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Fan fiction in the library

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[0.1] Abstract—Although several notable collections of fan fiction exist in libraries, such as the Sandy Hereld Fanzine Collection at Texas A&M University (<http://oaktrust.library.tamu.edu/handle/1969.1/149935>) and the digital fanzine archives at the University of Iowa (<http://www.lib.uiowa.edu/sc/resources/fandomresources/>), not much attention is given to the systematic selection, acquisition, indexing, preservation, and sharing of fan works in the UK, considering the popularity of fandom, the volume of creative work that exists, and the rate at which new texts are produced. Here we present the results of an investigation into the extent to which UK libraries collect and manage fan fiction, and our attempts to ascertain the reasons underlying collection policy in local, public, special, academic, and national institutions. Our report is based on a review of recent literature, an analysis of the collection policies of a selection of UK libraries, and a brief survey of the views of Library & Information Science students. The empirical work was carried out in spring 2016. Results show that there is a little-known and less-understood dark side to fan fiction, in regard to how it is understood and valued in the library sector, which feeds a widening gap in our cultural heritage.

[0.2] Keywords—Archives; Collection policy; Fan works; Fanzine; UK libraries

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1. Introduction

[1.1] Although several notable collections of fan fiction exist in libraries, such as the Sandy Hereld Fanzine Collection at Texas A&M University (<http://oaktrust.library.tamu.edu/handle/1969.1/149935>) and the digital fanzine archives at the University of Iowa (<http://www.lib.uiowa.edu/sc/resources/fandomresources/>), not much attention is given in the UK to the systematic selection, acquisition, indexing, preservation, and sharing of fan works, despite the popularity of fandom, the volume of creative work that exists, and the rate at which new texts are produced. That the most significant collections are in the US is likely to be because of the greater number and better resourcing of US research libraries, rather than to any difference in viewpoint between the US and UK library communities. Here we present the results of an investigation into the extent to which UK libraries collect and manage fan fiction, and our attempts to ascertain the reasons underlying collection policy in local, public, special, academic, and national institutions. We take *fan fiction* to be the specifically creative writing component of the larger area of fan work, which encompasses a variety of document formats, including artwork, video, animation, music, costume, poetry, installations, 3D worlds, and others.

[1.2] It should be noted at the outset that collecting fan works does not necessarily mean promoting them, storing them with other items in the library's collection, or making them as easy to access as other items. They may be collected for archival purposes or in support of research and advanced study (as at Texas A&M and the University of Iowa), rather than for the more general entertainment, leisure, or cultural reasons that would be the remit of the public library. They may be kept in special collections or housed in a designated library or department, with different procedures for access and circulation. Conversely, their use may be promoted by special library events and presentations, aimed as much at the general public as at specialists; and even if a library does not collect fan works, its staff may direct users to other collections and sources, including online. These different ways of handling fan works form the backdrop to this study.

[1.3] Our findings should be relevant to a variety of audiences: fans interested in finding, reading, or otherwise engaging with fan works for enjoyment, reference, or research; archivists and library and information professionals wishing to establish, preserve, or refer to collections of fan works; scholars researching fandom, fan studies, or the wider realm of speculative fiction; educators interested in the ways in which engaging with fan works can encourage creativity and intellectual development; fan and professional authors; media and entertainment industry professionals; community leaders interested in the sort of worlds people wish to create; and anyone who is concerned with collecting and preserving a significant part of our cultural heritage.

2. Background and data collection

[2.1] Over the past five years, media reporting on fan-related news and issues has increased, doubtless fueled by the encroaching of a previously niche domain into mainstream concerns, including copyright and publishing. The media, education, library, and policy development industries have all shown interest in fan culture. See, for example, Duan 2015; Evans et al. 2016; Frisbie 2016; Grady 2016; Johnson 2016; Lieu 2016; Miller 2015; and Van der Sar 2016.

[2.2] Together with this expanding reportage, zine or fanzine collections have been established at the London College of Communication (<http://www.arts.ac.uk/study-at-ual/library-services/collections-and-archives/london-college-of-communication/>), the British Library ([http://www.bl.uk/reshelp/findhelpprestype/news/zines\(part1\)/zines1.html](http://www.bl.uk/reshelp/findhelpprestype/news/zines(part1)/zines1.html)), and the Glasgow Women's Library (<https://womenslibrary.org.uk/2013/09/04/zine-collection/>), as well as elsewhere in the UK and the US. But despite this, memory institutions (mainly libraries and archives) in the UK seem to devote little attention to discussing and engaging with fan works, or to developing fan fiction collections and policies for their management.

[2.3] In order to gather some empirical evidence about the extent to which the library and information science (LIS) discipline and profession considers fan fiction worthy of attention, we carried out a small investigation comprising a literature review, an examination of a sample of collection policies, and a survey of members of our library school cohort.

[2.4] To cover the LIS literature where information on fan fiction collections is likely to be found, we searched the two most relevant databases—Library and Information Science Abstracts and Library and Information Science Technology Abstracts—and supplemented them with searches on Google Scholar. We looked for any use of the terms "fans," "fan fiction," "fan works," "fanzines," and also the broader "zines," in the context of "libraries" and "collections." (We searched for both singular and plural forms, and for both one- and two-word forms, where relevant.) We considered all material mentioning fan fiction to be relevant, and selected representative items from material dealing with zines and with library interaction with fans.

[2.5] Then we searched the Web for collection development and management policies in UK libraries (and also received one in hardcopy that was not available online). We examined a selection of them, representing different sectors of libraries, for references to fan works. This process is biased toward those libraries that have a formal collection policy available online; this is likely to exclude smaller libraries, such as school libraries and smaller special and volunteer libraries. Also, of course, libraries may collect fan works ad hoc without mentioning them in a formal collection policy, and fan works may be subsumed under a more general category, as graphic novels often are (Slater and Kardos 2017). However, an institution's mentioning a particular kind of material in a collection policy indicates that it acknowledges that material's importance, and it is the formal acknowledgment and collection of fan fiction that we address here.

[2.6] We see that there is a noticeable body of fan work and interest in it, and yet the LIS community shows little acknowledgment of this in collection policies and internal processes. In order to understand this paradox, we invited both alumni of the Library School at City, University of London, and fellow students there (those registered in the academic year 2015–16) to complete a short online questionnaire about fan fiction, arguably the most well-known type of fan work. Our cohort represents the next generation of library and information professionals, and their views on fan fiction probably indicate future collection policy. We solicited respondents via Twitter—using the department's Twitter hashtag, #citylis—and via postings on its e-learning environment (Moodle) bulletin board.

[2.7] The questionnaire was conducted through eSurvey Creator (<https://www.esurveycreator.com/>) and comprised 13 questions, collecting quantitative and qualitative data. The first three questions were demographic, asking about the respondents' gender, age, and nationality. The rest dealt with their knowledge of fan fiction and their attitude toward libraries' collecting it. Four of these were to be answered only by respondents who had heard of fan fiction before matriculating at City. Another three were open questions, asking for qualitative data ("Please describe, in your own words, what you understand by the term 'fan fiction,'" "When did you first hear about fan fiction, or understand what it was?" and "Do you think libraries, archives, or other institutions should collect fan fiction?").

[2.8] From 45 current students and the unknown number of alumni who may have seen the survey promoted on Twitter, we garnered 25 respondents. Since the survey was anonymous, it is impossible to say how many were current students and how many alumni; however, since Moodle and the Twitter hashtag are most actively used by current students, it can be assumed that most of the respondents were from the current cohort. Of them, 22 (88%) had heard of fan fiction before beginning their studies. The gender split was even, with 13 women and 12 men. Ages ranged between 20 and 40, with the greatest concentration—11 respondents—between 25 and 30. Most were British, but there were two Americans, one Spaniard, and one Korean.

3. Results and discussion

[3.1] Neither the literature of fan studies nor that of LIS contains much material on library and archival collection of fan fiction or other fan works. This confirms our belief that the topic is overlooked by the mainstream LIS sector, and that there is little dialogue between the LIS discipline and the fan community.

[3.2] In our LIS database searches, we found only a few mentions of fan fiction in library collections, with rather more peripherally relevant items dealing with offering services to fans and with collections of zines in general, rather than fanzines specifically. The only article to deal solely and directly with fan fiction collections is 18 years old (Hart et al. 1999). Its authors noted that many library and information practitioners ignored fan-produced materials on the grounds that much was ephemeral, and that the majority fell outside normal bibliographic control. Our review suggests that this remains true today; Hart et al.'s appeal for information professionals to become better informed about fan literature and its potential as a resource for public and academic libraries seems to have been generally ignored.

[3.3] More recent articles focusing on collections that include fan fiction deal with particular collections, such as the Sandy Hereld zine collection (Brett 2013, 2015) and the speculative fiction collection at the University of Iowa (Chant 2015). Hart et al. 1999 is shown as cited once in Web of Science and 12 times in Google Scholar, but none of the citing articles discuss fan fiction collections.

[3.4] Betsy Martens (2011) included fan fiction in what is called the "anti-collection," archives and collections not maintained by the main memory institutions. In this case, fan fiction collections form a part of the *transformative sector*, which Martens describes as a place in which "creative information objects are continuously being reused and renewed" (574). Such collections are organized and maintained by fans themselves. Indeed, fans do an excellent job of collecting and organizing fan works; some online collections, such as the Archive of Our Own (<http://archiveofourown.org/>), rival professional digital archives. Nonetheless, most such collections rely on ad hoc funding and resources, which are often personal and can disappear overnight. As Abigail de Kosnik puts it, "Digital objects are even more prone to sudden disappearance than physical ones—a hosting company can decide not to host your fan fiction works anymore, or an archivist can 'flounce' from their archive and simply shut it down, or a social media platform can opt to delete fanfic stories without notifying anyone, or servers can simply crash" (Jenkins 2016).

[3.5] The literature suggests several reasons why fan fiction is largely ignored by libraries, of which the most significant are that fan works are "not proper books" and that they cannot be easily fitted into library structures and processes. These ideas are visible in comments about fan fiction on GoodReads (<https://www.goodreads.com/>), a book review site:

[3.6] I thought this site was for real books. Is there any way to restrict my searches to avoid this stuff?

[3.7] I thought this site was for reviews about books that I could get from the library.

[3.8] These commenters might, in fact, enjoy fan fiction, but they believe that it is less appealing than commercially published works, particularly if they are not familiar with it. This lack of awareness and understanding is probably shared by many librarians, present and past, including those who created the bulk of existing library collections and collection development practices. This sets up a vicious circle: libraries don't collect fan fiction because their patrons don't expect it to be there because they know libraries don't collect it.

[3.9] Furthermore, fan fiction, like other unconventional literature, is not usually formally published. Fan works lack ISBNs and similar identifiers, are not available through the usual acquisition processes, vary in format and quality, are not reviewed in the sources libraries usually refer to, are not provided with metadata by centralized bodies, and so on. It therefore poses problems for the usual library collection and management processes, such as selection, acquisition, cataloguing, organization, and preservation (Hart et al. 1999). The literature review shows that these issues are being addressed for the zine genre in general (Freedman 2006; Koh 2008; Gardner 2009; Lymn 2013; Brett 2015), and also for media such as graphic novels (Slater and Kardos 2017), and this may influence policy on fan works in the future. Developments in cataloguing practices for such materials should also help (Freedman 2006; Lember, Lipkin, and Lee 2013). Copyright and intellectual property issues are also problematic for fan works, as we discuss below.

[3.10] Despite these difficulties, libraries are becoming increasingly interested in catering to fans as users (Pearson 2006; Brenner 2013), in recommending sources and examples of fan fiction (Griffis and Jones 2008; Philpot 2014), in using fan fiction for literary instruction (Kell 2009), and in running in-library fan events (Rogers-Whitehead 2015; Atkinson 2015). However, the collecting of fan works by libraries remains very limited and underdeveloped.

[3.11] Library collection policies govern all aspects of creating and maintaining a collection, including selection, acquisition, accessioning, preservation, provision of access, and weeding or disposal of items. They are governed by the basic questions of what purpose the collection serves and for whom it is being maintained. Answers to these questions will differ, of course, between types of library, but since fan works have a distinctive nature, we might expect that any library that considers fan works important will mention them specifically in its policies.

[3.12] And yet, the results of our (admittedly small-scale) survey are clear. Fan works are not mentioned in the collection policies of UK libraries, either positively (to be collected) or negatively (to be excluded). Table 1 lists 10 libraries, representing the national, academic (old and new institutions), public, and special library sectors, whose policies we examined; none makes mention of fan works. Nor did any of the other 30 collection policies we examined; the 10 shown here are examples of detailed policies that might be expected to mention fan works if such were included.

Table 1. Links to library policies, none of which mentions fan works

Library	Policy Link
British Library (including Web archive)	http://www.bl.uk/aboutus/stratpolprog/coldevpol
National Library of Scotland	https://www.nls.uk/about/partnerships/rarebooksinscotland/colldev
Cambridge University Library	http://www.lib.cam.ac.uk/CDP_framework.pdf
University College London Library	https://www.ucl.ac.uk/library/about/strategies-policies/cmp/policy
Oxford Brookes University Library	https://www.brookes.ac.uk/library/library-services/library-policy-and-regulations/collection-management-policy
University of the Arts Library	http://www.arts.ac.uk/media/arts/study-at-ual/library-services/documents/Collection_Development_and_Management_Policy_2013.pdf
City of London Libraries and Archives (policy not online; provided by library)	—
Tameside public libraries	http://www.tameside.gov.uk/TamesideMBC/media/libraries/stockpolicy.pdf
Wiltshire public libraries	http://www.wiltshire.gov.uk/public_library_stock_policy.pdf
Bishopsgate Institute Library and Archive	http://www.bishopsgate.org.uk/file_download.aspx?id=9535

[3.13] Although their policies do not mention fan works, some libraries do have collections of fan works, usually fanzines, or zines in general. The British Library has a large collection of mostly counterculture and niche zines; the Glasgow Women's Library has a zine collection focusing on zines by, for, and about women; and the Salford Zine Library (<http://www.salfordzinelibrary.co.uk/>), which specifically collects zines, is a self-publishing archive. Although we could not find a UK collection focusing specifically on fanzines, it is worth asking how these zine collections, which often include fanzines, are acquired, in the absence of a formal collection policy. We found that the British Library acquired them through legal deposit; zines entered other libraries through donations or because the librarian or archivist was personally interested in them. These acquisition paths account for the rather minimal, and certainly ad hoc, examples of fanzine collections in UK libraries.

[3.14] As noted above, 22 of the respondents had heard of fan fiction before beginning their studies. Of them, 13 had read fan fiction themselves, 7 had written it, and 3 actively collected it. Nevertheless, only 13 of the total 25 respondents felt that memory institutions such as libraries should collect fan fiction; 11 were unsure, and 1 felt that they should not. Figure 1 depicts responses to 6 of the 13 questions.

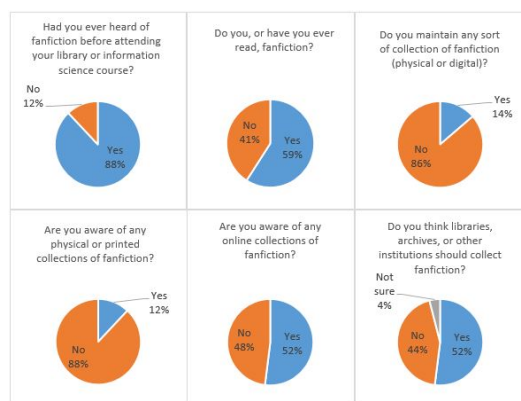


Figure 1. Responses to questions 5, 7, 9, 10, 11 and 12. [[View larger image.](#)]

[3.15] This suggests that LIS students tend to be aware of and engaged with fan fiction, even if they do not fully understand its nature. Their awareness may be ascribed to its gradual encroachment into mainstream media. In response to the question "When did you first hear about fan fiction?" participant 19 said,

[3.16] It has been a gradual discovery over the past couple of years. The term seems to be part of our culture now.

[3.17] Yet despite this high level of awareness, opinion on its value as cultural heritage was mixed. Reasons for this correlated with the reasons ascertained from the literature review. One participant admitted,

[3.18] I'm torn on the subject. On the one hand it is an important cultural institution at this point, and provides wonderful insight for those studying fanworks, feminism, LGBT issues among other subjects. On the other hand, part of the reason fanfiction is so diverse and weird and sprawling is its inherent illegality and not-for-profit status. (Participant 4)

[3.19] Some respondents approved of libraries collecting fan fiction:

[3.20] Libraries should preserve fanfiction just as they would any other documents because otherwise the information those documents contain and all the potential uses that information [could] have are lost. (Participant 1)

[3.21] It holds a lot of cultural significance for the way people react to popular culture, and could be an important historical resource for the future. (Participant 3)

[3.22] It is literature, part of the cultural record. It should be preserved so it can be read for pleasure as well as studied as literature and from a social and cultural perspective. Should be available to text mine as well. (Participant 20)

[3.23] Others did not believe it necessary:

[3.24] I think online archives manage themselves well and already have great metadata and information management. (Participant 6)

[3.25] I think fanfiction as an alt representation of fictional universes, should maintain their otherness by being apart from their origin universe. Institution based libraries, archives should be for the origin universe formats, purely because i think fanfiction should be organised or curated by those that create and love it, the fans. (Participants 18)

[3.26] There is far too much of it and it is a waste of resources...And most fanfiction is only of interest to people who belong to that particular fandom and not the wider populace. (Participant 10)

[3.27] Most took a nuanced stance, willing to countenance the collection of fan fiction by memory institutions with several caveats concerning its relevance, format, copyright, quality and quantity, and expertise.

[3.28] Some participants felt that fan fiction's growing cultural importance warranted attention from libraries and archives, but had concerns about its overall relevance to a library collection. Participant 12 thought that "it would need to be relevant to the collections," and participant 15 said that "it depends on the institution whether they feel they can or should collect it, and in what forms—depending on their remit, and its relevance to that, and the requirements of their users." Others made it clear they would have no objections if the collection was "in scope" and "legitimate," and if there were "sufficient grounds" for collection. Participant 23 suggested that "there is no reason to think some special libraries, archives or institution collecting them should not exist, if they have funds and resources...enough to do this job."

[3.29] Most fan fiction is in digital format, which was a concern for many respondents. Participant 4 thought that a collection of fan fiction would not be viable "unless it were stored in a digital only aspect similar to the Internet Way Back machine." Participant 15 thought that "there should be some kind of formal archiving by national libraries, but would this be done for online content via web archiving?" Participant 25 noted that it "would depend on the format, I don't know how much fanfiction is printed I know a lot is available online so it would be a question of working with site owners over archiving."

[3.30] Another problem is that much fan fiction is dynamic and ephemeral, often unfinished, and may be deleted at the whim of the author:

[3.31] It could be a hard thing to catalogue when it comes to a digital repository. I think it would be cool to be able to check out a physical copy of a fanfiction, but as a fanfiction writer myself, I know I have many unfinished stories out there, and even stories that I finish and then decide to go back years later and revamp. I'm not sure how a library could account for the evolving nature of fanfics. (Participant 8)

[3.32] One participant offered a solution to this problem:

[3.33] If free and online, then links in the OPAC [Online Public Access Catalog] (and potentially other promotion) would be required to help users find it. (Participant 12)

[3.34] This middle ground allows for the digital, dynamic format of most fan fiction. The links could be to online collections, such as fan fiction archives, or to individual items; the latter would be more useful, and are probably what the respondent intended.

[3.35] Copyright has been a significant obstacle to the recognition of fan fiction, and, as Hart et al. noted in 1999, is a chief reason why memory institutions have ignored it. Fan fiction uses characters and worlds derived from other works, and the authors, publishers, and others who hold copyright over the original works may not consider fan works acceptable. This lack of certainty has discouraged libraries from collecting and promoting fan works (Griffis and Jones 2008; Koulikov 2012; Christian 2013). The issue was indeed mentioned by several participants. Participant 14 asked the obvious question: "how about the copyright of the characters/intellectual property?" Participant 25 also brought up copyright issues in relation to digitally archiving fan fiction. It is interesting to note that although copyright was often mentioned, it was not discussed in depth, possibly because it is a complex issue and not well understood by LIS students. Perhaps it should be taught in LIS programs, if not within wider contexts.

[3.36] The quality and quantity of fan fiction was also a significant issue. Participant 8 pointed out that "fanfiction is so huge and the quality and type varies so much (half a page songfics vs. larger works, tons of unfinished work, grammatically challenged/hard to read vs. professional level writing)." This was echoed by participant 23: "I don't think it should be necessarily and actively collected at the level of public library due to its nature; quite impromptu, ephemeral, amateurish and numerous"; and participant 5 concluded that "there's a danger it could mushroom and expand as a collection to larger than was controllable."

[3.37] A few participants noted that expertise was a significant issue. Participant 10 asked, "Who gets to choose which... fanfiction is collected and which isn't?" Some suggested that information professionals would not know enough about fan fiction to effectively collect it:

[3.38] Traditional institutions tend to be very procedural in their understanding or organisation of works, I just can't see how they could do justice to the haphazard and democratic nature of fanfiction universes. (Participant 18)

[3.39] Some respondents seemed to feel that the world of LIS and fandom were inherently ill-matched—that fan fiction by its nature makes its collection a thorny issue to tackle. As quoted above, participant 8 worried that it would be difficult to catalogue; participant 4 thought it perhaps too "diverse and weird and sprawling"; and participant 6 thought that fan archives already have "great metadata and information management."

[3.40] Participant 11, however, noted that if the two parties were willing to work together, both could benefit:

[3.41] I think libraries being involved in collecting fanfiction would be beneficial for fans, as long as they consulted fans re: metadata, as fanfiction has its own vocabulary that laypeople might not be familiar with (e.g fluff, AU) but that fans would expect when searching a fanfiction archive.

[3.42] Overall, the majority of respondents thought that fan fiction was culturally significant enough to warrant further attention from libraries and archives. However, most expressed caution. It is undeniable that the complexity of fan fiction and other fan works is challenging to memory institutions. Yet the future information professionals we surveyed were aware of and engaged with fandom, and they might be able to bridge the gap between the two worlds. Indeed, several of them identified as fans and noted the rich taxonomies and information management strategies that fans have created and adopted. If the discipline of LIS is to turn its attention toward the collection and preservation of fan works in the future, a dialogue with fans themselves would be desirable.

4. Conclusions and recommendations

[4.1] The UK has no national plans or policies for the collection of fan fiction. At the institutional level, some collections of fanzines exist, but the limited extent to which a wider selection of works are collected, indexed, archived, and preserved leaves a growing gap in our cultural heritage. Fan fiction, and indeed all fan works, instantiates a significant body of creative talent across a wide variety of disciplines, including art, creative writing, poetry, and music. The technical skills needed to create fan works can be considerable, involving sound, video, animation, handicrafts, and programming, together with a high degree of Web and social media savvy. Perhaps more should be done to comprehend the scope of fan works, and to at least understand what we are not collecting.

[4.2] The issues associated with the collection of fan fiction and fan works are inarguably complex. The body of work is enormous, in both digital and print formats, and institutions are pressed for resources. Funding for such collections is

minimal to nonexistent. Two other topics that pose particularly significant challenges for the information professions, and that would benefit from further study, can be identified.

[4.3] First is the set of questions regarding copyright and publishing. Although fan works are challenging limitations on creativity, distribution, and commercial activity, little actual change has been achieved. Moreover, the rights of the authors of the works on which fan fiction is based must be respected. While this concern has not prevented some libraries from including fan works in their collections, the lack of clarity inhibits wider collection. Greater attention should be paid to these issues in professional debates and in library and information education.

[4.4] Second is the question of how we define a *document*. Although memory institutions include in their collections both digital media and analog images, audio, and video, the rapid multiplication of digital formats is challenging what we consider a document, and hence what we collect. Many fan works are multimodal texts, and some include video game mods, art installations, or performances. The increasingly available technologies of virtual and augmented reality offer yet more possible formats. The issue is not only whether we should collect and preserve these works, but how. Many fan works are ephemeral, and many are not compatible with the digital content management systems typically employed in libraries. Since no vendors of library systems take fan works into account, libraries wishing to provide access to such materials would have to either collaborate in building management systems for them or provide only basic retrieval and access functions.

[4.5] The question of the place of fan fiction in libraries may seem simple at first, but we have brought out some of its complexity. Future studies might examine how libraries make fan works available when they do not mention them in their collections policies, particularly smaller school and public libraries, which may not have a formal collection policy. Such questions cannot be answered by either the LIS or fan studies disciplines alone. The two must work together to more fully understand the issues. We can collaborate to develop library policies and processes that can present this important form of material to best advantage. The field of LIS can learn much from fans' innovative approaches to collecting multimodal and nontraditional documents; and perhaps future collaborative projects can allow fans access to formal institutional technology and expertise in the wider collection, presentation, and preservation of fan works.

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