

Information Seeking Behavior in the Fan Fiction Community

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INFO200 – Information Communities

December 2, 2018

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### Abstract:

The fan fiction community is the—largely online—community which is engaged in the production, distribution, and consumption of fan fiction, or fan-created writing based off of already extant media. This essay aims to examine the information seeking behavior of the members of this community, including both readers and writers of fan fiction, and the role and prevalence of prosumers, community members who fill both roles. By examining the existing research into the community, including through the theoretical models of serious leisure, the relationship between the fan fiction community and original content creators, the community as a place for the practice and pursuit of reading and writing, the role of ‘lurkers’ or non-participatory community members, the role of fan fiction as a conduit for information about sex, gender, and sexuality, the legal issues surrounding the community and the avenues taken to protect it, and the sources which community members themselves use to find and exchange information this essay traces the various forms and behaviors which community members exhibit and which shape the fan fiction community.

Introduction:

The fan fiction community is, broadly speaking, the community of written content creators and consumers which is formed of fans of all types of media, brought under the umbrella of broader ‘fanworks’ community. This broader community can also include the creators and consumers of other artistic mediums, including visual art and cosplay, and is itself a subset of the all-encompassing fan community. But, for the purposes of this essay, the focus will be kept on the fan fiction community—the creators, consumers, and prosumers of written ‘fanworks’.

These ‘fanworks’—fan fiction, or prose works, fan poetry, and other forms of written work all collectively to be referred to as fan fiction from here on—are “a subset, or type, of self-published cultural product” (Hill & Pecoskie, 843), which are based on established media—books, movies, television shows, etc. Originally these products were physical—print zines and newsletters—and their circulation limited, but the growth of the internet and “the migration of these communities to the online medium over the last 20 years has created an explosion of content and readership for the fanfiction community” (Hill & Pecoskie, 843). These works, although based off of copyrighted content, are considered ‘transformative’ by members of the community—that is, in some way, commenting on, critiquing, or otherwise modifying the original work—and is a more interactive form of fan culture that allows for social interaction and knowledge exchange between community members (Olin-Scheller & Wikström, 41).

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The members of this community can be classed as creators, consumers, and prosumers. This last group is thought to form the majority of active community participants, and describes those members who both create and consume content within the community. The information seeking behavior of all of these subsections of the community are of interest to LIS scholars for a multitude of reasons, although there is currently still somewhat of a dearth of attention on the subject from researchers in the field (Hill & Pecoskie, 844; Price & Robinson, 649). However, the range of work which is available—some of which explicitly sets out to examine the information seeking behavior of the community but the majority of which do not—provides a considerable body of work from which to draw when investigating the fanfiction community.

The study of the information seeking behavior of the fan fiction community is relevant because it offers a window into the information needs and other behaviors of the various (often minority, often intersecting) groups that comprise the majority of the community—women, young adults, LGBTQ+ individuals, etc. As such, relevant scholarship can be found in publications focusing on topics ranging from library and information science, to literature and culture, to digital media, to gender and sexuality studies. Given the broad range of sources which contain studies of the fan fiction community's information seeking behavior, this paper will focus on five main aspect of the fan fiction community from which relevant information regarding the information behavior of the community can be drawn: information seeking behavior in the fanfiction community as examined through the lens of serious leisure (one of the areas in which some LIS specific work has been done in regards to the community), the fan fiction community and authors (or other original content creators), the relationship of community and the activity of reading and writing fan fiction, the study of fanfiction as a method of

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information transmission regarding sex, gender, and sexuality, and the relationship of fan fiction and the law. These topics provide a thorough overview of the behaviors and interests of the community, in regards to the work that has been done to study it and as to why it still holds considerable interest to scholars.

### Literature Review:

The fan fiction community has been studied by scholars from a multitude of fields and to a variety of ends. In the LIS field, the theory of serious leisure has been used significantly to examine the fanfiction community. The idea of serious leisure can be applied to both the readers and writers of fanfiction as both groups “are based upon information acquisition and coalesce[] as information-rich social worlds” (Hartel, Cox, & Griffin, 3) which Jenna Hartel argues is the sort of group which is of interest to information scientists.

Outside of the fan-specific areas of the fan fiction community, the spaces of interaction between fans and original content creators is another area which has been studied. R. Lyle Skains argues that the growth of online communities has offered content creators a new medium in which creators and fans can interact. He argues that creator-backed sites and content serve as a bridge between official and fan networks, and as an “intermediary stage” between the original work and the full-blown fan community (Skains, 106-109).

The fan fiction community also serves as a place for writers to practice and hone their craft. The structure of the community provides multiple information sources, where “[f]ans often act as mentors to new fans, by recommending resources, sharing historical aspects of canon texts and fanworks, and advising on creative writing (beta reading)” (Price & Robinson, 655).

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Christina Olin-Scheller and Patrik Wikström's study of 'literary prosumers' found that fan-writers are able to actively improve their creative skillset both inside and outside of fandom spaces (Olin-Scheller & Wikström, 50-51).

The role of 'lurkers' or non-active participants in fan fiction has not been satisfactorily researched. The topic has been cursorily examined by Sarah Kate Merry and Anoush Simon in their examination of the blogging site LiveJournal, which looks at the motivations and satisfaction levels of 'lurker' community members, as well as perceptions of them (Merry & Simon, 242). However, further research is still needed to gain a better understanding of this portion of the community.

One last area in which the information seeking behavior of the fan fiction community has been studied is in regards to the relationship between fan fiction and sex, gender, and sexuality. These issues can be explored through fan fiction in ways which "offers young people the opportunity not simply to passively absorb queer-positive (and adult-approved) messages, but to actively engage with a supportive artistic community as readers, writers, and critics" (Tosenberger, 190). Scholarship in this area looks at how community members, especially young people, search for and interact with the often-taboo subject matter they have the freedom to explore through their fiction.

Despite the wide range of information available regarding the fan fiction community, there are still many gaps in the literature. The availability of LIS specific research is minimal—Price and Robinson acknowledge that "investigation of fan information behaviour has been relatively neglected within LIS" (Price & Robinson, 649) and Hill and Pecoskie state much the

same. Another area which is lacking, as previously mentioned, is in the area of ‘lurkers’, or non-active community members. The information seeking behavior of these community members has been little-studied, and further investigation could shed light on their behavior and on their influence on the community as a whole. Additionally, much of the research being done on the community focuses on young people, and while teens and young adults do make up a considerable portion of the community, they do not comprise its entirety. While it is of course valuable to discuss young people in the fan fiction community, the role of older community members should not be left out, since these members play an important role in establishing and maintaining community standards and traditions, passing along advice and information, and helping new members learn to navigate the community. In viewing the fan fiction community as a young person’s community, the literature ignores the community members that help construct and maintain the systems along which community information flows.

### Methodology:

The information in this paper was gathered through two primary methods. The first, and most common, method used was the search of multiple academic databases to locate the range of literature which has been produced on the community. Given the wide range of fields and specialties which the articles authors work in, and the range of subjects which the journals they were originally published in, significant use was made of a wide range of databases and search methods, including JSTOR, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. The aim of this broad approach was to attempt to locate the maximum possible number of relevant articles, even if neither the author nor the original publication was working in or related to the LIS field. This

allowed this essay's author to draw from a range of work which may not have been available to her if the search methods were restricted to LIS sources or articles with purely LIS goals.

The second source of information was the websites and forums used and built by the fan fiction community to find and share their work, and to communicate with others in the community. These sites, particularly the fan fiction hosting websites Archive of Our Own (AO3) and FanFiction.net and the blogging sites LiveJournal and tumblr, provided the author with firsthand examples of how members of the community interact and the sort of information they share and search for. While none of this research was comprehensive enough to include specific examples of in this paper, it was valuable to the author to familiarize herself with the forums utilized by the community, and discussed in the scholarly literature. It was also useful for the author in researching aspects of the community not covered in the scholarly literature—in particular, the website AO3 has grown in popularity and influence within the fan fiction community, but there is a gap in scholarly sources surrounding it due to its relatively recent appearance compared to other sites. The information provided in the site's informational literature assisted in filling in some of these gaps.

### Discussion:

The fan fiction community is a diverse and active one, and its members engage in a wide variety of information seeking behaviors both directly related to the community itself—searching for works or recommendations of what to read, looking for writing advice—and related to those issues which the community allows them to explore, such as issues of gender and sexuality. While the information seeking behaviors of the community have not been extensively studied by

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LIS scholars, there has been some work done, especially in regards to the community in relation to the theory of serious leisure. There are multiple areas which LIS professionals may find of interest regarding the community's information needs, as the relationship between the fan fiction community and library services has the opportunity for a solid foundation, if one does not already exist. Many of the issues which are of interest to the community—an invested relationship with multiple forms of media, an interest in writing and editing skills, the exploration of sex, gender, and sexuality, the interest in the legal standing and justifications for fan fiction—all align with many established library programs and practices. By learning more about the information needs and behaviors of the fan fiction community, LIS professionals have the opportunity to better target their services toward a portion of the population they serve who may not be reached by existing methods, particularly young people.

In their investigation of information behavior of fans and fan communities, Ludi Price and Lyn Robinson draw the conclusion that “[f]ans are practitioners par excellence in new forms of consumption and production”, creating “information hubs and archives, sharing hints and tips, and even becoming information gatekeepers themselves” (Price & Robinson, 655). These time-consuming, involved, and detail-oriented aspects of the fan fiction community all underscore the relevance of the serious leisure theory to the study of this community. As shown in Price and Robinson's survey and in other examinations of the community including one by Heather Hill and Jen J.L. Pecoskie, “the fanfiction community participates in SL-based information- and library related activities. These activities are integral and have been deliberately developed leading to practices that guide the community” (Hill & Pecoskie, 852).

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The dedication to both the craft of writing and the media they write about displays itself in the many areas which members of the fan fiction community seek information to better create and consume fan media. This includes the relationship to the original texts which fan fiction is based off of, and which fan fiction authors often study in meticulous detail both for issues of plot and setting and to “focus on linguistic features of texts, with a view to informing their own technique” (Jessop, 32). Outside of source texts, fans search on creator sanctioned official websites, where they can find new ‘canon’ information about their favorite series, learn about upcoming new releases or events, and interact with other fans (Skains, 106-109). This aspect of the information needs of the fan fiction community is of particular interest to LIS professionals, since the vast majority of the source texts fan fiction is based off of are books, movies, and television shows—all media which libraries are focused on providing. The specific interests and information needs regarding media within the fan fiction community are relevant to LIS professionals since members of the fan fiction community are invested consumers of their chosen media and LIS professionals aim to help provide access to that media.

By the nature of the fan fiction community—a community that produces and consumes literary works—the information needs of the community includes information on writing, editing, and distributing written fan content. As writers in the community seek to learn and improve their own fan fiction, the structure of the community provides multiple information sources where mentorship, advice, and feedback are passed between community members (Price & Robinson, 655). In examining the phenomenon of ‘literary prosumers’ Christina Olin-Scheller and Patrik Wikström look at how the fan fiction community invests considerable time and effort in creating and consuming literary works. Through, they found that “the ability to write and

appreciate good stories is something that can be taught and something you learn” (Olin-Scheller & Wikström, 48) through the combined practices of imitation—imitating both the style of the original work and other fan writers—and feedback from readers and fellow authors (Olin-Scheller & Wikström, 50-51). Community services such as writing workshops and feedback roundtables are already an established part of many libraries’ programming calendars, and a knowledge of the fan fiction community and its information needs regarding writing and editing may help attract participants who may not otherwise be inclined to attend.

An issue that is often explored through fan fiction and within the fan fiction community—although is not explicitly an aspect of fan fiction itself the way editing or source media are—is that of sex, gender, and sexuality. Fan fiction offers its readers and writers the opportunity to explore issues of sex, gender, and sexuality in a forum which they themselves control, and since “negotiating online erotic exchanges can be an important learning experience as part of the project of developing a healthy sexual identity” this is especially important since these topics may not be discussed in their off-line communities (McLelland, 240; Tosenberger, 202). In particular, the genre of ‘slash’ fiction, or stories which depict homoerotic romance, plays a significant role in the fan fiction community and in offering its members a venue to learn about and explore their sexuality (Tosenberger, 186). Given the highly policed and politicized nature of (particularly adolescent) sexuality, research has found that for many young readers, “the lack of books about homosexual teenagers whose relationships are accepted as normal and the opportunity to explore varying sexualities as part of the appeal of slash” (Duggan, 44). Issues of sex, gender, and sexuality—especially when these issues involve LGBTQ+ sex, gender, and sexuality—are regrettably still often highly politicized and fraught with conflict. These tensions

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underscore why many individuals, particularly young people, in the fan fiction community turn to that community for information on these subjects. But libraries are also supposed to be safe and unbiased sources of information—according to the ALA’s code of ethics libraries are to “provide . . . accurate, unbiased . . . responses to all requests” and librarians should “protect each library user's right to privacy and confidentiality with respect to information sought or received and resources consulted” (Professional Ethics). By investigating the role of issues of sex, gender and sexuality in the fan fiction community, LIS professionals can gather a greater understanding of how to provide information on these issues to their users.

The legal issues surrounding fan fiction, particularly those surrounding copyright and fair use, are central to much of the community and help to demonstrate the literacy and skills in information seeking within the community. Issues of copyright and fair use have their roots in the relationship between the community and the creators and copyright holders of the original works fan fiction is based on. On one end of the fan fiction-copyright holder relationship spectrum are the copyright holders who oppose and actively work against the creation of fan fiction of their works. One of the most famous of these, the novelist Anne Rice, is known within the fan fiction community for sending cease-and-desist letters to fan fiction authors and the online archives that host their works, and threatening to sue (Lipton, 425; Peaslee, 200-201). Other copyright holders choose to “forbid only select fan fiction, such as homosexual depictions of heterosexual characters, commercial fan fiction, or fan fiction that strictly copies large portions of works” (Peaslee, 201). In defense against these legal threats—which, although unlikely, are an ever-present concern—the fan fiction community has gained significant legal knowledge in its own defense. Particularly regarding the fair use clauses of copyright law,

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“which legally allows for the appropriation of copyrighted material for the purpose of creating a new, transformative work” (Peaslee, 2003), the fan fiction community has set fair use to serve as the bedrock of the legal defense for fan fiction’s existence. The need for fan writers to gain legal knowledge and form their own legal defense has also resulted in the formation of more centralized fan fiction organizations, in the form of The Organization for Transformative Works (parent to AO3). The Organization lobbies for the recognition of fan fiction and other fan works as legitimate creative products. It also opposes, in court, attempts to bring legal action against fan fiction creators or any attempts for any individual to claim ownership of fandom (Organization for Transformative Works). Many libraries already offer a range of legal and information services to their communities, and an understanding of the legal needs of the fan fiction community would assist LIS professionals in better understanding the legal needs of the community.

### Conclusion:

The fan fiction community is one which has a range of diverse information needs, and which is proactive and skilled at fulfilling them. With the vast resources of the internet, members of the fan fiction community have the opportunity to contribute to the

growing body of fan-related knowledge. Photocopied fanzines [can] migrate online and gain a wider readership; fans [can] exchange the latest news on dedicated Usenet and Listserv boards and set up their own personal sites, where they [can] showcase their own fan-related work, particularly stories and artwork (Price & Robinson, 651).

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Furthermore, the combination of the internet and the fan fiction community allows for community members to explore issues that may not be directly relevant to either the fan or writing aspects of the community, such as those of sex, gender, and sexuality. The anonymity and creative freedom which the fan fiction community provides allows community members to explore these issues in a forum which is generally more open than many of their real-life communities.

Since the fan fiction community is, for the most part, an online community, LIS professionals have not necessarily found their way to intentionally providing resources to the community. But the community is one which has many interests and aims which align well with the goals of many library projects, and with some thought and attention the ties between library programming and the fan fiction community can be strengthened. With the emphasis on writing and editing that the fan fiction community has, library programs which offer assistance in these areas and focus on fan fiction are a natural fit both to draw in fan fiction community members and to encourage new writers. Programing which provides information on the subject of sex, gender, and sexuality also fits in with a significant need of the fan fiction community, as well as the community at large. By promoting programs that benefit the fan fiction community, libraries also promote literacy, computer literacy, diversity, and tolerance, since all of these are both underscored by the demonstrated information needs of the community and align with the ethical stance of the ALA.

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