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# "Being in a knowledge space": information behaviour of cult media fan communities.

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## Abstract

This article describes the first two parts of a three-stage study investigating the information behaviour of fans and fan communities, focusing on fans of cult media. A literature analysis shows that information practices are an inherent and major part of fan activities, and that fans are practitioners of new forms of information consumption and production, showing sophisticated activities of information organisation and dissemination. A subsequent Delphi study, taking the novel form of a 'serious leisure' Delphi, in which the participants are not experts in the usual sense, identifies three aspects of fan information behaviour of particular interest beyond the fan context: information gatekeeping; classifying and tagging; and entrepreneurship and economic activity.

## Keywords

Information behaviour; serious leisure; fan studies; Delphi study; literature analysis

## 1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to describe the first stages of a project to investigate the information behaviour of fans and fan communities. The Oxford English Dictionary defines a fan, in the sense meant here, as “a person who has a strong interest in, or admiration for, a particular person or thing”. This interest or admiration, as will be discussed in detail below, is often the driving force behind the production, consumption and sharing of information. Fan communities make extensive and sophisticated use of the internet, and of social media in particular, collaboratively organising, classifying, disseminating and sharing fan-related information, and reusing and redistributing official texts in the creation of often high quality fanworks. In the literature on fans and fandom, which spans several disciplines, we see information practices that are both rich and complex.

The study reported here aims to examine the information behaviour of fans from a library/information science (LIS) perspective. By LIS perspective, we mean from the perspective of the information communication chain, in particular, from the focus of human information behaviour. The investigation of fan information behaviour has been relatively neglected within LIS, which has thereby overlooked the perspective of a unique and diverse group of information users, whose associated behaviour is born from a context of play, passion and, more importantly, fantasy; users who engage in emergent practices of co-creation which are afforded and sometimes encouraged by media producers. A better knowledge of the behaviour of this group would be of interest to researchers and practitioners within library and information science, having the potential to bring forth new insight into models of information behaviour, and to inform collections policy, discovery and service development for this unique form of cultural heritage.

A closer understanding of the information behaviour of fans and fan communities would also benefit members of other disciplines, including: educators interested in the development and support of literacy and digital literacy; the media industry, interested in how canon texts are consumed and remediated, with regard to impact on creation and management of creative industry content; and publishers and policy makers with regard to dissemination practices and

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copyright. This is particularly so as general information behaviour is likely to be increasingly influenced by fan characteristics, as a move towards cross-platform, multi-modal media creates a more immersive and participatory style of information access and consumption.

The study has three main aims:

- to understand the information behaviour of a unique group of people, to consider if and how fan information behaviour relates to existing information behaviour models, and to subsequently inform LIS theory and practice;
- to investigate current and emergent documents and collections produced by fans (fanworks), to understand them as cultural products, and to find out how fans consume, create, remediate, disseminate, promote, describe, access and preserve them;
- to understand if and how fan information behaviour can inform theory and practice within other domains, such as education, media, publishing, law and policymaking.

In order to keep the study within bounds, it focuses on fanworks from cult media fandoms such as those for TV shows, movies, videogames, comics, cartoons, books, and so on, rather than those for those based on music, sports, or 'real people' (whether they be cult icons or not), for instance, musicians, movie stars, and sports figures. It is also restricted, for practicality, to Western, English-language-based fan cultures, and to English-speaking fans.

The study has three empirical components:

- a broad literature review and synthesis;
- a Delphi study;
- an analysis of social media data (tags) on three online platforms: AO3, Etsy and Tumblr.

The outcomes from the first two components are reported in this paper.

## 2. Literature review and synthesis

Since little work has been done solely and specifically on fan information behaviour, relevant material was likely to be scattered across disciplinary literatures. Searches were carried out on a variety of sources, including the fan studies literature, Web of Science, Library and Information Science and Technology Abstracts, Google Scholar, JSTOR, Mendeley, and Academia.edu. In addition to terms such as "information behaviour" and variants, specific terms such as "tagging", "classification" etc. were used, to identify as many information-related behaviours as possible within the fan context. References in, and citations to, relevant material were followed up, and this proved a valuable source of additional material. The literature analysis was kept updated as the study progressed, by repeated searches and alerts, and monitoring of Twitter accounts in the fan studies community.

In the initial stages of the literature review, articles and book excerpts were imported into NVivo's qualitative data management software. These were inductively coded by theme, such as *Communication*, *Indexing and Classification*, *Publishing* etc. These codes later became the basis of the themes used in the Delphi study.

Reports of research relevant to the information behaviour of fans are found within the literatures both of LIS and of fan studies. There is little overlap or interaction between these two disciplines, and their epistemological and methodological backgrounds are widely divergent. The limited number of studies within LIS which deal with fans in any way do not always reflect the unique nature of the fan context, while within fan studies there are somewhat diffuse and disconnected mentions of information issues. The results of this stage of the study aim to provide for the first time a coherent synthesis of this topic, from an LIS perspective. It is divided into three main sections: the nature of fans; fan communities, from an informational perspective; and studies specifically investigating the information behaviour of fans.

### 2.1. Understanding fans

The word 'fan' itself has had a long history, meaning, in the original sense, a fanatic or zealot, but it was only in the late nineteenth century that the term came to be applied in its current sense of a passionate enthusiast who avidly follows something or someone. The general consensus is that, during the 1880's, 'fan' was first used to describe sports enthusiasts, particularly those following American baseball [1]. Cult or media fandom itself can be traced back to this

time, to the legion of Sherlock Holmes fans who apparently took to the streets upon Arthur Conan-Doyle killing off his hugely popular fictional detective [2].

Fandom found a new outlet during the 1920's and 30's with the popularisation of science fiction, and dedicated magazines were published which provided fans with a forum to comment and share their opinions via the letters section. Science fiction fans were thus able to contact one another by reading the letters of like-minded people whose addresses were often printed in the magazines [3, 4]. These fans began to arrange gatherings which grew into large and well-organised national conventions.

It is generally considered that modern fandom has its roots in the era of mass media, and specifically to the cult TV shows of the 1960's, *Star Trek* and *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* [5, 6, 7]. These shows developed large, dedicated followings that continued to engage with these cultural texts well after they were taken off the air, and responded to the source text in creative and hitherto unseen ways [3]. Fans of this time rarely promoted their activities amongst the non-initiated, and usually met only during infrequent specialised conventions. They communicated via networks exchanging *fanzines*, amateur or small press magazines that catered to their audience by providing news, information, and creative works made by other fans that gave expression to their enthusiasm for the primary text.

Just as fandom grew from the mass media culture of the 1960's, so it changed with that culture, and with technology, over the following decades. With the rise of MTV and the popular use of home VCR's during the late 1970's and 80's, fans adopted the new technology to create music videos and short films of their chosen texts. These practices involved a great deal of technological know-how for the time, and were mostly self-taught [5, 8]. Fans were one of the first groups to make wide use the internet during its early years [4], embracing the digital world and information networks that had previously been bound to the offline and the analogue. It was not merely a question of access. The internet afforded the opportunity to contribute to this growing body of fan-related knowledge. Photocopied fanzines could migrate online and gain a wider readership; fans could exchange the latest news on dedicated Usenet and Listserv boards, and set up their own personal sites, where they could showcase their own fan-related work, particularly stories and artwork [3].

Fans have always been inherently social, enjoying the discursive interactions that come with discussing and debating their areas of interest [9, 10], and they fully embraced the affordances of the digital world [4]. They created new, appropriated texts from the sources they admired, organized, indexed, classified and shared them, reviewed them, and remediated them into further derivative texts. Fans also acted as gatekeepers and knowledge experts to their peers [4]. Fandom is, and always has been, rooted in information practices.

Over the past twenty years or so, the question of what is, and what it means to be, a fan has been undergoing a slow but steady change, due largely to the use of the internet and social media, which has allowed fans and their associated fandoms to become far more visible and interconnected than ever before. The seminal academic studies of fans and fan communities pre-date this change [5, 8, 11, 12]. However, it is notable that, although very few studies have set out to consider fans explicitly in information terms, all studies, both before and after the internet became central, have categorised fans *de facto* largely in terms of their dealing with information.

Fiske was the first to attempt a systematic definition of fans, categorising them mainly in terms of their productivity [9]. He saw fans as engaged in three 'levels' of productivity: semiotic, enunciative and textual. Semiotic productivity is meaning-making behaviour, forming identity through engagement with cultural outputs; enunciative productivity is the circulation of such outputs in face-to-face interactions which Fiske likens to an oral culture; textual productivity refers to the creative and artistic productions which fans engage in, such as fanfiction and fanart. This provides a categorisation of information output, through which it is possible to categorise fans themselves.

Abercrombie and Longhurst developed Fiske's ideas, positing that audiences of cultural texts or activities exist on a continuum which includes consumers, fans, cultists, enthusiasts and petty producers [13]. Their model particularly focuses on the fan, cultist and enthusiast categories, and makes relatively fine distinctions between the three. Consumers, according to them, are mainly engaged in the consumption of cultural artefacts; petty producers have made the leap from amateur enthusiast to full-time producers as a kind of occupation. In terms of Fiske's cultural economy of fan production, Abercrombie and Longhurst divide their 'fan types' mainly by enunciative and textual production. The main difference between the consumer and the fan (here including cultists and enthusiasts) is that the fan is engaged in the production of material artefacts, whilst consumers restrict themselves in the main to 'fan talk'.

Whilst these early models are still in some measure relevant today (i.e. in terms of analysing the productive behaviour of fans), Busse and Gray suggest that it is perhaps time to reframe our concept of fans and fandoms. The internet has made it increasingly difficult to differentiate between what might be called a casual fan and a dedicated fan:

[...] many casual fans may visit a wiki, and some may even add material and thus create user content, but it still requires someone more dedicated to provide server space, maintain the wiki, and assure its continuance. Fan film, machinima, and vids may be

watched by thousands on Youtube.com, but a much smaller band of fans actually dedicates the significant time and creative energy needed to make such films [14: 431-432].

Hills agrees, regarding the theories of Fiske and of Abercrombie and Longhurst as rather simplistic, especially in an era where ‘fan talk’ – largely verbal in Fiske’s day – has seen a radical shift from the verbal to digital platforms [10]. Verbal enunciative productivity, of course, has not ‘disappeared’; but Hills sees the digital as having, to a large extent, dissolved the semiotic and enunciative into a more generalized form of textual productivity. Therefore, he suggests, it is time to seek a new paradigm to explain the concept of fan productivity as a whole.

Hills also criticises Jenkins’ theory of participatory culture for being too broad in an age where Web 2.0 has afforded participatory activities on a wide range of levels to a large swathe of users [10, 15, 16]. Furthermore, participatory activities have long been recognised in contexts quite apart from fandom [17]. Hills draws on the work of Schäfer [18] to construct a bipartite model of participatory culture which is more relevant. This posits two types of participation and production – one which both constructs and is constructed by group identity, and one which does not take place in a social group context.

This approach is supported by Busse and Gray [14], and Wyatt et al. [17], who also see fannish activities as taking place on a continuum, and remind us that such activities are not always the works of creativity so valorised by Jenkins and others, but include textual production of *all* types, such as wikis, guides, reviews, and comments.

The question of what is a fan in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is therefore not easily answered. It would be fair to say, however, that the casual fan acts as a consumer: reading articles or searching for images. The dedicated fan does this, but also *writes* the articles and *creates* the images. These fans might be considered producers; creators of information, knowledge and other cultural artefacts related to a fandom. Or they may be considered *producers* [19, 20]; both consumers *and* producers, who consume a source text – a novel, movie, TV show, comic book, etc. – and use or remediate it to produce related but often widely divergent media. Dedicated fans take the time to maintain wikis, administrate online forums and message boards [14], and mentor novice fans [21].

It is thus difficult to delineate fans from non-fans, since many people engage in low-level fan activities at some point, and both casual and dedicated fans engage in fan-related information behaviour. Dedicated fans are still active information seekers, even if they become information aggregators and creators. Casual fans sometimes make the leap into more dedicated fans, and indeed, some dedicated fans ‘leave’ a fandom, for various reasons. In this sense, the concept of being a fan can be seen as cyclical.

In light of the problems of defining and categorising fans, this study does not follow any rigorous definition. It focuses on the more complex informational behaviours of what Busse and Gray class as dedicated fans, while taking into account also the information behaviours of casual fans [14]. Indeed, their information behaviours are often intrinsically tied to the consumption of fanworks, and if they choose to further remediate the objects of their consumption that would, by Busse and Gray’s analysis, transform them into dedicated fans. This study aims, in part, to gain a better understanding of the cyclical models of information behaviour that fans appear to engage in: the use of information by dedicated fans in the creation of fanworks, and the engagement that other fans (both casual and dedicated) have with those fanworks.

## 2.2. Fan communities

The idea of ‘community’ is one that is fraught with difficulty, and the nebulous quality of the concept is one that has been widely discussed in the fields of sociology and anthropology [22, 23]. Much of the difficulty comes from the fact that the term itself has been attributed many definitions by scholars from many different disciplines, and indeed, its use by the everyday layman may refer to more than one concept. In the sociological sense, ‘community’ was classically defined by sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies [24], using the terms *gemeinschaft* (translated as ‘community’) and *gesellschaft* (loosely translated as ‘society’ or ‘association’). Since Tönnies’ seminal text, various definitions have been put forward over the past 100 years or so, with Hillery [25] famously drawing up a list of 94 definitions for the word, all essentially ideas of ‘places and spaces’, of physical locality as a defining characteristic of human social relationships.

Since the rise of the internet, and particularly of the World Wide Web, the notion of ‘virtual community’ has become popular in recent years; yet the idea that communities can exist in non-physical spaces is hotly contested [22, 26, 27, 28]. Coupled with the already fraught history of how to define physical, ‘real world’ communities, this suggests the need for care in applying the term ‘community’ to groups on the internet. Yet the evidence suggests that fan behaviour can only be understood in such terms; more specifically by communities defined by participation, discourse and genre.

To first discuss the concept of the online community, Armstrong and Hagel [29] distinguish four types of virtual community: communities of transaction (e.g. goods via eBay and information via Wikipedia); communities of interest

(e.g. online fan clubs); communities of fantasy (e.g. *Second Life*); and communities of relationship (e.g. online dating sites and support networks). All four types are of relevance to fans, who build online communities through shared interests, use them to play out fantasy, to forge relationships with like-minded people, and to structure the resulting networks through the transaction of material or digital artefacts and informational goods. Many fan communities, both online and offline, are based upon the pursuit of the virtual in digital (but very real) spaces. This pursuit of the virtual – that is, virtual in terms of fantasy – has long been considered one of the prime aspects of fan culture, most notably and notoriously in the pathological sense [30], but also, more recently, in the playful and creative sense [4, 5, 31, 32]. This is a clear example of Armstrong and Hagel's communities of fantasy [29].

The following examples show specific examples of fan communities occupying all four of Armstrong and Hagel's categories of online community:

- (1) *Communities of transaction*: Spaces such as Etsy, RedBubble and Teefury are spaces where fanworks can be commodified, sold and bought for actual currency. Fan communities also thrive on a gift economy where fanworks are traded and/or freely shared [33, 34, 35].
- (2) *Communities of interest*: This seems obvious, since by its nature fandom entails the clustering of people around a franchise or source text based on a common interest. However, based on the definition of Armstrong & Hagel which implies no inherent sense of personal connection, this category might better describe the 'low-level' activities of fan communities [14].
- (3) *Communities of fantasy*: Fans come together online in order to perform acts of fantasy and roleplay, such as using Twitter to take on the persona of certain favoured characters [36, 37]; performing quests and missions on online games [38, 39]; or writing fictional diaries (in character) on LiveJournal [40].
- (4) *Communities of relationship*: Whilst the building of relationships may not be the primary objective of joining a fan community, fans can often create deep, meaningful relationships built on intense personal connections [14, 41].

Participatory communities bring together the contributions of decentralised users in ways that were not previously possible through the endeavours of individual persons or even corporations, turning consumers into active producers [4, 20, 42, 43, 44, 45]. It is worth remembering that participatory culture, now regarded as an integral part of Web 2.0, was first proposed by Jenkins in terms of fan community [5]. It has provided new platforms for fans to create, share and disseminate works collaboratively [36, 37, 38, 46, 47, 48]. Such evident participation among fan communities is centred around their discourse, implying that fan communities are, as Swales posits, discourse communities [49].

Discourse communities are groups having definite goals or purposes, and who use communication to achieve these goals [49, 50]. They are not necessarily homogenous, and may contain a diversity of cultures and of people, including experts and novices, leaders and occasional participants [51]. Fan groups bear many similarities to such communities. Taking both Adams' [39] and Sköld's [52] analysis of City of Heroes players as an example, this fan community had a set of common goals pertaining to successfully navigating the gamespace, and it was the in-game communication systems (as well as online fora) that they used to discuss plans and strategies for effective navigation. This goal was determined by the genre of the game itself, i.e. an environment where one's avatar must develop a heroic personality based on the player's actions. These groups possessed several 'gatekeepers' or 'experts', players who were known for their extensive knowledge of the game, who would pool information with other members in a participatory fashion. In fact, this kind of information-gathering was preferred amongst gamers. This example reiterates how genre is socially embedded within discourse communities and develops via communicative events, as with other communities of this type [49].

Devitt follows Swales in regarding communities as groups of people that come together for prolonged periods of time in intense common endeavours, but distinguishes three types of discourse 'group': the community proper; the collective, whose members come together in common interest but without the intensity or frequency of a community, and whose actions are usually temporary and focused on a short-term goal; and the network, where discourse is shared between individuals in a web-like configuration, but is not shared collectively and is far more ephemeral [51]. It seems clear that fan groups largely fit Devitt's conception of a discourse community, as opposed to a collective or network, in that their togetherness is predicated upon intense, lengthy and high-quality goal-orientated activities, and that they both define and achieve their goals through the application of genre; in this case, generally the genre of cult media.

Within discourse communities, genres are developed, and the nature of these genres furthers the construction of the community. Not only is genre embedded in the community, but the community is defined by genre, and, in a kind of symbiosis, genres may evolve to meet the changing needs of a group as it develops [51]. Within genre theory, there are

two different types of genre – literary genre, and rhetorical genre. Literary genre is based on stylistic criteria, one that is widely associated with the literary or entertainment forms, whereas rhetorical genre is a wider set of conventions that guide both the production and consumption of communication, including social interactions [53]. Both forms are observed in fan communities. Indeed, fan communities appear to be both creators of, and created by, a unique blend of both rhetorical and literary genre. This is most clearly seen in fanfiction communities, where genre as a literary form is most visible. Fanfiction, by its nature, follows and is codified into distinct generic forms, such as *slash* (homosexual fiction), *het* (heterosexual fiction) and *gen* (general fiction), which are overarching genres, and may be split into further sub-genres such as *first-time*, *hurt/comfort* and *darkfic* [40, 54].

In short, the nature of fan communities is as complex as that of communities in general. For instance, Busse and Gray remind us that “there remain central differences between fandom as social community and aggregates of individual fans” [14: 431]. Thus, speaking of the ‘fan community’ is simplistic, yet cannot be avoided. Additionally, any consideration of fan communities must take the online dimension explicitly into account. A typical explanation of fan community is that of Duffet:

While an artist’s fan base is the collective made of people who feel a connection to him/her, the fan community is a physical manifestation of the fan base, a mutually supportive social network of people that can – and do – regularly communicate with each other as individuals. [33: 244]

This generalised definition holds as much for fans based in the offline as the online. However, it is clear that the move online has had dramatic effects on fan communities [6, 33, 55]: first, technology has engendered the exposure and visibility of fans and fandom; second, it has increased access to both source and fan texts; thirdly, it has enabled fans to come together in ways that were not previously possible; fourthly, it has allowed fans to express their fandom more creatively.

Fan communities are also subject to the freedom of engagement that Miller [22] ascribes to online communities, and this effect can be seen in, for example, Deller’s longitudinal study of an online fan community, where, over ten years, fans migrated either to other platforms or other fandoms, and where some fans opined that “newer Internet spaces have contributed to the community’s decline” [56: 224]. This, it would seem, is endemic to an online culture that is experiencing convergence [55], wherein content flows easily and fluidly across various platforms and devices. It seems natural to assume that fans would ‘chase’ such content across platforms and in ways that suit them. Nevertheless, as Miller [22] and Boellstorff [57] have also discussed, it is naïve to assume that this protean quality detracts from the ‘realness’ that fans attribute to these communities and the relationships they form within them; as Sandvoss [401: 56] notes, “there can be little doubt that many fans themselves imagine these networks as a community and equal to other friendship ties”.

### 2.3. Fans' information behaviour

#### 2.3.1. Fan studies literature

Research from a fan studies perspective has not focused specifically on information behaviour; at best it is a brief aside to larger scale, general studies of fandom, and has rarely been underpinned by theories or models established within LIS. However, numerous such studies have noted distinctive information practices within the wider context of fan practice. The classic fan studies of the early 1990’s discussed fans’ information behaviour (though not using that expression), in terms of their attitudes to authorship, copyright, and distribution of fanworks [5, 8, 58].

More recently, Aardse [59] examined the ways in which young gaming fans exchange information across networks and various transmedia outlets in alternate reality games (ARGs), and Sihvonen [60] investigated how players of *The Sims* index, categorise and organise digital files related to the game. Black [61], Soto [62] and Henderson [63] investigated the effect fanfiction has on the literacy (traditional and digital) of young people. Pugh [64] examined various phenomena related to fanfiction, including beta-reading, resource guide writing, feedback culture, and LiveJournal relisting. Bore and Hickman examined the information use of fan groups on Twitter [36], while Jenkins discussed the way in which the digital environment expands fans’ power to archive, annotate, appropriate, and recirculate media products [4].

#### 2.3.2. LIS literature

Fan communities have been given comparatively little consideration in the LIS literature, considerably less than other ‘amateur’ or ‘everyday’ groups. In an early study Hart et al. suggested that this is because “there is prejudice against

fans and fan information among librarians. Fans are often viewed as ‘different to us’, indulging in activities that are at best deviant or at worst dangerous” [65: 82].

Yet some LIS studies have highlighted the unique relationship fans have with information. Indeed, Hart et al. showed that fans create and manage printed and electronic resources, engaging in a type of sophisticated bibliographic control that is outside of professional channels, characterising fan literature as a largely unexplored branch of grey literature [65].

More recent studies by Bullard [66], Dalton [67], Johnson [68] and Gursoy [69] have specifically examined the amateur classification and indexing structures used in fanfiction repositories. Their results suggest that much of this ‘amateur classification’ is done in a voluntary capacity because fans have a personal stake in it or they find it fun, and that social-tagging of fanworks, amounting to semi-controlled taxonomies, is fairly effective. It is worth noting that the major library classification and subject heading schemes have no categorisation for fanworks, by contrast with the sophisticated and highly granular classifications developed by fans themselves. A form of information gatekeeping, with expert ‘tag wranglers’ exerting some control of the terms used for indexing on the website, Archive of Our Own, was noted.

Adams [39] made an ethnographic study of a role-playing game community, using Savolainen’s Everyday Life Information Seeking (ELIS) model as a framework [70]. This study showed the fans to be highly social and interactive, preferring informal to formal sources, and largely relying on opportunistic and serendipitous information seeking. Nyman researched another role-playing game community, again finding a highly social and interactive environment, with a preference for informal and interactive sources, and for fan-generated databases [38]. The nature of the fandom, the game in this case, seems to have a significant influence on information practices; fans, even in this relatively restricted context, are a heterogeneous group informationally.

Finally, Peckosie and Hill [71] have examined the publication of fanfiction as an example of generally changing patterns of publication and information dissemination, whereby fanfiction may progress to small press publication, and finally to successful conventional publication, supported by online promotion and positive reviews from fans of the original story; this intersects with concepts of ambivalent and/or complex fan attitudes towards copyright laws [35, 72].

#### 2.4. Results of the literature synthesis

From this synthesis of the research in the literatures of LIS and of fan studies, several main findings emerge.

First and foremost, it is clear that information practices are an inherent and major part of fan activities, such that being a fan, even a casual fan, implies a distinctive pattern of information behaviour.

Much of this information related behaviour is afforded by internet technologies, especially social media. Fans are practitioners *par excellence* in new forms of consumption and production, including intense engagement with the original text, often involving shared activity, and resulting in new derivative works. This behaviour is undertaken almost exclusively in an amateur capacity. Fan communities are hence a contradiction to the view that consumers are necessarily dupes of the media industry, a view espoused by scholars such as Adorno, Benjamin and Baudrillard [73, 74, 75].

There is an ever-expanding archive of fan texts, created, managed and distributed by fans themselves, bypassing formal avenues, authorities and controls [76]. They have embraced participatory forms of information organisation such as folksonomies, and created their own, purpose-built classification systems. Both rhetorical and literary genres have come to inform much of fandom’s classificatory practices, and how individual fandoms have developed their own genres, tailored to that particular community’s needs.

Their strategies for obtaining information are sophisticated and, crucially, informal; fans create their own information hubs and archives, sharing hints and tips, and even becoming information gatekeepers themselves if their knowledge becomes respected enough within the community. Fans often act as mentors to new fans, by recommending resources, sharing historical aspects of canon texts and fanworks, and advising on creative writing (beta reading).

Fans exemplify different aspects of online communities, and consequently their behaviours are rich and diverse. They fit into several categories of online community as described by scholars from various backgrounds: communities of transaction, interest, fantasy and relationships; communities of play; interpretive communities; and genre and discourse communities. These serve as a background to the remediative activities that fans engage in, and indicate that the motivations behind what fans do are myriad and diverse. Nevertheless, it cannot be understated that the element of play is central to much of what is evidenced by fan behaviour. The concept of pleasure as a driver for information behaviour is one that has been little explored, and whilst studies such as Hartel [77] and Margree et al. [78] show the information



behaviour of similar, hobbyist groups, they fail to capture the large-scale, participatory aspects of online culture that fan communities exemplify.

Whilst our literature analysis reveals much about fan information behaviour, several aspects present themselves as deserving of further investigation. It remains unclear, for example, if there is any difference between the information behaviour of fans when they are *offline*. There is no doubt that the information practices of fans have been revolutionised by the advent of the internet, but it is far from certain what the relationship is between what they do online and what they do offline, and whether online participatory culture has influenced what they do offline.

It is also not clear how new forms of fan produsage and remediation are challenging the industries that are at the source of so many fan franchises; the media industry and publishing houses. It is easy for fans to promote, share, disseminate and even sell fanworks. We need to understand how the ways in which canon texts are consumed and remediated impact on the creation and management of creative industry content. What does fan information behaviour contribute to our understanding of intellectual property and copyright laws in the modern information society? Is a new paradigm needed to satisfy the creative needs of fans and other amateur producers/producers? Could this be beneficial to the industries themselves?

The literature synthesis thus raises five specific issues on which further investigation is needed:

- How much of fan information behaviour is determined by the *online* and has been enabled by the internet?
- How much of fan information behaviour is determined by the *offline* and is intrinsic to being a fan in itself?
- What information resources do fans use, and which are most important? Are official and fan-made resources of equal importance to fans?
- What can we learn from fan participatory culture and the ways in which fans support and mentor one another?
- What can we learn about the semi-professional activities of fans and whether these warrant new attitudes towards publishing, copyright and intellectual property?

These questions are addressed in the next stage of the research, the Delphi study.

### 3. Delphi Study

The Delphi method was adopted for the next stage of the study, so as to gain a rich account of individual experiences with the overall aim of gaining a consensus amongst the individuals.

The Delphi method facilitates the negotiation of consensus between a group of experts, via questionnaires and moderator-controlled opinion feedback [79]. Expert participants are given a problem, statement or question and present their anonymous opinion to the researcher in written form. The researcher then moderates and restructures these responses and returns them to the pool of subjects for further comment in a series of rounds. These rounds continue until it is deemed that a consensus has been reached, or that no consensus is possible.

First used by Helmer-Hirschberg & Rescher in the 1950's as a quantitative tool for the prediction of future events using the knowledge and experience of experts [80], the Delphi method has since been developed largely for detailed qualitative analysis of conceptual issues. It has been increasingly used recently by LIS researchers [81, 82]; examples include the studies of Howard [83], Casselden, Pickard & McLeod [84], Poirier & Robinson [85], Missingham [86], and Zins [87-90]. It was considered particularly suitable for this study for two reasons. First, many fans are interested in *their own status as fans*, and some fan communities already have a body of self-critical literature [91, 92]; the detailed written narrative form utilised in the Delphi study is therefore apposite. Second, although the Delphi was designed to seek consensus, it is equally valuable in identifying divergence of opinion, an important point due to the heterogeneous nature of fan communities discussed above.

Pickard gives six criteria for a 'standard' Delphi study: only experts are used in the panel; all data is collected in writing; there is a systematic attempt to produce a consensus; panel members are given anonymity; at least two rounds are used [79]. This study arguably deviated in one respect, since the participants were experienced and knowledgeable fans. While they undeniably have expertise, they are not experts in the usual sense of being academically or professionally qualified; to this extent this study may be regarded as a variant or modified Delphi. Not being one of Delphi variants recognised in the literature [85], it might be termed a 'serious leisure Delphi'.

The Delphi study was carried out over three rounds, using a panel of fans of cult media, or of some media franchise, and included a mix of 'regular' fans and 'acafans' (academics who self-identify as fans and who research in the field of fan studies) [31]. No test was carried out as to the validity of the participants' self-identification as fans; if someone identifies as a fan, that seemed sufficient for them to be treated as one. The inclusion of the acafans, though no specific

proportion of such was sought among the participants, was beneficial for the Delphi process, in that such people would have already reflected on the nature of fandom and their own attitudes and practices.

The study was approved by the City University London ethics committee. A detailed, committee-approved information sheet and consent form was sent to all potential participants along with a formal study invitation.

Pilot studies were carried out for each of the three rounds, in each case with four or five (in the third round) participants known to the researcher, to check the relevance and clarity of the questions asked and terminology used.

Participants were recruited by two means: direct approach to suitable persons known to the researcher, and a general invitation on social media (Twitter and Tumblr) sources used by fan communities. Twenty potential participants were contacted through the first method, 25 through the second. Thirty-one participants took part in the first round. One dropped out at this stage, and 30 took part in the second and third rounds. This convenience sampling methodology, while not adequate for a quantitative survey, is appropriate for gathering an informed group for participation in the Delphi process.

Interaction with participants was by email questionnaires for rounds 1 and 2, and by the eSurvey Creator online survey software for round 3.

### 3.1. Round 1

The questionnaire comprised 5 questions, some with sub-questions, each based on one of the key areas noted above: for example, on the issue of information resources, the question was “What sources of information do fans use? Which are the most important and why?”; for the participatory culture issue, it was “in what ways are fans helpful to other fans either online or offline?”

Since the aim of this round was to glean ideas and opinions from the panel members, and also to ascertain the range of issues that were considered important to the participants and their fan experiences, the questions were designed to be as open as possible, with plenty of scope for in-depth response.

All responses were imported into NVivo10 and each response was coded to nodes related to themes that emerged during the literature review. However, following concepts of inductive coding [93, 94] these themes were refined and extra themes added as necessary as coding progressed, in order to ensure that no element of the responses was left out. A final list of 18 themes was generated from this initial analysis. Word frequencies were then generated for each question, to indicate the concepts and ideas most prevalent within the responses.

Further analysis of the data was then carried out, with thematic units identified from each theme by close reading of the text of the responses. A list of thematic units was generated, each described by an accompanying statement, for example:

- |            |   |
|------------|---|
| unit 1.1.8 | Fans do the same things online as they do offline                         |
| unit 2.2.7 | Fans can tailor information behaviour depending on their needs            |
| unit 2.5.2 | Collaboration and crowdsourcing is a large part of produsage              |
| unit 3.1.8 | Some creators will actively engage with fans and encourage fan activities |
| unit 3.3.1 | Libraries and archives have a place in fandom.                            |

Statements were, as far as possible, taken from the panel members’ own words, and each was assigned an appropriate unit code. Each statement was designed to ensure that all concepts present in the responses were covered.

Themes which had very few units assigned to them, and were close conceptually, were merged. For example, the themes of *Education* and of *Libraries* were merged, as were the themes of *Publishing* and *Copyright*. This brought the number of themes to a total of 15, in three main categories.

The final list included 155 thematic codes with accompanying statements.

These were arranged under the following themes:

- Fan communities
  - Online community
  - Offline community
  - Participatory culture
  - Social & knowledge capital
  - Conflict
- Fan information behaviour

- Communication
- Information seeking
- Information organisation
- Resources
- Producers & user-generated content
- Social effect
  - Media industry
  - Publishing & copyright
  - Education & information provision
  - Charities, advocacy, activism and support
  - Pro-am & amateur professionals

This round also generated a list of information resources used by respondents in their fan activities. This list of 74 items was very diverse, encompassing online and physical resources, people and institutions, and varied from the general (books, articles, libraries, other fans) to the specific (named websites, blogs and search engines).

### 3.2. Round 2

In this round, the participants were asked to indicate the extent of their agreement with the statements from round 1 on a 5-point Likert scale. Additionally, they were encouraged to use the optional comment boxes in order to record any ideas they felt had been unaddressed by the questionnaire, explanations for their choices, or alterations of opinion since the last round.

As a result of suggestions given in the pilot study, the number of statements was reduced from 155 to 88 by merging similar statements, in order to make the questionnaire more tractable, and some clarifications in wording were made.

The analysis of the responses sought to establish the extent of consensus in participants' views. This is a problematic aspect of Delphi studies, since many different measures have been used to quantify consensus [95]. In this study the Average Percent of Majority Opinions (APMO) Cut-Off Rate [96, 97] was used as the consensus measure; this requires over 50% support to establish consensus.

For a total of 88 statements, 2,637 opinions were expressed by the participants. Of these, 1,758 were majority opinions (i.e. they reached over 50% support). These figures gave an APMO cut-off rate of 67% (66.66%). Thus, 63 of the 88 statements in Round 2 reached a consensus (i.e. over 67% of participants agreed with one another on 63 of the statements). This left 25 statements that did not achieve a consensus and were thus deemed 'controversial'.

Sixteen of the participants made additional optional comments, some lengthy and expressing strong and complex opinions, and these were analysed by close reading. Many of these comments reiterated or clarified opinions expressed in Round 1, while others suggested additional themes. A third Delphi questionnaire was therefore prepared, which included the controversial statements from Round 2, as well as eight additional questions based upon the new themes that emerged from that round.

### 3.3. Round 3

Each questionnaire consisted of the controversial statements from Round 2 (for which the participants were reminded of their previous rating and invited to re-evaluate their opinion), plus new themes. Participants were invited to rate each statement via a 5-point Likert scale. Again, an optional comments box was added.

As with the second round, consensus was established using the APMO cut-off rate.

For a total of 33 statements, 990 opinions were expressed by the participants. Of these, 452 were majority opinions (i.e. they reached over 50% support). These figures gave an APMO cut-off rate of 46% (45.65%). Thus, 29 of the 33 statements in Round 3 reached a consensus (i.e. over 46% of participants agreed with one another on 29 of the statements). This left 4 statements that did not achieve a consensus and were thus deemed 'controversial'.

What is evident from these results is that the rate of consensus was considerably lower in Round 3 as opposed to Round 2. This is not surprising, considering the controversial nature of the statements presented in Round 3, statements which panel members found difficult to agree on in Round 2. It was decided, therefore, that a third designation would be used to classify statements – statements that were above the APMO cut-off rate (46%), but below the majority opinion cut-off rate (51%) would be termed 'borderline statements'. These are statements which cannot be said to statistically have no consensus (according to the APMO), but that nevertheless did not reach a high level of confidence, as less than

half of participants came to a consensus on them. Seven of the statements from Round 3 were, according to these parameters, considered borderline.

At the conclusion of the Round 3 analysis, it became necessary to synthesise the results from all three rounds. Accounting the total number of rounds, in total there were 96 statements presented to the judgement of the panel. Ninety-two of these reached a consensus. Of these 92 consensus statements, 7 were borderline statements and of low confidence. This left 4 statements that did not reach a consensus.

Whilst each statement had now been classified, this left a large number of statements (92) that had reached consensus, but gave no sense of granularity. In fact, some statements presented a very high level of confidence, whilst others very low. In order to better understand and evaluate the results, it was decided to divide the consensus statements into quartiles. This arrangement gave a much clearer sense of which statements had gained a clear consensus, and which conversely displayed a much lower rate of confidence. Twenty of these statements were in the upper quartile, which suggested a very high rate of agreement between panel members.

Thirteen of the panel members chose to use the optional comment boxes during Round 3, and, as before, several of these responses were of considerable length, and conveyed strong opinions, but mostly expanded upon opinions expressed in the previous rounds; very few expressed new ideas.

### 3.4. Results of the Delphi study

There was a high level of consensus amongst panel members, with 92 out of 96 statements (96%) reaching a consensus. Even disregarding the 7 statements considered borderline, and therefore of low confidence, this still leaves 89% consensus. However only 20 of the 96 consensus statements were in the upper quartile, indicating extremely high confidence. Because of the low APMO cut-off rate for Round 3, the upper quartile range is very wide for these statements (67-93%); whereas for Round 2, with a higher APMO cut-off rate, the upper quartile range is very narrow (93-100%). This would suggest that the upper quartile consensus statements in Round 2 were of much higher confidence than those in Round 3 – unsurprising, considering Round 3 mostly comprised controversial statements from Round 2. Table 1 lists the upper quartile consensus statements detailing the percentage of agreement and round number.

**Table 1.** Upper quartile consensus statements from the Delphi study, detailing the percentage of agreement and round number.

%	Quartile	Round	Statements
100	4	2	The internet enables increased a) reach; b) diversity; c) visibility and; d) discussion.
100	4	2	Fans are collectors of information and news about their fandom.
100	4	2	Fans can create and contribute to amateur information resources (e.g. wikis).
100	4	2	New technologies have changed how we create, edit and distribute media.
100	4	2	Fans support one another through mental, practical and physical problems.
96	4	2	Significant and meaningful relationships can be formed online.
96	4	2	Due to the speed and easiness of communication, the internet has become the premier medium for fan communication.
96	4	2	Fans collect information for other fans in the form of creating rec lists, link lists, wikis, tutorials, guides, etc.
94	4	2	Franchise producers acknowledge fans by incorporating Easter eggs and fan service into their products.
94	4	2	Fans collaborate in large-scale projects as well as small-scale ones.
94	4	2	Other fans are an important discovery tool and source of information.
94	4	2	Certain fans act as information sources or gatekeepers for the wider fan community.
94	4	2	Fans can raise awareness of issues through social media campaigns and other forms of activism.
93	4	3	The online allows for a narrowing of physical and temporal space. (The online makes it easier to cross physical and time boundaries.)
90	4	3	Despite copyright, fanworks are created and traded without many boundaries.
90	4	3	Using both online and offline resources together and according to my needs works best.
83	4	3	A lot of what we can say about fans depends on the fandom they belong to, the producers/creators of their fandom, and the individual personality of the fan.
77	4	3	Lurkers can be visible through the 'hits' they leave - number of visits, kudos, likes, favourites, reblogs, retweets, etc.
73	4	3	Male fans rarely get the same degree of scrutiny and mockery that female fans have to face.
70	4	3	The source of a fandom is the most important resource.

Considering these statements by theme, consensus is greatest with statements relating to the information behaviour of fans. There is a focus on the role of other fans, or groups of fans, as sources, providers and gatekeepers of fan information. This highlights the collaborative nature of information resource creation and dissemination, and the favouring of informal channels of news and information.

By contrast, only four of the statements did not reach a consensus. These statements fell under the themes of offline community and the media industry; only one of these statements came from the extra questions from Round 3, and is to do with fan money-making and entrepreneurship. Table 2 presents these statements.

**Table 2.** Delphi statements that did not reach a consensus.

%	Statement
43	Offline, fans primarily engage in consumerism - buying and collecting merchandise.
37	Offline fan activity is more ephemeral, intense, and intimate.
37	Fans' influence on producers is limited mainly to their purchasing power.
33	Making money is important to fans, and they're finding more ways to make it.

From looking at these statements, it can be seen that the most contentious statement (i.e. the statement with the lowest percentage of consensus, at 33%) was the statement pertaining to fans making money. It is also worth noting that the most prevalent issue discussed in the Round 3 comments was money-making in fandom.

Overall, the Delphi study suggests that there is more consensus amongst fans regarding their practices than might be supposed, in view of the emphasis in the literature on the highly diverse nature of fandom. While it was clear from participant comments that much of fan experience is dependent on the particular fandom, and fan experience itself is indeed not homogeneous, a generalised fan viewpoint can be identified to a large extent.

Consensus was found in themes of fan information behaviour, online community and activities, information resources, the media industry, information provision, and community support. Participants were positive about the changes technology and the internet had achieved in bringing together fans and creating a platform for community growth, the publishing of fanworks, and the sharing of fan-related materials. Related to this was a strong agreement that the internet was no barrier to creating lasting and meaningful relationships with other fans. However, comments also suggested that there was a blurring of the boundaries between online and offline behaviour: participants found that whilst some activities were exclusive to either one domain or the other, the situation is more complex than a straight demarcation of activities between the two. Many fan activities progress from one domain to the other (e.g. fans will cosplay offline, and post and tag photos of their cosplay to share with other fans on Tumblr). Therefore, it would be misleading to suggest that fan activities can be easily classified under either online or offline – there appears to be a large degree of interdependence between the two, and fans do not seem to regard their actions as being exclusive to one or the other, but part of a continuum. Participants did not agree that online and offline activities could be distinguished, with respect to consumerism, or to intense and ephemeral fan experiences; one comment was that “offline spaces [such as conventions] now resemble online spaces”.

Another concept with a high level of agreement was the degree of agency that fans might have in relation to the media industry and the creators of their fandoms. Participants seemed to be aware that, whilst producers are cognisant of the importance of pleasing fans and courting their opinion, the actual power fans wield is limited.

Participants were in agreement on the role other fans had to play in the information chain; that is, in the creation, organisation and dissemination of information and fanworks. There was also a strong belief in the concept that fans are not merely followers of a franchise, but also collectors of information, news and cultural artefacts related to that franchise. This is not only restricted to officially-created or endorsed materials, but also unofficial or, as some might say, derivative materials, such as fanart or fanfiction. Fans tend to be generous in the sharing of these materials, collating and sharing them via fan-created wikis, Tumblrs, guides, tutorials, rec lists, etc. This is reflected in a strong agreement that other fans are an important source of fan information, and that some act as gatekeepers to the rest of the community. This would suggest that much of the information behaviour of fans is generally collaborative, informal and generous. As one participant commented: “being in fandom means being in a knowledge space”; and as another noted: “fandom is a huge information hub just by existing”.

Some participants were active users of fan tags for organising their work, particularly on Tumblr, and found it useful in both managing, sharing and finding materials. Other participants, however, were of the opinion that tagging was unreliable and was dependent on the tagging abilities of the individual tagger.

The most contentious statement was that making money was important to fans, and that there were more opportunities for fans to make money; typical of the complex attitudes expressed was “some fans make money - fewer than I'd like and usually in ways I don't like”. As well as participants not being able to agree on this point, it was also the most mentioned issue in the Round 3 comments, and will be investigated further in the 3<sup>rd</sup> phase of the study.

#### 4. Discussion and conclusions

Although this study of fan information behaviour is ongoing, the first two phases reported here go some way to addressing the three main aims.

On the first aim, insight has been gained into the unique and distinctive features of fan information behaviour. Although it is evident from previous studies that fans value information resources and communication, these results show the fan communities are saturated and defined by distinctive information behaviours, affecting all aspects of the information communication chain, from creation and dissemination, to organisation and use. They make extensive use of digital resources, combining and blending the online and offline in a way as yet uncommon, and which makes tangible Floridi's idea of the 'infosphere' [98], in which we live in a manner termed 'onlife', where digital and physical environments merge.

This is seen particularly in the results relating to the second aim, where fanworks, in both physical and digital form, are seen to take a central place in the information environment; a forerunner of what we may see more generally in the future.

As to the third aim, the relevance of fan behaviour to other areas, the results show that fan information activity does indeed touch on, and in some respects show the future of, other areas. In publishing and media, the complex relations between producers and consumers, and between formally published media and fanworks, are likely to be seen more widely, as consumers or media become more participative, and gain a fan-like character. The sophisticated practices of fans in organising and sharing information offer a glimpse into what is likely to become a more common environment, which will both pose challenges, and provide opportunities, for publishers, librarians, and other participants in the information world.

In summary, we may say that cult media fans are seen to be an information-intensive group in many respects, with a variety of sophisticated online and offline information practices. A better understanding of these will be of value to publishers, librarians, and others, in dealing with this community. Information practices related to fandom may have value in education and the promotion of digital literacy. Beyond this, there may be more general lessons, as the information environment becomes more participative, and information users in general develop a fan-like character.

In this respect three aspects identified above seem of particular importance, in terms of what fan practices have to offer to the wider information world: information gatekeeping; classifying and tagging; and entrepreneurship and economic activity. These will be the subject of research, involving close study of fan activity on social media in a follow-up to the study reported here.

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