

## **Editors' Introduction: On toxic fan practices and the new culture wars**

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### **The Toxic Turn?**

Since at least 2014, the terrain of popular culture has paid host to an uptick in political conflict and quarrel, becoming the battleground on which the new culture wars are being fought. Largely occurring in online territories, this post-millennial spin on the extreme partisan polarities of the 1980s and '90s, which functioned as a way to repeal the enormous gains won by the 1960s counterculture (Hartman, 2015), has centred the texts of popular culture in its sights. In the Marvel comic book universe, for instance, there have been a spate of character changes that diversify who gets to be a superhero, but these changes have been met with opposing responses, most often viewed in bald binary terms as a conflict between the 'politically correct' pro-diversity crowd — commonly referred to as 'social justice warriors' (SJWs) — and members of the so-called 'alt-right' hell-bent on hijacking progressive shifts in popular culture (if only things were ever quite so simple!). In July 2014, Marvel Comics announced that two of their most prized assets, Thor and Captain

America, were being marked for recalibration. Although this is a common occurrence in superhero comics, Marvel decided to shake things up by handing over the mantle of Thor to a female character, whom readers would come to learn is none other than Jane Foster, Thor's sometime girlfriend. Marvel's announcement of this new iteration placed her in a tradition of 'strong female characters':

No longer is the classic male hero able to hold the mighty hammer, Mjölnir, and a brand new female hero will emerge who will be worthy of the name Thor [...] The new Thor continues Marvel's proud tradition of strong female characters like Captain Marvel, Storm, Black Widow and more. And this new Thor isn't a temporary female substitute – she's now the one and only Thor, and she is worthy! (Marvel.com, 2014)

The following day, Marvel announced that the original Captain America, Steve Rogers, was out of commission, passing the star-spangled shield and tights over to Sam Wilson, one of the first black superheroes in comics (first appearing in 1969 as the Falcon). Marvel's Senior Vice-President of Publishing, Tom Brevoort, explained that shifts in diversity would continue because 'change is one of the watchwords of the Marvel Universe' (Montgomery, 2014). Thus, Marvel introduced Riri Williams as the doubly diverse relief for Tony Stark's Iron Man, a black female teenager who goes by the 'feminine' appellation 'Iron Heart', as well as the new Ms. Marvel, Pakistani Muslim character, Kamala Khan; Mile Morales as a Hispanic Spider-Man; and an LGBT version of Ice-Man from the original X-Men team, among others.

In the days following Marvel's announcement, social media and comment threads were set aflame. Complaints about these new iterations of classic characters often invoked arguments centred on what Proctor describes as 'canonical fidelity' in his article on #blackstormtrooper in this themed-section, perhaps best exemplified by this tweet: 'I hate all this manipulation of characters just to "appeal to everyone". They suddenly want to change already written characters races and sex and that's just not cool'. More recently, Marvel's Vice President of Sales, David Gabriel, blamed the pro-diversity roster for plummeting sales, claiming:

What we heard was that people didn't want any more diversity. They didn't want female characters out there. That's what we heard, whether we believe that or not. I don't know that that's really true, but that's what we saw in sales (in McMillan, 2017).

Film and television franchises have undertaken many of the same efforts to diversify in recent years, with equally mixed results from fans, audiences, and critics. The American version of Sherlock Holmes, *Elementary* (CBS, 2012— ) reimagined the character of Dr. Watson as an Asian-American woman, while a similar change is planned for the reboot of *Magnum PI*, in which Mexican-American Jay Hernandez will play Thomas Magnum opposite

Perdita Weeks as Juliet Higgins, reconceptualising British male character, Jonathan Higgins, originally played by John Hillerman (Otterson, 2018a, 2018b). The 2016 remake of *Ghostbusters* famously cast women as the ghost-fighting team, a choice that was met with significant contention on social media, but was ultimately much more complicated than what was contained in news media (Bore, 2016; Proctor, 2017). For fans of the original incarnations of these media texts, the new, diverse casts can seem to ‘ruin’ the original, while others celebrate what they see as a move toward inclusivity.

Disputes among fans related to casting, preservation of (and fidelity to) various canonical texts, alongside producer/author choices, are not new to fan communities. However, the ‘mainstreaming’ of fan cultures since the turn of the millennium has granted new possibilities, affordances and greater popular press attention to broader discursive and ideological conflicts within audiences and fan communities, especially on social media and other user-generated platforms. Subcultural squabbles are also no longer restricted to the margins, but readily available for public consumption via press stories that decidedly ‘cherry-pick’ social media utterances as clear evidence that there is a rising toxicity that can be simplistically attributed to certain subsets of fans, most often understood as angry white, heterosexual men who feel the decline of their social, political, cultural and economic capital most poignantly through these changes to entertainment media.



Lucy Liu as Joan Watson in CBS' Sherlock Holmes reimagining, *Elementary*.

The ‘Gamergate’ controversy of 2014 was another example of what Adrienne Massanari (2017) dubs ‘toxic technocultures’. The release of a blog post by Eron Gjoni, a disgruntled

ex-lover of independent games designer, Zoe Quinn, implied that Quinn had offered sexual favors to gaming journalist, Nathan Grayson of Kotaku, in return for positive reviews of her interactive novel, *Depression Quest*. Although Grayson did not actually review the game, Gjoni's blog post incited numerous outcries on Reddit, 4Chan and Twitter, where users harassed Quinn and her supporters *en masse* under the guise of preserving the ethics of videogame journalism. The resulting cyber-violence involved weaponized rhetorics of misogyny, including rape and death threats as well as 'doxing' — that is, releasing personal information online such as identities, bank details, addresses, telephone numbers, and workplaces (Massanari, 2017; Salter and Blodgett, 2017, p. 91).

Protests surrounding diversity in comics, film, TV and video games highlight the inherent tensions and contradictions within popular culture and fan communities. On the one hand, some see the move toward more inclusive representation as proactive and reflective of genuine social change. Others, however, feel an increasing sense of disempowerment at their loss of privileged status, and social media can become serve as a useful tool, allowing them to attempt to overcome a status loss by tweeting, blogging, doxing, and creating niche movements with similarly disempowered fans. As several articles in this themed-section attest, toxic behaviors are often the result of hegemonic elites feeling as though they are marginalized or in the minority.



Mexican-American Jay Hernandez will play Thomas Magnum in the *Magnum P.I.* reboot.

Between 2013 and 2017, firebrand sci-fi fans hijacked the Hugo awards by organizing an attempt to block nominations for so-called 'message fiction', a catchall term for literature seen as overly invested in political correctness with a left-wing bent. One of the key villains behind the campaign, fascist Theodore Beale (who goes by the pseudonym Vox Day) aimed to topple the Hugo awards by exploiting the voting system, stacking the nominations

through an orchestrated campaign to ensure that ‘message fiction’ did not gain award kudos — a campaign that largely failed (Sandifer, 2017). Indeed, Vox Day was a key player in the Gamergate controversy and also a mobilizer of various so-called ‘alt-right’ campaigns. (This campaign, known as the Sad Puppies, is the focal point of one of our articles in this themed-section by J. Richard Stevens and Rachel Watson.)

It is worth noting that popular right wing figures, such as Vox Day and Milo Yiannopoulos, were active participants and provocateurs in the Gamergate and Sad Puppies campaigns, as well as the ongoing ‘Comicsgate’ kerfuffle (Francisco, 2018), ultimately demonstrating that discourses surrounding ‘toxic’ fans, PC-inflected ‘message’ culture, and the rise of the radical right in online quarters cannot be viewed reductively as comprising distinct publics. Instead, we should understand these phenomena as part of a broader matrix comprised of overlapping discourses, utterances, and ‘counter-publics’ (Fraser, 1990; Butsch, 2008). Writing for *The Guardian* in 2016, Matt Lees argues that:

The similarities between Gamergate and the ‘alt-right’ are huge, startling and in no way a coincidence. After all, the culture wars that began in games now has a senior representative in the White House [although since sacked by President Trump]. As a founder member and former executive of Breitbart News, Steve Bannon had a hand in creating media monster Milo Yiannopoulos, who built his fame and Twitter following by supporting and cheerleading Gamergate. This hashtag was the canary in the coalmine, and we ignored it (2016).

That said, however, there have been various ‘boycott’ campaigns that have received a lion’s share of (hyperbolic) press coverage, constructed as part of ‘alt-right’ mobilization around popular culture. However, not every campaign of this sort can be simplistically attributed to orchestrated ‘alt-right’ strategies, even as news reports hype and exaggerate such claims. In so doing, there has been an over-amplification of right-wing rhetoric in press accounts to the point that cautionary guidelines have since been provided by official journalistic bodies about the way journalists report on reactionary agents by relocating marginal discourse into mainstream prominence — a key characteristic of right wing ‘metapolitical’ warfare (see Heikkilä, 2017; Lyons, 2017; Proctor, 2018b). Savvy readers of *The New York Times*, for instance, have observed the newspaper’s tendency to write articles that attempt to make sense of Trump supporters, white nationalists, neo-Nazis and members of the ‘alt-right’. In response, a flurry of tweets and memes have ranged from scolding to scathing in their criticisms of what they perceive as *The New York Times’* complicity in extreme right-wing politics. On 18 January 2018, *The New York Times’* editorial page was given over to letters from Trump supporters, with a note explaining that the newspaper, generally critical of Trump, wanted to ‘let Mr. Trump’s supporters make the best case for him as the first year of his presidency draws to a close’. Editorial page editor James Bennet justified the decision as in the interest of education: ‘people don’t understand where the support [for Trump] is

coming from, and part of our job is to inform them and help explain it' (as quoted in Grove, 2018). Unsurprisingly, responses on social media indicated that large numbers of readers did not agree with Bennet.



Tropes in Video Games

Such reactionary responses from the left are partly what led us to the subject of 'toxicity' as it relates to fan cultures, especially given the academic tendency to gloss over what we might term 'progressive toxicity' (which is not to imply that all instantiations of progressive 'push-back' emanate from explicitly left-wing spheres). More than exploring how members of the disenfranchised fight back, we sought to understand how those in positions of social privilege participate in toxic practices while bemoaning their oppression. Our final example of a similar media event, however, demonstrates how fan and audience researchers must be mindful of how we excavate and interpret these events and of what critical and social distance we place between ourselves and the toxic fans we study.

The Disney-era of Star Wars has been one of the key sites of quarrel regarding pro-diversity politics, including new franchise films, *The Force Awakens* (2015), *Rogue One* (2016) and, more recently, *The Last Jedi* (2017). For example, in December 2014, the release of *The Force Awakens* teaser trailer sparked controversy, with journalists and bloggers rushing to exclaim that fandom is now clearly a participatory space for racist ideologues due to the casting of John Boyega as a First Order Stormtrooper. As Matthew Rozsa of *The Daily Dot* terms it, the complaints about Boyega made manifest the 'the dark side of geek culture' (2014). The hashtag #blackstormtrooper began trending on Twitter, coinciding with, and at times surpassing, the popularity of hashtags related to the Black Lives Matter movement, rapidly mushrooming into a 'discursive event' (Rambukkana, 2015), wherein *Star Wars* fans supposedly decried Boyega's racial identity as yet another example of political correctness run amok. However, *contra* news stories, the hashtag was actually free of racist content and was certainly not launched to protest Boyega despite the litany of news stories that might well have 'manufactured controversy' (Proctor's article in this themed-section covers this event in greater detail). Indeed, the way the #blackstormtooper hashtag was reported by news media — and perhaps more troubling, the way that this discourse was accepted unquestionably by audiences and, to a lesser extent, academics — raises important

questions about our methodological protocols for discovering and interpreting what scholars might deem 'toxic fan practice', as well as providing urgent insights for audience, fan and reception studies generally. While one can perhaps understand, if not condone, news media's penchant for social media 'cherry picking', whereby inflammatory content is chosen for maximum cultural penetration (read: click-bait potential), then the academic community can and should fully examine claims made by news media discourses rather than reproducing them unequivocally.

The emergence of a parallel boycott hashtag (#boycottStarWarsVII) galvanized many journalists to comment on what they saw as a further instance of 'toxic fan practice', but has since been overturned as the work of internet trolls. Yet it was the bevy of news media reporting that catapulted the hashtag into prominence, not the social media platform itself. The website *Mashable* employed social media analytics firm 'Fizzology' to scrape the hashtag and provide quantitative data on the amount of racism within the thread, as well as stern challenges from the Twitterati. According to the data, 94% of comments were critical of the hashtag with 6% being 'racist trolls trying to get people mad' (Dickey, 2016). Indeed, people certainly did get mad, often without checking the veracity of media stories, preferring instead to perform a kind of progressive 'toxicity', an avenue of exploration not yet fully tapped by scholars as already mentioned. As Abad-Santos (2015) writes, these types of trolling operations work

like a tsunami, starting with an initial shock that's followed by quiet as the bluster and bombast retreats like a low tide, then returns in a megaton surge, often aided by the media. The irony is that in the rush to prove one's moral superiority by speaking out against some racist, sexist, or otherwise hurtful sentiment (whether it's a hashtag or a viral video about a coffee cup), the sentiment is frequently amplified on a scale that wouldn't have been possible had people not taken the bait.

If nothing else, these campaigns should serve as a cautionary tale for researchers engaging in 'netnography' (Kozinets, 2009) and other online research protocols and methods. (For more on *Star Wars* and the 'alt-right', see Proctor 2018, 2018b, 2018c). None of the examples cited here are isolated incidents, as the articles within this issue will attest. However, we seek to understand how these toxic practices are instantiations of larger political and cultural polarization, and how the current socio-political climate and technical capacities of the digital realm may contribute to greater spreading of toxic fan practices.

In an essay by Dan Hassler-Forest, we can see the scholarly will to 'imputation', to construct what Martin Barker terms 'figures of the audience', that is, 'predictive claims built out of theorizations', but which remain largely, if not invariably, untested and unsubstantiated (2011, p. 106-107). 'Today,' writes Hassler-Forest, 'we need to learn to recognize and understand these new forms of online fan culture that are mobilizing under the neo-fascist "alt-right" banner in the Trump era' (2016). As evidence, Hassler-Forest

evokes #boycottStarWarsVII, which, as discussed earlier, was largely a container for progressive reaction and a trolling operation to boot. How do we know that these are ‘new forms of online fan culture’, without first addressing whether these developments have a longer history, and which have gone uninvestigated hitherto? How does Hassler-Forest know what he claims to know, and what evidence does he have to support such claims, except for yet another citing of hashtag boycott campaigns that problematize such reductive arguments? Is it possible that the reverse is true? That ‘new forms’ of online fascism are mobilizing under a ‘fan cultures banner’, rather than the other way around? Are these developments ‘real’ as opposed to things being amplified by the media based on individualized and antisocial participants? How do we distinguish fans from trolls in the way Whitney Phillips has described them (2015)? For if the radical right frequently attempt to hijack forms of popular culture for their own ideological ends, including not just film, TV, video-games and comics, but also Doritos, Pepsi and Netflix (Ford, 2016), then it goes without saying that *we simply do not know who these people are*, whether they might be fans, trolls or reactionary protestors jumping on what they see as politically correct objects — *whatever they may be*. Naturally, we do not intend to defend or celebrate fandom, but to ask the academic community to query their own world-views in order to develop adequate tests and methodologies, rather than relying upon imputation that could well end up over-amplifying and exaggerating right-wing rhetoric. To be clear: we are not saying that fans might not be involved with the online radical right; we are asking, *how would we know if they are fans in any case?* As Whitney Phillips and Ryan M. Milner argue, ‘not knowing who created what, what the creator 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’ (Jenkins, Phillips and Milner, 2017, our emphasis).

The rise of the so-called ‘alt-right’, an ‘amorphous, ideologically diffuse, and largely online movement’ (Heikkilä, 2017, p. 2), signals another way that polarization of the political sphere has become enacted – even exaggerated – within digital and fan communities. It is instrumental that scholars understand the epistemological implications of fully embracing press reports that focus explicitly on ‘toxic’ elements within fandom. As Niko Heikkilä (2017) and Matthew N. Lyons (2017) argue, members of the so-called ‘alt-right’ advocate a ‘metapolitical’ strategy ‘that would gradually transform the political and intellectual culture as a precursor to transforming institutions and systems’ (Lyons, 2017, p. 10). There is certainly an argument to be made that right-wing agents, often mobilized behind the so-called ‘alt-right’ banner and brand, have engaged in strategies that ultimately hijack the popular culture imaginary. As right-wing comic book creator, Brett R. Smith, puts it: ‘[t]he highest form of warfare is to subvert the culture because you don’t have to raise a standing army. *We’re never going to change the culture from Washington. We’re going to do it from comics, from movies*’ (Alcorn, 2017, our italics).

We hope that this section will delve into the ways the ‘alt-right’ has shaped popular culture through social media, memes, and more. (Indeed, ‘alt-right’ memes are the subject of the contribution in this section by Nicolle Lamerichs, Anna Lange-Böhmer, Dennis



Nguyen, Mari Carmen Puerta Melguizo, and Radmila Radojevic.) We also hope, however, to encourage more study into how the 'alt-right' is losing the ideological war, prompting some of the toxic behaviours that receive the most attention in the popular press, and how our conception of 'fans' has shaped how we study these phenomena. In relation to Gamergate, Anita Sarkessian (2014) claims that anti-diversity users, usually denizens of 'toxic technocultures' like Reddit, 4Chan and 8Chan (Massanari, 2017), are fighting so vehemently because they have lost the battle:

Those who police the borders of our hobby, the ones who try to shame and threaten women like me into silence, have already lost. The new reality is that video games are maturing, evolving, and becoming more diverse.

It makes little sense, for example, to make claims that the *Ghostbusters* reboot flopped at the box office and failed to launch its own cinematic universe because of misogynistic currents leveled at the female-centric film (although these certainly exist). The enormous success of Marvel's *Black Panther* (2018), the pro-diversity *Star Wars* films, with female leads, Rey (Daisy Ridley) and Jyn Erso (Felicity Jones) in protagonist roles, and the popularity of *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2016) and *Wonder Woman* (2017), to name a few, would seem to attest to the popularity and staying power of efforts at diversity and inclusion. When right-wing commenters set out to derail Andy Muschetti's 're-adaptation' (Leitch, 2002) of Stephen King's *IT* in order to protest the author's Twitter comments about Donald Trump, the film swiftly smashed box office records for horror cinema. The aforementioned Disney *Star Wars* films have all crossed the billion-dollar line during theatrical life spans, and the sales of DVD/Blu-ray have been more of a cash cow than box office receipts by a wide margin (Balio, 2013). If economic performance is a marker of success or failure, at least from the perspective of establishment critics and industry executives, then right-wing boycott campaigns seem to have had little effect. We believe that this side of the narrative is something that requires scholarly attention so as not to reproduce press discourse without robust exegesis.

To be clear: we have not set about this section to argue that toxicity is a new phenomenon, but that discourses *labeled as toxic* are a relatively recent emergence resulting from the particular circumstances of our time. Toxicity and, by extension, toxic fan practices, are concepts that have thus far lacked theoretical, methodological, and conceptual foundations. For this reason, we argue for more attention in scholarship not to just enumerating instances of toxic fan practices, but also determining the best models for researching them. We seek to encourage a new line of work in fan, audience and reception studies that will contribute much needed theories and will offer new methods for understanding and dissecting toxicity as a concept beyond 'toxic masculinity'.

## The New Phase of Fan Studies?

At the Fan Studies Network conference at the University of East Anglia in 2015, we both gave papers that began asking key questions related to the emergent discourse of ‘toxic fandom’ and the ‘dark side’ of fan cultures. In collaboration, our goal is encourage a new mode of fan studies to address the often overlooked and understudied aspects of fan cultures and communities – aspects that popular media has been increasingly paying attention to. Our initial title proposed for this themed-section was ‘toxic fan cultures’, in deference to Matt Hills’ foundational work, *Fan Cultures* (2002). As one of the peer reviewers of our proposal, Hills proposed ‘toxic fan practices’ as a more apposite title in order to acknowledge that fandom is not toxic in and of itself, but certain practices carried out by certain individuals who may identify as fans may well be. In other words, viewing a single fan culture as wholly toxic has little scholarly merit and would function only to homogenize what fan studies has been saying for almost three decades at this point.

Our aim is certainly to kick up some dust, and we chose *Participations* as an ideal space to pioneer our concept of toxic fan practices, not to specifically analyze ‘bad fans’ per se, but to question extant methodological apparatuses in light of what the mass migration to the internet means for standard research protocols. Firstly, what is meant by the term ‘toxicity’ in relation to fan practices? Reframed by Bertha Chin and Mark Stewart as ‘appropriate fandom’ in their work-in-progress, the boundaries of toxicity are what we similarly acknowledge as the corollary to finding the boundaries of non-toxic fan practices. As the notion of ‘toxic fandom’ becomes part of mainstream discourses, how are journalists and fans using the terminology? What kind of research in fan studies embraces the ‘toxicity’ label? We seek to intensify studies that analyze fan conflicts or the way in which fans perform ‘othering’ of practices and individuals that do not meet their idea of a homogenous, harmonious fan ‘community’, an avenue already explored by Williams (2013), Bennett (2011), Hills (2011), Stanfill (2015), Proctor (2017), and others. In other words, fans themselves often stereotype other fans, especially if utopian visions of fandom are consistently projected onto narratives of inclusion/exclusion.

Our second key question arising from this issue is how and why do fans internalize and project notions of community and solidarity? The concept of a singular fan community is no longer a sufficient description of the multi-faceted and complex operations understood by the term ‘fandom’ — if indeed it ever was. In a recent article for *Palabra Clave*, Matt Hills (2017) argues that as fandom ‘cannot be viewed as a coherent culture or community’, we need another term, one that illustrates fragmentation and heterogeneity. Hills suggests moving towards an understanding of the ‘fan world’, an imagined and imaginary location with multiple geographical coordinates, ‘countries’ and ‘continents’. Individual fans may share affective patterns and common alliances with some other fans, but, equally, can stand in stark contrast with other fan practices and performances. A shift in understanding from fan community to fan world raises further questions about the position of the researcher, given the long history of aca-fandom and community participation expected among fan studies scholars. It is easy, perhaps expected, that we will distance ourselves from fan

behaviors that are deemed toxic. In a recent question and answer session following a session at the 2018 ‘Society for Cinema and Media Studies’ (SCMS) conference, Mel Stanfill noted that when researchers seek to divorce themselves from ‘bad fans’, they often neglect the extent to which the researcher and fan share commonalities. If white, heterosexual male fans undertake many toxic fan practices, for example, researchers may neglect that they share whiteness or heterosexuality or maleness, if not all three identities, and indeed benefit from the systems that enable toxicity. Added to this, we could add the various practices and performances that cannot be reduced to the overused label, ‘toxic masculinity,’ considering forms of ‘toxic fan practice’ emanating from other cultural agents, including female (Austin, 2017) or queer toxicity (the latter being the focus of Mar Guerrero-Pico, María-José Establés, and Rafael Ventura’s article on *The 100* in this themed-section). Given how much fan studies work has concentrated on the ethnographic and auto-ethnographic, it would be somewhat unfair to position the researcher as someone whose identity and practice are completely removed from the ‘toxic’ or ‘bad’ fan.

Since conflict has always already been a constitutive feature of ‘fan worlds’, we do not accept that all argument and contestation can be reduced to toxicity. In relation to Star Wars fan conflicts around the release of *The Phantom Menace* in 1999, Will Brooker claims that ‘to talk of the fan reaction or the fan viewpoint is to impose an imagined consensus on a community that thrives on debate’ (2002, p. 113). As an innate part of fan experiences, ‘thriving on debate’ is not necessarily a signifier of toxicity – although it can be.

Considering the impact of cyber-culture on audience behaviors, John Suler (2004) explains that the anonymous/pseudonymous affordances provided by screens and avatars plays a fundamental role in what audiences feel comfortable saying online; that is, ‘people say and do things online that they wouldn’t ordinarily say and do in the face-to-face world’. Suler proposes that online behavior may be understood through ‘benign disinhibition’ and ‘toxic disinhibition’:

Sometimes people share very personal things about themselves. They reveal secret emotions, fears, wishes. They show unusual acts of kindness and generosity, sometimes going out of their way to help others. We may call this benign disinhibition [...] However, the disinhibition is not always so salutary. We witness rude language, harsh criticisms, anger, hatred, even threats. Or people visit the dark underworld of the Internet—places of pornography, crime, and violence— territory they would never explore in the real world. We may call this toxic disinhibition.

For Suler, the principle of anonymity is at the core of such disinhibition, including both benign and toxic displays. We would add the proviso that we don’t necessarily see this in simplistic bifurcated terms — what is benign to some may be toxic to others, adding another complication into the already complex and dynamic field of internet audience studies. Where we differ from Suler regarding fandom is that we do not view ‘rude language’ or

‘harsh criticism’ as inherently toxic unless it falls into the realm of bullying, racism, misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, or other types of ad hominem attack based on identity politics and progressive ideologies. As we near the thirtieth anniversary of the genesis of fan studies through publications like Henry Jenkins’ (1992) *Textual Poachers* and Camille Bacon-Smith’s (1992) *Enterprising Women*, it should be abundantly clear at this point that fans often engage in spirited dispute and dissent, which may or may not result in ‘toxic fan practices’.

This corresponds to our third and perhaps most urgent question with this issue, which is how are we, as researchers, to know if online comments and behaviors are actually emanating from fan quarters? Do we intrinsically know that all parties involved on the toxic side of #Gamergate are actually video games fans? Are researchers making moral and ethical judgments about what constitutes ‘toxic’ and ‘bad’ fan practices? Or should scholars only address how others frame toxicity in discourse? How can we address the epistemological and methodological challenges that digital research in the era of the so-called ‘alt-right’ and Russian hacking brings to bear on both fan and audience studies in an empirical sense? As Mark Duffett asks in *Understanding Fandom: ‘Am I gathering data from actual fans?’*:

Research conducted over the internet is convenient, but respondents can easily disappear, it allows for various kinds of deception, and it can hide the variable contexts of everyday fandom...Forum membership and comment-posting does not necessarily signify fannish dedication although it can act as a sign of it (2013, p. 256).

We do not pretend that this themed section answers these questions, but, rather, functions as provocation, the beginning of a dialogue across fan, audience and reception studies disciplines. We also do not expect to kick-start a new phase of fan studies that we could describe as ‘fandom is ugly’, but we hope to encourage scholars to ask foundational questions about source, method, and protocol. Fandom may be beautiful, transformational, performative, and indeed, ugly, but we stand firm in our belief that fandom in all its many guises, warts and all, should be set on the table for examination and exegesis.

The articles in this section attempt to do that through several different approaches. J. Richard Stevens and Rachel Watson, Sarah Walton, and Mar Guerrero-Pico, María-José Establés, and Rafa Ventura examine case studies within particular fandoms to reveal the inherent ideological contradictions that may lead to toxic fan practices. For Melina Meimardis and Thaiané Oliveira, certain toxic behaviours might be better understood in their cultural context, in this case a Brazilian tendency to revel in others’ misery. Andrew Zolides suggests the concept of the ‘kynical’ in relation to wrestling fandom, to explain what may be perceived as toxic practice but is, in fact, a precisely calibrated combination of cynicism, appreciation, and awareness. Nicolle Lamerichs, Anna Lange-Böhmer, Dennis Nguyen, Radmilla Radojevic, and Mari Carmen Puerta examine how memes pertaining to

the 2016 U.S. presidential election discursively framed the election for members of the alt-right communities that circulated these memes. For Kelsey Cameron, understanding the origins of toxic fan practices surrounding character deaths on television necessitates a return to television industrial history, wherein Cameron finds the structural conditions that lay the groundwork for troubled producer/fan interactions that result in backlash against producers. Lincoln Geraghty sees the idea of toxicity extending beyond the digital to the spatial in his article on the Chicago Cubs fandom, while Bethan Jones on *The Walking Dead*, and Suzanne Scott's 'producorial trolling' see the conditions for toxic behaviors as an inherent part of the fan experience, thanks to producer/fan power dynamics and proximity, and the changing possibilities for some fans to serve as quasi-producers. Our section concludes with a roundtable examining definitions of toxicity and featuring contributions by both editors, Bertha Chin, Katherine Larsen, Richard McCulloch, Rukmini Pande, and Mel Stanfill. As the editors of this themed-section, we hope that these essays will serve as a starting point for larger body of research in fan studies and that we have in some way helped to change the breadth and scope of fan studies research to shine a light on an often overlooked, but increasingly important and timely, facet of fan worlds.

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