Changing Relations Between Fan Cultures and Industry: The Legitimation Paradox

Dr. Judith Fathallah

The ways that fans engage with their preferred media are changing and expanding rapidly. Over the past ten years, we have seen rapid growth online of creative communities devoted to producing and sharing fanart, costuming, translating, subtitling, game modification and more. Fanfiction, the unauthorized rewriting and adaptation of corporately owned media, is the fastest growing form of writing in the world (Mirmohamadi 2014, 5). Though its ultimate origins are in pre-Gutenberg, communal forms of storytelling, its modern articulations really begin with the hardcopy fanzines television fans created in the 60s for circulation within closed communities. Nowadays, fanfic operates almost entirely online, and had obtained unprecedented popularity and visibility. Despite increasing professionalization of this and author forms of fan creativity, fanfiction rarely commands the sort of credibility or cultural kudos associated with professional writing, and may even be constructed as vaguely risible in the popular press.

Beginning in 2013, I designed and conducted the first large scale discourse analysis to address fanfiction. Like most forms of discourse analysis, I was concerned not only with the construction and consolidation of social ideology but with processes of change: how discourse is solidified, adapted and/or undermined. In the work eventually published a*s Fanfiction and the Author: How Fanfic Changes Popular Cultural Texts* (Fathallah 2017), I established that fanfic operates through a paradox of legitimation. Through this process, fanfic attempts to legitimate itself through appeal to the very construction of authorship it subverts, an ultimately Romantic conception of the lone male genius imbued with the powers of originality. Using the current cult texts *Sherlock* (BBC), *Game of Thrones* (HBO) and *Supernatural* (CW) as a case my study, discourse theory adapted from Foucault was utilized to establish that discursive formations from the source text can be de- and re-constructed, sometimes consolidating canon's constructions, but at other times, altering Othered characterizations and criticising statements from canon. Paradoxically, however, this process utilizes and functions through the capital of the already-empowered: the White male Author (Jenkins 1995; Hills 2002; 2010; Gray 2010; Scott 2011), and/or the White male protagonists of the series (c.f. Dyer 1992). The formations selected for analysis build upon each other to demonstrate this construction: first, (White) masculinity in the BBC's *Sherlock*; second, authority in HBO's *Game of Thrones;* and finally authorship in the CW's *Supernatural*. In this last and most explicit clearest example, the fan's writing is legitimated by the TV-auteur who appears as a character in the series. The fan is simultaneously empowered and contained as showrunners grant metatextual acknowledgment of and paratextual permission for fanfic rvia its inclusion in the show. Derivative writing which changes popular culture is legitimated and empowered - because and so far as the author says so. By the final chapter, however, we will begin to see the deconstruction of the legitimation paradox at work, as the legitimacy of authorship itself begins to be questioned. We see this most clear in metatextual styles of fanfic which reflects on its own relationship with the source text, and the showrunners' attempts at containment, which are then complicated by fandom's re-(re!)appropriation of control of the narrative, often with explicit reflection on the process. This article first explains

the methodology I developed, and makes the broader case for utilizing discourse analysis as a tool in studying fanwork. My primary focus was written text, but I have since gone on to utilize multi-modal tools in the study of fanvids, artwork, and even musical conventions. In the second part of the article, I will explain how changing media affordances of sites like Tumblr critique and undermine traditional conceptions of authorship and authority through their structure as modes of engagement as much as their content, and suggest some strategies of engagement for industry professionals.

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) developed from Michel Foucault, Laclau and Mouffe and Norman Fairclough informed the methodology and its philosophical underpinnings. CDA is not prescriptive and practitioners use a range of approaches depending on their purposes and data, but there are certain principles which underpin all forms of the practice. Michel Foucault is typically considered the founding philosopher of CDA (see e.g., Fairclough 1993; 2003; Wetherell, Taylor and Yates 2001) for his arguments that language is less like a vehicle *conveying* meaning than the instrument of meaning construction. There is no pre-extant truth behind language, only 'regimes of truth' constructed and maintained through social communication. For example, in his book *Birth of the Clinic* (1976), Foucault set out to write a cultural history of medicine. He discovered as he worked that there is no object called 'medicine' which exists prior to language, but that 'medicine' is a discursive construction authorized, upheld, enacted and contested by certain institutions and individuals whom we invest with greater or lesser authority to do so. This, Foucault contends, is the state of reality – essentially he makes an anti-theological argument concerning truth and meaning. How we communicate structures reality, and statements gain strength from repetition and wide distribution. In *The Archaeology of Knowledge* , Foucault called this property of statements their 'repeatable materiality' (1989). He utilized the image of a tree to help convey his concept of discourse formations at their roots are 'governing statements', which provide the foundation. These cannot be contradicted. At the peripheries – the branches of the tree – are a whole range of statements, some weaker, some stronger, and these may be in conflict: the discourse formation 'medicine' might include both 'statins are beneficial' and 'statins are dangerous', but neither of these would contradict a governing statement such as 'medicine is the study and treatment of the human body in illness', or something similar. Statements move in and out of discourses over time: previous cultures' medical discourses included all manner of statements we have now disregarded (the theories of bodily humours spring to mind) whilst our construction of medicine now includes certain social and psychological which would previously have belonged to other domained. The task of a critical discourse analyst is to chart a discourse – to discover its limits, grounding statements and conditions – at a particular point in time, and demonstrate its processes of change.

Norman Fairclough developed CDA by demonstrating how each individual text is made out of the echoes of earlier texts, often from disparate genres. Statements carry shadows of meaning from earlier usages, even as their recombination changes and renews their meaning. An article in a tabloid on a promising new drug might combine several lexes, those from the discourse of accepted science imbuing it with authority whilst statements sourced in religion (miracle, hope, revelation) shape the human interest angle. This kind of intertextuality and interdiscursivity naturally create much of the meaning of fanwork, as citations from the source text are self consciously contrasted with statements from other genres, tropes, and styles.

I took precedent from Fairclough's work in attention to these stylistic operations. However, many previous discourse analyses have been weakened by a failure to discuss the reception of statements in their context. I wished to explore how fanfic received, shaped and altered the concept of authorship. Thus I needed to demonstrate what kind of statements were approved, which rejected, which celebrated and recommended. Luckily, the fannish practice of reviewing and recommendation made this simple – if time consuming – to document. In each of the major research chapters, I first considered how is the discursive formation (of masculinity, authority or authorship respectively) constructed in the source text? This was accomplished by close textual analysis suited to televisual drama, taking account of the script, production and official paratextual materials. As patterns began to emerge, I was able to identify the 'governing' statements at the basis of each construction – for example, I discovered that whilst *Game of Thrones*' construction of authority was highly fragmented and diverse, authority was always constructed as dependent on belief and acceptance on behalf of those over whom it was exercised. This was therefore a grounding statement of the discourse formation – a condition upon which the other statements all rested.

Then I moved on to explore the related fanfic at 3 of the web's most popular hosting sites: Fanfiction.net; LiveJournal and the Archive of Our Own. My own history in fandom gave me insight into where to begin my searching and how to navigate these sites – in each case, I began by searching with the site's tags, filters or other mechanisms for fanfic pertinent to the discursive formation in question. I read all the relevant stories closely - a total of 402 for *Sherlock,* 154 for *Game of Thrones* and 704 for *Supernatural,* ranging in length from 100 word drabbles to multiple-hundred thousand word epics. There were no shortcuts possible here – large-scale discourse analysis does take a large amount of time and attention, but it is really the only reliable way of demonstrating how changes in ideas and ideologies take place. As I explained in the methodology chapter:

I established versions of what network analysts call 'ego networks' (Beaulieu 2005, p. 186) for each fic by searching for the title and/or author in quotation marks, always remembering that the context of a connection bears on its importance in a network (Park and Thelwall 2003). This part of the process has an unavoidable margin of error: occasionally, where both the title and username were very common words, I had to enclose '[title] by [author]' in quotation marks, and thus may have missed some references. A title-and-author reference, whether a recommendation or a negative comment, almost always takes the form of a hyperlink. I began these searches with Google, as it is the world's most-used search engine, then repeated them on Yahoo and Bing, the world's second-and-third most used search engines at the time this research commenced. After these the market share in search engines drops dramatically, so it is unlikely that further engines would yield more relevant data (Fathallah 2017, 38).

I will now provide an example of the way I chose to illustrate changes in discourse formations. We will use the last example, which brought together the themes of the project to examine how fandom changed the construction of authorship in *Supernatural*. All diagrams are from *Fanfiction and the Author,* published Amsterdam University Press in 2017, at p. 160 and p. 169. Figure 1 is based on the statements drawn from the series itself, whose metatextual construction of authorship is based on the the characters of Chuck Shurley and Becky Rosen. Shurley is a neurotic alcoholic and stereotypical geek, who makes his living as pulp novelist due to the mystic visions he receives of the show's actual protagonists on their adventures.

Fig. 1: The construction of authorship (by its negative) in *Supernatural*.
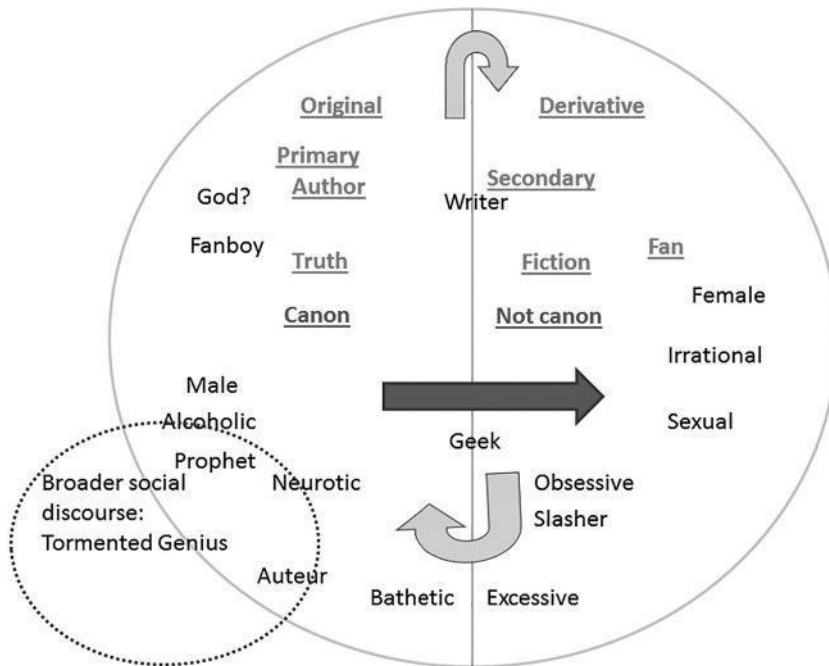
As the diagram illustrates, the concept of authorship was diegetically constructed by contrast with its posited 'opposite', i.e., fandom. Construction through opposition is a common means of definition in discourse formations (consider: woman/man, West/East, good/bad). Within the show's diegesis, fandom is constructed primarily through the character of Becky Rosen, a huge fan of Chuck's books. As the show's fourth and fifth season progresses, Chuck learns that the 'characters' he thought were figments of his inspired imagination are real people within the diegis of the show, whilst Becky has the good fortune first to be contacted by her favourite author and then to learn that the series of books she loves most is actually an account of real events. (Her exclamation of 'I knew it!' is a nod to *Galaxy Quest,* an affectionate satire on geek culture and fandom). As the diagram shows, she is constructed as feminine, comic, hysterical and sexualised to Chuck's brand of geek masculinity. Chuck stands in metatextually for the real writers of the show, specifically the original creator in the person of Eric Kripke. Kripke is a key example of what Suzanne Scott (2011) called the 'fanboy-auteur': a geeky, amicable an fan-friendly persona assumed by certain male writers in the cult TV industry whilst of course retaining economic, industrial and cultural power over the text and largely determining its direction. Chuck enters into a relationship with Becky – writers need their fans – and tolerates her writing fanfiction about his characters. Nonetheless, it is quite clear within the show's diegesis that his output is the true and real text – he is, after all, quite literally a prophet. There is even a coda to the final episode of the 5-season arc Eric Kripke designed, humorously implying Chuck might be not just a prophet but God himself (the original Author and traditional source of inspiration for gifted writers) . The outer small, outer circle on the diagram illustrates how the construction of Chuck as an alcoholic taps into a broader cultural discourse of tormented artists and geniuses. Carabine (2001) calls this process 'hooking' – a technique by which a single statement can do a large amount of definitional work. I concluded that, according to the official text, there were two interdependent grounding statements in the discursive construction of authorship: that the Author's text is true, canonical and real, and the fan's writing, though permissible, is secondary, derivative and imaginary.

After working through the methodological process designed above, I concluded that the construction of authorship in *Supernatural* fanfic separated the concept of authorship from fandom. There were plenty of stories featuring only Becky or only Chuck, and explicitly contributing to only one side of the dyad. When I had finished the investigation, I represented the new discursive formations as follows:

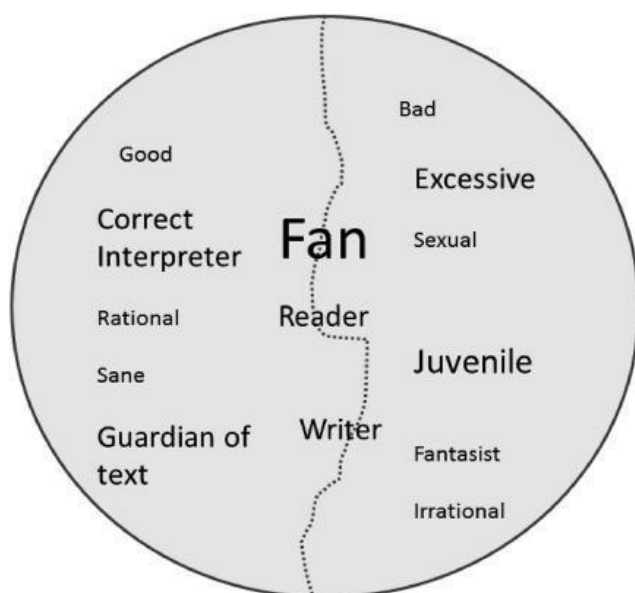**Fig. 2: Fandom's reconstruction of authorship.**

Fig. 3: Fandom's reconstruction of the writing fan.

Larger font represents statements that were more impactful (i.e., received more reviews, reblogs and quotations) and smaller font represents those tat were present but did not make much impact on the formations. Obviously there is not space here to rehearse in detail the analysis of the stories and reviews, but I will provide a quick summary.

As illustrated by the diagrams:

- Fanfic constructed the author and the fan as independent characters who sometimes interact

- The author's relationship with truth was destabilised through a variety of stories on the relationship between his writing and diegesis

- There were a range of popular metatextual stories destabilising the concept of authorship, including dissection of the concepts of sole authorship, collaboration, fallibility, knowledge and divine authorship

- The construction of fans as largely feminine, hysterical and hypersexualized was not contradicted in the fanfiction, but rather separated off into Other 'bad' fans, immature and silly viewers or readers who like texts for the wrong reason, and 'good' fans, mature, witty and properly appreciative critics with whom the reader and writer are identified

- There were a couple of meta-textual stories explicitly discussing fanfiction's ability to 'change' discourse, considering truth claims from a postmodern perspective arguing for relativity and the ability/right of all writers to contribute to social discourse

- However, there was a stronger and more pervasive tendency for fanfic and fan practices to be legitimated via reference to the character of the author, or the concept of authorship. For example, Becky may be depicted as the only person who can properly interpret the 'prophet's texts. She might justify fanwork be attempting to demonstrate that it is valid, or almost as valid as, professionally published authorship, and/or the story might explore these themes metatextually.

This last point was the culmination of a paradox I identified across the formations, the paradox of legitimation. In *Sherlock,* the title character is a construction and demonstration of a particular kind of English masculinity, explicitly used a role model for such since his first appearance in the Conan Doyle stories. Whilst fandom contributes a huge variety of statements on gender, ethnicity, masculinity, femininity, minds and bodies, the patterns of variation were ultimately justified and legitimated with reference to what Sherlock/*Sherlock* really is: the civilized man. In *Game of Thrones*, a book and television series concerned with the justification of power, authority is ultimately justified by a mixture of charismatic and traditional principles. The contributions of fandom were surprisingly faithful to the text, and legitimated themselves with reference to the series author George R. R. Martin and the showrunners David Benioff and D. B. Weiss. (I offer several context-specific hypothesis as to why this might be the case in Fathallah 2017, pp. 117-53). *Supernatural* fandom's impact on the discursive formation of authorship is the most explicit example of the legitimation paradox at work. A similar pattern has been identified in postcolonial literature and art: in order to effect change and challenge the authority of canonical predecessors, one must necessarily engage with them, thus appealing to it for the legitimation required to make its criticisms. As one might expect, fanfic has developed to a point wherein it directly addresses, satirizes and discusses the paradox, assuming multiple writing personas and even utilizing the multimedia

Thus, I have demonstrated a qualitative/quantitative method that allows the discourse analyst to make evidentiary statements on how discourse formations are changed. The methodology allowed me to empirically establish the development, shape and incipient deconstruction of the legitimation paradox, which will certainly undergo further change and development as showrunners take more and more explicit notice of their fansearching the keywords 'Sherlock AND hate' and following result links to discover the blogs sherlocksucks.tumblr.com and anti-bbcsherlock.tumblr.com,which describes itself in measured tones as 'an archive for people who dislike BBC Sherlock',and why-helo-is-i-stvenen-mofat,tumblr.com. This latter a

deliberate misspelling of Steven Moffat, a cult television writer, producer and former showrunner for *Sherlock.* As I established,

> Their very titles deny their own claims to authoritative voice, via the obvious misspelling and grammatical inversion of 'is-i-stvenen-mofatt.' 'Is-I' is a grammatical question: each reader must judge the authority of the claim for themselves. Via citation and incorporation into each other's textual format, all the anti-*Sherlock* blogs become part of each other, in addition to their constant citation of and interaction with *Sherlock* fandom and the show itself (2018).

The particular affordances of Tumblr, dependent on intertextuality, embedding, citation and fragmentation, create a postmodern pastiche effect. They recirculate serious criticisms of the show, such as lack of character development:

> Remember when Sherlock was literally getting tortured and his brother was treating it all like a joke and then Sherlock was magically fine and it was never mentioned again…
> Because Moffat's characters do not have emotions, and PTSD just means you're bored. (post at antibbcsherlock.tumblr.com, reblogged from rjalker, 2015).

These comments are interspersed with absurdist satire as the 'why-helo' blog poses as the incoherent voice of a showrunner at odds with his fanbase, and is reblogged by the other accounts alongside the serious criticisms. Tumblr allows questions to be submitted to accounts, which are then publically reblogged and answered as below:

> 'Anonymous' asks
> y is irene not lesbian after seeing shrerlckock[1]
> why-helo-is-i-stvenen-mofatt:
> HOW BOUT FLUID SXEUALTIY? Um r u hmomphobia? All women fall for Shreklok he MYSTERYIOUS and SXYE. They want DESFROTS GLCACIER and make him HUBSAND. IRENE is STRONG WOMEN with GUN AND SASS and U R BULLY BYE. (post at antibbcsherlock.tumblr.com, reblogged from why-helo-is-i-stvenen-mofatt, 2014).

The answer plays on two common criticisms of Moffat as a showrunner - that his female characters are shallow and unbelievable; and that he cannot take criticism, exaggerating these tendencies to comedic excess. Moffat notoriously claimed that female fans of *Sherlock* were attracted to the unemotional title character because each believed they would be the woman to 'defrost that glacier', but were all wrong, as 'nothing will melt that glacier' (quoted in Ng 2014). Yet even as the traditional authorial voice is undercut and ridiculed, the Tumblr blogs equally turn that critique on themselves, their own postures of authority and the claims to authority of fandoms. Because the format integrates reblogs into each micro-blog's template, there is visual or semantic border between these sorts of reblogs and the poses of authoritative criticism. Moreover, the parodic tone is used self-reflexively, as when a user posts 'i used to like sherlock and now i have repented from those bad days thanks to this blog, god bless you' and receives the response 'God bless YOU, carinaroundvevo. Welcome to the light' (carinaroundvevo

---

[1] Referring to a controversial decision in the script for episode xxx, wherein the lesbian character Irene Adler apparently fell in love with Sherlock.

2014), which is then reblogged in several places. The hyperbolic pose of critical awareness in the language of religious salvation parodies its own stance. I have developed some analysis of these processes in Fathallah (2018), but this line of research is just developing, and could be applied and adapted to a wide range of multimedia fanwork and indeed, other kinds of transformative work but researchers from different specialities.

How are media industries responding to these changes? Schäfer has suggested that industry responses have largely fallen into three categories, which he calls offered a balanced and nuanced perspective suggesting that corporate responses to new media practice can be categorized in three main ways, which he calls: confrontation, which aims to prevent users from challenging established business models; implementation, which attempts to utilize user-generated content (UGC) in new revenue models; and integration, which seeks to involve new media practices in socio-politically responsible ways (2011, 13). The problem with confrontation is, firstly, that it does not work - George R. R. Martin intially attempted to ban fanfiction via a blogpost, demonstrating a poor grasp of copyright law in the process; secondly, that it might not be legal (fanwork is the very definition of a gray area when it comes to copyright), but most significantly, that it is an excellent way of generating ill will towards a franchising, compromising the loyalties of one's most important audience members. The second option, implementation, is increasingly popular: HBO, for example, ran a fan competition for artwork to be posted to a Tumblr account, of which it chose the best examples for publication - to it's own profit. The problem here again is the risk of generating ill will - though on one hand fans may simply be happy with the opportunity for promotion, the exploitation of fans' labour is rather obvious. It also runs a risk Kristina Busse recognised earlier in the development of fan studies, of

> legitimizing fannish activities and artifacts through various modes of convergence may create a two-
>
> tiered fan system of acceptable and non-acceptable fan productions by dividing the fan activities into
>
> those approved/encouraged by the producers and those that are not, legitimating the former and further
>
> ostracizing the latter (2006, n.p.).

Schäfer's otherwise thoughtful book could be criticized for lack of attention to what *kinds* of UGC tend to receive what kind of corporate response. Schäfer's otherwise thoughtful book could be criticized for lack of attention to what *kinds* of UGC tend to receive what kind of corporate response. Scott's (2011) thesis argues this case, identifying a gender divide between the approved fannish production (primarily masculine, e.g. vid creation from licensed material) and non-approved (primarily feminine, e.g. fanfiction focusing on feminine and queer relationships). Clearly, there is not going to be any set list of instructions for the successful, profitable and ethical integration of fanwork, but each franchise must consider a range of issues, including

- labour and exploitation
- what kinds of fanwork are valued, and why? By what system of value?
- protection of brand image
- how far ownership over ideas can extend
- fan goodwill and loyalty
- any issues particular to the property in question,

I have established, then, that, the operations of the legitimation paradox have underpinned a great deal of fanwork in the past and present, and may be particularly applicable to literature which upholds a traditional conception of authorship (see also Fathallah 2016a, 2016b). However, as fans experiment with multimedia who's very forms question the traditions of authorship, in addition to conventions of content, there is a great deal more research to be done on how these ideologies will operate in the future, in this context of rapidly changing relations between the media industry and its audience. Media property owners face unavoidable changes in how franchises will be negotiated with fan cultures, and whilst there is no way to create a set formula or list of instructions for this rapidly developing landscape, issues of labour, brand image and fan goodwill are central to the coming challenges.

References.

Beaulieu, Anne. 2005. 'Sociable Hyperlinks: An Ethnographic Approach to Connectivity'. In *Virtual Methods: Issues in Social Research on the Internet*, edited by Christine Hine, 183–198. Oxford and New York: Berg.

Busse, K. 2006. Podcasts and the fan experience of disseminated media commentary. Austin,

Texas. *Flow Conference,* October 26-29. Available at

<http://www.kristinabusse.com/cv/research/flow06.html> [accessed 22/04/11].

Carabine, Jean. 2001. 'Unmarried Motherhood 1830-1990: A Genealogical Analysis'. In *Discourse as Data: A Guide for Analysis,* edited by Margaret Wetherell, Stephanie Taylor, and Simeon J. Yates, 267-307. London and CA: Sage.

Dyer, Richard. 1997. *White.* London and NY: Routledge

Fairclough, Norman. 1993. *Discourse and Social Change.* London: Polity.

- 2003. *Analysing Discourse: Textual Analysis for Social Research*. London and NY:

Routledge.

Fathallah, Judith M. 2016a. Statements and silence: fanfic paratexts for *ASOIAF/Game of Thrones*. *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies* 30 (1), 75-88.2017.

2016b. 'Except that Joss Whedon is God': fannish attitudes to statements of author/ity'. *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 19 (4), 459-476.

2017. *Fanfiction and the Author: How Fanfic Changes Popular Cultural Texts*. Amsterdam University Press.

- 2018. Polyphony on Tumblr: Reading the hateblog as pastiche. *Transformative Works and Cultures* 27. Available at:
  https://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/1210

Foucault, Michel 1976. *The Birth of the Clinic*. London: Tavistock Publications Ltd
- 1989. *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, translated by A. M. Sheridan Smith. London: Routledge.
Gray, Jonathan. 2010. *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts*. London and NY: New York University Press.
Hills, Matt. 2002. *Fan Cultures.* London and NY: Routledge.
- 2010. *Triumph of a Time Lord: Regenerating Doctor Who in the Twenty- First Century.* London: IB Tauris.
Mills, Sarah. 1993. *Discourses of Difference: An Analysis of Women's Travel Writing and Colonialism.* London and NY: Routledge.

Mirmohamadi, Kylie. 2014. *The Digital Afterlives of Jane Austen: Janeites at the Keyboard.* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Park, Han Woo, and Thelwall, Mike. 2003. 'Hyperlink Analyses of the World Wide Web: A Review'. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* no. 8, 4.
http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1083-6101.2003.tb00223.x/abstract.

Schäfer, M. T. 2011. *Bastard culture! How user participation transforms cultural production*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.

Scott, Suzanne. 2011. 'Revenge of the Fanboy: Convergence Culture and The Politics of Incorporation.' PhD diss., University of Southern California.

Wetherell Margaret, Taylor, Stephanie, and Yates, Simeon J., eds. 2001. *Discourse as Data: A Guide for Analysis.* London and CA: Sage.