On toxic fan practices: A round-table

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The following discussion was held between 26 March and 5 April 2018 in Google Docs. The objective was to wrestle with key queries and issues revolving around research protocols and methodologies for scholars exploring internet-based fan cultures and practices. At the heart of these issues is how researchers might define 'toxicity' in relation to fan practices as well as the way in which scholars approach the study of fan cultures from various positions. Henry Jenkins kindly provided a series of insights regarding fundamentally important issues around defining certain fan practices as 'toxic' and these are included too for readers interested in further research into online territories.

Henry Jenkins

General discussions of 'toxic fandom' in the mass media and elsewhere make assumptions that are hard to address without more foundational work in fan studies. Some core questions the field would need to consider include: Can we distinguish meaningfully between fans and 'trolls' (as discussed for example by Whitney Phillips and others)? Can we distinguish between fans who have a commitment to fandom as an ongoing social and cultural community and other groups and individuals who draw on references to popular culture or tap fan practices for their own purposes? And does this open up larger theoretical questions about what it means to operate within or outside fandom? Can we talk about toxic fan masculinity without a broader theorization of gendered fan identities and practices -- one that includes more benign forms of fan masculinity or more toxic forms of fan femininity? Or for that matter, can we situate toxic masculinity against more general forms of hegemonic masculinity? Can we talk about an increase or intensification of toxic fan practices without a broader historical frame which looks at gendered and racialized animosities in fan culture over time? And can we understand toxic fandom without pathologizing fans if we do not draw on broader frameworks of patriarchy and systemic racism? What other kinds of foundational work need to be done if we are going to address some of the controversial and abusive practices in fandom?

We begin with a general question about defining the 'toxic' subject and associated fan practices.

What is meant by the term 'toxic' as it relates to fan behaviours and practices?

Mel Stanfill

So, I'd say the low-hanging fruit on toxicity is hostility and aggression – getting in people's faces, anonymous (or non-anonymous) harassment, naming and shaming (like block lists), etc. That's what people usually think of, those sorts of 'methods' issues. That's the 101 conversation.

But there are a couple of 202 conversations, let's call them 202A and 202B, that I think are more interesting (and maybe more important, because they're not as well understood). 202A is something like 'fandoms are exclusionary and toxic to they're the people they exclude' – most fandoms (at least, the Anglophone ones with which I am familiar) are exclusionary to people of colour; many are exclusionary to women (cf. Gamergate, Sad/Rabid Puppies, etc.); and some are exclusionary to queer people (and of course people of colour can also be queer and/or women, and women can be queer, but think of this all as a big Venn diagram). At this level I'm talking about everything from active racism to dismissal of fans' of colour's concerns (structural exclusion is a 303 thing) – one

example that comes to mind is deifying Emily Andras for her representation of (white, skinny) queer women and refusing to listen to criticism about lack of women of colour in her work.

202B is related but different – it's the perception that people of colour, queer folks, and/or women seeking inclusion is itself toxic, regardless of tactics. This plays on tropes of aggressive people of colour (particularly Black and Latinx folks in the US context I'm familiar with) and predatory queer folks, and it takes the hurt feelings of majoritarians as evidence of minoritarian violence. I have seen this a lot in accusations from heterosexual fans that queer fans tweeting to showrunners are 'harassing' them, regardless of how polite they are (which, yes, sometimes they aren't).

William (Billy) Proctor

I'm not familiar with the terms 'majoritarians' or 'minoritarian' violence, but I think I get the general gist. Okay, so aggression and hostility are forms of 'toxicity'. However, many fan cultures are often 'hostile' or 'aggressive', but may not necessarily be 'toxic'. This reminds me of a quote from Cornel Sandvoss:

> [o]nline fan spaces offering focal points for fan communities are far from universal. Like all communities they are based on the necessity of Othering and distinction (2011: 62).

And one from Katherine Larsen and Lynn Zubernis regarding *Supernatural* fans:

> Aggression serves instrumental functions within a group by helping to enforce norms, build cohesion, and defend against outsiders (121).

So, considering that fan cultures are neither homogenous nor harmonious, which behaviours are we singling out as 'toxic'? Mel, you have raised racism and misogyny as 'toxic fan practices' – and I think many scholars would agree – but what about other forms of hostility and aggression? Is it 'toxic', say, to shout abuse at an opposing football team's fans? Perhaps more urgently, who decides what is 'toxic' and what is benign? Are we, as scholars and researchers, making these moral and ethical judgements? Or should we be analysing what fan practices have been discursively constructed **as** 'toxic' by fans and journalists etcetera?

Rukmini Pande

I'm going to jump off from Mel's (excellent) characterization of the debates around the definition of 'toxicity' and the points Billy raises to think through how we conceive of violence/hostility/aggression within fandom spaces. To me, the definition of toxicity is always going to be bound up in ideas of privilege and power. So while, of course, fandoms

have always been marked by some degree of conflict, perhaps a productive framing of toxicity would be to put that definition in relationship to systemic power structures, which would obviously vary from context to context. Mel's point about being careful that majoritarian 'hurt feelings' are not given the same weight as the effect of structural power differentials around race, gender, sexuality etc is key for me as well. So in my view, this isn't about researchers applying a moral or ethical judgement, but analysing these fan practices with knowledge with how they intersect with the power structures I have just mentioned. So for instance, for me, the backlash against *Ghostbusters* and *Ocean's 8* is not equivalent to the criticism of *Iron Fist*, even though in both cases it is fans being critical of casting decisions. To refer to Billy's example, when approaching the issue of 'shouting abuse at an opposite team', I think the question would be whether the content of what is being shouted is inflected by racism/misogyny/homophobia etc.

Relatedly, we cannot analyse issues of hostility and aggression without also bringing into focus who these labels are being applied towards. I think that the most overt forms of this are well documented as controversies like Gamergate, Sad Puppies, etc are marked by direct threats of violence and (relatively) easily identifiable expressions of racism, misogyny, homophobia etc. However, as I've been talking about in my own work, this sometimes leads to a lack of attention to how whiteness structures fandom spaces where women and/or queer fans are more active. So non-white fans are often seen to disrupt operations of pleasure around het, slash and femslash ships because they object to the (often automatic) primacy granted to white characters within fandom spaces. Black fans especially have been talking about these dynamics and I'm linking here to Zina Hutton's (@stitchomancery) great blog post on the topic https://stitchmediamix.com/2018/01/06/let-black-people-feel-things-in-fandom-2018/. I think fan scholars always have to be alert to these dynamics when framing their questions and then produce context-specific definitions of toxicity.

Richard McCulloch

I think Mel, Billy and Rukmini have all raised some fantastic points so far, but collectively, they also point towards some of the reasons why this is such a thorny (and interesting) subject of debate. In particular, I love Rukmini's distinction between the respective backlashes against *Ghostbusters* and *Iron Fist*. I completely agree that, if we want to understand the hostile and/or exclusionary practices Mel mentioned, and if we want to contribute towards explanations of how and why they occur, then we absolutely *do* need to be thinking in terms of how they relate to power structures that exist far beyond a given fan community. That said, there is a methodological dimension to this debate that has not really been addressed yet – one that has big implications for the ways in which the word 'toxic' has found its way into both journalistic and academic conversations about fandom.

One of the things I love about audience and fan studies is that it is so well positioned to capture the complex relationship between structure, on the one hand, and agency on the other. But if our basis for defining 'toxicity' is whether or not some observed behaviour

reinforces or challenges existing power structures, then I think we are in danger of being overly deterministic and/or making sweeping generalisations about large, heterogeneous groups of people. My argument here is that those structures are indeed vitally important, but they should not be our starting point.

Fan studies, having emerged out of a cultural studies tradition, is a field that has always attempted (as far as possible) to avoid making moral judgements about why people behave in particular ways, aiming instead to understand the contexts in which those behaviours are enacted, and how the people involved justify their own actions. This approach, at least from what I have seen, is more likely to be ignored when it comes to studying and talking about 'toxic' fan practices. The furore around *The Last Jedi* is a good example of this, as commentators (academics included) were incredibly quick to separate the film's detractors from its embracers, not only in an affective sense, but in relation to an assumed ideological position (see Billy's recent series of essays and roundtable discussions on this controversy on Henry Jenkins' blog for more on this: http://henryjenkins.org/blog/2018/2/4/disneys-star-wars-episode-ii-attack-of-the-groans). The imputations were strong with this one. Quite simply, I find it very strange that such judgements are now occurring so routinely in a discipline that has spent so long trying to avoid pathologising its subjects.

I also remember reading a few months ago about large groups of *Rick and Morty* fans congregating at their local McDonalds to demand Szechuan sauce, becoming overly aggressive and, in some cases, threatening towards restaurant employees. What puzzled me about the coverage was not so much that their behaviour was reported and criticised, but that it was also linked to earlier instances of *Rick and Morty* fans harassing the show's female writers. These two incidents *may* indeed be linked, but how can we be sure that (a) they really are linked, and that (b) the link is the one we assume it to be? Do we know that the same fans were involved in both incidents? Even if they were, do we know *why* they chose to act like this? Most importantly, why are we assuming that these are the actions of a homogenous group of people acting for a coherent set of reasons, when, as Billy points out, everything we know about audiences and fans tells us the opposite is far more likely? Something similar has happened in political discourse, with Americans who voted for Trump, or Britons who voted to leave the EU, overwhelmingly castigated as racists, idiots, or simply as 'deplorables'. Without wanting to dismiss those claims outright, I would simply say that, as academics, we should be above tarring masses of people with any single ideological brush. There is obviously an ethical dimension to this too, in that the *will to moralise* often seems to be overriding attempts to study this phenomenon from the perspective of those involved.

To be clear: I have absolutely no wish to condone or defend any of the practices mentioned so far, nor any others that we could potentially include in this debate. Rather, I am saying that if we really want to understand why 'toxic' behaviour happens, we need to try to park our moral compasses at the gate. This is the approach taken by some of the most fascinating and illuminating studies of abhorrent human behaviour, such as Christopher

Browning's *Ordinary Men* (1992) and Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963). What I love about both books is that, even though they are studying people who committed or ordered truly horrifying acts of violence during the Holocaust, the authors put morality to one side in favour of trying to understand the personal and contextual circumstances that facilitated and/or motivated their actions. Crucially, by aspiring to take morality out of the equation and pay close attention to individual agency, we actually learn far *more* about the power structures involved – not only how such structures allow and/or constrain our behaviour, but also where they might be vulnerable to abuse, exploitation and manipulation – and indeed, where structural power is at its weakest. I'd like to see audience and fan studies scholars doing something similar when it comes to studying hostile and exclusionary fan practices, maintaining scepticism in the face of widespread moralising, and sticking resolutely to a principle of trying to understand people on their own terms. This shouldn't preclude us from making judgements altogether, but it should help to ensure those judgements are more accurate *and* more useful.

Billy

I agree with you, Richard, well said. What troubles me is the will to apply the label of 'toxicity' so readily to certain fan practices, not by journalists and fans themselves, but by academics. The term is under-theorised at present, and massively so, becoming a yardstick with which to address these behaviours in moral and ethical terms. My research on #blackstormtrooper, *The Last Jedi*, and *Ghostbusters* used established research protocols to fully analyse the contents of hashtags and forum threads and the results were far more complicated and complex than current discourses would seem to permit. I also find it worrying that it is essentially reactionary screeds and currents are being singled out as 'toxic'. What about progressive, left-leaning actors? There is an abundance of evidence that certain commenters – I don't know if they're 'fans' or not – from the progressive left also engage in such practices, as well as women too. Jessica Austin's paper at FSN in 2017 was the start of a much longer conversation about 'toxic femininity' – although I'm not convinced it is 'femininity' per se that is being performed in these high profile cases simply just because they emanate from a female contingent. I don't think it is particularly 'feminine' for a One Direction fan to threaten to 'pour fucking bleach' down someone's throat. Jack Halberstam's theory of 'female masculinity' may be an avenue worth exploring (with thanks to Bridget Kies for recommending that). Perhaps the same can be said of female Star Wars fans that evoked rape analogies and metaphors yet directed them towards an imagined and imaginary community of 'butt hurt' sad little boys crying oceans of male tears. (Personally, I can't see how this kind of riposte is anything but a type of 'fight fire with fire', which does not mean that this cannot be viewed as 'toxic' as well – two wrongs don't make a right, and all that – especially given our current frameworks and a distinct lack of methodological protocol.)

On the latter, I believe I have been quite wrong in the past. In a chapter I wrote on One Direction fans and the Channel Four documentary film, *Crazy About One Direction*, I explain aggressive practices as performative and unlikely to be carried through. Bethan Jones' chapter on One Direction fans in the same collection heads in this direction. Both of us argue that 'Directioners' – and we could add many female-centric fan cultures to this – are often infantilized by media commentators and 'geek' fans. However, I strongly believe that I was wrong in this, primarily because both Bethan and I, arguably and inadvertently, 're-infantilise' Directioners by excusing what we may call 'toxic fan practices' as mere performance and, ultimately, 'not real'. In doing so, we 'let them off' and defended them from excoriation, whether we intended to do so or not (I cannot speak for Bethan, naturally, but this is simply my reading of our parallel accounts). But that introduces an unstable element, and one that requires significant address. Here's what I mean by 're-infantilisation' in this context:

- Gamergate actors are 'toxic'. We do not view them as performative but as insidious and ideologically risible (and I'm not saying that they're not).

- One Direction fans are 'non-toxic'. We view them as performative, innocuous and innocent. Why is this? I'm not saying that Directioners **are** toxic; but it certainly seems as if there is a double-standard at work, at least to my thinking. I suspect I may have positioned Directioner fan discourse as performative and innocous primarily because those represented in the Channel Four documentary are young girls, something that Bethan and I push back against.

To be clear: I am not claiming that women and men are ideological equals, but the way in which extant research seems to cover reactionary currents only, while excusing progressive or female 'toxicity', demands refocusing. If nothing else, fan studies may be guilty of establishing a skewed portrait of the political constituency of fan cultures across the board. As a researcher, I strongly believe that methodology and epistemology should be at the core of audience, reception and fan studies. I have yet to see a robust quantitative/ qualitative study of what happened during Gamergate without reproducing press accounts unequivocally. How would we explain the fact that women were also involved in Gamergate? I want to say that the campaign was 'all men', but even a cursory scroll of Twitter feeds tells us that this is not so simple (as if we could tell gender from pseudonymous avatars in any case). Although I am well aware that male video game fans led the charge, the situation is so much more complex than current research seems able to account for and examine rigorously.

This brings me full circle: how do we know if commenters are fans or trolls? What methodological instruments are brought to bear on campaigns and discourses of this sort? For if the hashtag #boycottstarwarsVII contains a ratio of progressive/ reactionary comments that shows the former at 96% and the latter at 4%, then we could quite easily

problematize press accounts that evoked this as a racist hashtag. How do we single out trolling operations from the 'real' ideological consistency of fans, which would not be monolithic?

At this point in time, I think the term 'toxicity' has little academic value whatsoever, unless produced discursively by other agents that require analysis without morality.

Bertha Chin

I agree with Mel that anything amounting to hostility and aggression in fan behaviours would be 'toxic'. However, this hostility and aggression can also be internalised, in ways that a fan is made to feel, especially if the ways they read a text and the ships they support differ from the majority-approved reading or officially sanctioned ones.

Here I'm thinking of examples I've seen: from talking to a fan fiction author from early *X-Files* days who discussed how betrayed they felt upon discovering their fan fiction have received a lot of criticism on a LiveJournal community called Fanfic_Hate – created for anonymous commentary – and how criticism of their creative works have extended to personal attacks that often contain details about their personal lives. Or a more recent example on CW's *The Flash* between fans who ship Barry Allen and Iris West (WestAllen) and those who ship Allen with Caitlin Snow (SnowBarry), with the latter fans often shamed for their racism. And while this (Iris West being African American on the show) may indeed be an issue for some, I think it's crucial we not overlook the elements of policing within the fandom that has led to toxic behaviour being directed towards the fans and the actors.

Of course, fan policing is very much rooted in conceptions of power, and with that, privilege, as Rukmini and Richard have astutely mentioned. Fans with the loudest voices and strength in numbers online often attract attention, and a showrunner's attention can lead to the policing of what is and isn't appropriate fan behaviour online in order to maintain that attention (see Scott's article in this themed-section). Fan scholars have observed fans' tendencies to be exclusionary, but fans' increasing public presence on social media networks (as opposed to more private spaces like LiveJournal) have heightened this behaviour policing, and as divisions grow, the toxic behaviours and practices (shaming fans for reading a text a particular way or shipping a non-sanctioned couple; death threats to fans and actors) become more public too.

My point being, certainly, issues surrounding exclusion of fans of colour, women, queer fans and others are important and need to be addressed. But the toxic behaviour that arises out of fan policing is – I think – equally important, and if fans are being shamed for their fan practices, or not supporting a mixed race couple, then it potentially limits any productive discourse to be had about bigger issues such as racism, sexism and homophobia. This is where Richard's point about checking our own moral judgement at the gate comes in handy, in looking at where the accusations of discrimination originates from; and if it comes from the desire to police appropriate behaviours in order to present and maintain an

idealised notion of fandom to showrunners and the media industry, then something else is at play here.

I think Billy also raises an important, if not uncomfortable, point about our role as researchers and how we might, at times, in our research end up excusing certain behaviours and to borrow Billy's term, 're-infantilise' some fans because of the ways in which the media and the public have positioned them. For me, it certainly raises issues of internalised misogyny, sexism and colonialism (issues which I'm seeing more frequently the longer I remain in Asia), which I think is something we need to be more reflexive about in our own work.

Mel

Thinking about this question Rukmini and Richard raised about whether we as researchers should make moral judgments, I feel like I want to push back on that and go back to standpoint theory. We're always talking from somewhere and to pretend that we're not is to treat our situatedness as neutrality. That way lies 'both sides'-ism and profiling every neo-Nazi in America in *The New York Times* as if their perspectives deserve the air time, you know? (see editor's introduction in this themed-section). Things can be worth studying and still be awful and we do no favours not saying that they're awful when they are. And I think we can do that while still maintaining awareness of the power we have as academics over the people we write about.

To Billy's question about toxicity's definitional fuzziness, I wonder if we should go back to the place where (to my knowledge) the term entered the conversation – toxic masculinity. In that framework, it's the particular kind of masculinity rooted in domination that's a problem. So then, the reactionary (or majoritarian, i.e., those representing the dominant category, which will be contextual) responses will more easily be toxic. Whiteness is a relation of domination; hegemonic masculinity is a relation of domination; heterosexism is a relation of domination. By contrast, actions by people without institutional or structural power will have to meet a higher threshold to cross into toxicity because domination is not as attainable when you're punching up.

So then, to account for something like women in Gamergate (and bracketing the fact that some unknown proportion were sock puppets), we could look at Jessie Daniels' work on women in white supremacy – not because those people were necessarily white supremacists (at least, not overtly) but because she analyses how white women gain privilege from compliance with white supremacist patriarchy. Again, this is why we can't take toxicity apart from relations of domination. Then, if we're thinking about domination, it doesn't matter whether somebody 'means it' or not (i.e., trolling vs. sincere) for the measure of toxicity (it would matter for understanding the phenomenon, of course). The act of domination is what matters.

But Bertha's points are also fascinating and they point to the weaponization of social justice in fandom that is really poorly understood (and I really hope her book with Mark

Stewart studies it!). That is what people used to mean by 'social justice warrior', before it got as politicized as it is now: people who perform – but do not genuinely believe in – social justice, purely in order to score points. It also points back to what I called the 303 conversation – people's understanding of structural inequality is not good generally and fandom is not necessarily better at that than the general population. So things that are systemic (folks in anti-Black cultures will tend not to promote Black characters) get converted to individual moral failings ('you are a racist for not shipping this thing') in a way that is both inaccurate and foreclosing of dialogue (even though we can be critical of hurt majoritarian feelings playing a role in that).

Billy

I agree with some of your overarching points, Mel, but would like clarification on others if I may be so bold. I would like to offer a series of provocations; not because of vehement disagreement, but to address some key factors that I think may need expansion and development.

Now, I agree for the most part about the idea of power, privilege and domination; but I don't believe it's so neat and pat. In actual fact, I believe there is a tendency in academic spheres to construct what I would term a 'hierarchy of privilege'. In most accounts, it is racial, gender and sexuality privileges that stand at the apex of this hierarchy, as illustrated above. As Mel wrote: 'Whiteness is a relation of domination; hegemonic masculinity is a relation of domination; heterosexism is a relation of domination'. I am not about to counter that in any way as I think Mel, Rukmini and Richard are right. But there is more to 'privilege' than race, gender and sexuality. One thing that seems to have been almost completely erased from consideration is class privilege; mental health privilege; neurotypical privilege; able-bodied privilege; employment privilege; and so on. This is something that is very much a key part of my everyday life, and I would like to draw attention to some issues that I feel demand redress. Before I continue, I would like to ensure that I am not disagreeing with the notion of white, masculine, heterosexual privilege – far from it. But in the spirit of debate, I'd like to raise fundamental issues as I see them.

So, I was born on a council estate in Sunderland, a town (awarded 'city status' in 1992) with a lengthy industrial vintage, including shipbuilding and coal mining. During the miner's strike in the eighties, Margaret Thatcher and the Conservative Party adopted a strategy that set out to break and fragment working class solidarity, a strategy that largely succeeded in many ways. Nowadays, Sunderland is a pale shadow of its former self. Industry has been decimated and erased completely in most cases (and largely replaced by the ubiquitous call-centre). The shipyards and coalmines are long gone; and Vaux Breweries, a major employer in the area for two decades, is now a distant memory, the land vacated sometime ago to make way for car parking facilities. This is the political and geographical context within which I grew up (and an enormous reason why I have identified as a Marxist for much of my adult life).

I spent the majority of my life in abject poverty. Many of us were told in school that we had little in the way of career prospects and would end up working in a shop or garage. Class – working class and underclass – was thus a key component in the formation of my identity.

I have also struggled with undiagnosed autism for much of my life, having just been diagnosed six months ago, and also struggle with PTSD. However, because I attended university in 2007 and received a BA degree, and then went on to study for a PhD, I am now suddenly and magically framed as 'privileged' because I am white and male. I use myself as an example anecdotally because I see this as a kind of praxis based in the reality of everyday life as I experience it.

So, I agree: I possess white, masculine heterosexual privilege, so I tick all the boxes in the hierarchy, hence, I am privileged. Unequivocally and unquestionably.

It is simply too easy, and too reductive to view privilege according to the dominant narrative. I am not neurotypically privileged; I am not able-body privileged; I am not privileged in terms of class, until 2014 when I was awarded a PhD and successfully obtained a full-time position at Bournemouth University. Somehow the latter expunges my entire life history, identity, ontology and self-narrative, so that 'the hierarchy of privilege' can remain intact. But I strongly think that this does a disservice to a broad range of the global populace, especially given how the rhetoric of privilege is used to discipline and police white, heterosexual males. To reiterate, I am not claiming that these characteristics are not privileged ones. But this has not been the only way in which I have experienced the world.

This brings me to the idea of domination as a key site for 'toxic' fan practices (and I shall keep that in scare quotes until I'm convinced it is necessary). My earlier comment about the central focus being on white heterosexual males, which Bertha quite rightly said is 'uncomfortable' – and I think it should be, just as I think provocation is a necessary strategy to avoid academia becoming dogmatic – is not about claiming that this area of study isn't worth pursuing. But I admit to feeling aggrieved that because I am white, heterosexual and male, that that dictates how I am seen by others as occupying a position of domination (and I'm not saying that I don't in some instances).

In one of the articles in the themed-section, Mar Guerrero-Pico, María-José Establés, and Rafael Ventura examine 'toxicity' centred on the 'Dead Lesbian Syndrome' trope in relation to the fictional death of Lexia, a queer character in the US TV series *The 100*. I'm sure many scholars are aware of the backlash that emerged as a result, with fans tweeting directly to producers on the show to complain and criticize, often in ways that could be described as 'toxic' (based on our conversation thus far). It is quite fascinating that what the authors also examine is the way that queers fans within 'The L Chat'' forum also engaged in policing practices to discipline fan 'toxicity' from within (intra-fandom), so as not to contaminate their highly visible and public protests. Naturally, that did not prevent some fans from doing so.

As we have already agreed that heterosexuality and masculinity are forms of privilege, how might we address 'toxicity' of this nature? For queer 'toxicity' is not a form of

privilege or a kind of domination in the ideological sense. So, I don't necessarily agree that 'toxicity' always comes from sites of domination and privilege. In actual fact, I have been taken by existing research in 'intersectional feminism', which also rebukes the umbrella concept of 'patriarchy' as too neat and tidy, incapable of capturing the social, cultural and ideological dynamics of the world. (Incidentally, feminist repeal of patriarchy as umbrella goes back to the early eighties.) As Shira Tarrant puts it in *Men and Feminism*:

> Yet it is not the case that men always have privilege even if they are at the centre in certain instances. It is possible for men to simultaneously inhabit many worlds with different degrees of privilege and powerlessness. Some men experience masculine privilege within a family setting or on the job, yet they may also experience disadvantage as, say, a black man in white-dominated settings or as a Muslim man in white, Christian communities' (109).

From this perspective, power and privilege are neither dominant nor dormant, but intersectional, with multifaceted lines of conflict existing within a system 'of ruling and oppression'. I think that this is a more productive framework than the current 'hierarchy of privilege' can cope with and which leaves a lot of people behind.

 I certainly don't agree that researchers should be anything but neutral. There are ways to examine and analyse without casting moral judgements on fannish behaviour (and I think Richard's examples of Christopher Browning's *Ordinary Men* and Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem* are excellent instantiations of non-moral and non-judgemental studies of genocide and mass murder). I have cited Matt Hills' thinking in *Fan Cultures* before, but it really struck a chord with me, never being far from my mind when embarking on research endeavours. One of the main points Hills makes is that he adopts a 'suspensionist position', that is to say,

> a position which refuses to split fandom into the 'good' and the 'bad' and which embraces inescapable contradiction (the ugly?). This means approaching the contradictions of fan cultures and cult media as essential cultural negotiations that can only be closed won at the cost of ignoring fandom's cultural dynamics (2002: xiii).

I am especially concerned about this 'closing down', and this can be linked back to my comments about 'the hierarchy of privilege'.

Note: At this point, I have never been as convinced as I am now that the concept of 'toxicity' is not needed as an academic term if we already have other terms that 'do the job' (hostility, aggression, bullying, racism, class-icism, weight-ism, homophobia, trans-phobia, neurotypical-ism, and so on and so forth).

Richard

I think what Billy is saying here is not just compelling, but vitally important, and I just want to quickly follow up on his comments before everyone else responds.

I am especially intrigued by this idea of a 'hierarchy of privilege', although I'm not entirely certain these hierarchies are consistent across all contexts, with race and gender always at the apex. After all, fan communities often function as subcultural spaces, where power and privilege can take unconventional or even highly unlikely forms. This in turn would change the kinds of fan behaviour deemed 'toxic' in those spaces, as well as determining the impact those practices have on the people who populate or pass through them. So yes, hostile fan interactions (including bullying, exclusion, harassment, policing, and all those other terms we have already discussed) are always likely to be bound up with relations of power, but Billy's points about hierarchy and intersectionality should remind us that we may be overestimating our ability to predict what these relations are, or which ones are the most important in a given situation.

This brings me back to something I discussed earlier about methodology: if our research begins from the premise that hostility must be tied to particular forms of privilege, then I fear we are destined to only ever see small parts of a much more complex picture. There is no question that whiteness and masculinity are key frameworks that we should be considering, but they certainly shouldn't be the only two, especially if we are to have any hope of answering some of the fascinating questions Henry posed. Instead, I think we need to develop ways of researching hostility that allow for the possibility of unexpected explanations to enter our field of vision.

I don't think what I am advocating for here constitutes 'both sides-ism'. Indeed, my point is precisely that conflicts never have just two 'sides' to them, and thinking in terms of 'sides' may result in wedding ourselves to particular lines of enquiry, when in fact there may be many more that we are ignoring. If we are going to study instances of cultural ugliness and hostility (and I definitely think we need to be), then I want us to be mapping their contours in as much detail as possible, rather than making inferences on the basis of their most visible landmarks.

Mel

Apologies for not expressing myself more clearly. I wasn't saying anyone was engaging in both-sides-ism here, but rather the fantasy that objectivity is possible or even desirable requires treating things as neutral (when nothing is neutral), and then both-sides-ism is the endpoint of that.

But I absolutely agree with you, Richard, that the particular forms any given instance of toxicity takes can't be read off from the identities of the participants, because there is obviously much more to the dynamics. My point was more that the capacity and felt entitlement to marginalize others is unevenly distributed from the start, which explains some patterns even before we get down to fandom-specific or interpersonal dynamics. I

raised that up front because I have seen so many people (in general, not necessarily in this conversation) go straight to the fandom-specific or interpersonal dynamics without considering those conditioning structures. We need both.

Rukmini

To build on what Mel has said above, I also want to clarify that when I talk about considering the operations of power and privilege in approaching toxicity in fan practices. I am not advocating for some sort of moral positioning by researchers. To me, it is just good research practice to be aware of these dynamics while also paying attention to how internal exchanges can complicate our understandings of the same.

As the problem of positionality also came up I want to push back on the idea that identifying structural dynamics like racism/sexism/homophobia is by definition taking a moral stand. I don't think my work is, or can be, 'neutral' simply because I don't think any work can occupy that position. As someone trained in postcolonial studies, I am always acutely aware of the way in which so-called 'neutral' methodological and theoretical tools are very often built on assumptions that must be questioned and dismantled. I always talk about the whiteness of our bibliographies in fan studies, so when we discuss *how* we are approaching these problems maybe we should also be thinking about *who* we see as essential reading when approaching those issues. Rebecca Wanzo's (2015) excellent piece about the genealogies of fan studies is pretty relevant here as she notes that, 'One of the reasons race may be neglected is because it troubles some of the claims – and desires – at the heart of fan studies scholars and their scholarship'.

So, for me, discussing how these structure fan spaces is precisely in order to **not** come to any pat conclusions about intra-fandom power dynamics or to deploy broad-based assumptions about any particular group of fans. My own work is absolutely built on the need to deploy nuance and intersectionality to analyse 'messy' interactions between fans. In fact, one of the biggest challenges in my research has been to find a way to express the very complex, context-specific, ideas of race/racism in a transnational/transcultural context and track how privilege and power work in unexpected ways in these spaces.

I think a good example of this messiness is the controversy in *The 100* fandom and the death of one of the central queer characters (Lexa) who was part of the fan favourite pairing Clexa. There was a lot of justifiable anger amongst fans about the 'shocking twist'. However, building on that reaction, fans of colour in turn critiqued Clexa fans of having ignored (or actively celebrated) the racist aspects of the show up until that point. Were there fans of colour for whom Clexa as queer representation was important? Yes! Were there white (and queer) fans who were historically critical of the racist aspects of the show? Absolutely. As a researcher approaching this situation I would say that talking about structural whiteness in an analysis of the controversy as a whole is not to invalidate these reactions or lump individual fans into homogenous groups (you're racist!). I would argue,

that, in fact, it brings the complex workings of identification and representation and pleasure within fan spaces to the forefront.

Bertha

I think Billy brings up a fascinating point about 'hierarchy of privilege' here, and it calls to Katherine Larsen and Lynn Zubernis's argument in *Fan Culture: Theory/Practice* on how our own biases – disciplinary background and otherwise – as well as our experience with fandom will limit our understandings of the field in general. And yes, Rukmini is also absolutely right about the structural whiteness that impinges our approach to the field. In a way, this reminds me of when Lori (Morimoto) and I first started our work on transcultural fandom: the resistance we felt came from both sides. On the one hand, we were discussing something which – given our structural whiteness – were foreign and may not necessarily apply (at the time) to most people's experience of fandom. On the other hand, in our desire to move the conceptualisation of non-Western fandom away from being merely embedded in the discourse of the otaku, the other resistant was that we were de-politicising Asian (cultural) studies and putting too much emphasis on practices that were, in essence, considered structurally 'Western' (namely, also white).

And here I'm going to go back to what I said earlier, about bringing in the 'uncomfortable-ness', which I think takes into account what Billy was saying about hierarchy of privilege. That in order to move past our anxieties about homogenisation and assigning privilege when we accrue certain cultural, economic – and perhaps especially, educational – capitals, we need to also look at the gaps and silences. In my case, it is to acknowledge the various internal-isms (i.e. the internal sexism, misogyny, racism, colonialism), no matter how uncomfortable it may be to acknowledge its existence. So, for instance, Felicity Smoak's recent unpopularity in the *Arrow* fandom is because she's diverting attention away from the male superhero, and in the process, her pairing with Oliver Queen has made the main character weak; and her fans (and those who support the 'Olicity' pairing) are subjected to hostility and vitriol because of this fan reading (performed not by male fans). I can't help but think that there is some level of (unconscious) internal misogyny at work here. So, yes, while it isn't as controversial as the issue surrounding Clexa in *The 100* fandom, for fans of Felicity Smoak, who view her character as a positive incarnation of women in STEM, as a 'superhero without a mask', this toxicity can be devastating. Am I not being objective when I'm performing this reading, that what seems to be happening, may not be internalised misogyny as such, but just fans disliking one character in favour of another? But fandom policing has resulted in conflict and hostility, which often results in one voice being subjugated over another so it is also a complex set of issues and emotions (or is it affect?).

In essence, I want to recall what Richard said, that in approaching our research, we should be aware of the various intersections that impinge our approach, as well as the conflicts that we see in fandom.

Bridget

Talking about 'toxic masculinity' is quite en vogue, and I think corresponds with some recent and deeply troubling political and social events (the rise of the alt-right, Trump's election, greater visibility to white nationalism, mass shootings). One of the points on which Billy and I disagree, though, is that there has been some kind of shift or turn toward greater toxicity within fan cultures in recent years. As someone whose work is often historical, I am naturally sceptical of any claims of 'new-ness' or of 'first-ness' because these claims often indicate we haven't dug deeply enough in history. Fan Studies is a notoriously contemporary-focused discipline, and I think there is a lot of room for more work on historical constructions of fans and fan communities. Doing so will, I firmly believe, demonstrate that some of the contemporary phenomena we see discussed so often in academic work and in the pop press has actually always existed, but that perhaps our contemporary technologies just render it more visible. I'd like to see the concepts of 'toxic fan practices' and the 'dark side of fandom' extended to more historical projects.

Billy

Just to jump in and say that I don't think we disagree at all. I have been quite clear that what I mean is that it is a discourse centred on 'toxicity' that emerges around 2014, not that it is a new phenomenon. In fact, I have, and many others, have argued specifically that there is a longer vintage in historical terms. The so-called 'alt-right,' for example, did not emerge *ex nihilo* in 2014 either, but *discourses* about 'the alt-right' (or at least the radical right) certainly began to stir and accelerated in 2016. I am talking about 'regimes of truth', not truth itself.

To bring the conversation back to Rukmini's last comment about *The 100*, I mentioned earlier that some 'toxic fan practices' emerging from forums such as 'The L Chat' were neither dominant nor masculine, but a form of what might be described as 'queer toxicity'. But I'd like to bring back the discussion to other avenues of query if I may. One point that I fear has been lost is about methodology, epistemology and 'neutrality'. I should have pointed out that while researchers can only hope to be as 'objective' as possible – with the proviso that 'true' objectivity tis but a myth – it is possible to be 'neutral' by not casting moral aspersions and judgements, which returns us to an earlier question I proposed.

Should we, as researchers, be making claims about fan 'toxicity' ourselves, or addressing discursive instantiations whereby the term is marshalled by fans, journalists and bloggers, etc? I think this is a crucial question because as soon as we point and claim 'toxicity', then we have made a moral judgement. I'm not saying that we can't, I just wonder what others think about this. Once more, this is because I am not quite certain that the term is required in academic research unless it is examining what is discursively viewed as 'toxic', rather than scholars making those judgements. I think neutrality is achievable by the language we adopt and how we discuss these issues rather than being 'objective' in any pure sense. There are many instances of scholars making assumptions and constructing

'figures of the audience', as Martin Barker describes it, which are imputations rather than supported by data and other empirical evidence. As Whitney Phillips and Ryan Milner have argued (and which I agree wholly, even as I've quoted this numerous times in various ways),

> not knowing who created what, what the(se) creator(s) meant to accomplish, or what a given text 'really' means, *forces one to stay empirical and focus on the things that can be known and confirmed* (my emphasis).

Bertha

I would, very quickly, want to ask if language is ever neutral though? Our disciplinary background may already frame us in a certain manner that would influence our approach to notions of 'toxicity' or fandom. Or, for that matter, Rukmini and I are, for instance, writing in a language that was brought to our home countries due to our colonial past. I can't speak on behalf of Rukmini here, but as a Bornean – with the Malaysian state where I'm from existing in the past as a private English kingdom under the rule of one family for more than a century, and with family ties that is still today, linked to said family – I don't think my language can ever be neutral, no matter how I choose to reflexive about it.

But I also want to address Bridget's points here, that I agree concepts of 'toxic fan practices' and the 'dark side of fandom' should be extended to historical projects as well. I think technology – in particular, social media – has afforded a more public view of fandom, and coupled that with shifting industry practices where media producers are taking to social media platforms to not only showcase their work but also to 'perform' their celebrity and producer personas have made 'toxicity' (and I'm still ambivalent about whether we should be making claims about 'toxicity' in relation to what we see or read, Billy, to somewhat answer your question?) more visible.

I also wonder, given a lot of us in fan studies have a background in media and cultural studies, if we might perhaps tend towards left-leaning views. And given fan studies' history in studying fandoms we ourselves are familiar with, we tend to also participate in, and gravitate towards readings that are more liberal. But given the public nature of fandom on social media platforms (or 'newer' technological platforms), it is harder to avoid these surges of hostility and conflict – something that is also reflected in the rise of right-wing populism seen through the rise of Trump and the Brexit vote.

Mel

Thinking about not knowing intent (trolling vs. not) or only being able to talk about what is empirically verifiable, as Billy prompted – as it happens, I was just talking about this with my grad students last night in relation to Kristina Busse's (2017) book. In her first chapter one of the key questions is about what do we do with authorial intent – is the author dead? Is it about how fans put the author to work (or don't) in constructing their textual interpretations? And I think what that line of argument ultimately gestures toward is that

whether we care about intent depends on our question. If we want to know about the people engaging in a toxic practice, intent is part of the picture. If we want to know about how the toxic practice impacts recipients or the community in which it happens, intent is irrelevant.

But I love Bertha's point about our positionality – which also touches on how Rukmini took the time to position herself earlier. And the place we're speaking from may be more marginalized in some cases (leftists in a reactionary world, postcolonial people) but it can also be accorded privilege in others (at the very least as academics in relation to fans). At SCMS I said something that I think is what got me invited to participate in this: we're really often implicated in the practices we study. Not just because we're fans or even because we're in the fandoms we study, though that's part of it and it's something fan studies has grappled with for years. But also because we may benefit from acts of domination even if we don't agree with them. People listen to me more than they do to fans of colour in the fandoms I'm in because as a white person I'm perceived as neutral on the question of race. I benefit from the suppression of voices of colour because that raises my profile – even though I don't seek that out and work to resist it. Our own hands aren't clean a whole lot of the time. So again, that's part of where I'm coming from in talking about our positionality and recognizing that we HAVE a positionality whether it's one we choose or not.

Richard

I think Mel has hit the nail on the head there – as with all research, our methods should certainly be dictated by the precise question(s) we are trying to answer. However, while I have really enjoyed reading the excellent discussion of positionality, Billy and Henry raised some key questions earlier that I don't think have been answered yet: regardless of whether we are trying to understand their *causes* (who engages in toxic fan practices, why, and under what circumstances?) or their *impact* (how does this affect the community and its members?), how do we identify 'toxic' practices in the first place? How do we isolate them from other forms of abusive or problematic behaviour, some of which may take quite benign forms, or may be enacted by marginal or disempowered persons? Is this even possible? To paraphrase Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart's infamous 'definition' of pornography, is toxicity simply a case of, 'we know it when we see it'?

I have to say, in some of the emerging work on this topic, the term seems to have been surprisingly taken for granted, and for me at least, tends to raise more questions than it answers. The more I think about this, the more I agree with Billy: to my mind, the term 'toxic' seems to hinder our research rather than helping it, seemingly acting as an umbrella term for a number of unwanted behaviours and ideologies, but lacking in any specificity.

For example, Salter and Blodgett's recent book *Toxic Geek Masculinity in Media* (2017) contains plenty of thought-provoking case studies of harassment, hostility and othering in fan/geek communities, but the word 'toxic' in its title is curiously never

explained. It certainly seems to be synonymous with 'bad', but it is unclear exactly how 'bad' something needs to be in order to warrant inclusion in the book, or how many different versions of 'badness' might qualify. If the main criterion is causing harm (as might be implied in wider uses of the word toxic), then how is 'harm' being defined, and by whom? If we take 'exclusion' as our starting point (as alluded to earlier in our discussion), does someone need to have been literally excluded or prevented from participating, or do they just need to *feel* excluded? Given that such people would by definition either be absent from a particular space or disinclined to participate in it, how could we locate them in order to conduct our research? Salter and Blodgett also refer to 'increased hostilities towards the feminine in geek spaces' (ibid: 13), but is it the *target* of the hostility that makes it 'toxic', the *intention* behind it, the 'increase', or something else entirely? How is this purported increase even being measured? What has it increased *from* and *to*? How would we even begin to quantify such an abstract concept as 'hostility'? Would one lengthy tirade count as one act of hostility, or would we need to count the number of individual insults on display? Even if we could agree on a precise definition, can we be sure that any 'increase' in toxicity is in fact an increase in real terms, as opposed to a rise in *visibility*, as Bridget and Bertha suggest? Most importantly, to return to another question Billy has raised, how do we even know that the people carrying out these purportedly toxic acts are fans at all?

My point here is not to single out one particular piece of research for opprobrium. Rather, I offer these questions as instructive examples in response to Henry's question about 'foundational work' that needs to be done in this area. These are the kinds of theoretical and methodological questions that I believe must be answered before we can meaningfully begin to interrogate the causes or implications of toxic fan practices. If, for whatever reason, these questions cannot be answered, then we at least need to ensure we are consistently transparent on an epistemological level, explaining what we can claim to 'know', and how we came to obtain that 'knowledge'.

Bertha

Those are really excellent questions that Richard raised. Thinking of my own work here – in trying to contemplate whether I can actually identify what constitutes as toxic practices – prior to participating in this conversation, I've rarely used the word 'toxic' in reference to fan practices. With my work, hostility and vitriol form part of the discourse around fandom policing that creates notions of appropriate fandom and anti-fandom (which I've argued in Melissa Click's forthcoming edited collection is messy and often indistinguishable from, and at times evolved out of, love for textual purity), but it is not the only feature of these fan practices, however. Which is why I started off this conversation with reflecting about how fans were made to feel excluded and betrayed when they felt their trust was broken, which in retrospect, is less unsettling than constant harassment and death threats that we seem to see more of recently. And indeed, leaving it to fans who feel excluded and/or betrayed may be a case of the majority's hurt feelings as Mel pointed out being made front and centre

here. However, going back to harassment and death threats or, perhaps economic threats when someone's job is at stake – which was, incidentally what I looked in the anti-fan/hate chapter I talked about above – I framed it as anti-fandom rather than explicitly identifying it as toxic fan practices. This is likely because I was working from a framework of anti-fandom, even though my focus was on how social media platforms may have mediated these public vocalisations of hate from fans when the actor is talking back. I think for me, especially with the work Mark Stewart and I have been trying to do around the framing of what is and isn't appropriate fandom, it is first and foremost, about policing. When the policing affects a particular group of fans' enjoyment of the text, and there is consistent shaming of the fans' reading of the text or shipping of a particular couple, then, to me, it becomes a toxic practice. In which case, it is perhaps as much a moral judgement as it is enabling the fans to voice out how they see policing has affected their experience of fandom.

Kathy

Apologies for coming late to the conversation. I'll begin with my own working definition of toxicity (though by this point I think we may have decided that we need to jettison the term — more on that later) and then jump back in to pick up on several wonderful points that have been raised throughout this conversation.

What we seem to be talking about is a spectrum of behaviours ranging from the honestly clueless to the intentionally and aggressively harmful.

Clueless first. I'm thinking here of some things that Billy brought up about privilege that is not situated around gender or race. At the conference I attended last week, there was a roundtable on fandom and disability. One of the things that emerged from that discussion was the ways in which we fail to recognize disability (unless it is clearly and physically manifested) and thus fail to recognize our own positions as able bodied, as the ones who 'other' without even realizing we are doing it. I'm wondering how much of the behavior we may consider toxic comes out of a certain obliviousness to our own positions of power whatever they might be – white, male, straight, etc. I'm in no way excusing this, just thinking about some of the reasons behind problematic behavior (in fandom as in other areas of life) that do not rise to the level of aggression, yet can still have a negative – perhaps toxic? – effect on others, as Bertha suggests when she reminds us of the ways in which fans can internalize hostility.

The other end of the spectrum would be things like swatting, where people have crossed the line from verbal abuse to putting others in real physical peril, and in at least one case it's gotten someone killed.

It's what's in the middle though that I think is most difficult to pinpoint. Is disagreement with another fan toxic? In some communities it may be. Is exclusion in and of itself toxic? I'm not so sure. As Mel has pointed out here and elsewhere, fandoms are exclusionary – perhaps by nature. Is this necessarily 'toxic'? (I'm not advocating for exclusion here – merely asking whether this rises to the level of toxicity.) Fans tend to self-

sort along a variety of fault lines and practices – shipping, whether or not you approve of RPF (real person fiction), whether Tom Hiddleston is the best thing about MCU (OK – maybe not the last one) – and they know which corners of the playground are the most hospitable. Would it be a better world of all corners of the playground were welcoming? Yes? Is that going to happen? No. Fans will continue to exclude and police each other because it's what we do. But is it 'toxic'?

It's at this point that the term 'toxic' seems to be unproductive. I agree with Rukmini and Richard that we need to develop a methodology that analyses how fan practices intersect with power structures and that simultaneously allows us to park our moral compasses at the door. This is a message I'm continually driving home to my (very young) students who come into my class wanting to write about 'crazy' or 'obsessive' fans. The terms just don't get us very far toward understanding what's really happening and have similarly slippery definitions.

I also think the discussion of positionality is spot on, particularly Bertha's observation that it's likely we are mostly coming at our research from the left. I know my own responses to things I have observed (and yes, been horrified by) have been coloured by my own politics. I've sat in front of a group of women at a fan convention who loudly and insistently deplored any question directed to actors that may have alluded to fan fiction, shipping, or anything 'gay', with comments like 'disgusting' and 'just shut up'. My immediate response was not understanding their positionality. I just wanted to scream at them. (For the record, I did not.) Overall, I've been much more invested in the ways in which people are impacted by aggressive behaviour rather than understanding the causes of that aggressive behaviour.

Which raises the question: how do we square our positions as left-leaning aca-fans with our research practices? Going back to Mel's point about things we acknowledge as awful being worth studying, I completely agree, but I'm less clear (and I stress that this may only be my own difficulty) how to go about actually doing this.

Richard

I like the idea of a spectrum of toxicity, Kathy, since clearly some of the fan practices we have discussed here are far more problematic than others. It wouldn't be fair to equate swatting or doxing with, say, written insults or bad-mouthing someone behind their back. Both ends of this spectrum might be said to be causing actual or potential harm, but the levels of harm are obviously in a completely different ballpark. However, I am reluctant to adopt this as a framing concept for examining toxicity, and this probably comes back to my issues with the term 'toxic' itself. Quite simply, 'harm' is not objective, and functions very differently for different people. This in turn means that a practice we might place at the 'less toxic' end of the spectrum could in fact be causing extremely high levels of distress for individuals or groups of people within a particular community. Similarly, at the other end of the spectrum, even the most hostile of fan practices might actually be relatively ineffective, depending on who is on the receiving end, and the precise ways in which the practices play

out. I'm thinking here of some of the people interviewed by Jon Ronson for his 2015 book *So You've Been Publicly Shamed* – individuals who have all been subjected to intensely personal, vitriolic (social) media attacks, usually in response to purportedly transgressive or offensive actions. Of course, this isn't an academic piece of research, but it does at least suggest that not all public shamings are equal in terms of the damage done to their victims. For some, lives and/or careers were all but destroyed, whereas for others, it was almost like water off a duck's back.

If we think about these issues in a legal sense, we can also say that the law (in all countries that I am aware of) deems physical assault to be a far more serious crime than name-calling, verbal aggression or subtler forms of emotional abuse. Yet we know that those latter practices can in many cases lead to far more lasting damage to an individual than the former. If the law doesn't even delineate consistently in terms of harm or damage caused by a given crime, I would say that 'aggression' or 'intention' are similarly flawed criteria for determining how 'toxic' a particular fan practice might be. We also need to recognise that the exact same fan practice can vary substantially in its potential or perceived harm, depending on the context in which it occurs. I'll give an example.

I was on a train recently, and found myself surrounded by a large group of extremely boisterous fans of a football (soccer) team from South Yorkshire. You can probably picture the scene quite vividly: 15-20 fans in total, most of them visibly drunk, staggering around the train and occasionally falling against other passengers. They sang and shouted loudly and incessantly – maintaining a deafening drum beat by banging their fists against tables, windows and the ceiling – for at least an hour. I felt especially sorry for an elderly lady whose seat was right next to the group, and was visibly frightened and upset by their behaviour. Several of the rest of us just wanted to get home in peace. Needless to say, the time passed slowly, and eventually the train was delayed while the British Transport Police boarded the carriage to make some arrests (presumably on the grounds of anti-social behaviour or public disturbance). I was annoyed by their behaviour, but as an avid football fan myself, the incident really made me question how and where we draw the line between acceptable and unacceptable fandom (or 'appropriate', to use Bertha and Mark Stewart's term). I knew that, had these fans been doing this somewhere else – a stadium, a pub, or even in a train carriage that was exclusively populated by other fans – there would likely have been zero cause for arrests or complaints. This was completely typical fan behaviour, performed by and for fans as an important part of their collective and individual identity, yet their behaviour became 'toxic' purely because *it was witnessed by non-fans*.

So, how can we place 'drunken, boisterous singing in public' on a spectrum of toxic fan practices? I'm not sure that we can. To me, any attempt to taxonomise toxicity would either create methodological issues further down the line (e.g. practices being categorised inappropriately, inaccurately, or inconsistently across different studies), or would require us to make moral/ethical judgements before we even began our research (i.e. [x] is inherently more toxic than [y]).

As this discussion draws to a close, at this point I suppose it is worth saying that we seem to have raised far more questions than we have devised concrete solutions, but I honestly don't think that is a bad thing! We *should* be asking all of these methodological questions, and many more besides – questioning our own thinking, prejudices and research design from conception through to submission. If this roundtable achieves anything, I hope it is to act as both a call for conscientiousness and an illustration of why we need to devise projects that are fully open to unexpected, divergent, confusing and contradictory findings. Aggression, conflict, hostility and exclusion are always likely to be hugely emotive subjects (for us researchers as well as the fans/audiences involved), but as we have seen, they are also hugely multi-dimensional. Journalistic coverage of such conflict is often simplistic in its conclusions and imputations, and as audience and fan studies researchers, we need to rise above that. We need to be constantly on the lookout for complexity and nuance, and we should take seriously any and all evidence that suggests our assumptions might be wrong, because those contradictions might point towards important issues that simplistic narratives would ignore. Fan cultures, like the rest of our world, are sometimes ugly, messy places, and I want us to be capturing, exploring and questioning that ugliness in all its glory!

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