’ and the ways in which these moments that attempt to acknowledge fannish reading strategies are commonly coded as trolling.

Vitally, the ‘bait’ in queerbaiting implies *intent* on the part of media producers, with homoerotic subtext or content overtly positioned to lure LGBT audiences and/or those fans who ‘see queerly’ (Kohnen 2008). Once fans are ‘caught’ (or, more to the point, counted and sold back to advertisers), the representational bait is revealed to be something other than it initially appeared, with homoerotic desire either sublimated or foreclosed entirely. This fishing analogy serves a dual function for the purposes of this analysis: first, it connects explicitly back to one of the primary etymological origins of the term ‘trolling’, namely stringing lines of bait behind a fishing boat (Phillips, 2015: 15). Second, and more vitally, just as fishermen have increasingly moved away from live bait to plastic lures that only offer a facsimile of the real thing, accusations of queerbaiting are frequently the result of media

producers' propensity for what Kristen J. Warner (2017) calls 'plastic representation'. In her critique, Warner suggests that the 'overdetermining of black images as the marker of societal progress or regression makes any image acceptable on its face, obliterating context and sidelining any consideration of depth' (34). Like plastic, the resulting representations are marked by their 'synthetic malleability' (34), and thus 'can only approximate depth and substance because ultimately it is hollow and cannot survive close scrutiny' (35). One reason why accusations of 'queerbaiting' have so rapidly increased in volume over the past several years is unquestionably due to the fact that fans as an audience segment are well practiced in scrutinizing and calling out these sorts of hollow representations.

It is through this emphasis on a perceived intent to incite anger, frequently provoked by the plastic or 'inauthentic' qualities of producorial efforts to reach out to fans, that I would like to begin conceptualizing a theory of producorial trolling that is closely related to issues of representation. Similar to the ways in which Warner presents 'plastic representation' as a framework to simultaneously think through industrial structures that shape media representations and the desires projected upon these representations by audiences, I would suggest that the plasticity endemic to queerbaiting offers a framework to think through how representations shape and are shaped by toxic fan/producer relations. Fans in many cases have already heeded Warner's call, to see these moments of plastic representation as inorganic and artificial, and to demand better. Fan activist campaigns like #LGBTfansdeservebetter and #BuryYourGays both emerged out of public fights between content creators and fans across an array of social media platforms. Responding to a wave of high profile deaths of lesbian characters on television in 2016, most notably Lexa on the CW series *The 100*, who was gunned down just moments after the popular femslash ship 'Clexa' or Clarke/Lexa was finally consummated on screen (see Mar Guerrero-Pico, María-José Establés, and Rafael Ventura in this themed-section), these hashtag activist campaigns both exposed the long history of killing off queer characters (McConnaughy, 2016) and the toxicity of contemporary fan/producer relationships on social media.

Importantly, these fan activist movements developed in large part due to the (lack of) meaningful response from *The 100*'s showrunner, Jason Rothenberg, to the controversy surrounding the show's use of the 'bury your gays' trope. After weeks of radio silence as fan vitriol grew, Rothenberg (2016) offered an apology to fans via his blog for coupling, and then immediately killing off one half of *The 100*'s most popular queer ship, insisting that 'burying, baiting or hurting anyone was never our intention. It's not who I am'. This brings us back to the thorny issue of intent, or perhaps more pointedly the ways that media producers' intent to 'troll' audiences is perceived by fans. Fans were quick to dismiss the apology as 'hollow' (Jusino, 2016), extending the media representation's plasticity to the media producer, whose actions were similarly scrutinized and painted as inauthentic or deceptive. Part of the fannish dismissal of this seemingly heartfelt apology was predicated on the fact that Rothenberg had, in the weeks between the episode airing and this official apology, discursively doubled down on his creative decision to kill off Lexa, stating that he stood by

the story and would not change anything, even now knowing about the outrage and trauma expressed by LGBT fans (Rothenberg in Holbrook, 2016).

It was thus less a matter of fans 'gleefully shutting the apology down, they simply don't feel they can trust it' (Roth, 2016). This distinction is important, as it gets at the heart of the inherent imbalance when assigning 'trolling' to media producers and fans. This imbalance, and indeed much of the implicit characterization of media producers as 'trolling' fans, is a product of a perceived 'infiltration' of fan identities and communities, and the subsequent exploitation of those identities and communities (Elizabeth Bridges in Roth, 2016). Did Rothenberg, the show's creative team, and the network's publicity department potentially troll or queerbait fans and shippers by strategically making inroads 'on Twitter, Tumblr, and very pointedly at LGBT-specific forums as well in order to garner not only more eyeballs, but also faith in *The 100's* commitment to do LGBT characters' stories justice' (Roth, 2016)? Yes, absolutely. The wave of fannish hurt and vitriol that was directed at Rothenberg and other affiliated writers/producers, however coordinated or hurtful, cannot be framed in these terms. This doesn't mean that fans don't engage in trolling, or that media producers can't be similarly 'baited' by fans, but there is always access to the means of cultural production to consider.

Compounding this reading of 'plastic' representations as efforts to troll fans is that many forms of producorial trolling are similarly delivered via 'humor', or perhaps more accurately uses humor as a patina to evade any appearance of intent to harm, much as trolls do in order to dismiss the impact of their actions. Consider, for example, Judith Fathallah's (2015) definition of queerbaiting as

a strategy by which writers and networks attempt to gain the attention of queer viewers via hints, jokes, gestures, and symbolism suggesting a queer relationship between two characters, and then emphatically denying and laughing off the possibility (491).

The aforementioned *Riverdale* example is a textbook case of this producorial trolling strategy. For Fathallah (2015), in diegetically framing queer coupling as an obvious joke, and identifying fans invested in these couplings as worthy of mockery, what is ultimately reified is 'a heteronormative narrative that poses no danger of offending mainstream viewers at the expense of queer eyes' (491). One important facet of this framing is the way in which producorial trolling emerges from within the feedback loop between the text and promotional paratexts. So, for example Cheryl Blossom's comment on Beronica's 'faux' lesbian kiss was reiterated by the actress who plays Betty (Lili Reinhart) during a press tour for the show. Reinhart pointedly noted, '[o]ur show is not meant to be fan fiction. We give them a taste of it when they kiss, but that's all it is [...] that's just not our show' (in Longeretta 2017, n.p.). Thus, Cheryl's 'joke' diegetically laughs off the possibility, and Reinhart's promotional paratextual remark emphatically denies it.

Trolling the Trolls: Fannish Readings and Proxy Characters

The utilization of ‘humor’ or ‘lulz’ as a smokescreen to target particular minority fan communities and reading practices has perhaps been most actively visible through the recent trend of actors performing live readings of erotic fanfiction featuring their characters (see: Romano 2013 and Alexander 2014). In these cases, slash or femslash fannish shipping practices and the resultant transformative production created by fans that are focused on these speculative homoerotic pairings (fanfiction, fanart, fanvids, etc.) are openly targeted for ridicule. Though fans may not actively deploy the term ‘trolling’ in these instances to describe these moments of mocking transformative fan practices, the humor is designed to function similarly in marking particular groups as ‘inauthentic’ or overly affective. For example, Melissa A. Click and Nettie Brock (2016) suggest that one of *Doctor Who* showrunner Russell T. Davies’ primary strategies for broadening the show’s appeal and bringing new fans to the re-launched cult series was to publically express ‘his disdain for fans whom he feels take things too far’ (118), thereby reinforcing his own carefully calibrated (and thus always already affirmational and deferential) fannish affect for the property and reasserting his power in the process. These moments in which fans’ transformative works are offered up for ‘lulz’ by either talk show hosts, interviewers, or the creators themselves (rarely with any permission granted by the fan to share this work), are marked by either laughter or a performative response of horror and disgust.

In modelling this response, they importantly design moments of collective trolling in which media producers and the various ‘audiences’ present (live in studio, but also via an array of media through which this footage might be broadcast and spread) are encouraged to ‘share the joke’ and not think too deeply about whose expense that joke is at or the power structures that undergird who can make it. These performances also, importantly, situate the fans producing this ‘scandalous’ and unauthorized content as the true trolls in order to justify their mockery as an exercise in ‘trolling the trolls’. This not only belies the reality that the vast majority of transformative content being shared was never intended to be seen by media producers or the outside world, and was produced to generate pleasure for their fellow fans rather than provoke the creators or stars of their fan object.

Similarly, when television series like *Supernatural* (CW 2005-present) and *Sherlock* (BBC 2010-present) work ‘fan-proxy’ characters into their narrative, they commonly utilize humor to express their disdain for fanfiction and the fangirls who tend to compose and consume it. These sorts of ‘fan proxy’ characters both reflect and refract the growing toxicity of fan/producer relationships that have emerged out of the growing intimacy between creators and fans on digital platforms such as Twitter and Tumblr. Take, for example, the Season Three premiere of *Sherlock*, which playfully referenced many of the fan theories that circulated online following the apparent death of the title character at the end of Season Two. In one of the visual reenactments of these ‘fan theories’, we see Sherlock and his nemesis, Moriarty, conspiring to fake the detective’s death, giggling about their plan before the music swells and their faces move inexorably closer. Just before the kiss can be consummated, however, we smash cut to a close up the leader of a group of fans sharing

theories about how and why Sherlock faked his death. This man exclaims, directly into the camera and thus breaking the fourth wall to directly address the show's fans: 'What?! Are you out of your mind?!' It is quickly revealed that this particular theory belongs to Laura, one of the few female members of the group. She protests, suggesting that her theory the Sherlock and Moriarty were secretly lovers is as plausible as any of the others being offered up, but she is quickly chastised for 'not taking this seriously' and told to leave. Here, then, it's less fan interaction that is being taken issue with, but rather interactions that openly contradict showrunner Steven Moffat's insistence that Sherlock is not gay, despite the show's many jokes to the contrary. As Bethan Jones (2014) notes in her discussion of this scene, *Sherlock's* 'female fans are firstly unsure of whether the scene is a nod to them or a criticism, and secondly because they want to be left alone in peace to enjoy the series, and instead are constantly dragged out to be laughed at', trolled consistently by Moffat.

Supernatural has taken this sort of producorial trolling one step further, offering both an array of fan-proxy characters over the years as well as a proxy character for the showrunner. For example, 'The Monster at the End of this Book' (4.18), a meta-episode in which protagonists Sam and Dean discover a series of novels detailing their adventures, not only do Sam and Dean symbolically confront *Supernatural's* female fan base (many of whom ship the brother's relationship), they meet their 'creator', Carver Edlund. This fictional amalgam of two of the television series' writers (Jeremy Carver and Ben Edlund) is revealed to be a pen name for Chuck Shirley, but most fans viewed the character as an avatar for the show's creator Eric Kripke. As Laura E. Felschow (2010) has argued:

this self-reflexive exercise jokingly positions Eric Kripke as an all-knowing, all-powerful god and we, the fans, as his followers. While this is a relationship referred to in jest, underneath the joke lies a kernel of truth, even more so later on when Chuck is revealed to be a prophet whose 'Winchester Gospel' has earned him protection from the archangels.

Just as 'the logic of lulz' make it difficult to differentiate between 'playful (if antisocial) irony, satire, and parody and 'earnest' racism' (Milner 2013: 74) or sexism or homophobia, it is frequently difficult with both 'creator' and 'fan-proxy' characters to differentiate between playful or self-reflexive acknowledgement of fan culture and the earnest disdain for it.

In some cases, though, this disdain is clearly conveyed, and efforts to actively troll particular segments of the fan base become transparent. Becky was first revealed in the Season Five premiere episode writing erotic fanfic about *Supernatural's* two main characters, Sam and Dean. In all of the episodes she appears in, Becky embodies the age-old pathology that fans are incapable of distinguishing fantasy from reality. Importantly, all of her efforts to interact with the show's characters are mocked and circumvented, rendering her something of a cautionary tale for a particular subset of fans. Much as trolls desire to both provoke a response from their targets, while also actively striving to silence them, the treatment of Becky (and other fan-proxy characters like her), reveals the impetus behind

producorial trolling. Alternately, some scholars have read these pejorative female fan-proxy characters as producing their own unique brand of disruptive humor. Judith May Fathallah (2010), for example, has suggested that Becky on *Supernatural* can be viewed as enacting Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of resistant laughter by 'refusing to take seriously the official, dominant storyline, inviting those not privileged in mainstream society to appropriate the narrative for their pleasure'. Fathallah makes a compelling case for Becky's disruptive presence to be read and appropriated by fangirls as a form of resistance against the series' masculinist narratives, but just as Fathallah cautions that fans must be socially positioned to 'share the joke', it might be argued that the creator must be socially positioned within the fan community to make the joke without it appearing as a self-serving effort to produce 'lulz' for the production team.

'Asian chick speaks less': Fan Edits and the 'Chauvinist Cut' of *The Last Jedi*

It is precisely because work on toxic fan practices has a tendency to elide instances on industry provocation that I have thus far focused on instances of what I have been calling 'producorial trolling'. Now, we turn to what is perhaps a more conventional example of toxic fan practice to consider intersections between toxicity and trolling, and the conceptual slippage between the two categories. On January 14, 2018, one month after the theatrical release of *Star Wars: Episode VIII – The Last Jedi* and in the midst of continued sturm and drang surrounding the film's representational politics and narrative choices that polarized the franchise's fan base (VanDerWerff, 2017), a 'De-Feminized Fanedit' of the film appeared on torrent site 'The Pirate Bay'. With a scant 46-minute runtime, the anonymous fan edit was accompanied by an artist's statement that unabashedly labeled it 'The Chauvinist Cut,' and offered the following rationale for its creation, namely to improve *The Last Jedi* by stripping it of 'Girlz Powah and other silly stuff'.

This 'silly stuff' was documented in a long list of elements excised from the film, which apparently ranged from any scene in which a core male character (e.g. Kylo Ren or Luke Skywalker) appears 'whiny' or not sufficiently 'badass', to the wholesale erasure of female characters such as Holdo under the umbrella principle that, 'when there's a scene where a woman is cut in making some important statement that can be substituted by another statement by a guy, then she gets cut out'. As the header for this section suggests, particular ire is directed at Rose, the much-celebrated first 'Asian chick' to appear in a key role in the *Star Wars* franchise. The fan artist's statement goes so far as to state that Rose deserves to be awkwardly cut out of the film, noting that it 'serves her right for all the heinous stuff she did'. This 'heinous stuff' appears to be deigning to be a female character of color within a franchise that white male fans claim ownership over, and doing things like occasionally speaking or potentially 'bullying' male characters.

At first glance, this appears to be an open-and-shut case of toxic fan practice, but the whole endeavor also seems designed (almost clumsily so in its overt racism and sexism) to provoke outrage and generate attention from the mainstream media. And it did just that, spawning a wave of incensed articles, fan commentary across social media platforms and,

ultimately, responses from the film's director, Rian Johnson, as well as Luke Skywalker himself, Mark Hamill. The reaction from both Johnson and Hamill was both explicit laughter and mockery of the endeavor, with Hamill simply filling his nearly all of his tweet's 240 character allotment with the repeated image of the 'ROTFL' crying laughing emoji. This response is significant on two fronts: first, if the creator of the 'Chauvinist Cut' was indeed a troll looking for attention and seeking to spark outrage, there is perhaps no greater success than winning the attention of the film's creators and having them signal boost the project. However, because trolls seek to spark indignation in order to mock other emotional responses (particularly around issues of racism and sexism), we might also read this play by Johnson and Hamill as a coup: deflating any desire to take the exercise seriously and stealing the troll's lulz for themselves.

As one geek culture blogger noted in the wake of the fan edit and debates about the sincerity of its creator, 'The Last Jedi chauvinist cut, even if it is the work of a particularly bored troll, is a product of this supposed proprietorship over a fictional world and its fictional characters' (Busch, 2018). It is, of course, impossible to determine whether the creator of the 'Chauvinist Cut' is a disgruntled longtime *Star Wars* fan, a troll seeking attention or to sow discord within the fandom, or some combination thereof. What is clear, and intriguing, is that this 'De-Feminized' edit also appears to be born out of a criticism of what the fan perceives to be an industrial exercise in plastic representation. While it is vital to note that the impetus behind these sorts of toxic fan critiques surrounding representational diversity and, say, complaints about queerbaiting are diametrically opposed (the former a intolerant attempt to retcon *Star Wars* to a more representationally regressive moment, and the latter an effort to call attention to and correct decades of 'Bury Your Gays' tropes), they nonetheless orbit around similar fannish anxieties about how the media industry hails and values particular types of fans.

A Few Closing Words on 'Fan Entitlement'

Some of this toxicity between media producers and fans has been compounded by a wave of think pieces surrounding how fans' (still comparatively limited) access to the means of cultural production and dissemination of discourse has rendered them 'entitled'. On May 30 2016, a *Birth. Movies. Death.* blog post by Devin Faraci (2016) titled 'Fandom is Broken' gained traction on social media, provoking an array of response posts from fans and other pop culture bloggers. Faraci (who, it is worth noting, resigned shortly thereafter amidst similar sexual assault allegations that he apologized for and did not deny) began his thesis with a simple, yet incredibly loaded and pointedly gendered, question: 'What if Annie Wilkes had the internet?' Faraci's primary critique was that social media's creation of 'ever thinner' walls separating creators and fans, and fans' audacious desires to 'try to shape [content]' through their criticisms, has produced 'some kind of a chamber of screams, where [fans] can and do voice their immediate and often personal displeasure directly and horribly'. Though many of Faraci's examples of entitled and aggressive (e.g. 'trollish') fans were male, by invoking the deranged fangirl protagonist of Stephen King's *Misery* from the outset all of

these instances of fan entitlement were implicitly rooted in feminized, overly affective fannish 'excess'. Even more problematically, Faraci conflated fan activist campaigns for more representational diversity, like *Frozen* fandom's #GiveElsaAGirlfriend effort, with creators death threats and the 'uglier parts of fandom - the entitlement, the demands, the frankly poor understanding of how drama and storytelling work'. Thus, between these two descriptions, Faraci unwittingly describes the precise types of internet denizens that are so frequently the subjects of trolling, all the while framing them as potential trolls. Though Faraci is careful to not affix identity markers to the 'entitled fans' at the crux of his argument, the bulk of his piece is spent critiquing the wholly valid criticisms and recuperative or transformative textual practices most associated with fangirls and fans of color, in order to defend those that need the least defending: overwhelmingly white, straight, male media producers.

In his framing of media creators as the victims of fannish trolling, Faraci not only fails to acknowledge the power differential between media producers and fans, but that those creators who purportedly have a strong understanding of how drama and storytelling work will often weaponize those tropes to shut down particular fannish readings and criticism. Britta Lundin (2018), who thoughtfully balances her professional identity as a writer on *Riverdale* with her longstanding awareness of and participation in fan culture, notes:

I was thinking about 'fan entitlement' and how it's a thing we're talking about now, because these pesky fans are speaking out about things they'd like to see in their media. But on the other side of things, creator entitlement is also very real. [...] creators, I think, have always felt like they get to decide what's best for the story because they're the creators, and screw all those other voices, but now consumers are challenging that entitlement (373).

Just as it is impossible to discuss trolling without identifying the privilege that so frequently underpins and fuels it (however performatively or unconsciously), we cannot affix the same parameters of privilege to media producers and fans, or unilaterally consider 'fans' as an identity category divorced from real-world identity markers. Moreover, the adage 'don't feed the trolls' advice given to the subjects of trolling that rests on the logic that trolls feed on attention and outrage in order to produce lulz or schadenfreudic pleasure, is not viable under these conditions. Media producers and fans are not only mutually reliant on each other for sustenance; they are perpetually feeding each other both textually and paratextually across an array of media platforms. While both sides may play a role in turning the fan/producer relationship toxic, it is central to acknowledge that each operate from a distinctly different position of power that fundamentally impacts a conception of their actions as 'trolling'. For the time being it is sufficient to note that, just as some plastics contain toxins, forms of plastic representation that fail to meaningfully fulfill promises of representational diversity are more likely to poison the relationship between media

producers and fans, and these same forms might facilitate the spread of toxic fan practices and subcultures.

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