2. Fan Membership: Traditional and Digital Fieldwork

Abstract
In the study of participatory cultures, reflection on one's own membership and role within the communities is needed. I propose that mixed-methods research is essential when doing research on fan communities. The combination of different types of qualitative data and close reading is essential. This study is structured as an ethnography – applied in a broad sense as the study of lived cultures – by using relevant methods such as participant observation, insider ethnography, and qualitative interviewing. The role of the researcher as a fan herself is discussed as well. Finally, I advance geek feminism as a methodological stance, one that effectively connects the endeavours of researchers and informants, a scholar and her subjects.

Keywords: Ethnography, participant observation, geek feminism, aca-fandom

Introduction
The study of fans requires a methodological framework that can account for its social, creative, and affective features. My cases address textual and visual consumption as a lived experience and are investigated through methods from both the social sciences and the humanities. This study is interpretive and therefore relies on various qualitative rather than quantitative methods.

My methodology can be summarized in two ways. First, ethnography allowed me to collect information by participating in fandom both online and off-line. In addition, I used both informal and in-depth interview techniques to shed light on what fandom meant to my informants and how they viewed their creative practices. I did, however, also include my own affective experiences of fandom. By incorporating my own voice, I felt that I could better signify what certain creative and playful practices are like and what a source text does to fans.
Second, I have combined these social methods with a medium-specific analysis of the fan texts themselves and their source texts. This combination of narrative analysis and ethnographic methods is innovative and necessary. Important claims have been made to combine close reading with other types of data, such as in-depth interviews (see also Gray, 2003). A good example of this two-fold method is the study by Joke Hermes (2004), who discovered, in her research on detective novels, that fans highlighted specific textual structures that she had interpreted differently (pp. 79-96). My credo is that a scholar’s method is related to the type of data that s/he wants to unearth and that one should not be afraid to use inventive methods to provide a valid overview.

In this short chapter, I provide a critical overview of the methodological underpinnings of this study. First, I address traditional fieldwork and the challenges in researching these communities while I am a fan myself. Then, I discuss this qualitative approach to online platforms and digital media. Finally, I end with ethical notes that are useful for future fan research.

Methods of Audience Studies

Over the past decades, we have seen an increase in the application of qualitative methods such as ethnography and interviewing in cultural studies. Historically, the analysis of texts, movies, and their audiences clearly belonged to the humanities and involved methods such as close reading and discourse analysis. The social sciences, in turn, examined lived cultures. In the 1980s, this trend slowly started to shift when cultural studies began to gain more ground. In their cultural studies, scholars such as Michel de Certeau (1984), Stuart Hall (1973), and John Fiske (1990) combined insights from different disciplines. At the same time, literary scholars realized that they could no longer make strict divisions between the text and the reader.

From this period, the feminist studies of Janice Radway (1987) and Ien Ang (1985), who combined reception studies with feminist theory and explained how texts were situated by their largely female audiences, especially stand out. While Radway studied a reading group of romance novels, Ang let fans of Dallas write letters to her and studied these letters to get a better understanding of the reception of this soap opera. These are only two examples of a wider shift in academic thinking about texts. More scholars started to realize that, as Gray stipulates, “the text must be seen as both a product of particular social, cultural, and historical conditions and as an agent in circulation” (2003, p. 14).
Paramount to these innovations, the study of the audience itself developed into a wider field. Today, the audience is not studied as a tool to understand the text and its dominant interpretations better, but it has instead become an autonomous field of inquiry. By audience studies, I refer to those studies that investigate the formation of cultural identities related to texts; these studies may come from various disciplines. Cultural studies, literary studies, and media studies became interested in audiences as a way to analyze how people react to and appropriate cultural products (Fiske, 1990; Jenkins, 1992). In short, we have gone from text to context, from art to lived cultures that can be studied in mutual dependency. Today, the reception of texts is even more pertinent because our identities are increasingly anchored in global and dispersed media networks. This study continues in the vein of these earlier works that have approached textual studies in relation to social sciences.

**Insider Ethnography**

Another important aspect of the method used is my positioning of myself as an insider in the field. I have already referred to my own experiences as a fan of media texts, and those lived experiences shaped this research in many ways. This ethnography relies on two approaches: participant observation and auto-ethnography. The first position means that I gathered data through an ethnographic stance as a researcher who not only observes but generates knowledge by participating in these communities (Spradley, 1980). Participatory fieldwork has been conducted in several online and off-line communities. I attended relevant field sites, such as fan conventions. Because digital methods have specific implications for transparency, data use, and ethnographic stances, my approach to online fields is detailed in a separate section. Comparable audience studies have been conducted on video game players (Pearce, 2009; Taylor, 2006) and Internet users (Markham, 1998).

I noted my experiences by applying Geertz’s (1973) “thick description”, in which the researcher makes extensive field notes that are not just observations, but also include interpretations of the actors involved and reflexive notes (pp. 5-6). My participant observation was also structured along different memberships. Adler & Alder (1987) defined two stances within participant observation, namely an “opportunistic” position and a “convert” one (pp. 67-84). The opportunistic researcher conducts a study on a community in which s/he is already active; the convert becomes an insider through the research. In practice, it is difficult to distinguish between just these two positions. My own research shifted between close contacts and
new fields. My cases were also sampled based on the idea of moving closer to some fields than to others. For my study of *Sherlock*, for instance, I drew data from communities to which I subscribed for my research but also included interviews with people whom I found through my own social networks.

Different stances can thus be adopted to represent one’s data and research topic. Influential scholars have suggested that ethnographers adopt modes of increased participation and revisit their data multiple times (Spradley, 1980, pp. 53-58). Others are weary of the emotional or psychological bias that such a social performance implies. Conquerhood (1985) laments ethnographers who act too cynically and distance themselves excessively from the material and who have a similar analytical bias to their optimistic counterpart. Ideally, scholars should not forge distance from or closeness to informants but should instead find a healthy middle ground between the two. The analysis can also be enriched through close interaction with the informants, which he calls “dialogical performance” (Conquerhood, 1985, p. 10).

In addition, this study deploys auto-ethnography to make sense of fan cultures. Auto-ethnography is a type of insider’s ethnography that reflects on the life history of the researcher and thereby provides tentative conclusions about certain historical, social, or artistic issues. Ethnography and qualitative methods in general have often been credited as being suitable ways to unravel actors’ lived experiences (Gray, 2003, p. 16). Notions of identity can be tackled especially well through this type of research because it can amply reflect on how the self is positioned in the world and shaped by discourses. This method has been applied to unearth what it means to belong to a certain community and how its social hierarchies function (Chang, 2008).

Using an insider approach to discuss the impact of popular culture, or consumption patterns at large, is nothing new. Holbrook (1995) uses auto-ethnography to address issues such as shopping and collecting. McLelland (2002) draws from his own experience as a homosexual to investigate gay life and dating in Japan. In research on fandom, adopting an insider’s approach has been positively valued. Henry Jenkins (1992), for instance, relied on his experiences as a *Star Trek* fan in his earliest book but made new contacts for his case study on *Beauty and the Beast*.

In this auto-ethnography, I reflect on my own engagement in fandom. I not only draw from prior knowledge and make this transparent but also reflect on my feelings when producing or consuming media texts. What I also consider is my development as a researcher within a certain community and the way my presence has given shape to a field in which I am personally invested. This method differs from participant observation, which I believe to be more socially situated and extroverted: whereas this method turns
outwards, auto-ethnography turns inwards and uses one’s own body as an instrument. What I learn, what I feel, and how I experience fandom myself is of the highest importance in this research. Especially in the ethnographic vignettes, this stance becomes explicit. I am an insider who does not hide her alliance to the subject but instead analyzes her own investment.

Auto-ethnographies also familiarize the reader with the field in an engaging way. In particular, these accounts help explain specific social contexts to an unfamiliar reader. This exploration and understanding is essential in the study of fans especially because many people do not actively engage in fan communities. Simultaneously, auto-ethnography can be a way to add nuance to theoretical stances, provide casual counter-examples to wider debates, and show what types of feelings and meanings are generated in relation to particular cultures. The benefits of the methodology are its focus on immediate, lived experiences as the researcher has perceived them and its attention to membership and personal learning curves.

However, it can sometimes be difficult to balance what experiences are representative for the research and how many biographical elements are appropriate in a close reading or social study. For instance, in his media analysis of the *Wizard of Oz* (1939), Alexander Doty (2000) admits that he had to weigh the relevance of his personal experiences carefully (p. 13). I solve this balance through methodological triangulation, as explained in the next section. I combine participant observation with interviews and online data as well as the close reading of source texts and fan practices. Rather than producing personal anecdotes, I test my own experiences and give them validity by combining them with other methods. I realize that my ethnography is highly situated and can only be generalized to a certain extent. I have undertaken this research with self-reflexive awareness and an understanding of the contextual limits of personal ethnography. I realize that this mode of analysis is deeply informed by my gender, sexuality, and race, as well as my ethical responsibilities as a human being.

“Aca-Fan” and “Geek Feminist”

The role of the researcher has been discussed in fan studies at large. Matt Hills provides a framework for the insider’s stance in *Fan Cultures* (2002a). He describes the figure of the “scholar-fan” or “aca-fan” as a scholar who also happens to be a fan or becomes a fan through the cases that s/he researches. This is in opposition to the “fan-scholar”, who is primarily a fan who applies scholarly methods to arrange and produce knowledge about the texts that
s/he loves. Since Jenkins published *Convergence Culture* in 2006 and started his blog *Confessions of an Aca-Fan* (2006-ongoing), the figure of the aca-fan has been widely popularized and has become a template for many fan scholars and media scholars at large.

The methodology that the aca-fan deploys is a strand of auto-ethnography or participant observation, depending on how the researcher uses his or her experiences and contacts. As in any type of insider’s ethnography, being an aca-fan allows for many levels of participation. In fan studies, however, the relation between the researcher and research object is often discussed without much finesse. In *Understanding Fandom* (2013), Mark Duffett suggests: “I would prefer scholars to reach a place where the issue is dropped and we just take it for granted that anyone – fan or not – can potentially write with insight about fandom if they do so with respect” (p. 275). He raises the idea of a “fan-positive researcher” (id.). While this is a more inclusive idea of fan scholarship, it is not a real solution to the problem. As a field, fan studies can benefit from more nuanced discussions on the role of fan identity in relation to the research object and process. As I shall explain in this section, self-reflexivity and transparency would improve the field.

As contributors to an emerging field, fan scholars often have to make their position clear. The aca-fan is under more pressure than other scholars. Critics fear that scholars who are fans of their research object run the risk of glorifying it. Notably, Ian Bogost (2010) stirred a methodological debate about the strength of the aca-fan model:

> Embracing aca-fandom is a bad idea. Not because it’s immoral or crude, but because it’s too great a temptation. Those of us who make an enviable living being champions of media, particularly popular media, must also remain dissatisfied with them. We ought to challenge not only ourselves, our colleagues, and our students – but also the public and the creators of our chosen media. We ought not to be satisfied.

Such a claim has little to do with the reality of doing ethnographic research. Being an insider comes with advantages. During my research, for instance, being an insider meant that I could avoid easy mistakes because I was knowledgeable about fan cultures. Informants not only knew that they could trust me, but they also often approached me directly or shared my work. Even if they research fan communities around the texts that they love, doing so does not imply that they already know the fans, the relevant platforms, and situations. Fandom consists of an array of sites and communities, both
online and off-line. Academic fans can subscribe to new communities of the same fandom to get a different perspective and new contacts.

The criticism of ethnography, however, has less to do with opportunism and more to do with an interpretive bias. Some scholars fear that media ethnographers are too overwhelmed by their research topic – a problem that exceeds fan studies and is relevant to many other types of cultural studies. Scholars of media and literature are always first and foremost audience members and must not be read as privileged. They are inherently involved with their research topic. Even in the hard sciences, we cannot remove affect from the equation. Most scholars grow to care about the topics that they research as well as their informants. Every qualitative method balances between intimacy and distance. This is a challenge in all disciplines. An ethnographer in Ghana may face similar problems negotiating the social and affective relationships with informants as a fan scholar. At the other end of the spectrum are those who purposefully position themselves close to their informants. Scholars of sexuality and intimacy have often addressed the need to reflect even more on feelings regarding their informants (McLelland, 2002).

Ethnographic criticism can only be countered with self-reflexivity. As Joke Hermes (2005) writes, "Interpretive ethnography questions the position and authority of the researcher her or himself, and urges her or him to be self-reflective to a much higher degree than mainstream research would ask for" (pp. 146-147). Being explicit about your position as an insider offers opportunities to be trustworthy, to position yourself in the field, and to be reflexive. As a reflexive practice, ethnography allows the scholar to move closer at times and to be more distant at others. Ethnography means being surprised by the field, which also requires one to stand back, marvel, and experience situations anew when possible. The artistic guide How to Be an Explorer of the World (Smith, 2008), with its highly visual exercises in collecting and documenting the everyday in new ways, helped me develop my sense of wonderment.

Although I have defended the concept of insider ethnography until now, I must admit that the aca-fan model also has its downsides. Its strength is that it emphasizes fan loyalties, but this stance is too narrow to describe my activity and engagement with the source texts. That is to say, I am certainly not a fan of all of my cases and am even highly critical of some of the series that I investigated. Moreover, the aca-fan model does not include the dimension of social awareness and activism within media cultures. Throughout the conduct of this research, I engaged deeply with issues of representation in media culture. I often felt that my position as an adolescent female fan informed my opinions more than my affect towards certain genres of fiction.
Therefore, I feel that it is more accurate to describe my viewpoint as aligned with “geek feminism”, which promotes women’s critical online activity and their engagement with media technologies. Linguist Bucholtz (2002) coined the term in her studies on female computer users to outline a theoretical and socially engaged viewpoint informed by the legacy of feminism while retaining geek identity: “Geek feminism, like all political affiliations and identities, is not a category with which to classify individuals but a stance that shapes and is shaped by social practice” (Bucholtz, 2002, p. 282). Bloggers have been quick to pick up the term and developed the platform *Geek Feminism*, founded in 2009. This blog articulates female geek identity and critically assesses media representations and user cultures. More than ever, the term “geek” refers to a positive alignment with popular culture rather than a pejorative one. Geek connotes enthusiasts and hobbyists and even suggests a particular life style that revolves around Internet or gaming capital. Merchandise lines from Hot Topic and ThinkGeek increasingly cater to “geek girls” as well. Geek is becoming a female, marketable identity but also one that is increasingly associated with a critical subculture.

I believe that geek feminism, rather than aca-fandom, accurately captures my independent critical perspective that unites my roles as a fan and scholar. Similar to my informants, I invest in resistive creativity, emancipatory media representations, and free culture. I do not shy away from progressive discussions and interventions with my subjects. As an anime fan and science-fiction enthusiast, I am well aware of the heteronormative context of media culture and the social protocols within fandom. I engage in many creative fan practices myself and invest in critical approaches to popular culture. To me, geek feminism entails a critical pursuit of media content and its social wealth, as well as an agenda for social change.

**Online Ethnography**

This ethnography is not only characterized by its insider views, but also by its combination of online and off-line data. Online spaces have specific implications for participation which require further unpacking. Online ethnographies such as my own have been explored under the headers of “virtual ethnography” (Hine, 2000), “netnography” (Kozinets, 2010), or “cyberethnography” (Ward, 1999). Still, every concept has its own nuances and implications. I use the more neural term “online ethnography” because I have drawn insights from all of these methods and do not want to enter ontological debates about the virtuality of the Internet. More importantly,
I do not want to make online ethnography into something innately different from traditional ethnography. Although some would highlight the differences between Internet spaces and traditional fields, I also want to be clear about the similarities. Annette Markham (1998) shows that, in online contexts, the body of the researcher facilitates social experiences. The Internet cannot easily be separated from one's habits or home. Like any other ethnographic undertaking, it involves journeying towards a field and taking notes on it. Studying the web is a journey with real consequences for the researcher.

Moreover, online ethnography addresses sites that are mediated and technological constructs. I have used studies on science and technology to theorize how Internet use functions in practice. Technologies do not produce certain effects but are given meaning by the social groups that operate them. Although common user patterns may arise, there is great leeway in how we understand these technologies and what types of culture can form around them. Technology is not a neutral tool but is always given meaning by the users themselves. The Internet is but one example of how people have constructed social and cultural patterns around a new technology.

Online platforms are clearly mediated spaces that can best be understood in combination with other qualitative methods and off-line spaces. These spaces cannot be divided easily, though some methodologies describe the Internet as a separate space. As Kozinets (2010) writes, “The virtual intended to signal an effort that is necessarily partial and inauthentic because it only focuses on the online aspect of the social experience, rather than the entire experience” (p. 5). The Internet is as much its own culture as it is part of other traditional cultures. To understand this new technology, we must look at actual user practices. As an online ethnographer, it is my job to understand online culture as part of culture as a whole: a lived and shared experience, rather than a textual or mediated experience.

Membership in digital communities bears many resemblances to its traditional counterparts. The question of membership, for instance, is an important one in both fields and has frequently been discussed in the context of online environments. In her study on multiplayer virtual worlds, Annette Markham (1998) has shown that individual users valued the role of such communities differently. While some informants clearly considered these spaces to be an enrichment of their social lives, others had more reservations and discussed them as a form of entertainment. As in traditional communities, members may develop important social relationships in these communities depending on the frequency of their participation and how well they are embedded within its social structures.
Online communities also pose specific challenges for the researcher. First, they allow for more modes of interacting with the field. Kozinets (2010) describes the scholar’s development in the field from an outsider to an insider that can increasingly participate by not only posting comments, but also engaging in feedback processes and projects and even taking up leadership roles (pp. 74-95). In my research, I experimented with these levels of participation and closeness to one’s informants. This choice was related not only to the questions that I wanted to pose, but also to the structures of these communities. Sites such as YouTube or DeviantArt function less as discussion forums and more as portfolios where many users host their work. Here, getting a large overview is almost impossible, and scholars are forced to “lurk” at a site, i.e., observe a community without others being aware of his/her presence (Kozinets, 2010, p. 35). Online, it is possible to be invisible, which makes an enormous methodological difference. Although I tried to stay visible, meaningful interaction was not always possible because, on larger sites with networking features, discussions tend to take place on people’s profiles or in response to artworks or videos.

Second, online data can be recorded very differently than in traditional fields. I stored a great deal of data by pasting them in Word documents, taking daily screenshots, and scribbling notes with interpretations. These notes fundamentally differed from my traditional field notes, which were more personal and involved fewer quotations. Moreover, my traditional notes were mediated at least twice as I initially penned down thoughts in the field and then substantiated them at home – a process during which I was already interpreting their meaning. Many contemporary scholars also use data mining or other tools to get a larger overview of relevant statistics and issues. In my case, such methods did not contribute to the research because the online communities were relatively small and the insights that I gained were always triangulated with other qualitative data.

Third, online research is very delicate in terms of presence because the researcher is not always present as a researcher or leaves traces as one. This raises ethical questions that often scare young researchers such as myself. Luckily, many rules about online research have been written down. The Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) formulated guidelines to preserve quality and integrity of online research (Ess & Association of Internet Researchers, 2002). These carefully phrased recommendations bring to mind Markham and Nancy Baym (2009)’s warrant that research in online environments should not be rule-driven as “the ethical treatment of human subjects is inductive and context-sensitive” (p. xviii).
By speaking to my informants and keeping them posted, I tried to treat my informants respectfully and make my research as accessible to them as possible. To be sure that people knew I cited them, I always contacted informants. However, I met similar challenges in my traditional ethnography and am not eager to see these as new online problems. Rather, these challenges are integral to any type of research design that engages with human subjects and cultures; however, there are a few ethical considerations specific to fandom that I would still like to share.

**Ethical Guidelines**

The book has been written in a constant dialogue with the communities that I investigated. Throughout this project, I tried to be clear about my membership in both fan communities and academia. I let myself be surprised by new situations and encounters. In addition, I asked for permission to cite fan texts and comments, in line with the policies of the fan research organization *Organization of Transformative Works*. Their rules on the quotation and treatment of human subjects also deeply encouraged me to stay in touch with my online informants. Keeping these users informed without seeing them on a regular basis off-line proved to be a daunting challenge, as some informants left the Internet spaces that we shared.

Moreover, in terms of time, I could not participate in some fan spaces as much as I would have liked. This ethos also pressed me to think about how deeply I wanted to engage with certain fan sites and whether announcing myself there was at all possible. I studied various online communities with different stances. When I studied online communities in detail, I made it a rule of thumb to contact moderators and users to announce myself as a researcher. However, many sites also had an exploratory function in my research as a space in which I could make my primary observations. In such cases, I was more liberal with how I presented my research and data collection.

To facilitate an open dialogue, I kept my close informants updated on the progress of the book and the study. This allowed me to generate interest in my research as well as feedback. I created a blog to encourage more transparency in this process and sent relevant chapter drafts to fans. I viewed this collective process as a valuable one and hope that I may explore it further in the future. As Celia Pearce (2009) notes, ethnography is a social construct that influences the group as much as the researcher, who should not pose as an authority but should be on equal level with the others (pp. 64-65). This was my rule of thumb throughout the study.
Conclusion

Thus, *Productive Fandom* has a unique methodology in several ways. First, many of the chapters rely on traditional data such as in-depth interviews and participant observation. Within fan and audience studies, these methods have moved to the background in favor of online methods and investigations of digital culture. My own hybrid method aims to capture fandom as a rich and social space of production. The combination of digital and traditional fieldwork is an important characteristic of this book. While online data reveals patterns in fan interpretation and creativity, the off-line space may generate more insights in fan cultures as they are lived and felt. The off-line space can also be used in addition to online findings in a mixed method approach. I believe that such a combination of fields and approaches is suitable for future fan studies. While research on fans tends to demarcate online spaces or communities, fandom is a dynamic phenomenon and its communities are heterogeneous and diverse. This combination of lived and mediated insights can effectively capture the experience of fandom, which is never isolated, but always embedded in different social contexts.