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Canine possibilities: Discourses of dog fandom

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Abstract:
This essay explores the possibilities of canine fandom – that is, dogs as fans of texts and objects much as humans are – through analysis of three evidentiary discourses: scholarly discourse on fan-media engagement, layperson discourse on fan-object engagement, and industry discourse on canine commerce. In a prior essay (Harrington 2019) I proposed a multispecies fan studies, ultimately suggesting that fan studies join the animal turn taking place within the humanities and social sciences. This essay extends that argument by focusing specifically on potentials associated with canine fandom.

Keywords: fan studies, multispecies, canine, audience

Introduction

This essay explores the possibilities of dog fandom – not human fans of dogs but dogs as fans of texts and objects much as humans are – through analysis of intersections between three evidentiary discourses: scholarly (foundational research), layperson (pet owners' perspectives), and industry (trade materials of veterinary and pet toy commerce). While social media has rapidly accelerated the growth of (and research on) animal celebrities, there is virtually no concomitant scholarly discussion on the potential for animals to be fans. In a prior essay I proposed a multispecies fan studies (Harrington 2019), synthesizing research from animal science and related fields to suggest that fan studies join the animal turn taking place within the humanities and social sciences (e.g., Wilkie 2015). Since scientists now agree that select nonhuman species share core traits associated with human fandom – including culture, play, sociality, and emotionality – I suggested an expanded research trajectory for fan studies (Harrington 2019).

In this essay I focus specifically on possibilities associated with canine fandom, taking both text and object fandom into consideration but assuming affirmational rather than transformative behaviors or activities. Why canines? In large part because domestic animals

are more likely than other species to be exposed to media (TV, movies, internet, gaming) as part of living with humans, and according to the American Veterinary Medical Association dogs are the most popular pet in the U.S. (Brulliard & Clement 2019). Moreover, 87% of pet owners report that their pets 'curl up with them or at their feet when they watch TV' and almost 50% of all dogs are described by their owners as actively attuned to the TV screen (see Robins 2005). This routine exposure to media texts and technologies coupled with the rise of 'pet parenting' in the U.S. (Arenofsky 2017)[1] has helped create an emergent market (among humans) for dog- and cat-centric experiences, including species-specific DVDs (e.g., 'Couch Potato Kitty' and 'Pooch TV'; Robins 2005), TV snacks for pets (such as Woofy Pop popcorn; ibid), movie theaters catering to human-and-canine audiences (see https://www.k9cinemas.com/), and TV channels designed specifically for canine viewers.[2] While production of media content for dogs does not necessarily mean they are watching said content in a 'fannish' way (or even watching at all), industry and dog owners' growing enthusiasm for animal-media experiences and products is joined with rising academic interest in canine screen time – for example, Dog-Computer Interaction (DCI) studies recently emerged as a subfield of Animal-Computer Interaction (ACI) studies (Hirskyj-Douglas 2017). Given these developments both outside and within academia, I focus analytic attention specifically on fannish possibilities associated with dogs.

As noted, my prior work reviewed scientific findings on animal traits that resonate with human fandom (Harrington 2019). However, in that essay I did not consider animals' level of emotional and cognitive capacity in relationship to fandom, which becomes relevant when shifting focus to a specific species. While there is variation among breeds, in general dogs are believed to have similar capacities as 2-year-old children (see Bryer 2009; Hirskyj-Douglas & Read 2016), rendering the nascent literature on child fandom (Hunting 2019) most relevant as a point of entrée for any future fan scholarship on dog fandom.[3] One of Hunting's core arguments, that '[m]any markers of fandom such as participatory engagement, gathering knowledge, collecting, playing, and immersing oneself in a fan object all align neatly with behaviors associated with children's media engagement' (p. 99), resonates with my rationale for a multispecies fan studies (Harrington 2019). I return to the ethical implications of a relationship between child and canine capacities in the conclusion of this essay.

The following sections explore possibilities of canine fandom via three different discourses. First, I examine scholarly discourse on dog-media engagement by synthesizing relevant literature from animal studies and DCI. This review of research from outside fan studies helps inform fan scholars by providing a scientific foundation for the potential and limitations of canine-textual fandom. Second, I explore pet owners' (laypersons) discourse on canine-object engagement via analysis of stories posted on the website The Dodo: For Animal People (https://www.thedodo.com/). Finally, I consider ways dog fandom is implied in the industrial texts of veterinarians and pet toy manufacturers, focusing specifically on vet magazines and pet trade show marketing materials. I conclude by discussing ethical considerations we face as fan scholars if we elect to embrace dogs as fans. In short, this

essay initiates a conversation on the potential for canine fandom and (hopefully) serves as a provocation to further research.

Dog-Media Engagement: Scholarly Discourse

Laypersons appear convinced their dogs like popular media, even favoring specific TV genres or programs ranging from NASCAR to *Judge Judy* to *Animal Cops* (Robins 2005), and embracing canine-friendly movie theaters that offer water bowls, 'potty break intermissions,' and screenings of classic dog-centric films such as *Lady and the Tramp* (*Family Dog*, July/August 2019, p. 6). Animal experts, in contrast, are more hesitant about what dog-media engagement might actually imply. For example, Ron Levi, co-founder of DogTV, spent three years working with a team of experts researching canine vision and hearing prior to launching the channel.[4] Levi emphasizes the science behind DogTV's content, which offers programming in the areas of stimulation, relaxation, and exposure: 'The first to stimulate dogs' brains, the second to chill them out, and the third to expose them (gently) to things they may find frightening in the real world, from fireworks and traffic to vacuum cleaners' (*The Guardian*, April 4, 2015). DogTV also airs shows designed for dogs and humans to watch together and the program *Dogstar* invites viewers to send in videos of their own dogs. The biggest challenge in creating canine-friendly programming, says Levi, is aesthetic restraint:

> Normally with music and visual content, people try to do more: another cut, another camera angle to make it more interesting. With dogs, it's the opposite, you have to do less. If you do more, you're going to lose your audience. Another cut, and the dog is 'where did that go?' and you've lost them. They have brains like two-year old kids: if you do another camera angle suddenly or go point-of-view, you've lost the dog. You lose your audience, and they get irritated (*The Guardian*, April 4, 2015).

The 2009 launch of DogTV (see note 2) garnered considerable global press, some of it respectful and some more tongue-in-cheek. For example, an article in *The New York Times* (Genslinger 2012) followed the author's efforts to gauge the channel's scientific foundation by studying (unscientifically, he notes) how various species react to it. Using a 'control group' of six dogs and a random collection of other-species 'test subjects' – including a snake, a turtle, rabbits, squirrels, and chipmunks (he placed a laptop turned to DogTV on the lawn) – the author concludes that the 'haphazard' and 'unpredictable' responses in both dogs and non-dogs suggests 'there are not many types of creatures on the planet, but essentially only one: the one that either stares at a TV screen or doesn't' (Genslinger 2012). Despite its at-times-humorous reception DogTV is a ratings success, inspiring multiple competitors to create pet-friendly programming including U.S.-based Animal Planet and the Canadian channel The Pet Network.

Scholars working in Animal-Computer Interaction (ACI) and Dog-Computer Interaction (DCI) appear less certain than content creators and laypersons about the potential for canine fandom. Given that ACI and its sub-fields are explicitly oriented toward animal welfare, scholars are concerned about rapid advancements in canine-screen experiences 'since innovation appears to be driven largely by technology rather than the needs of the animals' (Lawson, Kirman & Linehan 2016, p. 37). ACI and DCI take an explicitly animal-centered approach to understanding how nonhumans engage with media technologies. For example, in their innovative study of TV-watching canines, Hirskyj-Douglas and her colleagues (2017) track dogs' head movements as a way to measure attention to TV screens. Involving two dogs, three screens, and 12 videos, the goal of the study is 'to determine what, if anything, a dog might watch given a choice of content, and to additionally draw insights on whether a dog was making a choice in [a] particular way' (p. 211). The authors describe a 'favorite' video (that is, one holding fannish potential) as 'one that was watched at least twice as much in a single session, as the least viewed video' (p. 216). The study confirmed prior research that dogs are more interested in watching other dogs on-screen than they are in watching humans, but also found that canine test subjects prefer to watch *nothing* over watching TV:

> The dogs in this study chose to not watch TV over any TV content; even *Coronation Street* failed to hold their attention […] When the dogs chose not to participate they walked off, went to their beds, took drinks, looked out the window, played with toys and did all manner of dog things (p. 218).[5]

Furthermore, DCI scholars find that while there is some evidence that dogs turn from one screen to an adjacent one (perhaps indicating program selection; p. 218), dogs do not appear to follow media clips from screen to screen – 'their attention is not strong to a *story* in media' (Hirskyj-Douglas 2017, p. 148; emphasis added). Moreover, when dogs do attend to a screen their attention span is 'an average of less than three seconds' (ibid), indicating a preference (or species capacity) for super-short-form texts and seemingly rendering immersive media engagement moot (the shows on DogTV are typically three- to six-minute segments). Finally, even if a dog *does* appear to be watching a program it is difficult to determine if he or she is enjoying it, raising the interesting possibility of canine media anti-fandom or even hate-watching. While scientists agree that a wide range of nonhumans (including canines) experience emotion,[6] there is little research focused on animal enjoyment. Scholarship on canine emotionality focuses mostly on aggression and fear (Kujala 2017, p. 6)[7], and the few extant studies of enjoyment highlight cortisol and heart rate levels (see Hirskyj-Douglas, Read & Cassidy 2017, p. 211). So perhaps the ratings success of DogTV rests less in responding to or cultivating canine textual fandom than in its explicitly therapeutic function, helping entertain animals that are anxious or bored or depressed (see note 2).[8] Without this therapeutic function dogs' interest in TV programming made for humans may be more limited than laypersons attest (that is, dogs 'happily'

watching TV with their humans might actually be happy just to be on the couch), but these findings are informative for professionals in the new area of interactive media design for canines (Hirskyj-Douglas 2017, p. 149). And while there is no expert consensus on how long, if at all, dogs 'should' be watching TV, the 'possibility for the dog to decide in these matters is an enticing one' (Hirskyj-Douglas, Read & Cassidy 2017, p. 209).

DCI is a nascent field and other media-based fannish possibilities, such as dogs' experiences at movie theaters or concerts or Comic-Con, have not to my knowledge been systematically studied. Dog internet use has garnered more attention despite (or perhaps because of) Julian Assange's infamous assertion that dogs will soon have internet access 'whether they want it or not' (see Lawson, Kirman & Linehan 2016, p. 41). DCI scholars have begun fascinating speculative work on an internet for dogs, employing design fiction to develop ''fantasy prototypes' of what is plausible in the near future' (Hiskyj-Douglas & Lucero 2019, p. 3). For example, one design allows dogs in different spaces to play 'together' with stuffed animals (potentially exemplifying object fandom; p. 6) and another allows dogs watching TV to 'call a friend' and engage in joint viewing (potentially exemplifying media fandom; p. 7). Ultimately, however, 'genuinely animal-centric technology may be inscrutable and impossible to understand from a human perspective, since the interactions would be composed primarily of signals that are meaningful only to animals' (Lawson, Kirman & Linehan 2016, p. 40). In short, animal intention, and what animals see as possible to do with media screens, have yet to be identified. This scholarly gap, known as the 'gulf of execution' in ACI and DCI (see Hirskyj-Douglas, Pons, Read & Jaen 2018, p. 3), typically exists in human children as well.[9]

While emergent scholarly findings on dog-media engagement offer cautious optimism for the possibility of canine *textual* fandom, research on animal play yields greater potential for the idea of canine *object* fandom – creative play is, of course, a hallmark of human fandom in both affective (e.g., Hills 2002) and material (e.g., Heljakka 2013) forms (see also Harrington 2019). I turn to object fandom in the following section with a focus on laypersons' discourse.

Dog-Object Engagement: Layperson Discourse

Scientists agree that numerous species of nonhumans engage in play for fun as well as function, and in contrast to the lack of hard evidence on animal enjoyment of screen-time, the neurochemical changes that make play enjoyable are known to be shared by both humans and animals (Bekoff 2007, p. 56). Play among juvenile animals has well-established developmental functions but its purpose goes beyond that and is clearly beyond that for adult animals (Hall 1998). In the absence of objects manufactured by humans, 'domestic, captive and wild animals may use a variety of tools such as sticks, rocks, leaves, fruit, feathers, dead prey animals and even items of discarded bric-a-brac to play with' (Hall 1998, p. 45). Object play has been documented in domestic animals such as dogs and cats along with species including elephants, bears, Komodo dragons, lions, hooded crows, and chimpanzees (Mason and McCarthy 1994, pp. 148, 150). Scientists do not claim that animals

'love' or even 'like' the objects they play with but the activity itself is (as noted) experientially comparable to human play.[10]

Laypersons, in contrast, seem convinced of animal adoration for favored toys and offer fannish renderings of animal-object relationships. I draw here on stories posted to the popular website The Dodo: For Animal Lovers (https://www.thedodo.com/), which offers short illustrated narratives of pets ('Close to Home'), farm animals ('On the Farm'), and non-domesticated animals ('In the Wild'). Entering the search term 'stuffed animals' yielded 42 related postings and the term 'dog toys' yielded 122 postings. Not all postings speak to fannish potential – for example, 'stuffed animals' includes numerous sad stories of animals stuffed into suitcases or boxes for purposes of smuggling or abandonment and 'dog toys' includes stories warning of dangerous or hazardous merchandise. Numerous stories, however, are told through a lens of fan-object connections. For example, 'Sweet Dog Has Been Collecting Stuffed Animals For The Past 10 Years' (https://www.thedodo.com/close-to-home/dog-allie-collects-toys) describes a dog named Alli who 'absolutely adored' the first stuffed animal gifted her (a lobster named Leroy) and 'still has every stuffed animal she's ever gotten, and loves them more than anything in the world.' Alli reportedly 'play[s] with them nonstop at home' and takes a stuffed animal with her everywhere she goes. While from the perspective of animal experts this might exemplify hoarding behavior, or safeguarding resources for future times of scarcity (Erb 2017), the narrative also evokes scholarly literature on human fandom and collecting – that is, fans' cherished personal connections to mass-produced objects (e.g., Geraghty 2014).

Another story, 'Dog Has Destroyed Every Toy For Years – Until She Met This One' (https://www.thedodo.com/close-to-home/dog-destroys-all-but-one-toy) tells of rescue dog Phoenix who has had numerous toys over the years but after 'vigorously' playing with them for several days 'meticulously' rips them apart. All changed with the introduction of a pink and green stuffed dragon – Phoenix is described as 'absolutely ador[ing]' the dragon, 'cuddl[ing] nonstop with it' and cradling it 'lovingly' between her paws. Several stories describe stuffed animals undergoing repair and dogs watching anxiously until the operation is complete – one dog owner reports, 'He acted as if his wife was in surgery' (https://www.the.dodo.com/close-to-home/grandma-saves-pit-bull-dogs-favorite-pillow) – and other stories describe stuffed animal 'clones' purchased to replace loved-too-much objects (e.g., https://www.thedodo.com/pug-dog-fox-toy-2133843486.html). The idea of a specific, favored object clearly resonates with human fandom and the story 'Pets Who Have Loved The Same Toy Since Forever' (https://www.thedodo.com/pets-with-toys-1125699167.html) captures pet-object relations across time. The webpage features 'then' and 'now' photos of cats and dogs with their favorite toys, with some of the 'now' photos capturing objects tattered beyond recognition. As I've noted elsewhere (Harrington 2019 [5.1]), this story is reminiscent of photographer Mark Nixon's wonderful portraiture book *Much Loved* (2013), which celebrates people's lifelong attachments with cherished stuffed animals that have been 'loved to bits' (in Nixon's words) and resonates with fan scholarship on aging, human

development, and the life course (Harrington & Bielby 2010; see also *Journal of Fandom Studies*, 2019, Volume 7, Number 2).

Fannish interpretations running through stories on The Dodo are accompanied by other more canine-specific readings. For example, 'Why Are Dogs So Obsessed With That One Toy?' (https://www.thedodo.com/why-dogs-one-toy-2156129371.html) quotes veterinarian Erika Loftin: 'There's no one-size-fits-all reason for why certain dogs might decide on a favorite toy.' Dogs sometimes bond with toys that reminds them of puppies (surrogate parenting behavior), those with high predatory drives become attached to toys they can eventually destroy, and dogs routinely turn to toys for comfort and security (aka the therapeutic function forming the foundation of DogTV). Animal experts frame at least some of this behavior developmentally. According to dog trainer Liz Kover:

> Dogs are eternally toddlers. A human child who has a favorite toy will, at some point, reach a developmental stage where it's not appropriate to carry around a teddy bear anymore […] With dogs they never develop beyond that stage. There is no reason to replace something that they are really attached to with something else. That one toy she has been attached to – it's part of their repertoire of their comfort things that make up their world (ibid).

This animal-centric reading syncs with fan studies in interesting ways. For example, the toddler-canine connection emphasizes the importance of engaging emergent literature on child fandom (Hunting 2019) for any future canine fan studies, and reference to the developmental appropriateness of favored objects furthers the scholarly debate over Winnicottian transitional phenomena in fandom (see brief summary in Harrington & Bielby 2013). As such, even animal experts' interpretations of canine behavior may resonate with our knowledge on human fandom.

If scholarly discourse on animal-media experiences yields cautious optimism for the possibility of canine-textual fandom, laypersons' discourse on canine-object play (which is at least partially backed by animal science) offers greater potential for canine-object fandom. In the following section, I turn to the final discourse under consideration: veterinary and pet product industries.

Canine Commerce: Industry Discourse

Understanding how animal-oriented industries position dog-textual and dog-object relationships is important for two reasons. First, the history of human fandom has documented a marked shift in how media industries responded to fans over time, from the early days of 'get a life!' dismissal to the current practice of courting fan bases as part of advance promotional strategies. Second, the rise of pet parenting in the U.S. has generated massive (human) consumption of pet products (read: potential fan objects; Arenofsky 2017). Consumer spending on pets in the U.S. is $100 billion as of this writing and the industry as a whole appears recession-resistant due to a variety of factors, including the multi-

generational appeal of pets and the growing pet celebrity culture (ibid). Industry discourse on the potential of canine fandom can thus shape both pet-owner and canine experiences, although evidence points to overall industry ambivalence regarding this potential.

I explore two data sources here: dog-oriented magazines and pet trade show materials. The magazines are available to consumers on larger newsstands or via subscription and are ubiquitous in veterinary waiting rooms, but the pet toy trade materials are what Caldwell (2004) refers to as 'deep industrial texts,' made by practitioners for practitioners and reflecting the way the industry makes sense of itself to itself. I reviewed the contents of 15 canine-oriented magazines obtained from my local veterinary office from late 2017 through summer 2019: *Dogster Magazine* (n=6), *Modern Dog* (n=5), *Family Dog* (n=3) and *Pet Quarterly* (n=1). The magazines display a shared repetitive interest in topics such as canine health (mental and physical), details of specific breeds, behavioral problems such as barking or leash pulling, recipes for homemade dog food and warnings about dangerous food items, and dogs' experiences with agility courses and other types of training programs. The magazines cater to the rise of pet celebrity and pet parenting through a variety of mechanisms including advertisements for new dog fashions, tips for how to take better photos of one's dog, interesting slippage in the description of canine-human relationships (pet/owner, dog/human, child/parent, dog/guardian), and holiday gift guides directed at both humans and dogs.

However, I found no clear evidence that magazines are explicitly cultivating canine fandom, whether textual or object. I found several reviews of pet-oriented movies such as *Secret Life of Pets 2* and novels with dog-oriented themes (see *Dogster Magazine*, August/September 2019, p. 10). I came across an article titled 'Movie Barquee' which touts the rise in movie theaters allowing dogs and screening canine-friendly programming (*Family Dog*, July/August 2019, p. 6), thusly hinting at canine-textual fandom. Consistent across all magazines are promotions for new pet products including stuffed animals, which suggests canine-object fandom. Product advertising copy typically combines both perspectives noted above: animal expert (emphasizing comfort and security) and layperson (emphasizing 'love' for plush toys). Here, for example, is ad copy for Drake the Dragon:

> If your dog loves plush squeaky toys, he won't be able to get enough of this cheeky dragon, made out of ultra-soft plush to provide a sense of comfort and companionship. Drake's multi-colored path over his heart symbolizes lifelong dedication to spreading autism awareness (*Dogster Magazine*, February/March 2019, p. 60).

Perhaps most interesting in the magazines I reviewed are regular features wherein animal experts compare human and canine characteristics; as noted, the extent to which humans and nonhumans share certain traits opens the possibility of animal fans (Harrington 2019). For example, animal expert and professor of psychology Stanley Coren, who created a series of DVDs for dogs titled 'The Dog Companion' (Quenqua 2012), wrote for two different

magazines about a study finding dogs' personalities developing over time much as humans' do (*Modern Dog*, Summer 2019, p. 24; *Family Dog*, July/August 2019, p. 16-17).[11] In another article, animal expert Victoria Stilwell explores the fact that 'Dogs, like people, have a mutual need to form social attachments…' (*Dogster Magazine*, April/May 2019, p. 24), hinting at the community aspect of fandom. As a final example, a feature on canine grief grounded in academic scholarship draws a parallel between human and canine emotionality (*Modern Dog*, Winter 2018/2019, pp. 70-73); again, emotionality is a core aspect of human fandom. These articles seem primarily designed to improve pet owners' interpretation of their dog's behavior but they also position humans and canines in a comparable emotional and behavioral landscape.

My review of pet trade materials yields a similar ambivalence regarding the possibility of canine fandom. I attended the two-day National Pet Industry Trade Show in Mississauga, Ontario (CA) in September 2019[12] to observe buying-and-selling practices for a wide variety of pet products, including toys, clothing, food, carriers, beds, and restraint or safety devices (among other items). As was described above in the context of pet magazines, I found trade show materials catering to the rise of pet parenting and pet celebrity via mechanisms such as dog clothing, personalized pet calendars, elaborate dwellings and leisure merchandise (e.g. dog hammocks), artisanal food products, and so on. Similarly, I found trade product advertising copy, as well as vendors' verbal descriptions, combining animal experts' perspectives with those of laypersons. They do so by simultaneously emphasizing multiple product functions including breed function (e.g. hunting instinct), therapeutic function (e.g. alleviating fear or anxiety), health function (e.g. dental, eyesight, weight management), environmental function (e.g. organic or single-origin ingredients), play-for-dogs function (e.g. puzzle toys with multiple permutations), and play-for-humans function (e.g. pet holiday costumes). For example, the vendor stall for well-known toy company KONG featured a large banner proclaiming 'KONG helps solve chewing, teething, separation anxiety, weight management, crate treating, and digging & barking' with the company slogan at the bottom: 'Dogs Need to Play.' KONG's catalog further explains the company's priority:

> For dogs, mental and physical development, emotions and behavior are all influenced by healthy play. Play helps dogs expend excess energy, which is important for appropriate behavior. KONG dog toys encourage play, satisfying dogs' instinctual needs and strengthening the bond between dog and owner (KONG 2019-2020 Product Catalog, p. 4).

While the developmental function of canine play is ubiquitous in product marketing, some print materials and vendor discourse also suggest canine fandom. For example, a flyer for Wicked Ball: First Smart Interactive Pet Toy (n.d.) features a photo of a sad-looking dog with a bubble-thought above its head stating 'Alas, mom left me alone again…' Wicked Ball (a small blue ball on the floor beside the dog) replies with its own bubble-thought, 'Don't

worry! You're not alone anymore', implying a friendship (or at least companionship) between the dog and the toy and curiously implying that the dog is anthropomorphizing the toy (or whatever anthropomorphism-by-dogs would be termed; see Harrington [2019] for relevance to multispecies fan studies). The advertising copy further states that Wicked Ball is 'tons of fun' (raising again the question of how do we know a dog is having fun? See note 9) and is available in 'fun colors' (fun for whom?).

This slippage in product target (canine or human?) is common in trade materials. For example, the company foufouBRANDS features holiday crinkle toys '[p]rinted with a beautiful metallic snowflake design [and featuring] a To/From tag, making it the perfect stocking stuffer' (Fall Winter 2019/2020 Catalogue, p. 5), and one of its knotted toys is described as 'on-trend, with the ever popular sloth design' (ibid, p. 22). Whether dogs like metallic snowflake designs or are fans of sloths may be unanswerable and the crinkle toys' stocking stuffer potential is presumably directed at the pet parent rather than the dog. As another example, I chatted with a vendor selling a stuffed dog featuring a steadily beating 'heart.' Designed as a canine comfort product, the vendor emphasized it is meant to be a dog's 'friend,' not a toy (again implying anthropomorphism-by-dogs). Overall, I found that marketing for stuffed toys routinely highlights developmental functions while also hinting at the possibility of canine-object fandom.

While academic discourse on animal-media experiences yields guarded optimism for the possibility of canine-textual fandom, and laypersons' discourse yields greater hopefulness for the possibility canine-object fandom, I found mixed evidence of industry attempts to court dog fandom despite the normalization of human fandom, our increasing tendency to treat pets as family members, and the potential financial gain of doing so. Below, I turn to implications of a canine-inclusive fan studies (Harrington 2019).

Conclusion

This essay has explored possibilities of dog fandom via three evidentiary discourses: scholarly, layperson, and industrial. In short, scientific (specifically DCI) research interpreted within a fan studies context appears cautiously optimistic in terms of canine-textual fandom; layperson's discourse enthusiastically embraces the idea of canine-object fandom; and industry materials appear ambivalent in their portrayal and/or solicitation of dogs as fans. While fan studies' focus on nonhumans is embryonic at best, the cognitive and emotional capacities of certain animal species along with growing efforts by activists to grant legal personhood to a range of nonhumans (see note 3 and the Nonhuman Rights Project; https://www.nonhumanrights.org/) suggest broadening the scope of who might 'count' as a fan (Harrington 2019). Assuming fan scholars pursue this idea further, how best to ethically proceed?

To recall, dogs are believed to have comparable sentience to 2-year-old children[13]. In making a case for including children in fan studies Hunting (2019) summarizes core conceptual and methodological challenges, including the fact that for many fan scholars 'self-identification as a fan is crucial to recognizing fandom' (p. 100). To elaborate:

> The expectation of discursive self-identification in fan studies presents a problem for studying children as fans, and the barriers that some children may have to self-identify will complicate how subjects are chosen, and the questions we can ask about fan engagement (ibid).

While prior classroom observations reveal that 'children as young as kindergarteners use their favorite media to form stories and may take a 'transformative' approach to these stories' (p. 97), existing methodologies may not allow us to fully capture experiences and expressions of children's fandom, including their community engagement, creative activities, and knowledge-gathering behaviors. As Hunting expounds:

> Perhaps the largest challenge will be developing new methods and deciding how far we can bend the norms of fan studies before they break in order to gather information about fans whose creative work may be extremely primitive, and who may be limited in their ability to 'speak for themselves' or to self-identify as fans (p. 105).

Much as children's vulnerability requires special ethical considerations, so too of course does the vulnerability of animals, and research proposals including either children or animals as subjects are assessed via special IRB protocols. For example, the 1966 federal Animal Welfare Act (U.S.) 'regulates the treatment of animals in research, exhibition, transport, and by dealers' (https://www.nal.usda.gov/awic/animal-welfare-act) and requires animals be provided with humane care and treatment. Moreover, the U.S. Public Health Service's *Policy on the Humane Care and Use of Laboratory Animals* (revised 2015) applies to animal research supported by the National Institutes of Health and requires institutions 'to establish and maintain proper measures to ensure the appropriate care and use of all animals involved in research, research training, and biological testing' (https://olaw.nih.gov/policies-laws/phs-policy.htm).

However, existing protocols protecting nonhuman research participants are founded on the long-standing belief that animals are property or things – 'objects that can be disposed of as long as reasonable care is taken to minimize their suffering' (Berns 2013). Scholars in Animal-Computer Interaction (ACI) and Dog-Computer Interaction (DCI) studies instead believe in (certain species of) animals as sentient beings, requiring an animal-centered research design and revised ethical protocols. For example, in his efforts to train dogs to go in M.R.I scanners 'completely awake and unrestrained,' Berns and his colleagues began by treating the dogs as persons:

> We had a consent form, which was modeled after a child's consent form but signed by the dog's owner. We emphasized that participation was voluntary, and that the dog had the right to quit the study. We used only positive

training methods. No sedation. No restraints. If the dogs didn't want to be in the M.R.I. scanner, they could leave. Same as any human volunteer (2013).

In their efforts to formalize an animal-centered design approach for DCI, Hirskyj-Douglas and Read (2016) offer the following guidelines: (a) 'Enable Consent: Walk Away'; (b) 'Providing a Safe Place'; (c) 'Work Where Possible Within the Dog's Own Home'; (d) 'Have the Owner or Carer Observing'; (e) 'When Using Audio or Video Never Show Familiar or Distressing Footage or Sound'; (f) 'Dogs Should Have No Behavioral Problems'; and (g) 'Dogs Should Not Be Trained To Use a System.' However, they question whether even if the guidelines are in place 'does the dog ever really have a choice behind the activities it participates in?' (ibid). Given the inevitable interpretive gap between humans and canines, this is an important question to consider as we move forward with the idea of canine fandom.

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Notes:

[1] For example, 94% of U.S. pet owners see pets as part of their family and 80% report treating pets as surrogate children (Arenofsky 2017).

[2] For example, DogTV launched in the U.S. in 2009 as a 24/7 digital TV channel supported by the Humane Society. The channel provides "dog-friendly programming scientifically developed to provide the right company for dogs when left alone. Through years of research with some of the world's top pet experts, special content was created to meet specific attributes of a dog's sense of vision and hearing and supports their natural behavior patterns. The result: a confident, happy dog, who's less likely to develop stress, separation anxiety or other related problems" (http://www.dogtv.com).

[3] The capacities of canines have resulted in dogs "being reclassified in 2014/2015 as sentient beings rather than property, having the same legal protection as children under the law in France, Quebec and New Zealand" (Hirskyj-Douglas & Read 2016).

[4] Like humans, dogs gather three basic types of visual information: "They perceive an object's motion, its color and its shape." However, dogs see fewer colors than humans do, their eyes collect light better than human eyes, and their eyes "refresh" more quickly than human eyes. Dogs "experience TV programming with both their eyes and ears […] dog sounds are often the most

compelling noises for dogs, but they also respond to the sounds of other animals, people and high-pitched squeaks" (Team 2017). These species differences shape entertainment programming designed for canines vs. humans.

[5] The authors describe comparable results from a study of a touch-screen interface allowing orangutans to listen to music; the orangutans preferred silence over a variety of musical choices (see Ritvo & Allison 2014).

[6] Scientists agree on the experience of primary emotions (anger, sadness, joy, pain, fear, and disgust; Demoulin 2004, p. 72) in a wide range of nonhumans but disagree about the presence of secondary emotions such as shame, guilt, or love. However, pet owners report that their dogs feel a wide range of emotions including "sadness, anxiety, surprise, anger, curiosity, interest, affection, joy and fear" (Morris, Doe & Godsell 2008, p. 12).

[7] However, "[a]n exception among the positive emotions is dog play behavior, which is well-documented" (Kujala 2017, p. 16) and is discussed in the following section.

[8] According to Team (2017), any given dog's interest in TV is shaped by "The amount of exposure your dog has had to the television"; "The extent to which your dog's breed relies on its vision to hunt or work"; and "Your dog's relative interest in pleasing you."

[9] To elaborate, Lawson and colleagues caution, "it is very tempting to infer from watching an animal interact with a device that they 'like' it, or 'want' it, or that they are 'curious,' all based on our perspectives as humans. More likely, the animal is behaving in a manner that they have previously learned is likely to produce attention, food, and approval from the humans present. It is important that such observations should not be mistaken for the genuine thoughts or feelings of the animal. As counterintuitive as it sounds to all animal lovers, we simply have no evidence that these thoughts and feelings exist, or, if they do, that we can interpret them reliably and accurately" (Lawson, Kirman & Linehan 2016, p. 39).

[10] I do not mean to equate human and canine experience; as stated earlier (see note 9), due to communication barriers humans can never accurately interpret canine thoughts and feelings. However, as Bekoff (2007) puts it, "Dogs are happy, not 'happy' [...] the truth is simply that a dog has rich emotional and cognitive experiences of the *dog kind*" (p. 9, 15; emphasis in original). Much of canine science, including DCI, is oriented toward a better understanding of what the "dog kind" might entail.

[11] The study surveyed over 1,500 dog owners (Chopik & Weaver 2019), and the central finding that dog personalities differ by age resonates with scholarship on lifelong, enduring (human) fandom (see Harrington & Bielby 2010).

[12] I was given a press (media) pass to attend the event, which is closed to the public. I gathered print materials, observed, and chatted informally with vendors and other attendees. I did not administer surveys or conduct formal interviews.

[13] Interestingly, at least one pet product company (P.L.A.Y. Pet Lifestyle and You) markets toys with the note "Tested to meet safety standards for children's toys," implying comparability to children beyond cognitive or emotional capacity.