

Podcasts and Convergent Digital Media, pt. 2

“Podcasting Fandom”

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What does overtly “being a fan” reflect about the contemporary fan experience? What one person considers fannish behavior might not be considered fannish by others. Indeed, fandom is both personal (in that it is something experienced within the self) and public (in that no one will know you are a fan if you don’t display it in some way). In the convergent digital media era, fandom is profoundly mutable. From armchair fan to fan fiction author, from convention-goer to podcast-maker, “being a fan” can mean many things in many different corners of the web. Not only can one be a fan in the quiet of one’s own living room, but one can be a fan—a loud fan—online and with others in a podcast. With the increasingly rapid monetization of fandom throughout the media environment, however, I want to explore the various ways that podcasting fandom can problematize contemporary discourses of fan activity. How does podcasting change our notions of fandom? And how does fandom change our notions of podcasting?

For the mainstream media industries, fandom does have a particular identity—one marked with a dollar sign. Fans are big business. Media corporations have harnessed fan work for advertising, have used fans to Tweet news, have enabled online contests to sell fans’ information on mailing lists, have developed platforms for fan interaction, and have made countless millions of dollars on advertising and page views. It is the era of “broadcast yourself” on YouTube and “what’s happening” on Twitter: And while social media platforms are useful for fans’ organization and connection, fans ultimately serve a commercial agenda for these platforms. The content fans

produce is used for financial gain by Google, Twitter, Facebook, and other social media barons. With all of this financial incentivizing, is it any wonder that media companies engender fannish behavior? Of course, as has been pointed out by scholars like Kristina Busse and Suzanne Scott, the type of fannish behavior courted by media corporations fits firmly into a docile, complacent, and affirmational fan audience.

Podcasting fandom complicates this picture of corporate fandom. Although routinely described in the same way as other social media like Tweeting and Facebooking, Podcasting is not actually the same thing at all—whereas most social media activities are confined to a particular platform (e.g, YouTube, Twitter, Facebook), podcasting is an *activity* that exists outside of platform-specific modules. Like vidding before it, podcasting *can* be monetized on platforms like iTunes, but the activity itself can be as under-the-radar and non-corporate as any amateur ‘zine. But the question remains, if a fan makes a podcast but no one listens, is that podcast fannish?

The majority of my discussion will focus on podcasts devoted to *Doctor Who*, a particular interest of mine. What more is there to say about this popular, heavily analyzed, and thoroughly researched television show that premiered over fifty years ago? For the creators of the over 100 *Doctor Who* podcasts currently being produced, the answer is, quite a lot, actually. The online repository “Doctor Who Podcast Alliance” (DWPA) lists 161 podcasts with over 17,000 episodes for a total duration of “538 days, 16 hours, 36 minutes and 21 seconds” (as of 13 April 2016). Matt Hills has discussed how the “Doctor Who Mafia”—a group of big name fans in the 1990s—became producers of 2005’s *Doctor Who*. In this roundtable, I’ll open up discussion about the presence of *Doctor Who* podcasters as fans in the contemporary media environment.

They present unique windows into the fan experience: positioned between fan, scholar, and celebrity, the hosts are a new type of “Mafia” that articulates a fluid fan identity. At the same time, these Doctor Who podcasts present a seemingly non-commercialized platform for fan discussion. Podcasting ostensibly offers an opportunity for critical fan voices to be heard at a time when fandom is becoming more mainstream. This discussion will hopefully open up debate about the relative opportunities that podcasting can bring to fans and fan studies.