

## **The leaky canon: Constructing and policing heteronormativity in the *Harry Potter* fandom**

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### **Abstract:**

Though scholars have turned to the *Harry Potter* universe as a prime example of an explosive, international fan community and as a site of canon-building, few have drawn attention to the particular websites and individual web identities that were responsible for constructing and policing the HP fanon. This article looks closely at the websites MuggleNet and the Leaky Cauldron as they operated during the early millennium and argues that these spaces and those respected individuals who maintained them established the foundation for a gender normative and often conservative ‘mainstream’ Potter canon. Of interest is how these websites gained authority and power within the fandom and fan communities writ large, a significant feat considering they were centered in a children’s fictional world and, more notably, were sometimes created and managed by children (and at the very least frequented by them). These websites’ role in the HP community complicates understandings of children’s agency, identity construction, and power in large part because of the way gender and sexuality are presented in these sites’ fan-generated material. In short, MuggleNet and the Leaky Cauldron’s understanding of the Potter ‘canon’ as being heteronormative – as is most evident in their actions and reactions in the shipping wars – does more than simply police interpretations of Rowling’s books: it also reveals how gatekeeping practices can slip into toxicity, transforming a fandom community into one that is arguably hostile to multiple interpretations or, more worryingly, traditionally marginalized fans.

**Keywords:** fandom, *Harry Potter*, heteronormativity, childhood, children’s agency, MuggleNet, canon, fanon, toxicity.

As a child, I primarily used the clunky, beige IBM in our playroom as a gateway (or portkey) to the *Harry Potter* fan community. It is only in retrospect, and as I consider the Potter fandom in light of academic conversations about fan culture, digital spaces, and, especially,

childhood, that I have begun to understand that my particular experience was likely not coincidental. The websites I frequented – namely, MuggleNet.com (MuggleNet) and the-leaky-cauldron.org (Leaky) – are and were connected, partly because of their fame and because of what they produced. Both were concerned with providing legitimate or reliable news and/or fan created material and were conscious of keeping their material rooted in the characterizations and world they believed supported by J.K. Rowling’s source books. These decisions no doubt contributed to these spaces’ popularity, especially during the years of the books’ publication when ‘official’ news and believable theorizing were so important. Intrinsic to this believability and legitimacy was an adherence to a largely heteronormative interpretation of the source texts and characters. This interpretation manifested most obviously in these websites’ stance during the ‘shipping wars’, a term that describes the ferocious (and, in some senses, ongoing) debate about whether Hermione was in love with Harry or Ron. ‘Shipping’ is a common fan experience and its capacity for creating toxicity is dependent on context, such as the fandom in question and the characters being shipped. In the case of the Potterverse during the early millennium, shipping took on a significance that went beyond the romantic preferences of characters and instead had to do with canonicity, legitimacy, and, consequently, power. For these many reasons, MuggleNet and Leaky can be thought of as places of canon-policing and fanon construction within the larger Potter fandom. That these websites exercised power within their online community and sometimes within the internet as a whole is significant considering they were centered in a fictional world created for children and, more importantly from a childhood studies perspective, they were sometimes created and managed by children and at the very least frequented by them. The Potter fandom, then, as represented by these two websites, complicates understandings of children’s agency, online identity construction, and cultural influence, in large part because of the way gender and sexuality are presented in these communities’ fan-generated material. In other words, MuggleNet and the Leaky Cauldron’s perpetuation of the *Harry Potter* series’ heteronormativity, made evident in their roles in and reactions to the shipping wars, provides a context for considering the implications of fandom gatekeeping or policing, particularly given their context within a child- or youth-centered mediaverse.

Underlying this concern about the implications of fan practices and expressions of power is the sense that these acts can produce digital environments that are toxic. The practices that establish the bounds of a fandom and perpetuate its continued engagement with its core media material are the lifeblood of fan communities; to condemn canon-enforcement and fanon construction as intrinsically toxic would be to condemn fandom itself. But because particular websites or web presences can construct and enforce fandom behavior – either via explicit choices about what can and cannot be posted or shared, or via more subtle expressions of bias for one interpretation or theory over another – it is easy to see how those spaces or individuals can become exclusionary forces within a fan culture. The toxicity, then, emerges from actions that marginalize or exclude fans (or characters) that are frequently marginalized or excluded in broader societal contexts: i.e., some

fandoms' treatment of people of color or members of the LGBTQ community mirror the harmful treatment of those groups in global cultural and political spaces. In this way, fandoms or digital fan communities are no different than any other social group. They embody the same flaws and are products of the same ideologies as any other human organization. What differentiates digital fandoms and practices from other social groups is also what particularly places them at risk for toxicity: their location online.

While fandom has certainly had a long history, the advent of the internet has opened the door for a kind of renaissance of fan culture. The internet, which allows people from all over the world to communicate, share media, and jointly create spaces for such interactions, has been critical to the growth and sustainment of fandom. Online fandom is significant because of this capacity for media sharing and communication, but also because of its anonymity (fans have the choice of whether to reveal their real-life identities), its accessibility (fandom in online spaces does not require the kind of entrance fees that real life conferences or gatherings do), its diversity (connected to its anonymity and, of course, that it is the World Wide Web), and its ability to distribute news in real time. These capacities – anonymity, accessibility, diversity, and immediacy – are what make modern fandoms exciting spaces for collaboration and imagination, but they are also some of the factors that allow for toxicity. Anonymity, in particular, creates an atmosphere where ideas can be expressed (seemingly) without the risk of consequences, and thus can be abused to bully or marginalize others. Immediacy exacerbates the issue by removing time-enforced reflection: a thought can be posted before the author has paused to consider its implications.

The benefits and harmfulness of online communities have been the subject of many studies and editorials, and the subject will no doubt continue to inspire debate as technology continually changes. For the purposes of this article, two specific online communities serve as exhibits of fan behavior and culture. After first considering the conditions that allowed these communities to gain power, the following pages will close read these sites (as they appeared during the period of the Potter books' publication) as if they are documentary texts. As texts, their authorship (referring to their webmasters and contributing fans), their posted material, and their design will be considered alongside the canonical Potter books and contemporaneous and current scholarship and media coverage, with the goal being to better understand how issues surrounding authority and legitimacy contribute to and complicate fan communities. In particular, these texts will offer a lens through which to observe specific authority figures within the fandom and to, consequently, speculate about cultural conceptions of childhood agency and toxic practices within online spaces. These websites lend themselves to literary analysis both because of the object of their interest (children's/YA novels) and expression of that interest and because of their popularity and influence within one of the most prominent fan communities online. There are innumerable online fan communities of varying size and influence, but most can agree that one of the largest of all is the one centered on J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series.

There are a number of potential explanations for the size and impact of the *Harry Potter* fandom, ranging from the fact that the books were being published as the internet shifted into Web 2.0 to the series' unprecedented popularity and commercial success. How and why the fandom grew is less important for the purposes of showing how a heteronormative canon/fanon developed within it than what it grew into: there are Harry Potter podcasts, vlogs, blogs, forums, chatrooms, news sites, memes, recipe collections, Pinterest pages, twitter feeds, tumblrs, YouTube channels, rock bands (with music distributed mostly online), RPGs, encyclopedias, and even HP-specific social media sites (mugglespace.com). And, of course, there are whole oceans of fanfiction – Potter was far and away the most popular world on fanfiction.net and is still extremely popular on An Archive of Our Own. *Harry Potter*, then and now, is a force on the internet. Its size is not necessarily what makes the Potter fandom so significant, so much as its innovative history. As Anne Jamison writes in 'A Selective History of Media Fandom', '*Harry Potter* fans were on the front lines of establishing the mechanisms and traditions of online fandom on a massive scale, taking them outside of smaller subcultures to a much broader online audience' (154). The HP podcasts, blogs, forums, and fanfiction, particularly those that were created during the books' publication, are worthy of notice not just because of the sheer number of them but because of the role they played in the formation of the internet as it is today.

Beyond its foundational relationship to today's social media-based and collaborative internet, the Harry Potter fandom is also noteworthy compared to many other web communities because it is centered in literature produced for children or young adults. Despite this, there seems to be a lack of scholarship about children's roles and participation as creators or agents in these online spaces. This scholarly gap may be a reflection of both legal constraints – studies involving minors face particular institutional and logistical challenges – and cultural/academic debate surrounding the very definition of childhood. This latter issue has emerged in recent scholarship due to increasing awareness of, to use Karen Sánchez-Eppler's words:

the complicated relations, and often glaring contradictions, between any society's idea of childhood and the lived experience of actual children. [Studies] offer persuasive evidence both of how attitudes toward childhood have changed over time and place, and of how much the content and duration of this life stage has differed even for children in the same society but of different genders, races, or class positions (35).

Despite the slipperiness of the term 'childhood', Sánchez-Eppler acknowledges 'the sense of childhood as a ubiquitous and fundamental category of human life has proved remarkably resilient' (35). In short, the reality of childhood as a biological stage of development cannot be entirely ignored and has supported the general sense that childhood is somehow stable or definable, though this universalism as a cultural category should be questioned. The Potter series itself highlights some of these definitional issues: is it written for child readers

(Harry is eleven in the first book) or teens, and what might signal that difference? Does the fact that it takes place in an alternative-England in a wizarding world erase issues of class and ethnicity as they might be understood in the muggle world (especially given the wizarding world's own institutional biases)? How might Harry's exposure to violence and position as the 'Chosen One' complicate understandings of his childhood or agency/autonomy? In other words, childhood itself is a construct whose flimsiness is exposed when subjected to scrutiny along these intersectional lines, and these books in particular complicate age-dependent understandings of the term.

It is not surprising, then, that what scholarship does exist regarding Potter readership is generally more focused on teens than children. As its age-centric term indicates, teenagers are slightly easier to categorize, though whether teens can also be considered children continues to be a matter of cultural and legal debate. Because of this focus, the research highlights teen-related issues: identity building and gender expression in chat rooms or social media spaces, for example, or fanfiction featuring teenage Potter characters that include sexual themes. Most scholars either construe the youthful readers (rarely writers) as victims or else ignore them entirely. Don Tresca's 'Spellbound: An Analysis of Adult-Oriented Harry Potter Fanfiction', for instance, dwells at length on what it might mean for pornographic fanfiction to focus on fictional children, making little distinction between the age or autonomy of a sixth year Hogwarts student and a third year, without once considering what it might mean that children or teens might be writing it. The word 'adult' always accompanies 'fanfic' in his article, begging the question who he thinks is reading and producing these texts and in what contexts. Other scholarly pursuits unrelated to fanfiction but concerned with Potter fandom that have the potential to consider issues of childhood often do not: *Harry Potter and the Millennials'* express purpose is to examine the huge impact the Potter series had on children growing up in the 1990s and early 2000s, but only in the context of how it might affect their current political affiliations and citizenship (as if children have no relationship to such things until they are eighteen). Heather Dunphy's dissertation 'Trust, Friendship, and Hogwarts Houses: An Ethnography of Harry Potter Fans' explicitly excludes children who desired to be a part of the project. As Dunphy explains it, 'many Harry Potter fans under the age of 18 were interested in participating in my research, but I did not include them in my study' (73). If anything, children seem to be assumed but understudied presences within these online spaces.

The lack of scholarship about children working and acting in these digital settings is odd both because these settings are ostensibly for children and, as noted by a select few of the scholars above, written or created by children. Many of the news sites and forums that appeared during the years of the books' publication were built and managed by children and teens, with the most notable being MuggleNet. Emerson Spartz was twelve years old in 1999 when he read the first three *Harry Potter* books and consequently created MuggleNet.com. The site was one of many fansites that doubled as a *Potter* news source and community builder, yet it was particularly successful and respected within the whole fandom for a variety of reasons, including its constant expansion and innovation. When

Spartz first built the fan site, it truly was just that – a site built by a fan of Rowling’s books, a place where he could synthesize materials about *Harry Potter* that he found on the internet, post any news he found, and generally provide information about the world of the books and their author. As the books exploded in popularity, though, so too did MuggleNet, and just as Rowling’s books became increasingly longer and denser, so too did Spartz’s site expand into a mega fan resource and community. Today, the site is still expanding, and now has more material that reflects a post-social media internet. MuggleNet has gone corporate: it offers internships, supports specific philanthropic efforts, has its own social media platform, and its own site-specific merchandise. The once twelve-year-old *Harry Potter* fan, in short, built a small media empire and is now the CEO of a major digital corporation (MuggleNet.com/history).

Arguably equally as famous (particularly in the peak years of the books’ publications) as MuggleNet, the Leaky Cauldron also grew into a huge Potter source, blending news, fan productions, and community spaces, though its origin story differs notably from MuggleNet’s. First, the creators of Leaky were not children like Emerson Spartz. When Kevin C. Murphy started the blog in 2000, he was a recent Harvard graduate, and B.K. DeLong, who assisted in managing it and took control of the site after the first year, was a recent graduate of UMASS Amherst. The Leaky Cauldron was established as a news blog with contributors, with no other features besides the news page. The fact that it was news-only at first also distinguishes it from MuggleNet; Leaky was not a ‘fan’ site in the sense that it was a space to meet other fans and express enthusiasm for Rowling’s books so much as a resource for anonymous viewers. Over the first half of the 2000s, Leaky, like MuggleNet, grew exponentially, though its role as a resource-before-community never quite disappeared. By late 2001, Leaky, like MuggleNet, had sections dedicated to the cast of the films, the various worldwide book covers, merchandise licensed by Warner Bros. and Scholastic, and online games, but underlying these sections was a clear desire to be a more academic resource than those others rooted in chatrooms and fanfiction. Unlike MuggleNet, Leaky, which has been managed by Melissa Anelli since 2004, has not expanded and shifted to reflect the social media giants of the contemporary internet today, but instead has pared down to its main (and traditional) features, including news, well-argued essays, and archived material.

These two websites are linked for several reasons, but perhaps the most obvious is that, especially during the years 2002-2009, these sites were famous within the fandom and even outside of it. Leaky and MuggleNet’s fame is evident in the amount of press attention they received and in the impact they had within Potter fandom and others. MuggleNet currently has an entire section dubbed ‘Press’, which lists the various newspapers, television channels, and journals that have referenced or featured the website. Likewise, Leaky has been recognized in many of the same publications and, like MuggleNet, has received People’s Choice internet awards, and much of their special content has received public recognition as well. Moreover, both sites caught the attention of members of different online fan communities. MuggleNet, in particular, made a point of acknowledging these

often negative responses to their site/fame. Spartz created a section called 'The Wall of Shame' – at first just labeled 'hate mail' – in early 2003 as a response to a number of emails that he had received as the founder and self-described 'crap-taker' of MuggleNet (MuggleNet.com). That Spartz personally received so many emails threatening him and his website reveals one form toxicity can take within fan cultures: dissatisfied fans or participants, aided by anonymity and mob mentality, can target scapegoats using both public (forums and comments) and private (email and messaging) means. The 'Wall of Shame' also indicates how famous Spartz had become and how culturally significant MuggleNet was within online fan communities in general: the vitriol was likely due to other fan sites and even fandoms feeling intimidated by what could have been perceived as MuggleNet's imperial force.<sup>1</sup>

It is difficult to determine whether fame fuels legitimacy or legitimacy fame, but another connection between these two websites was their continually increasing power, influence, or perceived legitimacy within the *Harry Potter* fandom. This, during the years when Rowling's books were still being written, was linked to the rhetoric of the websites themselves, the connections these sites and their webmasters made to authority figures within the Potterverse, and, interestingly, to their relationship with one another. Looking first at the details of the websites themselves, it is easy to see how viewers and participants would come to see both spaces as authoritative. In the case of MuggleNet, Spartz established his site's importance, if not within the realm of *Harry Potter* than at least within the realm of fansites, in some of its earliest iterations. The oldest version of MuggleNet available through web.archive.org is dated March 2001, and in it Spartz acknowledges the unusualness of a child being webmaster of a site and provides a series of dos and don'ts for those interested in building their own webpage. The tone of both sections is one of complete confidence in the legitimacy of the content and of his project as a whole, which is an attitude that only became more apparent as the website grew over time. By 2002 the revamped site's tagline was 'Simply the Best...', by 2005 it was 'The #1 Harry Potter Site in the World', and today it has settled on the straightforward 'The #1 Harry Potter Site'. The sheer scale of the site speaks to its comprehensiveness as well. Where the self-applauding notes might fail to convince, the sidebar on the 2005 version of the site, which consisted of sixty-one sections including eight different editorials and three different forums, might do the trick. MuggleNet created the sense, then and now, that it was the hub for all things Potter; there was always the feeling that every true fan in some way participated in or frequented the discussions, resources, or fan-created material available on the site, a feeling confirmed by the icon on the bottom of their main page, which tracked the number of 'Muggles currently online'. The number, from my memory, was always in the thousands.

The design of and features available on Leaky, too, facilitated an air of authority. By early 2005, the tagline beneath Leaky's header had shifted from 'A Harry Potter Weblog' to 'A Proud Member of the Floo Network'. The graphics had shifted from a headshot of young Emma Watson as Hermione (a pointed reference to their Hermione-like dedication to research and accuracy) to a picture of Hedwig delivering a changed-daily image of *The Daily*

*Prophet*. The search engine in the top right hand corner of the website was labeled ‘the oldest and most comprehensive HP news archive on the web’ (the-leaky-cauldron.org). Leaky was also vocal about supporting and associating with the Harry Potter Lexicon, written and managed by Steve Vander Ark. The Lexicon was an extremely detailed and complex site that maps any and all facts related to the plot of the Potter books, the details of the Wizarding World, and the lives and past of its characters. The material of this site (partnered with Leaky as part of the Floo Network) was such a lauded resource that there were rumors and a good bit of evidence that Warner Bros. copied Vander Ark’s timeline for use in the extras section of the *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* DVD ([www.hplexicon.com](http://www.hplexicon.com)).<sup>2</sup> Where MuggleNet felt like the most frequented and popular Potter space, Leaky always felt like the most thorough and its news, encyclopedic materials, and forums like the best places for well-argued, substantial theorizing or study.

But presentation, breadth, and depth are not the only, nor even the most notable ways both MuggleNet and Leaky established their legitimacy and, consequently, authority in the Potterverse. As noted above, their connections to key figures central to the production of the books and movies were critical to their success. In most cases, their connections overlapped. Without a doubt, much of both sites’ power and influence can be attributed to their relationship with J.K. Rowling herself. In the ‘History’ section of MuggleNet, there are several paragraphs dedicated to ‘Author and Corporate Relations’, where they establish their relationship with Rowling:

Rowling has praised MuggleNet on her website, bestowing upon it her Fan Site Award in 2004, saying, “It’s high time I paid homage to the mighty MuggleNet”. She also said that she occasionally visits the site and sometimes reads the comments left by visitors [...] she once visited the site’s chat room and was snubbed when she anonymously joined a conversation about Harry Potter theories (MuggleNet.com).

Leaky, too, makes a point of highlighting their connection to Rowling in their ‘About The Leaky Cauldron’ section, stating, ‘Rowling [...] has called Leaky “my favorite fan site” and “a wonderfully well-designed mine of accurate information on all things Harry Potter” that “attracts a lot of knowledgeable and entertaining debate”. She said it is about “the worst kept secret on this website that I am a huge fan”’ (the-leaky-cauldron.org). Moreover, Rowling personally invited Melissa Anelli and Emerson Spartz to interview her in Scotland directly after the release of *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* in 2005. The only other interviews Rowling gave at the time were to Katie Couric and *Time* magazine (the-leaky-cauldron.org). The significance of this interview and its aftermath will be examined more closely in upcoming paragraphs.

This connection with Rowling illustrates how central the author function can be to the fandoms and to the Potter fandom in particular, and how the author or creator of the source material for a fan community can be god-like to that community. This is illustrated by

the language of these sites themselves, wherein spaces like MuggleNet and Leaky are ‘unofficial’ where Rowling is always ‘official’. Because Rowling specifically identifies MuggleNet and the Leaky Cauldron by name, attaches characteristics to them (‘mighty’ or ‘accurate’), and celebrates them, she legitimizes both sites’ projects, confirms their reputations, and, in a sense (even if unintentionally), sanctions their materials and approaches. Besides Rowling, both sites had and continue to foster relationships with Warner Bros., Scholastic, and members of the film cast. That these relationships were overwhelmingly positive is notable: especially in the year prior to the release of the first Potter film, Warner Bros. attempted to shut down a number of fan sites on the basis that their use of Harry Potter materials violated copyright.<sup>3</sup> The significance of these positive relationships in terms of thinking about childhood agency and power, about fanon building and policing, and, embedded in both things (as I hope to make clear later), gender and sexuality as manifested in the fandom and fan creations, cannot be overstated. Nor can the fact that these websites were linked by more than just their similar innovation and growth trajectories over the course of the books’ publications – both sites were singled out by Rowling and other Potter authorities without the legal and publicity heartaches that such links caused for other fansites or individual fans (see endnotes ii and iii). MuggleNet and Leaky, then, grew to be the seminal websites in the Potterverse, but they did so both organically and, increasingly as the years went on, with the express support of powerful figures external to the fandom.

The podcasts, news items, encyclopedic entries, and awards from Rowling herself all contributed not just to Leaky and MuggleNet’s legitimacy, but to their constructive authority within the fandom. In the years 2000-2007, this manifested most clearly within fan speculation. While the series was incomplete, sites like MuggleNet and Leaky could gain influence because of the likelihood or believability of their theories. In short, the books themselves laid the groundwork for a kind of speculative canon that the fans then constructed and policed on the internet – resulting in what that same online community called the ‘fanon’. As Busse and Hellekson define it, fanon is ‘the events created by the fan community in a particular fandom and repeated pervasively throughout the fantext. Fanon often creates particular details or character readings even though canon does not fully support it’ (9). Canon-based fanon construction and policing seem to be standard practice in fandoms and indeed are central to the community-building experience (within the Potterverse, for example, mocking Michael Gambon’s non-canonical interpretation of Dumbledore in the *Goblet of Fire* film is a nearly universal pastime).<sup>4</sup> As noted above, it is not the concern over canonicity/fanonicity itself that is problematic; rather, it is that the practice of gatekeeping or policing can occasionally slip into toxicity. A concern for the canon, combined with authority and anonymity, can quickly transform communities into hostile spaces, especially for fans or characters that are traditionally Othered or marginalized, as some of the below examples show.

The fanon important to this paper can be understood as the purportedly book-based and often Rowling-sanctioned version of the main characters’ lives and loves. This fanon can

be expounded upon, so long as the characters stay recognizable and continue along the life path laid out for them in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, in fanfiction or fan-written music or videos. Leaky and MuggleNet were invested in this fanon; both implicitly and often explicitly required that the characters in fanfiction featured on their site act, look, and otherwise be like those in her books and that the editorials, blogs, and podcasts must take care to use their mainstream interpretation of the books as source material for all arguments and speculation. Canonicity and fanonicity rooted in the source Potter books lent these sites and nearly all of their material authority for obvious reasons: in a time when the books were unfinished, it was quite something to be able to predict that Snape was ultimately good, or that the gleam in Dumbledore's eye at the end of *Goblet of Fire* was not a sign of his being a Death Eater but rather an indication that Harry would survive. Both predictions were much easier to make if the theorists themselves were close readers of character and plot development in Rowling's text, and much, much easier to do if Rowling allowed them to interview her or otherwise acknowledged their questions.

What is perhaps unique to the Potter fandom, though, and absolutely central to MuggleNet and Leaky's power within the fanon, is that so much of the fan speculation was centered around one debate: whether Hermione Granger would, by the end of the series, get together with Ron Weasley or Harry Potter (designated, at the time, in fanfiction and throughout the fandom as R/Hr and H/Hr). This debate was so widespread throughout the fandom, so passionate (bordering on militant), and so protracted that it became known as the shipping wars (referring to different relationships). The shipping wars were, in many ways, what drove the entire fandom during the years of the books' publications. In a *San Francisco Chronicle* article titled 'If you're an obsessed *Harry Potter* fan, Voldemort isn't the problem. It's Hermione versus Ginny' and published after the release of *Half-Blood Prince*, Emerson Spartz is quoted as saying 'Romance in the books is the most prominent source of debate in the online fandom, where many of the fans border on obsessive, but casual readers will never understand what the big deal is.' Chonin, the writer, notes, 'Potter fans have long been divided into camps advocating one 'ship over another [...] Competition has been especially fierce between [...] camps, where devotees have spent years on various Web sites, forums and mailing lists arguing the plausibility of their chosen pairings.' Vaguely inaccurate summary aside (the wars had as much to do with Ron as with Ginny), the *Chronicle* is right to identify the online interactions as 'fierce' and to point out, as it does with its article title, that in many ways the central plot of the Potter series took the backseat in the fandom to the burgeoning romance between the main child (and then teenage) characters.

This fixation on the romance among the trio has its foundation in the books themselves; it is not as though either ship emerged online entirely unsubstantiated by Rowling's texts. Both sides of the R/Hr and H/Hr debate, then, used the books to support their arguments, and thus parts of the series itself can be implicated in some of the issues connected to the shipping wars and the ways it manifested online. These issues are mainly centered in the nature of the ships themselves: both are heteronormative and bring with

them particular ideas about gender and sexuality. Again, particularly in spaces like MuggleNet and Leaky, the goal of the creators and participants was to keep speculation and their fan written materials true to the books – the shipping war was not over which ship was better, per se, but rather which seemed likely to conclude the series. Melissa Anelli, in her bestselling book *Harry, A History*, devotes quite a bit of time discussing the war, and surmises the issue as it was in the early millennium perfectly: ‘this debate was for the facts. Not what should happen, but what would happen, based on facts from the ultimate source’ (211). Thus, it is worth considering whether fans considered non-hetero ships (like, Harry/Draco – drarry – for example, or Hermione/Ginny) improbable because they seemed incompatible with the world of the books, or because of prevalent societal and cultural ideas about gender and sexuality that permeated the fan community. Though the latter is surely partly true, the books have been critiqued by a number of scholars for being generally heteronormative and by some for including many gender-stereotypical characters. Tison Pugh and David L. Wallace argue in their article ‘Heteronormative Heroism and Queering the School Story in J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* Series’ (written before the publication of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* and thus before Rowling’s announcement that she imagined the character Dumbledore as gay) that

the cross-gendered setting of Hogwarts in the *Harry Potter* books appears to be both a fantastically post-feminist world where sexism no longer undermines women’s power and agency and one in which a post-feminist façade merely camouflages the novels’ rather traditional gender roles and its erasure of sexual orientation difference [...] heteronormative heroism ultimately squelches gender equality and sexual diversity in favor of the ideological status quo (260).

Nor does Rowling’s announcement that Dumbledore was gay disrupt this heteronormative heroism according to Pugh. In his chapter ‘Dumbledore’s Queer Ghost: Homosexuality and Its Heterosexual Afterlives in J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* Novels’ Pugh argues ‘Dumbledore queerly provides the necessary mentoring for Harry to accede to normative heterosexuality [...] Dumbledore plays the role of the self-sacrificial queer, gladly fading away from the plotline to facilitate heteronormativity’ (100).

Rowling’s series is riddled with traditional or stereotypical gender roles, as Elizabeth E. Heilman, Trevor Donaldson, and Eliza T. Dresang (to name a few) address at length. These depictions of gender cannot be considered separately from the underlying heteronormative sexual narrative of the books – the two are linked in such a way that has implications for interpreting the entire series. Indeed, it could be argued using Lee Edelman’s terms that the Potter series provides little to no space for queerness: the entire crux of the wizarding war is that the evil Voldemort, who believes wizarding-kind should be purged of muggle blood, needs to be defeated for the sake of the world’s future (though he is also the man attempting to defeat death for himself, which complicates this claim). Edelman asserts,

if the fate of the queer is to figure the fate that cuts the thread of futurity, if the jouissance, the excess enjoyment, by which we are defined would destroy the other, fetishistic, identity-confirming jouissance through which the social order congeals around the rituals of its own reproduction, then the only oppositional status to which our queerness can properly lead us depends on our taking seriously the place of the death drive (29).

For Edelman, social structures are determined and confirmed by a universal investment in reproduction. Children (symbolically, the 'Child') represent the reprinting of societal values; they are the articulation of futurity-based – and thus heteronormative – order. Such an order allows little space for queerness, prompting Edelman's call for a queer acceptance of "the death drive," or a queer, anti-Child space that operates outside of and in contrast to the hetero-dependant future. When Ron tells Harry in *Chamber of Secrets*, 'if we hadn't married Muggles, we'd've died out,' then, he is making explicit the heteronormative and futurity-focused agenda of the entire series, and is strongly hinting towards the epilogue to Harry's story that depicts the adult, reproductive future of the main child heroes (89). This not to say that the books are unequivocally anti-queer (a tough claim to make, especially given Rowling's claims about Dumbledore), but the series does keep queerness in the periphery, a move that has implications for its young readers. Pugh and Wallace make these implications clear:

[the] danger of heteronormative heroism in the *Harry Potter* books is that it potentially reinscribes the problematic heterosexual/homosexual binary that critics such as Michel Foucault, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and Jonathan Ned Katz identify as both policing desires and the identities constructed around those desires. This binary serves not only to stigmatize homosexuality and other expressions of sexual queerness; it also contributes to a concept of masculinity that marginalizes women and narrows the range of socially acceptable behaviors for men in ways that work to the detriment of all humanity (262).

In short, the issue with gender stereotyping and normativity in the Potter series is that it has the potential to confirm damaging cultural understandings of these issues that will only continue to serve exclusive and patriarchal power structures. This potential can seem particularly alarming when considering that the Potter books are written for and interpreted by children, and that this interpretation especially occurs in digital communities that, because of their platform and context, lend themselves to toxicity.

But where the Harry Potter books perhaps established the foundation for this heteronormative reading of its plot and characters, the websites listed above contributed greatly to the fan community's perception of the characters and romances in question, and in many senses are as responsible for the construction of a normative Potter canon (or, in this case, fanon) as Rowling's text or authorial comments. The scholarship summarized

above makes a strong case for these issues as they appear in the books and even occasionally questions what effect such tendencies within the text might have on their child or young adult readers, but it does not consider that readers, because of the vastness of the Potter fandom, might as participants and agents in these online space be implicated in perpetuating this normative narrative, too. MuggleNet and Leaky, as has been shown, exercised great influence over the Potter online community and, consequently, on interpretations of the text. Both sites did, in fact, actively assert and reconfirm the gender and sexual norms as can be interpreted in the text because, I would argue, of their commitment to ‘the canon.’ The books arguably present gender and sex in a way that supports a mainstream, heteronormative interpretation, and thus so, too, did both sites police material posted on their domain so as to make sure characterizations and speculation adhered to this model. These sites did this in mostly similar but occasionally differing ways to one another, and their approaches to the issue may help reveal something about children and teens’ power within online spaces.

In the first place, both sites, before even addressing individual characters from the Potter books themselves, took stances on the issue of homosexuality within fanfiction. Heidi Tandy, who was deeply immersed in the Potter fandom from the beginning (she founded the fanfiction site FictionAlley and wrote for Leaky) recalls that in 2001, Leaky ‘didn’t want to host slash [gay male fanfic] somewhere that kids could read it, even if the characters didn’t go beyond kissing’ and that ‘in the mid-2000s, MuggleNet took the same perspective’ (172-173). This decision on both sites’ part is significant for a number of reasons. First, it was clearly the result of cultural understandings of homosexuality as being in some way deviant. Neither site banned romantic fanfiction if the couple in question was a hetero pairing, and many fanfics available in both communities had characters go far ‘beyond kissing.’ Second, the decision assumes that children and/or teens have no role in creating this slash fanfiction – it labels ‘kids’ as victims without considering the possibility of their being agents in not only their decisions about which websites to visit but also in creating material for those websites themselves. Third, the decision, at least in MuggleNet’s case, is at least partly made by a teenager (Spartz). What are the implications of one teen making decisions about what is appropriate reading for others? For people younger than himself? Lastly, the decision to ban slash fanfic on MuggleNet and Leaky is one that now seems patently non-canonical (something both sites strived so hard to adhere to). Following the publication of *Deathly Hallows*, Rowling revealed that Dumbledore was gay; consequently, the sites’ attempt to ‘protect’ children in the name of the canon of the source texts loses credibility given that at least some gay characters appear in the Rowling-sanctioned world.

But it was in the shipping wars that MuggleNet and Leaky’s power within the fandom was most clear and most closely tied to their interpretation of normativity within the books themselves. As such a pivotal part of the fandom, it seems reasonable that MuggleNet and Leaky weighed in on the issue, but neither was particularly subtle about their ship affiliations – both supported the book-canonical ships Harry/Ginny and Ron/Hermione. Though both websites allowed H/Hr or other pairings in the fanfiction on their sites and

neither banned H/Hr speculation from their discussion boards, both webmasters were fairly vocal about their ship preferences and to some degree operated as advocates for R/Hr. Anelli, for example, in *Harry, a History*, recalls saying to a fellow Potter webmaster, “I don’t understand how anyone could think that Harry and Hermione are going to get together!” (85). But the incident that most implicated MuggleNet and Leaky in the fan wars happened during their interview with Rowling in 2005, days after the publication of *Half-Blood Prince* – the book that paired Harry with Ginny and made it clear that Ron and Hermione were meant to end up with each other. What the book itself may not have accomplished, the interview with J.K. Rowling certainly did. In it, Rowling asks her two interviewers how they felt about the romance in the book, which led to an enthusiastic discussion about shipping in which Rowling states, ‘yes, we do now know that it’s Ron and Hermione’ and Spartz and Anelli take turns laughing a little at H/Hr shippers’ expense<sup>5</sup> (MuggleNet.com).

This conversation caused an upheaval within the shipping forums. Anelli was implicated in this shipping war explosion and was a recipient of H/Hr attacks. In her summary of the aftermath of the interview in her book, Anelli remembers Rowling saying to her “As soon as Emerson said what he said, on tape, I knew we were in trouble” and recalls ‘it was worse than I imagined. Worlds worse [...] I’d come out the least scathed; some vile person suggested that I did unclean things with relatives, but that was the worst comment [...] Emerson received repeated death threats (I only got one)’ (264). The backlash against Spartz culminated in the H/Hr forums creating a thread designed for bashing him, which in turn resulted in a Special Edition of the Wall of Shame (the former ‘hate mail’ section of the site). This, like the original Wall, consisted of a series of excerpts from the forums with his sarcastic responses to each, thus creating a conglomerate of toxic fan practices, wherein both his critics and he himself transform a fan debate into a negative and exclusionary back-and-forth. Many of his responses are funny and lighthearted, but some awkwardly enter the realm of the inappropriate, as when both the H/Hr shipper and Spartz (repeating the words of another R/Hrer) enter into a mostly one-sided discussion about slavery.<sup>6</sup> It is not difficult to see how attempting to bring an argument about the romantic possibilities within a fictional children’s series into a conversation with something like slavery is a wildly miscalculated rhetorical move by the H/Hr shipper, but arguably Spartz’s engagement with it is just as problematic. He, as an authority figure within the fandom, was not so much fulfilling his self-assigned duty of remaining loyal to the ‘canon’ by calling H/Hr-ers ‘delusional’ and mocking their anger, as he was exacerbating the issue and potentially alienating fans from his website – thereby transforming the atmosphere of a website that was in many ways the main meeting point for the Potter fan community into a toxic one.

Thus, Spartz did not seem to be troubled by this conflict and indeed seemed to enjoy causing a scandal in the Potter fandom, as his actions outside of the space of MuggleNet show. LiveJournal blogger BethBethBeth, in a post titled ‘Lumos: Addendum to the Panel Report’ (a reference to the 2006 Lumos Convention), shares a story in which Spartz once again figures as a catalyst for controversy:

Five or so minutes into the Slash and Het panel [...] two guys (both teenagers, as far as I could tell) - one wearing Gryffindor robes and the other in Slytherin robes - stood up in response to the mention of Harry/Draco. The Gryffindor-costumed boy said something like “why does everybody think we’re together?” [...] he kept going on and on and on, ranting about slash in a very loud and disruptive way, until finally security had to go over and shut him up [...] I assumed they were just two silly random teenagers. Except...they weren’t. I discovered later that the mouthy Gryffindor was actually Emerson Spartz (he of MuggleNet fame), and that changed my opinion of this little foray into performance art.

In this example, Spartz was without a doubt being disruptive, insensitive, and arguably intolerant. He intentionally dominated a conversation at a formal conference and used his spotlight moment to air his feelings about fan fiction featuring homosexual pairings. It is tempting, given the ridiculousness of such action, to ignore it, especially given this was not an event he referenced on his website or otherwise distributed online. And yet, Beth is right to shift the event in her mind from a disruptive interruption to ‘performance art’ (or, if not that, then perhaps ‘political statement’). Spartz – like Anelli, given their shared interview of Rowling – is a well-known figure in the Potterverse (or BNF, ‘Big Name Fan’) and cannot escape his fame or his ability to influence. He cannot escape the fact that he is a representative of one of the most popular fan sites, nor that Rowling herself has condoned the site publicly. As Beth puts it in her response to his Lumos antics, ‘those folks who become part of the infrastructure of things (either formally or informally) need to understand that their ‘personal opinions’ are often interpreted as official responses.’

In the 2005 interview and its aftermath, both Anelli and Spartz were acting as constructing and policing forces. They, together with Rowling, essentially told a large section of the Potter fandom that they were wrong and that their views would henceforth be discouraged within their canon-centered web spaces.<sup>7</sup> Spartz, in his Special Edition of the Wall of Shame and his conference-crashing, explicitly used his power within the fandom to make his views known; he must have been aware that his online and real life trolling would have more of an impact than others’. Both sites, then, but particularly Spartz’s, used their influence within the Potter community to create a particular version of Potter fan-hood – a version that, because it actively excluded dissenting ideas, was on some level toxic. In both cases, the very things that allowed them to gain respect and power – relationships with authoritative people, innovation within their web spaces to the point of building up large, loyal communities, and their connection to each other – also opened the door for that toxicity. In sum, their gatekeeping authority within their specific digital communities ultimately extended to the entire Potterverse.

Spartz’s youth, and the youth of many of the internet identities he is interacting with and responding to, not to mention the youth of the fictional characters in the Harry Potter series themselves, become critical points of inquiry when thinking about these issues of

influence and policing within the Potter fandom. Firstly, his experiences provide clear examples of children/teens exercising power: Spartz is interviewing Rowling, is providing the conclusive evidence that ends (if temporarily) the shipping wars, is the manager of a major, internationally renowned online community in which he decides what kind of material to include and exclude. Secondly, he is establishing relationships with adults who have the same amount or less power than he does in these contexts. He and Anelli, who is seven years his senior and in her mid-twenties when they met, are peers, at least in the eyes of many within the fandom (if not perhaps in the eyes of Rowling). And thirdly, he is experiencing real fame: at eighteen years old (his age the year of *Half-Blood Prince's* publication) he has the ability to communicate with one of the most famous authors in the world, not to mention one of the largest and most influential companies in Hollywood and a number of internationally famous actors like Daniel Radcliffe and Emma Watson. All this because he built a fan website when he was twelve.

But Spartz's experiences alone, even when contextualized within the larger histories of his and Anelli's websites, do not fully capture how much the shipping wars and their (tentative) resolution complicate understandings of childhood agency and fandom construction within online spaces. After all, at the heart of the shipping wars are fictional children and their future (or, in fanfiction, often current) sexual relationships. One of the most obvious ways this becomes an issue has to do with age of both the characters and the fans speculating about them. Rowling is careful (almost too careful) in the books themselves to draw age lines, especially regarding anything to do with romantic relationships. In fanfiction and art, writers and artists have no such scruples about age. This lack of concern complicates the implicit goals of websites like MuggleNet and Leaky. Age, as it relates to these imagined sexual relationships, is deeply embedded in the normativity of both the series as it is typically interpreted and the fanon that MuggleNet and The Leaky Cauldron defend. As mentioned above, Edelman's understanding of futurity can be used to read the central plot of Rowling's books, but it can also be used to explain the vehemence of the shipping wars and the root of most fanfiction. The foundation of the shipping wars is who the main characters will date – but dating is not really where the imagination of the fandom stops. It was always clear that when people said they shipped R/Hr or H/Hr, what they meant was that they thought those two characters would get married. Indeed, at the end of *Deathly Hallows*, Ron and Hermione are married with two kids, and Harry and Ginny are with three. In short, part of what keeps the series itself and, consequently, fan communities like MuggleNet and Leaky heteronormative, is the concern with the main characters' reproductive future; the 'second generation' of Hogwarts – meaning the Weasley and Potter kids, one of whom almost inevitably dates Draco Malfoy's son – is one of the most popular fanfiction topics.

Yet intertwined with this attempt towards canonicity and heteronormativity is what ultimately undermines it: the imagined sexuality of these underage characters, at least in the context of fan speculation within the shipping wars or most canon-centered fanfic or art, either takes place past the timeframe of the books (and thus involves a post-Hogwarts,

unrealized, non-Rowling sanctioned world) or in the un-shown moments of the books, which necessarily complicates the narrative or character development found in the texts. In other words, Rowling, in the source material so important to the legitimacy and even authority of sites like MuggleNet and Leaky, does not tell readers how these characters feel about sex; she barely provides hints. Thus, any imagining of their sexual lives necessarily deviates from canon, even as it supports (often) heteronormative mainstream fanon. Spartz and Anelli, though perhaps less delusional than H/Hr-shippers in terms of predicting the conclusion of the book series, are still trapped within this fanon conundrum: in asserting their certainty that R/Hr is the correct pairing, they are revealing something about their own reading practice, their own imaginations.

As the histories and actions of MuggleNet and Leaky and the scholarship surrounding these and other online Potter spaces show, the *Harry Potter* fandom is a site of canon/fanon-building and policing that is often intertwined with childhood agency and power. Considered together, these complicate assumptions about the public space of the internet and its potential for toxicity, the relationship between children and adults as fans, the cultivation of influence, and childhood sexuality and/or accepted gender norms. These particular websites and web identities, though, are only the tip of the iceberg. Peripheral to this entire argument, for example, and worthy of future scholastic inquiry, is the reality that slash fanfic and otherwise alternative fan universes that are rooted in the Harry Potter series are often as popular and well-known as those perpetuated by the sites above. Can these things be considered queer in an Edelman sense, in that they are not concerned with the futurity of Rowling's characters as she imagined them? Perhaps even more interesting from a literary studies standpoint, can the canon or fanon as it is policed by sites like MuggleNet and Leaky be thought of as the catalyst for non-canonical or alternative texts; do they, in the same way that *Jane Eyre* provided the foundation for *Wide Sargasso Sea*, provoke a non-normative response and therefore offer the seeds for that response? Or, perhaps, is the toxicity of particular fan practices itself an impetus for creativity – might the vehemence of Spartz's 'Wall of Shame' be in some way responsible for alternative shippers' passion? In other words, are these other fanfictions and fan communities in some ways dependent on the widely-accepted norms of the 'canonical' books and fanonical shipping wars? Ultimately, the fact of these non-normative Potter communities speaks to the opportunities within online fandom for child power or agency as much as the examples detailed above, not to mention the potential within them to complicate understandings of authorship or canonicity. They perhaps even open the door to imagining an 'online childhood' as a space where queerness flourishes in tandem with normativity, a space where both toxic and constructive creativity exist simultaneously in the same fictions and communities.

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## Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Varied examples from MuggleNet's 'Wall of Shame' (Spartz's responses in italics):

'-whY don/t u do us all a favor and die cuase hary potter is gay.go smoke some floo powder u friggin fairy.

*-Reading things like this I begin to lose faith in the human race.'*

'-hey emerson!!!! HOW DARE YOU compare this stupid movie with jrr tolkiens epic masterpiece????? you suck the movie of harry potter is a disgrace! it has no point and no feeling behind it so how can you say they are even equal???????????? LOTR RULZ. u can just go kiss ant orc!

*-I do have a little thing for ant orcs. \*blushes and giggles\**

'-Excuse me mister know it all! You thing youre the biggest harry potter fan! Will your not I AM!!!!!!! So stop thinking your a great harry potter fan! I AM!!!!!!! YOUR NOT!!!!!!! So I have the following requests. I want you to close this site. I want you to write me back saying that I AM the biggest harry potter fan and your not. I want you to write an apology letter to everyone who has visited this site for making them think you were the biggest harry potter fan. That Is all.

*-Uh oh... I think it's time for s o m e b o d y ' s nappie!'*

'-Im the owner of \*\*\*\*\*.com. My site is nearly as popular as yours, but I want to get it more popular than yours. do a newspost about me, saying this:

"HI, Have you been to \*\*\*\*\*? Why dont you go now! GO TO \*\*\*\*\*.COM"

Please do this for me..... IF YOU DONT, then I WILL DESTROY MUGGLENET. I HAVE YOUR PASSWORDS, AND IF U DONT DO A POST THEN I WILL DO IT FOR YOU... AT THE SAME TIME AS DELETING IT!

I tried getting hits by doing that post of mine a few days ago about Dan Radcliffe dying, but people didnt like it much, so Im hoping they'll like it on your site!

Thanks.. REMEMBER WHAT ILL DO IF U DONT DO THIS FOR ME!!!!

*-And you wonder why your site isn't as popular?' ([www.web.archive.org/web/\\*/http://mugglenet](http://www.web.archive.org/web/*/http://mugglenet))*

<sup>2</sup> In 2008, J.K. Rowling and Warner Bros. brought a lawsuit against RDR Books, a publishing company that attempted to publish a hard copy edition of Vander Ark's Lexicon. Rowling won the suit, a ruling that has affected subsequent fair use issues. The case is sometimes mischaracterized as a suit against Vander Ark's website, but in fact it was only connected to his attempt to publish and sell a facsimile of it (Band 1-3).

<sup>3</sup> Warner Bros. faced particular criticism for attempting to shutdown [www.harrypotterguide.co.uk](http://www.harrypotterguide.co.uk), which reduced its 15-year-old webmaster to tears and infuriated her father (along with the media, who felt that the massive corporation had lost sight of that fact that Potter fans were largely children and teens) (McCarthy). MuggleNet characterizes its relationship with Warner Bros. as "friendly" and Leaky boasts that it "is proud to have been the first and only Potter fans to report from the Chamber of Secrets movie junket and Prisoner of Azkaban film set" ([MuggleNet.com/history](http://MuggleNet.com/history) and [the-leaky-cauldron.org/info/siteinfo](http://the-leaky-cauldron.org/info/siteinfo)).

<sup>4</sup> In a 2015 BuzzFeed list titled "24 Things All 'Harry Potter' Fans Can Agree On," Gambon's infamous line, "HARRY DIDJA PUT YA NAME IN DA GOBLET OF FIYAH" is listed *three* times (Golder and Rackham). Staff writers Golder and Rackham claim "Harry Potter fans will literally never get over [that moment]. Ever."

<sup>5</sup> "JKR: [...] How did you feel about the romance?"

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*[Melissa puts her thumbs up and grins widely while...]*

ES: *We were hi-fiving the whole time.*

JKR: [laughs] Yes! Good. I'm so glad.

MA: *We were running back and forth between rooms yelling at each other.*

ES: *We thought it was clearer than ever that Harry and Ginny are an item and Ron and Hermione — although we think you made it painfully obvious in the first five books —*

JKR: [points to herself and whispers] So do I!

ES: *What was that?*

JKR: [More loudly] Well so do I! So do I!

*[All laugh; Melissa doubles over, hysterical, and may have died.]*

ES: *Harry/Hermione shippers – delusional!*

JKR: Well no, I'm not going to – Emerson, I am not going to say they're delusional! They are still valued members of my readership! I am not going to use the word delusional. I am however, going to say — now I am trusting both of you to do the spoiler thing when you write this up —

*[More laughter.]*

JKR: I will say, that yes, I personally feel – well it's going to be clear once people have read book six. I mean, that's it. It's done, isn't it? We know. Yes, we do now know that it's Ron and Hermione. I do feel that I have dropped heavy –

*[All crack up]*

JKR: – hints. ANVIL-sized, actually, hints, prior to this point. I certainly think even if subtle clues hadn't been picked up by the end of "Azkaban," that by the time we hit Krum in Goblet..."

(MuggleNet's Interview with J.K. Rowling--July 16, 2005. Pt. 2)

<sup>6</sup> Wall of Shame, Special Edition: "The responses for the next two were shamelessly ripped from the Fandom Wank LJ because they were just.that.funny. Props to ahiru for the icon, xero sky, dax 069 and especially prettyveela.

Panther: Ya know, come to think of it, people like Emerson were probably the kinda people that started slavery. I mean, think about it, they thought the slaves were animals, just because they had different colored skin. Emerson thinks we're stupid and delusional for having different beliefs. Get the similarities here, people?

[Spartz et al]: Ah yes, I can hear the H/Hr's of yesteryear telling their great-great-great grandkids about the spiritual songs they used to sing [...] Yes, those poor slaves. If only someone had told them that they could avoid the whippings, beatings, and rapings by simply turning off the computer and getting a life." ([www.web.archive.org/web/\\*/http://mugglenet](http://www.web.archive.org/web/*/http://mugglenet)).

<sup>7</sup> "MA: *Watching all this, were you surprised when you first logged on and found this intense devotion to this thing that you knew was not going to happen?*

JKR: Yes. Well, you see, I'm a relative newcomer to the world of shipping, because for a long time, I didn't go on the net and look up Harry Potter. A long time. Occasionally I had to, because there were weird news stories or something that I would have to go and check, because I was supposed to have said something I hadn't said. I had never gone and looked at fan sites, and then one day I did and oh – my – god. Five hours later or something, I get up from the computer shaking slightly [all laugh].

'What is going on?' And it was during that first mammoth session that I met the shippers, and it was a most extraordinary thing. I had no idea there was this huge underworld seething beneath me.

ES: *She's putting it into a positive light!*

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JKR: Well I am, I am, but you know. I want to make it clear that delusional is your word and not mine! [Much laughter.]

MA: *You're making our lives a lot easier by laying it on the table –*

JKR: Well I think anyone who is still shipping Harry/Hermione after this book –

ES: *[whispered] Delusional!*

JKR: Uh – no! But they need to go back and reread, I think.

ES: *Thank you.*

JKR: Yeah.

MA: *That is going to –*

JKR: Will it make your lives slightly easier?

*[All three]: Yeah, yeah.*

JKR: I think so.

MA: *I have to tell you, I'm looking forward to [this coming out], because, you know, a lot of this is predicated upon a necessary hate for another character. Ron has suffered horribly at the hands of Harry/Hermione shippers.*

JKR: That bit makes me very uncomfortable, actually. Yeah, that bit does make me uncomfortable.

ES: *Honestly, I think the Harry/Hermione shippers are a very small percentage of the population anyway.*

MA: *Yeah, if you do a general poll –*

ES: *They seem more prominent online, but that's just because the online fandom is very –*

MA: *Militant was the best word I heard –*

JKR: Militant is a beautifully chosen word. Energetic. Feisty.

[...about two minutes pass]

ES: *On our Web sites we have a tendency to have very different stances on shipping. On The Leaky Cauldron they tow this fine political line –*

MA: *Down the line. We say, "If that's your thing, that's your thing."*

ES: *And on MuggleNet, we say –*

JKR: [Laughing] You say you're delusional lunatics?

MA: *He basically says, "If you don't think this, just get off my site."*

[JKR cracks up]

ES: *We say, "You're clearly delusional!"*

JKR: What's that section on your site again, when you post the absolute absurdities that you've received?

ES: *The Wall of Shame?*

JKR: The Wall of Shame. We could have a Wall of Shame. We could have them pasted up here, some of the ludicrous things I receive.

MA: *What kind of things?*

JKR: Very similar stuff. Very similar. From pure abuse, to just ramblings – we could say of an existential nature. Not from kids, from older people. What made me laugh out loud, I think, was your [Emerson's] comment on there saying, "Please don't try and send me a stupid email so you end up on the Wall of Shame." Isn't that human nature? It starts off as let's expose these [laughter], and people are competing to be on there?" ((MuggleNet's Interview with J.K. Rowling--July 16, 2005. Pt. 2)