Beyond antifandom: Cheerleading, textual hate and new media ethics

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Abstract
Drawing on a case study involving mediated vitriol targeting cheerleaders, this article identifies two potentially problematic aspects of the media studies concept of antifandom. First, it critiques the classification of vitriolic texts produced by antifans as belonging primarily to the field of audiences and reception. It argues that this move risks sidelining the fact that antifan discourse also constitutes a set of influential texts authored by a group of powerful textual producers. Second, it questions the designation of the human targets of antifandom as texts. This risks underplaying the ethical dimensions of the en masse articulation of vitriol towards human targets.

Keywords
antifandom, cheerleading, e-bile, ethics, fandom, hate speech, internet, new media, reception studies, textual analysis

Submerged victims
Cheerleading is one of those things much of society loves to hate. Representations of this American-born sport and its mostly youthful female practitioners saturate popular culture, the news media, and pornography. These representations are frequently accompanied by vitriolic – and often sexualised – discourse framing cheerleaders as any combination of ‘frivulous, talentless, inane, vain, trashy, promiscuous, exhibitionist, overly commodified agents of Americanisation and disruptive to key feminist, sporting and religious ideals’ (Tom, 2010: 53). We can see, therefore, that an energetic fixation

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with cheerleaders exists alongside the strident insistence that cheerleaders are unworthy of any attention at all. The psychological and aetiological motivational dimensions associated with these dynamics of pleasurable derision and disavowal (as well as the fact that this ‘negatively charged’ reception does not necessarily involve any ‘reading’ of or exposure to the cheerleading ‘texts’ purportedly under critique) would suggest that Jonathan Gray’s concept of antifandom would be well suited as an analytical lens.

Gray proposes the term ‘antifans’ to describe those audience members who strongly dislike a given text, genre, or personality, yet who may deliberately seek out these objects of detestation ‘precisely to raise their blood pressure’ (2003: 70). His stated intention is to extend the ‘dominant’, ‘oppositional’, and ‘negotiated’ reader positions proposed by Stuart Hall (2005), partly in recognition of the fact that there exists a sector of media audiences which may articulate strong negative views about certain films and television programs without having suffered the unpleasantness of ever having watched them. (Martin Barker et al. [2001: 85] have referred to similar audience types elsewhere as ‘Refusers’.) Gray’s work provided a critical intervention in the domain of reception research at a time when fans enjoyed great scholarly visibility while antifans and non-fans were not even recognised, let alone rigorously theorised. Now, however, antifandom constitutes a vibrant scholarly field in its own right – one with its own set of received wisdoms and assumptions that may be in need of ‘reinvigoration’. The rapidly changing nature of the media landscape also makes it timely to revisit and recalibrate this important concept. Particularly significant developments in this respect include: the extraordinary rise of user-producer activity in new media environments; the rapid increase in the celebritisation of ‘ordinary’ people; and the recent proliferation of aggressive – particularly sexually aggressive – ‘e-bile’ online (Jane, 2012b).

The case study of vitriolic discourse targeting cheerleaders offers two avenues for re-thinking the notion of antifandom as it currently stands. The first of these relates to the risk that vitriolic texts produced by antifans are classified as belonging first and foremost to the field of audiences and reception. Gray’s (2003, 2005) ground-breaking work in this area is certainly situated squarely within the domains of audience research and reception studies. When he refers to television viewers as ‘consumers’, to texts being ‘consumed’, and to these practices as constituting ‘consumption’, it is clear that he regards these consumers and consumption practices as ‘active’ rather than ‘passive’. Yet he figures this activity primarily in terms of decoding, of meaning-making rather than textual production. While antifan activity is described as being organised (Gray, 2003: 71), a type of performance (2005: 845), and as involving ‘textualized output’ (2005: 847), for the most part the texts produced by antifans are embedded into the broad concept of textuality rather than being explicitly considered as contenders for ‘production-end analysis’. Even in his article about Television Without Pity (TWoP) – a website entirely authored by antifans – Gray describes this material as comprising ‘antifan interaction with the television text’ (2005: 840, my emphasis). Once again, while his unpacking of these interactions offers tremendously rich and textured insights, overall antifan activity seems to be implicitly located in the ‘response’ stage in a ‘call and response’ model of communication.

Such models have obviously lost relevance given the radical collapse of whatever may have remained of earlier notions of producer/consumer, sender/receiver, text/
audience binaries. With regards to user-led content production online, Axel Bruns (2013) has coined the term ‘produser’ as part of his argument that the shift towards user-led forms of collaborative content creation in networked communities means ‘the role of consumer and even that of end user have long disappeared, and the distinctions between producers and users of content have faded into comparative insignificance’. Within antifan studies, it may be taken as a given that antifans’ increasingly organised and obstreperous articulations of displeasure – especially those self-published online – are something more than simply audience reception activity. My case, however, is that exploring what this ‘something’ might be – and articulating these findings explicitly – is an important foundational step in building an ethics of antifandom because it underlines the fact that antifan activity constitutes another critical set of media texts authored by yet more media producers, with all the power that media authors and their texts can wield. Conceptualising the voices of antifans solely or primarily through an audienceships prism, in contrast, risks downplaying the force potentially wielded by antifan texts, as well as underestimating the agency and power possessed by their creators.

The second departure point for re-thinking Gray’s model of antifandom relates to his readiness to classify the human targets of antifan hostility as texts. Gray argues, for instance, that Omarosa Manigault, a controversial contestant on the reality television program The Apprentice, ‘became her own text and an odious moral text to many’ (2005: 849). Theoretically, of course, people can and do circulate as texts (especially if this theory happens to be occurring within the disciplines of media and cultural studies). In Textual Analysis – A Beginner’s Guide, for example, Alan McKee describes a text as anything ‘we make meaning from’, writing that ‘whenever we produce an interpretation of something’s meaning – a book, television programme, film, magazine, T-shirt or kilt, piece of furniture or ornament – we treat it as a text’ (2003: 4). If we are going to treat living humans or groups of living humans as texts, however, ethical questions arise about the way in which we conduct and express our analysis. The fact that human texts are liable to suffer from the circulation of vitriolic antifan discourse in a way that inanimate texts such as films or kilts do not, assists us in beginning to appreciate the ramifications of what Gray describes briefly as antifandom’s ‘darker dimensions’ (2005: 852). After all, when disgust and hate are expressed about a person or group of people outside of media contexts (especially when this disgust or hate is based on a priori prejudices), it is usually known by other terms. ‘Sexism’, ‘racism’, ‘homophobia’, and ‘hate speech’ are a few that come to mind.

In his seminal essays on antifandom, ‘New audiences, new textualities: anti-fans and non-fans’ (2003), and ‘Antifandom and the moral text: Television Without Pity and textual dislike’ (2005), Gray’s concerns are primarily for the well-being of an academic discipline in that the problems he identifies and the solutions he proposes are methodological, conceptual, and theoretical in nature. He expressly states, for instance, that he wishes: to ‘shed further light on the nature of televisual textuality and on the role of media talk and intertextuality in forming it’ (2003: 64); and to re-evaluate ‘existing assumptions of textual ontology and of audience behavior and consumption’ (2005: 840). This was certainly a useful starting point for interrogating and advancing what was then the nascent domain of fan research. Ultimately, however, it is an approach that risks overlooking the well-being of the human subjects that constitute or are intimately
connected with those media texts which are the target of antifan activities. There is an interesting parallel here with Gray’s own concern for the unseen casualties of particular theoretical approaches. He warns, for instance, against under-studying and under-estimating textual hatred (2005: 841), and says he wishes to shed light on those ‘important issues, audiences and textualities … hiding in [the] shadow’ of fan studies because one of the key “‘submerged victims” of fan research has been a full understanding of textuality … and of the broad variety of interactions that occur between text and audience’ (2003: 68, 65). By the same token, my aim in this article is to shed light on those important issues, audiences, and textualities hiding in the shadow of antifan studies; that is, the ethical dimensions of mediated articulations of vitriol and hatred. Like Gray, my concern is for the ‘submerged victims’ of a conceptual orthodoxy: in this instance, those non-fictitious humans and groups of humans who are targeted by antifans yet who may be conceptualised in antifan scholarship principally as texts. My aim is to help extend the necessarily continuing conversation about the complex (and increasingly inseparable) relationships between media production and consumption, and the potential ramifications of the increasing volumes of mediated vitriol which are circulating in the cybersphere. My intention is not to criticise Gray but to use his extremely textured account of audience sense-making activities as a basis for developing an equally textured account of antifan produsage activities.

This article will begin with a brief discussion of the history and contemporary practice of cheerleading, before moving on to a survey of the vitriol directed at cheerleading and cheerleaders. It will include a brief overview of some possible explanations for this textual antagonism, before exploring the potential and limitations of Gray’s ideas about antifandom in unpacking the nature, function, significance, and ramifications of such discourse in relation to anti-cheerleading discourse, as well as in relation to online vitriol more broadly. Its overall conclusion is that the concept of antifandom should be reconsidered in light of the fact that antifan activity is far from an ethically neutral mode of discourse. My case is that it is important to explicitly interrogate and articulate the ethical dimensions of antifandom rather than running the risk that these critical aspects of contemporary discourse become submerged beneath the consideration of other issues. Before continuing, a warning to the squeamish: this piece includes the uncensored citation of graphically sexualised vitriol from web sites. As with work I have published elsewhere (Jane, 2012b), this represents a deliberate strategy to speak of the ostensibly unspeakable so as not to participate in any tyranny of silence surrounding the sexually explicit nature of such material. On a related note, I do not use ‘sic’ after grammatical and spelling errors in online material in recognition of the informalities of expression commonly found in these contexts.

‘Cheerleader falls on her face’: the desire and derision of cheerleading’s antifans

Cheerleading is an activity with origins in the elite, male-dominated domain of the late 19th-century American university campus (Tom, 2010: 53). It is now a highly commodified and mass mediated feminised activity which is practised by more than 3.5 million athletes in 70 nations (International Cheer Union – International Governing Body for
World Cheerleading, n.d.), and which, since the 1970s, has evolved into two distinctly different forms. Professional cheerleaders are synchronised dancers who appear on the sidelines of sports matches and perform in support of other athletes and competitors, often with the assistance of high kicks, low necklines, and large pom-poms. This is the type of cheerleading which features in the American reality television franchise Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders: Making the Team (currently in its seventh season [Country Music Television, n.d.]), which was modelled by the midriff-baring Dallas Cowboys cheerleader Barbie, and which won a TOADY (stands for Toys Oppressive and Destructive to Young Children) award in 2009 (Lang, 2009). Competitive cheerleading, in contrast, is an elite, some commentators say ‘extreme’ sport (Lisa Torgovnick cited in Steelman, 2008), involving human pyramids, stunts, and physical displays reminiscent of those performed in Olympic gymnastics. Participants involved in this type of cheerleading compete at regional, national, and international competitions staged solely for this purpose: in other words, they are involved in a competitive sport in its own right rather than performing as an adjunct to the sporting pursuits of others. This is the type of cheerleading featured in the film Bring It On (Reed, 2000), and in the television series Glee (Murphy et al., 2009–13).

Despite – and also likely because of – its mass popularity, cheerleading is the subject of intense vitriol generated by a range of ostensibly disparate social groups. The latter include feminists, social conservatives, cultural elites, sports administrators and fans, mainstream media commentators, and members of the general public. My research into media representations of cheerleading6 shows that much of this discourse can be linked to feminist, gender, sports, class, and taste distinction-related anxieties, as well as what is known as anti-Americanism. There also exists, in Anglophone media discourse and popular cultural contexts, a large quantity of mediated vitriol whose defining characteristic is a mechanistic, all-encompassing negativity towards cheerleaders. Much of this is accompanied by a lecherousness which positions cheerleaders as both objects of derision and desire.

An example of the latter is the reader response to a video – posted on a website called Nothing Toxic (2008) – of what appears to be a high school cheerleader falling from a human pyramid during a public performance. This is accompanied by a caption reading: ‘Cheerleader Falls on her Face in Front of the School. Watch the two girls in the audience give each other five when the slut falls on her face.’ The footage is viewed more than 65,000 times by visitors who give it an average rating of three-and-a-half out of five stars – an evaluation implying that many Nothing Toxic visitors are fans of the clip. Yet the substance of the comments posted suggests that these commentators are antifans of cheerleading and cheerleaders. Consider remarks such as: ‘Haha stupid cunt’ (Pubikare commenting on Nothing Toxic, 2008); and ‘She’s a cheerleader – don’t feel sorry for her. I’m sure she got on her boyfriends motorbike and asked where the pedals are?’ (sixsixsixsix commenting on Nothing Toxic, 2008). Given the enthusiasm with which other readers join the festival of Schadenfreude, perhaps these contributors can also be classified as being fans of antifandom.

The posting of the cheerleading clip on Nothing Toxic – and the interactive antifan discourse generated in response – provides an apt demonstration of the radical challenges the internet poses to the traditional sender versus receiver audience paradigm, as

6
well as to extant understandings of the fan and the antifan. ‘Cheerleader falls on her face’ is an amateur-style clip whose original ‘author’ and intended audience is unknown. Like much online content, however, it has been broadcast publicly, most likely without formal permission, by an unknown person or people in a context which invites an extreme mode of sexualised and vitriolic ‘reviewing’ by quasi-anonymous critics. The texts produced and self-published by the latter involve escalating invective and a conspicuous breaching of social norms. One reader, for instance, wonders whether the injured cheerleader in question might be able to give better oral sex because she has lost her front teeth (Yellaa_Fella commenting on Nothing Toxic, 2008). This prompts another to write: ‘Odd that she was splitting her minge lips for the audience one second then splitting her other lips on the floor the next’ (markels65 commenting on Nothing Toxic, 2008). As I have argued elsewhere, such ‘recreational nastiness’ on the internet looks very much like a form of gameplay in which participants compete to produce the most creative venom and break the largest number of taboos (Jane, 2012b: 4). In terms of intersubjectivity and intertextuality, we can also see that these antifan texts are being produced, circulated, and read in relation to the originary text (that is, the clip of the cheerleading accident), as well as in relation to each other. The comments of these new media antifans, therefore: (a) constitute texts in their own right; and (b) constitute texts which play a major role on the Nothing Toxic web page and may draw a focus which is equal to or which rivals that of the original video clip. In short, classifying these texts chiefly as audience responses misses a far more important aspect of their status and significance. This, in turn, strips agency – and consequently ethical responsibility – from their authors, and underplays the impact they may have on their cheerleading target (as well as on the broader social groups to which their target belongs).

There are many similar examples which illustrate the way publicly loathing cheerleaders and cheerleading is creative and rivalrous to the point where antifans of cheerleading seem to be consciously or subconsciously competing to produce the most original, humorous, or ‘politically incorrect’ anti-cheerleading response: interlocutors attempt to outflank each other in an antagonism of insults and offensiveness. This fits well with Gray’s observation that some antifans seek out texts they dislike as ‘an intellectual-rational challenge’ that allows access to intellectual, comic, and cultural capital via the engagement of ‘witty and analytical textual deconstruction’ (2005: 854). Anti-cheerleading vitriol which has resulted in tangible artistic enterprise include: the writings of singer Kurt Cobain (who fantasised about cheerleaders being stripped naked and humiliated at gunpoint [cited in Wells, 2006]); the formation of a Baltimore punk band called Die Cheerleader Die (which released a CD entitled Down with Pom Poms Up with Skirts [Die Cheerleader Die, n.d.]), and the establishment of the satirical Anti-Cheerleading Association website (which claims cheerleading ‘is kept strong by the forces of Hitler from beyond the grave’ [A.C.A. Anti-Cheerleading Association, n.d.]).

A significant sector of discourse produced by antifans of cheerleading involves harsh critiques of cheerleaders’ physical appearances. In the vast majority of cases, these targets are real-life girls and women, as opposed to fictional cheerleading characters from television and film. Examples include the condemnation of individual cheerleaders: for being overweight; for having breasts that are too small or too large; for being too old; and/or for generally being ‘U-G-L-Y’ (Jay Cutler’s Insulin commenting on Chandler,
Particularly vitriolic remarks claim cheerleaders look as if they have a physical or mental disability. Commenting on a photograph of a group of Australian professional cheerleaders, a viewer writes of one: ‘she’s a fucking mong hey her face is fucking weird like a downy or something’ (paveway commenting on Ausgamers, 2009). Another visitor to this site agrees: ‘I go to the football to watch footy, not watch some fat trogs whos faces resemble a bucket of smashed crabs’ (casa commenting on Ausgamers, 2009). Similar readers’ posts appear alongside a pictorial spread entitled ‘8 Cheerleaders that Will Make You Root for the Other Team’ (SMOSH, 2010). This showcases photographs of: a cheerleader in a neck brace; several overweight cheerleaders; and a cheerleader whose sole transgression seems to be that she is aged in her mid 30s. Her photograph is accompanied by the caption, ‘What has been seen can never be unseen’ (SMOSH, 2010), and prompts readers’ comments such as, ‘Kill it! Kill it with fire!!!!!!!’ (maydayparade123 commenting on SMOSH, 2010).

Consider, also, the Deadspin sports website’s profile of a 23-year-old Tennessee Titans cheerleader, Melissa Hodges, whose newsworthiness apparently lies in the fact that – instead of spending her time ‘mulling the advantages of calfskin vs. vinyl’ for her boots like ‘other Titans cheerleaders’ – she works full-time as a molecular neuroscience researcher (Chandler, 2009a). Acerbic comments from readers include: ‘I knew there had to be some explanation for her face’ (Error commenting on Chandler, 2009a); ‘I’m assuming the hair color came from some terrible laboratory accident’ (Marth commenting on Chandler, 2009a); and ‘so that’s what they did with Anna Nicole Smith’s corpse!’ (acer commenting on Chandler, 2009a). Expressions of revulsion for several moles apparent on Hodges’ stomach then prompt remarks such as: ‘I would play connect the dots on her midsection with my joy-juice’ (RickeyRickay commenting on Chandler, 2009a). Here we see a comment which includes both derision and desire for cheerleaders – a key feature of much discourse generated by cheerleading’s male antifans.

Some articulations of cheerleading-related antifandom involve what can be described as engaged enragement. As an online review of the film *Cheerleader Massacre* reads: ‘There is not one iota of this film that makes any sense…. Surpassing eye-rolling annoyance, it truly is the highlight of the film to see just what glaring error they’re going to make at any given point’ (Criswell, 2007). Then there are those anti-cheerleading texts which are not as informed – or are informed by active avoidance. On an internet forum dedicated to expressions of hatred for various films, a contributor states that they refuse to watch any cheerleading movies: ‘EWWWWWWWWWW!’ this post reads, ‘I HATE THOSE!’ (Amplify commenting on Club Penguin Forums, n.d.). Given that this commentator openly admits to refusing to view cheerleading movies, it begs the question of how they know they hate them. Gray, however, argues persuasively that it is rash to dismiss such comments. His case is that even un-read texts clearly have meaning and relevance to antifan audiences in that they inspire and require ‘the language of physical repulsion’ (2005: 848). His conclusion is that, in cases such as these, the moral rather than the aesthetic ‘or even the rational-realistic’ text has been read and responded to (2005: 848). This configuration fits with the universal, non-specific nature of much anti-cheerleading vitriol, although my conclusions are that it is the *symbolic* dimensions of cheerleading-related texts – rather than the moral – which provoke the most outrage.
In the Nothing Toxic example outlined earlier, antifan activity is inspired, at least ostensibly, by a very specific cheerleading-related text. In other contexts – such as the aforementioned antifan film site – antifan discourse relates to more generic texts, groups, or phenomena, such as celebrity cheerleaders, celebrity cheerleading squads, contemporary events involving cheerleading, or the very idea of cheerleading itself. These more globalised censures of cheerleading and cheerleaders include claims that cheerleaders are: opportunistic and greedy; vain and conceited; bitchy and/or snobbish; fake and hypocritical; and/or exhibitionistic. Cheerleaders are commonly dismissed as trivial – referred to as: ‘fluffbunnies’ (Wells, 2006); ‘shiny things that move’ (McSteez et al., 2008); ‘jiggling ninnies’ (bettybugbear commenting on Tharoor, 2010); and ‘the parsley of athletic competition … a frivolous expenditure … [an] ephemeral excrescence’ (King, 2009). Also common is the claim that cheerleaders are unintelligent or ‘bimbos’ (Hanson, 1995: 103).

A natural question when considering this deluge of cheerleading hate is, ‘Why is this relatively unexceptional feminised sporting activity seen as so self-evidently bad by so many?’ It is revealing that a significant body of cheerleading antifandom did not emerge until after the 1950s, when the activity was transforming from being elite and masculine, to mass popular and feminine. Like pornography, cheerleading’s liminality, sexuality, and aesthetics make it a crucible for anxieties about voyeurism, the spectacular, exhibitionism, exuberant female sexuality, and perhaps women in general. As a result, cheerleaders are used as multi-purpose scapegoats, becoming socially sanctioned outlets for misogyny (such as the expressing of sexualised vitriol towards school-aged girls) that would normally be considered socially unacceptable in mainstream media contexts (Jane, 2014: 92). The sexist scapegoating of cheerleaders does not come without consequences. There is ample evidence to show that the echo chamber of anti-cheerleading discourse produced by antifans has effects which are extra-discursive, and which result in tangible disadvantages for the activity and its participants. In America, for example, cheerleaders are not protected from injury via the usual sports-related safety mechanisms partly because the sport is simply not taken seriously as a sport. While some American cheerleading regulations do exist, these are ad hoc and wholly inadequate. One cheerleading researcher describes them as a ‘hodgepodge’ (Moritz, 2006: 26), while the executive director of America’s National Cheer Safety Foundation calls them a ‘joke’ (Kim Archie cited in Kingsbury, 2008). These governance-related deficiencies endure despite dramatic increases in cheerleading-related injuries. According to a 2011 investigation by the National Center for Catastrophic Sports Injury Research, cheerleading accounted for approximately two-thirds of the catastrophic injuries to US high school and college girls from 1982 to 2011 (Mueller and Cantu, 2011). Of the total of 128 fatal, disabling, or serious injuries recorded among female high school athletes in this period, 83 of these were cheerleading-related. Only nine occurred in gymnastics, the next most dangerous sport. A similar report, meanwhile, links cheerleading’s high injury rates to safety and regulatory inconsistencies resulting from confusion and disagreement over the definition of cheerleading, namely whether it is an activity to lead cheers or a sport (Mueller and Cantu, 2007: 44). Without wishing to endorse an antifandom version of a ‘media effects’ argument, it does seem reasonable to conclude that the large number of antifans saying and publishing opprobrious statements about cheerleaders will have consequences. My
findings are that these consequences definitely include a reputation deficit, and possibly include a greater risk of injury.

Misogyny by any other name

The arguably sexist nature of much vitriol targeting cheerleaders raises the question of whether this derogatory discourse ought to be designated as something other than antifandom – something such as misogyny, for example. Let us put aside, for the moment, that word ‘ought’ with all its loaded philosophical baggage, and look first at what is. Certainly, under current formulations, similar misogynist discourse is designated as belonging to the field of antifandom. In his discussion of various antifan campaigns on the TWoP website, Gray notes that a sizeable number of Omarosa’s detractors call her derogatory names such as ‘baboon’, ‘Bitch’, ‘Mrs. WorldBitch’, and ‘Crazy Bitch’, as well as engaging in ‘pseudo “revenge” or punishment fantasies’ by posting comments such as, ‘Bring on the Terminator! This bitch needs to be taken down’ (2005: 852). His conclusions are that – despite many of these postings being ‘too short to allow any meaningful psychoanalysis’:

> their frequent aggressive tone, and penchant for racist and sexist terminology … reveal a dire need for a socialpsychological examination of textual hatred. Particularly in cases such as this, where the anonymity of TWoP allows something akin to an e-lynch mob mentality to bubble to the surface, notably darker dimensions of antifandom emerge, as does the role of pleasure in textual hatred. (2005: 852)

My case is that a critical step in any such socio-psychological examination of textual hatred is the acknowledgement that the targets of e-lynch mobs are not simply – or only – texts, but may also involve a human or a group of humans. There is evidence of a potentially ethically problematic slippage between Gray’s references to inanimate texts, and his references to the human referents of inanimate texts. Consider, for example, the interchangeability of his remarks about ‘Omarosa as antifan text’ (2005: 855), and his observations about Omarosa the real-life woman. Of the antifan campaign against Omarosa, he writes:

> Bit by bit, then, a large number of posters came together to decide that for a variety of reasons, they did not want this person in the public sphere, that she was poisonous to it, and that they should and could, therefore, ensure her exit. (2005: 849–50)

He sees this attempt to silence the reality television star as a form of active audienceship; one which rejects passive consumption and is associated with ‘a commitment to shepherding the text’s travels through the public sphere’ (2005: 855). It is important to remember, however, that while Omarosa may well be a ‘vibrant … matrix for antifan activity’ (2005: 855), the campaign against her does not just represent an attempt to remove a text from circulation; it also involves an attempt to extinguish the entertainment career and public profile of a non-fictional black woman. This is not to infer that Omarosa is blameless or that popular entertainment would be forever lacking without her presence; merely to call attention to the tendency for antifan theory to elide the humans
who can constitute or be connected with antifan targets. At certain junctures, Gray does recognise that the organised and ‘heightened’ activities of antifans can transcend the textual and be displaced into the everyday where they may have real-life consequences (see 2003: 76, 2005: 855). He notes, for instance, that Salman Rushdie: ‘will forever be in danger because of a strong anti-fan reaction to his novel The Satanic Verses’ (2003: 73). He also writes that, ‘a particularly extreme example of the “productivity” and depth of textual engagement of antifandom’ is that ‘numerous artists worldwide face death threats’ (2005: 842). One may wonder, however, whether designating death threats as a ‘strong’, ‘heightened’, or especially productive antifan reactions risks minimising the seriousness of this phenomenon, given that what is at stake is not a crusade to terminate a television series but campaigns to end human lives.

The high-profile nature of both Omarosa and Rushdie also begs the question of whether different ethical standards should apply to the famous with regards to antifan activity. Some may argue, for instance, that directing vitriol at celebrities is ethically acceptable behaviour – or at least very different behaviour to verbally or textually attacking ‘ordinary’ people. High-profile public figures often enjoy a symbiotic and mutually beneficial relationship with the media. While coverage is notoriously volatile and not guaranteed to serve subjects’ interests, many celebrities are still adept at using various aspects of the media for their own advantage. This may help to explain the assumption that they are accustomed to, unlikely to be injured by, and/or deserving of intense criticism (the latter invoking assumptions relating to contractual and deserts-based ideas of justice). In other words, unpleasant antifan activity is seen as simply a necessary – and to-be-expected – consequence of being in the fame game. This dynamic is complicated, however, by unprecedented rises in the celebritisation of ‘ordinary’ people via the internet and media genres such as reality television. Directing invective at these sorts of ‘amateur’ or ‘accidental’ celebrities raises different ethical issues because it is likely that such people are more psychologically, physically and financially vulnerable to antifan campaigns, than seasoned celebrities. Once again, none of this is to imply that antifan activity targeting celebrities is consequence-free; merely that the ethics of publishing a sexualised joke about Paris Hilton are different from the ethics of publishing sexualised jokes about a high school cheerleader whose sole claim to ‘fame’ is having been injured during a sporting event that happened to have been filmed by spectators. Similar distinctions can also be made when considering the ethics of textually attacking a real-life person as opposed to, say, a fictional character, a feature film, or a genre. Furthermore, the ethical considerations arising in the various circumstances described above are relevant for the producers and the analysts of antifan discourse.

The importance of developing an ethics of both these dimensions of antifandom is further underscored by the fact that many of the issues raised in relation to my case study of cheerleading have relevance beyond the domain of cheerleading. Cheerleading certainly has a number of notable singularities (it would be difficult, for instance, to find a group subject to such widespread ridicule by so many sectors of society across so many media platforms). That said, the sexualised invective directed at cheerleaders by anonymous antifans online has significant intersections with a much larger discursive phenomenon – one which I have described elsewhere as ‘e-bile’ (Jane, 2012b). Like the anti-cheerleading comments posted on Nothing Toxic, e-bile involves hyperbolic
invective, sexualised threats of or fantasies about violence, and a kind of competitive nastiness. While it has similarities with the antifan discourse Gray examines from the TWoP website, it has some important differences which demonstrate that antifandom in online domains is changing both qualitatively and quantitatively. First, antifans can now contact celebrities and their families far more directly. (In 2012, shortly after the death of his mother, Australian footballer Robbie Farah alerted police after receiving a tweet reading: ‘I’d still fuck your mum, I will have to wear a gas mask to help with the smell of decomposing flesh, but I’d fuck her hard’ [@maxpower118 cited in Thomson, 2012]). Second, antifans are far more likely to target ordinary people – particularly ordinary people who are seen as vulnerable. (In September 2013, a 12-year-old Florida girl with a history of self-harming committed suicide after receiving a barrage of abuse by anonymous web users who bullied her about her appearance and urged her to kill herself [Alvarez, 2013].) Third – as we can start to see from points one and two above – antifan discourse online has become far more hyperbolic, threatening, and misogynist in nature.11 (In September 2013, a feminist activist who led a successful campaign to have Jane Austen’s face printed on British bank notes eventually retreated from the Twitter-sphere after being bombarded with graphic rape and death threats such as ‘KISS YOUR PUSSY GOODBYE AS WE BREAK IT IRREPARABLY’, and ‘I’m going to pistol whip you over and over until you lose consciousness while your children … watch and then burn ur flesh’ [Topping, 2013; Criado-Perez, 2013a; @CarolineIsDead 2013].) As for the quantitative dimensions of e-bile, my research accords with that of multiple other commentators who make the case that, in recent years, hyperbolic rape and death threats have reached ‘epidemic’ proportions online.12 We can see, therefore, that antifan activity on the internet is transforming into a very different beast – one which requires a revised conceptual perspective which confronts the palpable ethical horizon presenting itself in this field of inquiry.

Conclusion

In his first article on antifandom, Gray argues that audience research is in need of ‘rein-vigoration’ (2003: 65). A decade later, it is apposite to revisit his proposed intervention. As Gray says, there was, indeed, a time when the fan was notoriously ‘regarded as a dupe, a passively blind receptor to corporate propaganda and establishment ideology, and an obsessive, strange social outcast’ (2003: 67). Fan research provided an important corrective in this regard, but, as Derek Johnson observes, there was a tendency to accentuate the positive so as to ‘distance fandom from perceptions of it as immature, deviant, and ultimately immaterial to academic study’ (2007: 285). To a certain extent, there is a similar emphasis in framings of antifandom. Gray (2003: 67) writes approvingly of a scholarly attention to research rather than assumption, to exploration rather than judgment. Yet while this is a sound basis for the commencement of a research project, it should not preclude an ethics-related assessment of such activity at a later stage if the evidence suggests such an assessment is warranted. In the case of mediated vitriol targeting cheerleaders (as well as with regard to the broader phenomenon of e-bile), contemporary antifan activity is not an ethically neutral space in which the primary texts involved are those which provoke antifan audience activity, and the only humans
involved are antifan audience members. Instead, antifans are also powerful media producers, and their targets can include human subjects who may suffer real-life pain and suffering. My overall conclusion, therefore, is that antifandom, too, is in need of ‘reinvigoration’ via the introduction of an ethics which recognises that the considerable power of new media producers includes the power to do wrong and to cause harm. Such a move would enable a more textured appreciation of these aspects of textuality, reception, and new media user-production.

It would also pave the way for the consideration of further, more troublesome questions relating to whether categories such as ‘fan’ and ‘antifan’ continue to be useful given the dramatic changes that have occurred – and continue to occur – at such a staggering pace in the 21st century media landscape. Gray et al. acknowledge that, as often happens:

in the early stages of identity politics for groups heretofore Othered by mainstream society, early fan studies did not so much deconstruct the binary structure in which the fan had been placed as they tried to differently value the fan’s place in said binary. (2007: 3)

A similar observation can be made about antifan studies, and its implication that antifans and their activities are first and foremost related to reception. That this reception is conceptualised as being active rather than passive does not change the fact that it is located in binary relation to textual production – a framing which precludes the possibility that much new media activity is better theorised as a sublation13 of these two modes. Moreover, ethical questions arise – in a meta sense – about the appropriateness of using a term such as ‘antifandom’ to refer to hateful discourse which involves: excessively threatening, violent, or sexually violent rhetoric; attempts to incite violence or criminal action in the real world; and/or the causing of harm to ‘ordinary’ people or vulnerable groups. As with debates involving related issues such as hate speech and hate crimes, definitions are likely to be contested and one category of discourse may overlap with others. Certainly the case study of vitriol targeting cheerleaders demonstrates that it is quite possible for antifan discourse to intersect with those domains of speech and acts which might otherwise be designated as ‘sexism’ or ‘misogyny’.

While there is no problem in principle of categorising a type of discourse as being two (or indeed, many) things at once, there are a number of significant contemporary contexts in which labelling a vitriolic text as, first and foremost, an example of ‘antifandom’ may risk downplaying its force, potential ramifications, and ethical questionability. It would be both odd and disturbing, for example, if racist hate speech was described as the active audienceship of antifans of African Americans, or if internet trolls who threaten feminist bloggers with rape online were classified as antifans of gender equity and consensual sex. The (possibly insurmountable) challenge, here, is to settle on something other than a ‘we know it when we see it’ approach to determining when it might be appropriate to codify discourse as belonging to the domain of antifandom, and when it might be appropriate to look elsewhere for conceptual architecture. We may think we know instinctively what types of texts should be catalogued as fan and antifan activity and which should not, but, without meticulous attention to individual contexts, we as media academics might also find ourselves straying into ethically very murky territory.
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Notes
1. ‘Negatively charged’ is the term used by Gray (2003:70) to describe antifans in his figuration of an ‘atomic’ model of textuality.
2. This is Gray’s (2003: 65) term for what he hopes his antifan research will achieve in the domain of audience research.
4. To further support this reading of Gray’s work, I note that he situates ‘production-end analysis’ as being separate from the domain of the audience, and from reception research – the latter being described as offering ‘valuable insights into consumption and decoding’ (2003: 66). This leads to broader questions about whether it continues to be useful to refer – without extensive qualification – to ‘production-end analysis’ and ‘reception research’ as discrete areas of inquiry given the extraordinary rise of user/producer activity. While this article will limit itself to the consideration of antifandom, a broader re-think and recalibration may well be required of the domains of audience and reception studies themselves.
5. None of this is to suggest that Gray has somehow missed or misread these changes in new media ecosystems. Rather, the textual landscape he was mapping had significantly different contours than it does today. The first of Gray’s antifan essays was published in 2003, while the second was based on a conference paper delivered in 2004. To put the publication of these articles into historical context: the transformation of the web from a domain of mostly centralised and static pages into the interactive, collaborative, and user-driven sphere known as ‘Web 2.0’ is not regarded as having reached critical mass until around 2006 (the year Time magazine nominated ‘You’ as its official Person of the Year [Grossman, 2006]). On the subject of the extraordinary difficulties of attempting to keep internet-related research up to speed with internet-related changes in the media landscape, I also note Nicole B Ellison and danah m boyd’s observation that the cybersphere poses a ‘unique challenge’ to scholars who must ‘struggle to understand people’s practices while the very systems through which they are enacted shift’ (2013: 152).
6. Previously I have published as ‘Emma Tom’; see Tom (2010); Jane (2012a, 2014).
7. With thanks to Nicole A Vincent for input on this section.
8. This also accords with the technical perspective of reading star image as text – and as objectified commodity – in the burgeoning field of celebrity studies. As Graeme Turner observes, ‘the fetish for textual analysis that dominated so much of the 1980s has found itself right at home in the study of celebrity’, resulting in a field overwhelmingly populated with analyses of individual celebrities ‘as media texts’ (2010b: 10, 13). In line with Turner’s argument for an expansion of approaches to celebrity studies, a promising direction for future research could well involve re-thinking the ethics of reading ‘ordinary’ or ‘accidental’ celebrities as texts.
9. Turner, helpful again, has coined the expression ‘the demotic turn’ to characterise the increase in ‘ordinary celebrities’ (2010a: 2).
10. Here it is worth noting that while ‘amateur’ celebrities may stand to gain a degree of fame and even money as a result of sudden media attention, such rewards are unlikely to be on par with those reaped by ‘professional’ stars.
11. This contention is supported by my own research into such discourse (Jane, 2012b).
12. Commentators who have used the descriptor ‘epidemic’ in this context in recent years include Anita Sarkeesian (2012), Julian Norman (2012), Caroline Criado-Perez (2013b), and Laurie Penny (2013).
13. This term relates to the Hegelian concept of Aufhebung, which is usually situated in the domain of idealist metaphysics, but which has relevance here. Translated as both 'sublate' and 'supersede', Aufheben refers to the dialectical interplay of ideational content which concomitantly negates, preserves, and transforms. Aufheben is defined by Hegel in Phenomenology of Spirit as 'the negation proper to consciousness, which supersedes [aufhebt] in such a way that it retains and preserves what is superseded, and therewith survives its own supersession' (1994: 57, emphasis in original).

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