THE MODERN COTERIE: FAN FICTION WRITERS AS A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

BY

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Abstract

Female coterie writing groups have had certain characteristics in common across centuries that can be seen today in fan fiction writing groups online. This dissertation focuses on one group of such writers who are active at the LiveJournal blog site. Through the use of virtual ethnography, data has been collected over a period of four years for the purpose of exploring the concept of an online coterie community. The data is examined by using the Community of Practice framework to identify the ways in which group practices and the use of online technological platforms are both maintained and evolving.

The author argues that the exploration of coteries in previous studies has focused largely on external factors shaping the group, and has left unexplored the influence of technological choices and the learning framework within which coteries function. While there have been close textual analyses of the writing created within coteries, an equally close examination of other aspects, such as the practices surrounding creation and maintenance of the group, and the alignment and non-alignment of individuals in regards to these practices, have not been the subject of equal historical focus. The dissertation identifies several aspects of fan fiction writing coteries that are in transition, including their practice of gift exchange, and their concept of a safe space.

This dissertation adds to the understanding of CoP operations in online leisure communities and demonstrates that the historical custom of female writing coteries has a current virtual (and vibrant) presence. It also offers a case study in the reflexive interaction of technology and practice on a widely used Internet platform with an emphasis on women's use of technology. This dissertation also contributes to the literature of fan studies and the conceptualizations of fans.

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Did I, my lines intend for publick view,
How many censures, wou'd their faults persue,
Some wou'd, because such words they do affect,
Cry they're insipid, empty, uncorrect.
...
Alas! a woman that attempts the pen,
Such an intruder on the rights of men.

Anne Finch, Countess of Winchilsea. (1661-1720)

Staunch Anne! I know your trouble. The same tether
galls us. To be a woman and a writer
is double mischief, for the world will slight her
who slights "the servile house," and who would rather
make odes than beds. Lost lady! Gentle fighter!
Separate in time, we mutiny together.

Dilys Laing (1906-1960)   From *by a Woman Writt* (1972)

Have fun! I ought to be a good girl and get on with some housework ... but ... ! [Anon 1]

Thanks for a great list! So far, I've read only Fixing the factors, and the premises of the rest of the stories sound very tempting. Obviously, my household chores have to wait for another day... :))) [Anon 2]

Lets all be rebels together!! [Anon 1]

Conversation on LiveJournal (1/11/2007)

1.1 Introduction

Though considerable time has passed since the days in which the Countess of Winchilsea wrote, the writing practice she engaged in continues today. Weblogs (or blogs) have been examined since 2000 as a new medium of Internet communication that combines affordances from previous technologies such as web pages and bulletin boards (Herring, 2006). LiveJournal is one such blog site, composed of over a million active individual accounts as well as hundreds of thousands of group blogs. One particular network of individuals uses LiveJournal software to create, collaborate, discuss and carry on traditions whose origins many of them believe stretch back a few decades. In fact, some aspects of their practice go back to the early centuries of writing and bear many similarities to a form of exchange known as coterie publication.

Coterie publication is a term for literary circles that passed along manuscripts from member to member. The manuscripts would sometimes have responses attached, or would result in a collaboratively written work. This distribution method was common prior to widely available commercial printing but declined in use as the marketplace model of publishing became dominant. Decline does not mean disuse however. The motivations for individuals to congregate, create, share, fight, and depart have changed incrementally, even as the technologies they have employed for alternative publishing continue to evolve. The personal network found on LiveJournal carries on the history of women's self-expression through their private circulation of stories. Although some of these writers use their interactions to develop skills for a commercial career, the majority does not pursue mainstream publishing. Individual goals for writing vary widely, yet the same issues that motivated female writers in past centuries can be seen operating in the present day. These issues include a response to societal conventions and cultural strictures, a pursuit of personal identity, and an understanding of the framework of gender.

The LiveJournal network of coterie writers numbers around forty thousand individuals and is a small fraction of the over one million account holders, many of whom are completely unaware of the coterie's existence. The network is composed of writers, artists, video makers, and readers who are part of creative fandom. Although use of the term "fandom" may vary within cultural studies, it is used here to mean a collective of individuals who seek out information and interaction in respect to a particular interest, whether it be a media product, activity, or an individual. Fan fiction writers are individuals creating their own stories utilizing characters and settings from popular culture, such as television shows or films. I will be looking at a subset of this writing group, numbering around two thousand people, to examine how blog technology is employed in the continuation of coterie publication, and how the technology shapes the practices of the writers. To do so, I will be using the concept of a Community of Practice as a framework to examine these practices and identify key issues for the group.

This Introduction will briefly explain the three components of this study, which are (1) the online community of coterie writers, (2) the Community of Practice model and (3) the technology being employed by the online community – LiveJournal.

1.2 Coterie groups

Historically, coterie publication was not a practice exclusive to female writers. However, previous studies provide evidence that gender played a role in an individual's decision to employ it. As with many aspects of cultural life, women's experiences and practices can differ from men's within the same activities. In their introduction to *Women's Folklore, Women's Culture* (1985), Jordan and Kalcik concluded that within folklore a "male orientation has meant that women's expressive culture is ignored or viewed as insignificant and limited" (Jordan and Kalcik, 1985 p. xi). Around that same time, traditionally female genres in entertainment, such as the romance novel, Japanese shouju manga, and soap operas, began to receive attention from a reader-response perspective (Radway, 1983, Modleski, 1984, Buckley 1991, Brower, 1992, Mumford 1995). Some academics also linked folklore, entertainment genres, and technology as components of study (Penley, 1991). Within cultural studies, women's expressive culture in fandoms came to light. While many fandoms were either predominantly male or a mix of men and women, fan fiction (fanfic) was largely produced by women for a female audience. This female subset of culture within fandoms began to be explored academically in the late 1980s (Bacon-Smith, 1991, Jenkins, 1991, Tulloch and Jenkins 1995, Harris and Alexander, 1998).

A common finding in these studies is that fanfic writing, an activity dominated by women, was devalued by the larger group of non-writing fans when it emerged in the U.S. and U.K. during the 1960s. This sentiment remains true today in many fandoms. The devaluation of female writing in fandom stands in contrast to the increased role of women within the central texts of those same fandoms through greater diversity of female characters, more storylines written for those characters, and more female protagonists leading dramatic series.

One such example is the television program "Buffy the Vampire Slayer" and its spinoff, "Angel", which are jointly labeled the Buffyverse. The fanfic writers for this fandom provide a good focus for a study of coterie practices due to the size of the fandom, and the focus on a female protagonist and other important female characters.

These writers are also of particular interest because the fandom began in 1997 just at the start of the popularization of the Internet. The creation of the World Wide Web provided easy access to text, images, and other forms of audiovisual exchange, facilitating rapid growth and a diversity of communication among fan groups. The Buffyverse fandom has one of the first set of fanfic writers who coalesced exclusively through the use of online technology. Since 1997 they have rapidly adopted new Internet media to continue their work and interactions. Given the focus on women in their fandom's text (the two television series) one would also expect the issue of gender to be given particular focus within their writing and discussion. Although Buffyverse fanfic writers congregate and publish in various locations online, my study will focus on those writers who congregate primarily on LiveJournal, and employ that particular technology as the central medium of exchange. This group will be referred to as *ljficwriters*.

Ljficwriters embody three factors of interest in this study: (1) they are users of online technology, specifically blogs, (2) they embody historical elements of coterie writing groups, and (3) their membership is largely female. Since this dissertation will be examining data through the Community of Practice concept, Chapter 2 will begin by reviewing the origin of practices in female coterie writing groups as a basis for understanding the practices seen today in ljficwriters.

1.3 The Community of Practice

The Community of Practice (CoP) model arises from a social theory of learning which combines four areas of study and theory. One axis looks at formation of self at one end, and functions of the group at the other. Another axis looks at the connections between institutions at one end, and self activation at the other. The CoP also examines issues of power, collectivity, meaning, and subjectivity as each participant derives meaning from their interaction with a collective, and both expresses agency and is subject to the collective's power structures (Wenger, 1998).

In past studies the CoP model has been used to examine the work done by groups in workplaces, and has been used to suggest how informal coalitions of workers can

utile the model to improve communication in an organization, and devise best practices for their hosting institution (Wenger, Snyder and McDermott, 2002). In this study the CoP will be used to examine a virtual community which has no official sponsor, which interacts through a specific technological framework (LiveJournal), which is a voluntary leisure group with diverse practices, and whose leadership is emergent and changing as people cycle through the group. In his early conceptualization of a CoP, Wenger focuses on both practice and identity. This study will also segment discussion along this axis. Chapter 4 will discuss the CoP in greater detail and look at how its focus on practice as learning, community, boundary, and meaning is applicable to ljficwriters. Chapters 5 and 6 will look closely at two important concepts in the group, that of the "gift economy" and the "safe space" and how these relate to CoP factors such as belonging, commitment, barriers to participation, and the negotiation of multiple identities.

1.4 LiveJournal

LiveJournal (LJ) is a blog site that launched in 1999 and began to be used by fanfic writers as early as 2001. Site membership is not necessary to read posts, or even comment on them, assuming that individual blog owners do not block anonymous posting. LJ's features, which will be discussed in detail in forthcoming chapters, make it a popular site for the posting of fanfic, as well as for following the discussion of fanfic writers and readers. The public nature of the site, combined with its ability to host or present both personal and group blogs, threaded discussion, artwork, video, and customizable spaces, makes it a location where many aspects of fanfic writing practice can be observed in combination. The fact that different activities could be concentrated at a single virtual site was a boon for writers, and has led to both new practices and modifications of existing practice. These effects will be explored throughout this dissertation as a factor in the ljficwriter coterie's development.

1.5 Method

This dissertation is a virtual ethnography utilizing data collected over a four-year period. Observations, interactions, participation, interviews, and other data collection have been combined to present a view of a community's various activities through its rise and decline in participation. The study's method is discussed in Chapter 3. A glossary of terms used and explored in this study is also attached as Appendix 1.

This study targets a variety of concepts and areas of research: the activities of women in virtual communities; the application of the social identity approach in online behavior; the creation of Communities of Practice; the historical continuity of coterie writing groups; and the interaction between technology and use. This dissertation provides additional evidence for how technology shapes group practice, and how it affects conventions, and given its focus on a fan community, will also contribute to conceptualizations of fans in media studies literature. The Community of Practice framework will be used herein to examine central practices and key issues for the group such as (1) what is its end product? (2) what are its main values? (3) what motivates the participants to take part? (4) how does leadership emerge? and (5) is this a new model of participation? The dissertation will focus on aspects of historical continuity between ljficwriters and earlier coterie groups, but will also examine discontinuities that will help us better understand the role of coterie writers amidst modern forms of writing production.

Chapter 2: Incarnations of women's writing coteries

"Ok me nagging again! Next bit ready yet? No... ready now? Ok I am going to have to have it out with you! Are you aware that with each new chapter I look at the scroll bar on the side of my screen and either go YEAH it is small there for alot of fic, or it's large and I get all upset cause there is not so much fic!

You know I love this right? Just making sure you do not get a big head with all the warm and fuzzy feedback!" [Anon 3][4/4/2005]

2.1 Introduction

There is a tendency in societies when confronted with new technological experiences to ascribe to the technology itself all the practices that are seen to exist in its use. However individuals inevitably bring past experiences with older technologies to newer incarnations, just as groups adjust their existing practices to their new medium of interaction. The present day form of coterie writing as seen in the ljficwriters group continues various traditions found among earlier coterie writers. These connections include developing a female-oriented literature, the use of pseudonyms, a desire for a known readership, concerns for privacy, fears of censure, and internal dissension emerging out of disputes over the purpose of the group. In each case technology also plays its part. As can be seen in the opening quote, a reader's love of a good story is timeless. The way in which the writer presents that story, the way in which the reader accesses it, and the ways in which a reader may communicate with a writer though, are all affected by the practice structure and technological media each employs.

This chapter presents a brief history of women's coterie writing and draws comparisons between earlier aspects of the practice and current aspects as seen among ljficwriters to demonstrate a historical continuity in the engagements seen online today. Although there is some discussion of how the LiveJournal site has become a virtual gathering place for this group, a more in-depth discussion of the site and its technological effects on the coterie practice is reserved for later chapters. In some sections of this chapter, quotations from ljficwriter postings are used to show comparisons between historical and contemporary practices. As in this chapter's opening quote, all individuals quoted in this dissertation are listed by number to preserve their anonymity (i.e. Anon 1, Anon 32). Full details of the research data collection are given in Chapter 3.

2.2 A text of their own

Prior to written storytelling there were oral traditions, which continue today in many cultures. In looking at these storytelling practices we can see that there are differences in stories depending on the sex of the storyteller. In a look at one particularly gendered society, Muslim groups in Afghanistan, Mills (1985) sampled 450 narratives. In narratives told by men, 86% percent had male main characters. Only 11% focused exclusively on female characters and one third of those stories cast women in roles where they masqueraded as men. Female storytellers told tales evenly divided between either male or female main characters. Mills posits that the lack of women in male stories has to do with male avoidance of female narrative subjects. Although she does not present evidence as to why this avoidance occurs, Mills implies that the female sphere is limited in the male view and thus women are often made to take on male roles to create meaningful drama. Manguel (1997) suggests a different possibility. Such avoidance may be due to men's lack of understanding of the feminine experience of life, which produces an inability to tell it well. Women, also, tended to set stories within the areas of life of which women had knowledge. The men who appeared in women's stories were either acting within the women's sphere or were peripheral participants.

This lack of knowledge regarding the opposite sex's life experience has bearing on the content of storytelling. In discussing some of the earliest known written work by women, Manugel states that the common nature of women's daily experience influenced the sort of literature that was created. Speaking of Japanese court life around the year 1000, he writes "At court, the women's days were spent mostly 'gazing into space' in an agony of leisure...something akin to the European melancholy." But

"Even if all the libraries of Chinese and Japanese literature had been open to them they would not have found the sound of their own voices in most of the books of the period. Therefore, partly to augment their stock of reading material, and partly to gain access to reading material that responded to their unique preoccupations, they created their own literature" (Manguel, 1997, p. 229).

With this literature came the origin of the term "women's writing." It was derived from the need to transliterate the language women spoke, since their verbal language differed from that of men, the language used in public life. Women wrote to circulate their

material among other women in the court who lived the same strictured existence, and, thus also had the same cultural and class background as the author. *The Tale of Genji,* arguably the world's first novel, was written during this period, around the year 1000. Female authors tended to focus heavily on cultural and social aspects of life, and had only the vaguest discussions of politics and other exclusively male domains. The women were writing to reflect the realities of their own lives and interests, and thus male characters who appeared acted within the female reality and the domains in which women participated.

The habit of writing for a female group with common experiences continues into the modern era. This chapter will examine some of the common factors among these groups in different historical periods beginning with the issue of audience and identity. In describing coterie publication, Prescott (2003) writes, "This context for women's literary production was predicated on a known group of writers and readers who circulated poems in manuscript" and produced their writing

"in response to particular events and written to specific people, either on a grand scale such as the death of monarchs or addresses to patrons, or on the more intimate or familial level of the epistle to a friend or verses on the death of a child or family member" (Prescott, 2003, p. 32).

This is quite similar to what is seen with ljficwriters where at least half the material produced is in response to particular prompts. Such prompts might include storyline developments in the jointly viewed television show, the birthday or bad day of an acquaintance, or in response to an event happening in the author's life. Such prompted writing is formalized in *ficathons.* In ficathons stories are written to fit a particular theme or specific request. All the writers participating then post their stories on a designated day, thus either fulfilling someone's request or providing their take on the ficathon theme.

In coterie publication, circles of readership "ranged from close-knit provincial literary groups, often based around literary-minded female friends, to broader networks of friends and acquaintances" (Prescott, 2003, p.31). This would likely include male writers, patrons, and booksellers, but women were often the main audience.

"However for women this community of writers and readers was often based on the idea of female friendship, which was used as a trope in poetry and to signify shared political sympathies as well as providing a context for their work in addresses to specific women friends. A common approach which emerges from this context is women's use of pastoral and romance pseudonyms to signify their writing

identities, their place within certain social and literary circles, and their political sympathies" (Prescott, 2003, p. 31).

The use of pseudonyms was one of several characteristics common to female coteries, which was tied to other concerns such as a desire for a known readership, concerns for privacy, and fears of censure. The next section will explore the use of pseudonyms by female writers, both in terms of why they might be chosen and how this practice fits in with larger concerns in coterie groups.

2.3 Pseudonyms

Pseudonyms have been used throughout literary history to distance a writer's other identities from their writing persona, and to, in some cases, protect the writer's physical person from repercussions, such as in the case of politically dangerous speech. As a result the unmasking of identity by literary scholars had been the focus of *pseudepigrapha,* the study of pseudonyms. However, as Ezell pointed out in her examination of 17th century English coterie pseudonyms, this focus on the "who" had left the "why" largely unquestioned (Ezell, 1994). For coterie writers pseudonyms were in use not simply for a separation of writer from text, but were used within the coterie group as a way to build identity for the author. Rather than the assumption of an "antagonistic" relationship between writers and readers if pseudonyms were used for disguise, coterie writers used their pseudonyms to place themselves within their circles. By adopting names that would convey certain qualities to others that their given names would not, coterie writers created relationships and meaning with their names among their fellow writers. The "frivolous dilettantism" supposed by scholars of Renaissance and Restoration pseudonyms overlooked how names were chosen, not to signify the lack of serious literary intent, but as a form of connection to others in a group (Ezell, 1994).

This does not mean that "antagonism" was not a concern for women outside of the coterie circle. While the particular names chosen fit a group purpose, the use of pseudonyms for disguise was of particular use to women. As Campbell discusses, for "women [who] stepped out of the salon and into the primarily male preserve of print without the protection of a male crossing guard [t]he result was outrage on the part of

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some of her male critics." This outrage was due in part to the belief that a woman's feelings, thoughts, and behavior should either remain confined to platonic ideals, "or at least confined to her salon circle" (Campbell, 2006, p.102). Indeed, Campbell illustrates that within the literature being created in early modern Europe, the object of men's passions were given pseudonyms because "[h]iding the identity of his beloved through the use of a pseudonym illustrates the requisite level of privacy that a traditional defender of women believes is necessary for a woman to safely participate in the life of the mind and in literary society" (Campbell, 2006, p. 102).

Despite real concerns by women for their social reputations, and thus their general well being, Ezell argues that pseudonyms were used in various ways by different groups of writers over time, both those published in print as well as those circulating their writing within coteries. Pseudonyms were used even within what we would consider correspondence rather than literature, indicating that disguise or anonymity was not their purpose between the participants. Rather, "the pseudonym, acts not as a cloak or mask, but as a password to signal membership in an exclusive and much desired group" (Ezell, p. 22, 1994). While the masking of identity is a factor, Ezell suggests that the form of masking simulates the types of theatrical performances that used masques, not to hide the identity of the performer, but to involve the audience in the performance. The "pseudonyms announce and amplify identity in the same fashion that stage symbolic costumes, like the white hat, signal a moral and ethical position." The pseudonyms were both a part of the writing and part of the social participation of the writers.

"Like the romance, where real writers assumed fictional names and fictional characters acted out the accomplishments of real readers, the masque offers a literary environment where there is a permeable barrier between audience and performer, between reader and writer" (Ezell, p. 23, 1994).

This erosion of barriers between reader and writer was an important factor within coterie groups, as the building of relationships and the exchange of work were considered equally important forms of participation. While the pseudonyms that Ezell discusses were used by people who actually knew one another, the more anonymous world of the Internet, and the spaces ljficwriters use, convey real anonymity. Pseudonym use online is common in many locations. However, the playful aspect of pseudonym choice, as well as the identity building aspects, can be seen among ljficwriters, with many users choosing

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names which convey messages to their fellow fanfic readers and writers. These messages include an affinity for particular characters, the geographical location of the writer, aspects of the writer's personality, or a role they take on within the group. The use of the pseudonym as an important element in local participation can be seen when people change their pseudonyms with different groups, emphasizing aspects of themselves or their interests that show membership with their immediate audience (Kalcik, 1985).

The sense of connection writers work to maintain with their readers, as exemplified by their choice of, or maintenance of, pseudonym, is connected to the desire by coterie writers to create for a known audience. The following section will explore the different approaches to audience for commercial and coterie writers.

2.4 Knowing your audience

Coterie publication has co-existed with commercial publishing since the 1500s. Many women utilized one or the other form of distribution for reasons such as social class, religious beliefs, and cultural, economic, literary, or personal advantages. The modern era when "authors were celebrated for their creative self-sufficiency" (Justice, 2002, p. 2) is a relatively recent state of development in writing. In his book, *Afterlife Of Character, 1726-1825,* Brewer (2005) discusses the long tradition of public acquisition of well-known characters in order to create new adventures.

"Far from being close-ended and self-contained, the novels and plays in which these characters first appeared were treated by many as merely a starting point, a collective reference perpetually inviting augmentation through an astonishing wealth of unauthorized sequels. Characters became an inexhaustible form of common property, despite their patent authorship. Readers endowed them with value, knowing all the while that others were doing the same and so were collectively forging a new mode of virtual community" (Brewer, 2005, p. 209).

Brewer defines this virtual community as a "public coterie" which he distinguishes from the "embodied" coteries who are known individuals connected through social networks (p. 141). Connections within these public coteries arose from "a shared interest in devising further adventures for a beloved character," (p. 209) creating writers out of readers, who would then become readers again of the works of others. This collection of strangers Brewer studies might well have made use of the Internet, had it

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been available to them, to share their love of literature and specific stories. Today they can. Most ljficwriters begin as a modern version of Brewer's public coterie, unknown to one another and drawn together through a shared interest in stories and characters. Over time, however, groups of them develop into a private coterie of people known to one another, and who write knowing specific members of their audience and that audience's likely response to their work.

In Brewer's study, public coteries might include both men and women, and indeed many private coteries of the time did as well. But the reasons put forth for women's choice of publishing differed from those of men. Originally studies of coterie publication concluded women were not publishing commercially because of social codes that prevented their access to the technology of print. More recent scholarship, starting with Ezell in the 1980s, focuses on factors that led women to avoid the wide and indiscriminate readership that came with a commercially published work (Justice and Tinker, 2002).

Women who did publish commercially were acutely aware of the difficulties in understanding who their readers were and how to direct their writing accordingly. In examining the prefaces of the works of Penelope Aubin, Prescott (2003) writes that Aubin "expressed particular anxiety about the 'unknown' nature of a commercial readership" and was "very concerned to control the effect her novels could have on her readers and worries about how this authorial supervision can be achieved" (Prescott, 2003, p.48). The practices of coterie publication greatly reduced the possibility of textual misunderstanding as well as providing guidance to the author in anticipating the effects of their work. Even when the actual readership could not be known, the "construction of a gender-specific readership makes the idea of an unknown audience more palatable" (Prescott, 2003, p. 55). As Crick adds, non-commercial circulation provided for "self-examination, confession, or reflection, talking to yourself and others on paper with a freedom and degree of control that kept writer in touch with reader" (Crick, 2003, p. 282).

By contrast the worth of commercially published material was considerably diminished due to "the assumption, common to the times, that anyone who published merely for the sake of money was certain to lie" (Hall, 1996, p. 137). Today the goal is

"to reach the maximum number of readers which is the criterion of modern success" (Crick, p. 282). Today it is commercial publication that confers prestige, the assumption being that a commercially published work has been vetted by others and therefore is more likely to be truthful, regardless of regular evidence to the contrary (Altman and Broad, 2005). In part, this assumption about truth was part of what conferred a stigma to commercial distribution, since dishonesty was immoral. Any hint of immorality was always a concern for a woman who wanted to maintain her social status.

The bond between writer and reader in coterie publication is supplanted by a remoteness within "prestige publishing" where today a work becomes part of the publishing apparatus that has encircled commercial printing. This apparatus may include literary agencies, commercial reviews, indexes and publication lists, a series of editors, various levels of distribution, and of course marketing plans for both product and author. Each of these adds to the layer of intentions that shapes the work. However as Justice states,

"It is necessary to look at manuscript [coterie] culture as a persisting set of procedures with its own history and customs as well as balancing manuscript and print as unfinished, in-process cultures with strong cross-fertilization" (Justice, 2002, p.8).

In fact, commercial and private distribution of literature were not in competition so much as they were used to different purpose. Justice refutes a technology history model based on competition, where one technology succeeds to the abandonment and disuse of previous technologies. Indeed, ljficwriters can be seen to employ newer technology as just one of the multiple technologies that have value, from pen and paper to instant messaging. This is not to suggest that all technology continues to co-exist with the same level of influence. Justice's argument is useful because it suggests that a focus on the constant forward march of technology can obscure important exceptions to the rule in terms of *who* continues with older formats even as there is widespread adoption of the new.

Certainly from the 1500s to the 1800s a number of female authors decided to continue circulating their writings among small groups of like-minded readers and writers. Scholars have begun to explore the previously invisible circles of female

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literature and both the formal and informal exchange of material. In some cases, the controversial content of the work, whether political, religious or cultural, meant it was better suited for coterie publication. In others cases, issues of social status, social obligation, or social restriction made it more beneficial for women to circulate their works to limited groups. An example of each can be seen in the U.S. Hall (1996) discusses how religious and political opposition in Maryland around 1700 prompted a great deal of non-commercial writing since the government "was not able to monopolize inkhorns and paper." As such

"people who might ordinarily have remained on the periphery of cultural production became writers and readers in spite of efforts by the civil state to limit their freedom" (Hall, p. 100).

Indeed, as Crick (2003) points out, coterie publication is "flourishing in times of governmental repression" and "tended to falter only when the machinery of censorship crumbled or collapsed." Thus for "subversive, heterodox and unacceptable ideas, manuscript was the natural medium for obscene verse and critical political commentary" (Crick, 2003, p. 8).

For women, repression did not occur simply due to a hostile political climate. In Kerrison's (2005) work on southern American women in the 1700s, repression occurs much closer to home. She discusses how southern women trailed northern and English women in their writing output and wider circulation due to more restrictive social climes within their own households. As a result their coterie publications were restricted "to small circles of family and friends, who read them intensively and who treasured and kept them throughout the centuries" (Kerrison, 2005, p. 104). For women, knowing your audience was closely linked with issues of social and domestic pressure. These factors will now be looked at both in their historical context and in their current state as regards ljficwriters.

2.4.1 Privacy and separation

The concern about who was reading an author's work was intertwined with issues of repression, from either public or private authorities. For women, the repression did not need to be overtly expressed.   Women's wish for privacy could also be a matter of

avoiding confrontation on a personal level. What follows are older and newer examples of privacy and separation in the choice of circulation method by women.

In a study of the career of Elizabeth Singer Rowe, King (2002) describes Rowe's decisions for using print versus private circulation in advancing her writing career. Rowe began by being published commercially in a periodical that solicited contributions from its readers. Unfortunately for her, the publisher in question became infatuated with her and after her rejection of his marriage proposal threatened to publish their entire exchange of correspondence as a form of self-promotion for his own literary ambitions. She turned to coterie publication and became a protégé of an aristocratic family. This provided not only an outlet for her work but also a rise in her social position, as she became part of a largely female network of writers. Her access to these private literary circles allowed her to gain social capital as her material could circulate to well-connected intellectuals and others in the writing set. Although Rowe also wrote to and for men, much of her preserved writing deals with materials directed entirely to women.

"These materials bring into view a strikingly homosocial feminine world. It is evident that manuscript exchange among women offered a refuge from the grossness and irreligion Mrs. Rowe expected to encounter...in her dealings with men; it opened an imaginative space in which to spin out her well-known fantasies of love-after-death and pastoral egalitarianism without fear of check or the derision she routinely received (or imagined she did) from men" (King, 2002, p. 168).

Rowe's fear of derision came from receiving criticism personally and in being witness to the mocking of other women by her patron's husband. In hopes of finding a wider audience for her religious expressions Rowe did eventually return to commercial publication, albeit anonymously. Her male editor though, feared the "breathless, excessively ardent style suitable to manuscript exchange among women was embarassing when transferred into the public realm of print" (King, 2002, p. 169).

Aside from male criticisms of women's style of writing came criticisms of their topics as well. In her essay on the historical origins of fanfic, Derecho (2006) frames it explicitly as "a genre that has a long history of appealing to women and minorities, individuals on the margins who used archontic writing as a means to express not only their narrative creativity, but their criticism of social and political inequities as well." In her earliest example of such writing, Derecho cites several rewrites of Sir Philip Sydney's

Arcadia done between 1613 and 1654. One of these was done by Sydney's niece, Lady

Mary Wroth, who

> "received sharp criticism…from fellow noble Sir Edward Denny who lambasted her for producing a
> romance, a type of work unseemly for a woman – the only appropriate genres for women writers being,
> according to Denny, translations of scripture and other devotional material."(Roberts as cited in Derecho,
> 2006, p. 67).

Another version by Anna Weamys received support from male poets and publishers in

the preface, though these "gave the reader to understand that Weamys was infused with

the spirit of Philip Sydney" and downplayed "her agency as an author by attributing her

literary talent to spectral insemination by male genius." The concern may also have been

to downplay the fact that the rewrites of Sydney portrayed "aspects of English aristocratic

society as ridiculous and unjust." On the whole, Derecho concludes "These efforts to add

to male narratives were, for the most part, resented, minimized, or ignored by their male

contemporaries" (Derecho, 2006, p. 68).

Derecho might as well have been speaking of modern fandom. Among

ljficwriters there is an awareness that their separateness is due, at least in part, to clashes

with men. This usually goes unmentioned, but occasionally it becomes explicit.

In 2005 there was an exchange on a non-LJ forum, where negative comments

were made towards fanfic practices. An ljficwriter posted the following in her blog:

> "I'm not any kind of authority on their goings on there so I'm only speaking about vague feelings that I
> get… Because there definitely seems to be a lot of non-ficcers over there… *I know that there are some of
> "us" over there too* and maybe I'm being paranoid but I do not know that I'd want my smutty Spike porn
> writin' *self to be exposed in that way*.... *I just like my playground to be safe and secluded* to some degree.
> Which is also why I only tell select people in my "real life" what my screen name is.
> ...
> Anyway, I was also thinking about *how there seem to be more men posting over at places like
> Whedonesque than there are in my corner of the Buffy fandom*. It's beyond stating the obvious that most
> fanficcers are women. Which is something that I do think about relatively often. Sometimes I even have
> coherent thoughts about gender socialization and community and textual intimacy. I think I have a point.
> Oh yes, that perhaps that's also a factor in how fansites like Whedonesque seem like separate territory than
> what we have got going on around here...
>
> I'm not saying that I think that all men are threatening, potential fangirl mockers (although some of them
> are, and so are some women) or that I do not think that some men read fanfic (I know that some of them
> do), I'm just sayin' that *I was ruminating on the way that internet space can be gendered*. " [Anon
> 4][1/20/2006] (emphasis added)

As can be seen in the highlighted passages as well as in the rest of the excerpt there

continue to be similarities between female coterie writers of the past and ljficwriters

when it comes to a desire for the seclusion of a safer community – a space of their own where their forms of less inhibited self-expression will be understood by fellow readers and writers.

Before the Internet, the technology fanfic writers used was print, and fiction was distributed through non-commercial edited magazines known as "fanzines." Bacon-Smith (1991) reiterates the constant concern of repercussions for exposure at work, or among acquaintances that the fanfic writers faced. They employed strategies such as the use of pseudonyms or complete anonymity, secrecy in printing, and the use of "circuit publishing" in which fanzines would be circulated from person to person, rather than advertised openly. One does not have to make much of a leap to connect this modern form of coterie publication with its antecedents.

By the time the Buffyverse fandom developed in 1997, fanfic writing was already a well-established practice, but familiarity did not mean acceptance. A month after the show debuted, the first newsgroup for fan discussion was established. Arguments soon began about the posting of fanfic to the group. This resulted in a separate fanfic newsgroup being created within 6 months of the first, to which fanfic was banished.

In other fandoms women chose different technologies rather than stay on openly accessible newsgroups. In her study of private mailing lists in 1990s X-Files fandom, Bury (2005) focuses on the issue of conflict as central to the migration of women away from newsgroups to a subscription space where membership must be requested, and where conversations remain closed to public scrutiny.

"But a funny thing happened to the online fan forum in that first push into cyberspace ten years ago. As quickly as they arrived, groups of female fans turned their backs on the public spaces of interaction such as Usenet...Facing varying degrees of harassment and denigration on the male-dominated forums, many female fans chose to stake out and colonize cyberspaces of their own in the form of private mailing lists. The first such list appears to have been...founded in October 1991" (Bury, 2005, p. 1-2).

Bury notes that since 2000, media products that appeal to both sexes such as the Matrix and Lord of the Rings continue to have largely male participants on Usenet groups, whereas posting boards, especially those devoted to actors in the films, show far more female participation. A notable exception is Usenet groups dedicated to texts that appeal primarily to women, such as the r.a.t.s. soap opera newsgroup studied by Baym (2000) during the same period.

These examples of female writing groups, both past and present, have all had a technological component. Whether it was women choosing to avoid commercial printing in favor of manuscript circulation, avoiding mass copying of fanzines in favor of person-to-person circulation, or a move from open publishing in the early days of the Internet to private publishing through mailing lists, women have repeatedly chosen technologies that allowed for greater expectations of privacy and which allowed for a relatively known group of individuals to access their work. Chapter 4 will explore the way that the migration to LiveJournal as a technological platform serves as a historical continuation of this trend.

First though, one last factor about coterie groups, past and present, must be discussed. This issue has to do with the individual circumstances of particular coterie writers and how this relates to their experiences within the coterie, as well as the material they produce. Although women have tried to create separate groups for their activities to shelter them from larger social pressures, they cannot live in these communities full-time. The household and family environment inevitably exerts an influence, which can be positive or not. In some cases it is this very tension between closeness and the need for individual expression that finds its way into the texts of these coterie writers.

2.4.2 Censure and rebellion

For women, particularly literate middle and upper class women who wrote, the household environment was a strong influence on their writing production. Women would often create limited circles of writing and reading due to either familial censure or the desire to see one's own social experience reflected in the written work. In a piece on the ladies Montagu, Grundy (2002) emphasizes the generational differences between mother (Lady Mary) and daughter (Lady Montagu) as reflected in their written work. However, the differences between their experiences seem more situational than generational, since today some of these same differences in individual circumstance are played out among ljficwriters. The wish to use writing as a social activity, documenting the self and sharing experiences with others of like-mind, seems to transcend any generational difference or historical setting. Rather, the pressure that one's intimates

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exert on the writer to conform to social norms, or to abandon personal pursuits, seems to affect both what is written and what survives.

At the turn of the 18th century Montagu senior, Lady Mary, wrote for a group of fellow women in prose and verse. She utilized lovers and characters from ancient tales, and wrote in the classical-heroic or courtly-pastoral style.

"Even the poems which one may suspect of telling an autobiographical story tell it under the guise of the love of Clarinda for Hermensilda...Marriage (the actual prospect of Lady Mary and her putative audience) appears in these volumes only in contexts safely removed by history or fantasy" (Grundy, p. 185).

The contradictions between what women want and what is actually expected of them is also raised by Busse (2002) in her discussion of fanfic written in the Buffyverse fandom. Busse notes the ways in which fiction allows the exploration of contradictory impulses in the female experience, and situates it within the context of the community where it is both produced and received.

"The connection between the parental and the sexual indicates a tension played out...in the very structure of fan fiction itself...it is the competing roles that women are asked to perform that is one of the crucial psychological motivations and achievements of fan fiction" (Busse, p. 216).

Although broader societal expectations for western women today have changed from those of the ladies Montagu, expectations for women within romantic relationships, as well as within families, seem more fixed. These conflicts continue to be a topic of discussion and exploration for female writers, often in very personal ways. The distancing effect of a set of known characters and situations, whose symbolic purposes are understood by the group, is one method of exploring topics that can not be discussed directly or explored to any satisfactory conclusion. In fact, concealment from those closest to the issues may be a matter of some importance.

"In each of these collections of writing, then, some defiance of convention and authority was central. Lady Mary's seems to have been an attempt to choose, with the aid of poetry, a style of life which was in some way derived from the world of poetry, and conceived as fundamentally different from the one mapped out for her by social expectation. She failed, and the whole matter, rebellion and recantation, remained unknown outside her family" (Grundy, 2002, p. 188).

Among Lady Mary's collected works are pages cut out and obliterated, apparently at the censure of others. One of her poems refers obliquely to the events that led to their destruction.

'Twas folly made mee fondly write
(For what [have] I to doe with Love and wit?)
I own I tre[s]pass'd wickedly in Rhime
But oh my Punishment exceeds my crime.
My Folies tho' on parchment writt
I soon might burn and then forget,
But if I Now both burn and blot
(By mee) the[y] cannot bee forgot. (Montagu as cited in Grundy, 2002, p. 187).

Even today fear of repercussions and the obliteration of one's own writing can be seen among ljficwriters. In late 2005 one ljficwriter to whose blog I was subscribed announced suddenly that she was deleting her account because the anonymity of her LiveJournal space had been breached. She made the announcement so that those who noticed her account's deletion would be aware she would be returning under a different pseudonym. Her stories would all be removed permanently so that they could not be traced back to her. Nothing more was ever said about what had prompted her sudden identity erasure.

The fear of censure has a great deal to do with one's particular circumstances both then and now. Lady Mary's daughter and niece, referred to as the Ladies Montagu, wrote rather openly among their peers of their love interests, albeit using assumed names and in poetic form. As Grundy (2002) argues, their relationships were also conducted in more open defiance of their elders and society, with their own writings countering public views of their romantic escapades. The girls' crisis of conflicting duties and desires however were rather the same as that in other generations. In the central tale of their writings, a young heroine is blackmailed by her brother into marrying another suitor, one who will fulfill the real-life financial motivations for marriage, and the brother forces her to abandon her lover. Caught between losing her brother or her lover, the heroine seeks to do what she thinks is right and hopes at first to marry, as asked, and remain platonically close to her lover. She later realizes she cannot.

This recurring issue of conflicted loyalties is referred to by one of Bury's study participants (2005) when discussing a work-related storyline in "The X-Files." "'It's the hardest kind of rebellion because it's against someone she cares about,'" commented the participant. Bury concludes that the commenter "recasts Scully's professional struggle as personal and emotional and positions Mulder as the male authority"(Bury, 2005, p. 51).

In the Ladies Montagu text the voice of male authority does not need recasting. Instead, in their communal text, varying authorial voices take different stances on either marriage as a destructive institution, or the social conventions surrounding it as the cause of despair. Bacon-Smith observed a similar conflict between expectations and desires in her study of early fanfic writers.

"Most fans bring with them their bourgeois dreams of white picket fences, husbands, two kids, and the dog, and their bewilderment that the dream doesn't work. Some have it all but have discovered that it never has been enough. Some never came close to having it at all and still do not understand why...Fanziners do not gather in each other's homes and hotels around the country and march on the male heterosexual bastions and demand their rightful place. They come together for mutual healing, for protection from the outside, and to ponder the most pressing questions in their lives – Who am I? What do I really want? Why can't I have it? Why does life hurt so much?" (Bacon-Smith, 1991, p. 207).

However enduring these restrictions and frustrations have been for female coterie writers, the circumstances are not the same for all participants. Thus ljficwriters' actions and behavior reflect the circumstances of their daily life. Unlike some participants who feel the need to hide their writing habits from critical friends and family, other writers have supportive spouses, various fanfic writing (or fanfic reading, or at least indifferent) friends, and even the ultimate license, openness at work. From these differences of personal circumstance come other forms of division.

2.4.3 Internal dissension – local hierarchies

As much as Lady Mary wrote from a more cloistered and intellectual experience, the younger generation wrote from direct experience, a belief in self-expression, and a hope for self-fulfillment. Oppositions in social circumstance, personal interests, and purposes for writing also play out today among ljficwriters in verbal scuffles. There are clashes over the ultimate purpose of writing fanfic and what should be considered appropriate content and focus. King's conclusion appears just as apt for today's setting.

"These young women deployed their own literary resources for mental independence and imaginative self-realization. They apparently did not aspire to be learned ladies; their exchanges of poetry were a living element in their own kind of popular culture" (King, 2002, p. 198).

Controversies over literary merit appear to have begun simultaneously with women's writing. A contemporary to *The Tale of the Genji*, Sei Shonagon's *Pillow Book*

is "a seemingly casual record of impressions, descriptions, gossip, lists of pleasing or displeasing things – full of whimsical opinions, prejudiced and conceited, totally dominated by the notion of hierarchy," (Manguel. 1997, p. 230). It is not difficult to compare this description to the recitation of daily events, gossip, memes (a practice of circulating lists of personal tastes and characteristics), and a concern about popularity, which makes up the majority of blog entries across LiveJournal. *Genji* author Lady Murasaki criticized Shonagon for her frivolity of focus, the banal existence of women, rather than the more adventurous world of men. Centuries later George Elliot would echo some of the same criticism of "Lady Novelists" whose writings were full of "the frothy, the prosy, the pious, or the pedantic" and who raised her ire because "fiction written within [this] group, [did] little more than echo the official stereotypes and prejudices that led to the creation of the group in the first place" (Manguel, 1997, p. 231). The complaints about stereotypes, banality, and failing to strive for literary achievement may have begun 1000 years ago but are just as evident in this millenium.

In 2006 a cyclical argument emerged again among ljficwriters. One camp was made up of writers who felt that constructive criticism (concrit) should be a part of feedback to authors. The other camp were writers who felt the concrit supporters were merely trying to foist their own literary standards upon those who were writing primarily to socialize and participate. This second group of "social" writers was generally accused of creating stereotypic fiction devoid of literary merit and designed mostly to entertain themselves. Such fanfic has carried various labels. In this blog post, it is termed "crackfic" to signify its empty (but entertaining) nature.

"As regards crackfic though, I think there is a real problem when people become too addicted to it. Crackfic is all about the instant gratification and I think people becoming hooked on the instant gratification has directly contributed to the decline of standards I see in the fandom. It seems to me that people are churning out their crackfic too fast and too often and never bother to attend to the issues of polish and craftsmanship that improve their writing and raise it above the general run of the mill. Too many writers in this fandom are coasting." [Anon 5][2/2/2006]

Similar discussions took the social writers to task for reinstituting romance novel stereotypes into what had been "subversive" canon texts (the official media texts of the fandom). Other criticisms were the depiction of men in stereotypically female fashion, or failing to hew closely to the canonical text in the interpretation of characters and settings. The gist of the two sides can be summed up in the following responses to the above post.

"Maybe there's a slight case of anti-intellectualism going on - that if someone offers to help someone with writing that it reeks of arrogance and being judgemental. But not everyone has the same ability when it comes to car maintenace so why should writing be any difference[sic]? They're both a learned skill." [Anon 6][2/2/2006]

"I think [name deleted] is right though, some people are in fandom solely for the social aspect of it so any one quering as to whether character x would do that or about POV changes wont be welcome. They're not really in it for that. Which is kind of frustrating when you ARE in for that so that's when there are clashes of opinions and nobody is going to be won over to the other arguement because fundamentally we're just coming from two entirely different places." [Anon 7] [2/2/2006]

These various axes of division, support in offline life, issues of content, and hierarchies of taste, are all constantly occuring disputes within ljficwriters. In her study on private mailing lists in the X-Files fandom, Bury discusses the issue of taste hierarchies within the group and concludes it is a matter of class identity conflict, despite most of the women within the group being college educated, middle-class, and in general "deploy[ing] the critical reading strategies that we learned through literary or film studies" (Bury, 2005, p. 52). This critical distance, which Pierre Bourdieu (1972) marked as part of *bourgeois aesthetics,* tended to be a point of division within the group's discussion of the television texts. Some fanfic readers in Bury's study seeded doubt about their ability to separate "good" texts from "bad" by identifying with characters primarily on an emotional level, as well as showing inattention to the mechanics of writing. These approaches prompted disapproval from others on the list. In their discourse labels such as "Way Too Intellectual" and "fun camp" were used to describe the different motivational (and, Bury would argue, class identity) groups. Bury noted that "bourgeois aesthetics is a double-edged sword that can cut those who wield it in an effort to make distinctions on the basis of 'quality'" (Bury, 2005, p. 105).

This double-edged sword can be seen among ljficwriters. When specifics are asked for, what features mark a "bad" fanfic for example, the verbal bombs tend to become friendly fire when writers of the critic's acquaintance, or well regarded writers who happen to write in multiple genres, are unintentionally branded as being bad writers. Inevitably back-pedalling results, with attempts to more finely distinguish characteristics that exclude the individuals in question. The ultimate result is often to return the debate to terms of vague generalities. Rarely does the discussion touch on the fact that it is not the fanfic itself that is usually the cause of the problem, but that the reader's selectivity has

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changed based on what was available. As Bury states, "class tension only surfaced when a large enough fanfic base had been produced" and subgroups of readers could coalesce around particular types of fan created texts (Bury, 2005, p.100).

As in the case with ljficwriters, the X-Files fandom was extremely popular and spawned thousands of fanfic writers and texts. By comparison, for those in fandoms for media products (i.e. films, books) long ended or which never achieved much popularity, attitudes tended to remain more supportive and less critical of the works produced.

"I'm coming from a very supportive and small and fairly tight fandom. We all beta for each other, we're almost unnaturally supportive of new writers, artists, etc, we post huge tons of good historical and writing resources (I think there are like 5 comms for this stuff for Age of Sail), we spend tons of time wibbling about our inadequacies and getting encouragement from each other ... we're so upbeat and positive you could just PUKE... and the overall quality and quantity of the writing keeps going steadily up." [Anon 8] [2/2/2006]

So one difference among those in ljficwriters is previous experience in other writing groups. Those who came from small groups (or were around when a group began) might expect completely different reactions to their work from other group members.

Another example of class identity clashes Bury cites appeared during the interpretation of an actor's behavior during an interview. Different participants disagreed as to whether he should have been "'nice', a code word for a set of moral behaviors that has been historically associated with the performance of middle class identity in general and feminine middle-class identity in particular" and what such a term might mean (Bury, 2005, p. 66). In early 2006 some ljficwriters also used the term when discussing writing, as in this blog post below:

"I do not mock people who are genuine and sincere in their drive to be good writers. And I NEVER name names, because I'm not in junior high. But do I believe that everything being written in the fandoms I follow is gold? Oh, hell no. This "cult of nice" we have taking over is driving me nuts...WANTING excellence from our fellow fen isn't a bad thing. It's making us better. Why on earth is this "mean?" Now, I'm not in any way saying that people shouldn't write what they're going to write. But this hiding behind your "muse" (god, I LOATHE that word) and saying what you do is "art" and there are errors all over the place and I can't recognize who the HELL you are writing about except that I know the name? That ain't art. That's crack. And there ain't nothing wrong with a little crack. Just own up to being a Garwood and not Garfunkle. Garwood sells a lot of books at the supermarket. But I know I'd rather be Garfunkle and have "Bridge Over Troubled Waters" on my resume." [Anon 9][1/25/2006]

Looking at this statement it is possible to see support for Bury's identification of class identity as a flash point. As in Bury's example, the above discussion revolves around use

of the term "nice" and who gets to use it. The poster is taking offense at an appropriation of middle-class identity by use of the word nice, and other discussions of writing as art, springing from a "muse." She points out this vocabulary use stands in contradiction to other class markers such as a low level of written presentation. In short, the other's presentation of self is sloppy in execution. At the same time the poster does not couch her argument in the language of high rhetoric but deliberately (given her own vocabulary markers) in an emotional style with use of colloquialisms and ungrammatical language. It would seem that Anon 9's own stylistic presentation is a deliberate effort meant to forestall the usual accusation of elitism that counters calls for standards between the two camps mentioned earlier, the "social" and "literary" writers.

Bury's claim for class identity as a source of tension is also supported by other discussions that link class and writing performance quite clearly.

"*Early* fanfic seemed to include extremes of both terrible badfic and wonderfully brilliant fic, whereas these days it seems to have achieved a more "upper-middle-class with moments of brilliance" fanfic plateau." [Anon 10][3/18/2006]

What Bury appears to have left out of her discussion and what I examine in this study is the influence of *local* hierarchies found in a Community of Practice and how these may factor into the class performance conflict. Due to privacy issues with studying closed mailing lists, Bury created her own list of under twenty participants, limiting the observations she could make. By comparison, ljficwriters is a much larger group and hierarchy development and status issues within the group are far easier to observe. As Bury herself noted, the larger the groups the more likely the class tension would occur.

At first glance the issues of class performance and local hierarchies would seem to be separate issues. However they are linked by the factor of individual entitlement. In general, entitlement comes from a sense of position within a given community where certain behaviors can be expected as part of that position. However, as Bourdieu would argue, positions are mobile and can move down as well as up. For Bourdieu, society is fragmented among various specialist spheres. Each maintains mutual relationships of exchange and subordination as agents fight for power, status, and a definition of their own group. Unification in a society is organized around a dominant cultural model, that

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of the upper classes, to which other classes orient themselves. In the theory of social stratification, distinction, differentiation, and mobility play essential roles (Callon, 1987).

Anon 9's post emphasized differentiation and distinction between the "literary" and "social" writers. However this type of concern would seem unimportant in terms of an offline societal position. As with everyone else in the ljficwriters group, Anon 9's offline identity is unknown to most individuals. Her argument only has importance within ljficwriters, and those local hierarchies. It would seem therefore that the conflict is part of an effort for Anon 9 to reconcile the expectations she has in her offline social position to her online social position. This may also be seen as an assertion of personal identity as opposed to a community identity, a source of continual tension which will be explored further in Chapter 6.

2.5 Conclusion

In this chapter I have demonstrated a recurrence of motivations and practices among female coterie writers across centuries. These connections include developing a female-oriented literature, the use of pseudonyms, a desire for a known readership, concerns for privacy, fears of censure, and internal dissension over the purpose of the group. We have also seen how the choice between manuscript or commercial printing has been employed to better serve the writers' needs and concerns. This chapter has also demonstrated the historical roots of the fanfic group observed in this study, termed ljficwriters. The concern for privacy, a known audience, the common thread of rebellion against cultural standards for women, and the clashes over writing style and content, all continue today. These concerns can be seen to drive these groups of female writers and readers across technological platforms in search of the ideal balance of personal control, utilitarian concerns for the presentation of their work, and public availability. The move to LJ's site and software has created some changes in fan practices, but it has also allowed for many of those practices to be imported from previous online spaces. Chapter 4 will examine some core group practices and how these have or have not been altered in the new online setting, as well as how the group fits the definition of a Community of

Practice. First, however Chapter 3 will discuss how the ljficwriters site was selected, the

method used for data collection, and the origin of this dissertation.

Chapter 3: Method

3.1 Introduction

This dissertation focuses on participants creating, sharing and discussing works of fiction in an online setting. The CoP framework is used to examine their practices and cycles of participation, in order to identify motivations for joining and the purpose of the group's existence. These factors emerge from the group itself and require observation, questioning, and researcher participation. This chapter first discusses the criteria used for site selection, followed by a discussion of ethnographic research, and its uses. A discussion of observational methods and interviews employed follows, and concludes with a presentation of analytic frameworks to be used for evaluating the data.

3.2 Site selection

Several criteria were considered in selecting a group and online location for studying coterie practices. The criteria are (1) public availability of the site, (2) a long duration of activity at the site, (3) researcher ability to utilize the technology, and (4) the central focus on fanfic by the site participants. The following describes these four criteria and how LiveJournal (LJ) and the Buffyverse fanfic writing group located there (ljficwriters), satisfy these criteria.

The first consideration is that the interactions be public. In addition to the logistical problems involved in observing a group whose practices are largely, if not entirely, hidden from public view, there are also ethical barriers in observing a group that has a substantial expectation of privacy in their interactions. Although ljficwriters do often make "locked" posts which are visible only to select individuals, there is a wealth of public activity and discussion open to anyone with Internet access. While ljficwriter interactions differ little in observability from people in a public space such as a mall, a restaurant, or a classroom, the primary difference comes in individual identifiability.

Despite the use of anonymous usernames, a sustained individual identity is often linked to these pseudonyms, which can in some cases lead to offline identity matches. For reasons of participant privacy no usernames or specific LJ locations are used in this dissertation. All participants are given a number (i.e. Anon 1, Anon 15) which is unique to the participant, and to any quotations of theirs used herein.

A second consideration for site selection is persistence of activity, which means selecting a group with high levels of participation that would likely continue during a study period of several years. Given the transience of activity and information on the Internet, an expectation of persistence was likely only with a sizable group. The exact number of participants in ljficwriters is impossible to ascertain but preliminary observation, such as noting the number of subscribers to major group blogs the group uses, identified at least 1000 participants.

A third consideration is an ability to utilize the technology being employed by the group studied. As mentioned in Chapter 1, this fandom originated in 1997, a few years after the Internet boom. It seemed likely that their practices would be strongly shaped by the technology they used given that their main method of interacting was online and always had been. Timing was also important with the selection of LJ as the location of study. Given the study's focus on the adaptive use of technology within a Community of Practice, LJ was a useful site to select because the site was growing in popularity with ljficwriters. Prior to 2004, accounts could only be opened through an invitation from an existing LJ user. Even though the earliest ljficwriters had opened accounts in 2001, the community population boomed during 2004, the year this study began. So while the Buffyverse fandom had been born online and had been in existence for seven years, this site of interaction was relatively new and growing. It was also, thanks to the newly opened membership, possible for me as a researcher to open an account and learn how the site worked firsthand, as well as being personally affected by changes made to the software over time

As LJ is a large and diverse online location, and ljficwriters occupy only a small portion of it, observations of ljficwriters will be useful primarily in discussing how this particular group employs LJ technology. Observations of this group during the 2004-2008 period were conducted across dozens of individual and group blogs located on LJ,

(which for reasons of privacy will not be named). I have been open to ljficwriters about my ongoing research and had information about my dissertation listed as part of my biographical information at LJ. The public venues of observation, the voluntary participation of individuals in interviews or surveys, and the anonymity provided to individuals and groups regardless of research method employed, were part of my protocol. These criteria were presented in my application to the Institutional Review Board of the University of Illinois, which granted this study exempt status from Title 45, part 46, regarding protection of human subjects.

3.3 Methodology: Ethnographic research

Ethnography is an optimal research method for understanding naturally occurring human behavior such as the type likely to be found in a spontaneously organized leisure group. It is also a useful method when doing a technology study that is centered on actual use in the field under different conditions. The central elements discussed in section one, that of a large group of individuals, spontaneously organized online, who all utilize the same technology to interact and carry out their practices, are well served by this approach.

Ethnography uses observation, conversation, participation, and interviews to create rich data that brings together various elements that would be missing from other more quantitative methods which would depend more heavily on highly structured user-provided data such as surveys, or observations of limited numbers of people in pre-planned, formal settings. In addition to getting detailed descriptions from individuals about their activities, the observations of the researcher can be used to place those statements and actions into a wider context over a period of time. Length of study period is also something that distinguishes ethnography from various other methods since, in order to gather the variety of perspectives and wider context that is present in ethnographies, there needs to be some level of immersion by the researcher into the study setting. Notes are taken of activities and conversations, and multiple perspectives are gathered to provide correlating or contradictory data. Multiple types of recording information may also be employed including video, audio, photography, or written texts

In ethnography, data collection tends to be unstructured and categories for sorting data tend to be determined at a later period. This leaves the researcher more open to gathering the perspectives of the observed individuals themselves in describing and performing their own experiences. Aside from taking notes of observations, other forms of documentation may also be gathered, such as work done by the group or materials used in that work. Findings are likely to be reported in great descriptive detail, which will attempt to replicate for the reader the experiences of the individuals observed. In reporting there tends to be a focus on typical experiences, and those which embody values, conflicts, or other significant areas of cultural practice (Lindlof and Taylor, 2002).

The adaptation of the ethnographic method for online spaces is discussed in Hine's book on virtual ethnography. She notes that ethnography can be "used to do justice to the socially rich and often innovative uses to which CMC is put outside the experimental settings" (Hine, 2000, p.18). Just as with offline settings, online spaces can have porous boundaries, overlapping participants, and distinct behaviors in specific settings. Social spaces are created in varying degrees by organizational design and the behavioral nature of participants themselves. Insider/outsider behavior, conflict, hierarchy, and standards of conduct develop in various forms throughout different locations on the Internet and through different forms of CMC. Hine argues that community is not always present in a boundaried location but can exist in flows of connectivity as well as a sense of place (Hine, 2000, p. 61).

To explain her description of connectivity flows and sense of place we can look at the example of ljficwriters. On LJ alone, there are hundreds of forums for engagement, and the participants utilize various forms of CMC. E-mail, instant messaging, the phone, in-person meetings, and non-LJ sites are all used for meetings, discussions, and creative activities. What community exists functions through small linked networks of individuals – writers and readers, writers and editors, community moderators and members, writers and artists, all of whom have developed strong ties through repeated interactions, joint work, or geographic proximity. All the meeting places on LJ are separate yet linked with overlapping memberships, and a single technology that both requires and allows the development of unique practices.

Hine's principles of virtual ethnography discuss the ways in which ethnography is adapted to the virtual space. As the researcher engages in sustained interaction the meanings and relevance of practices become clear. Interactive media are something that the ethnographer must learn to utilize in the same manner as those being observed in the study, and this intensive engagement allows the ethnographer to be simultaneously an informant and observer, providing a reflexive aspect to the study. Boundaries and immersion are explored during the course of the ethnography but the latter can only be intermittently achieved. "The shaping of the ethnographic object as it is made possible by the available technologies *is* the ethnography" (Hine, 2000, p.65). My own approach to this study is interactive, long-term, multi-channel, and includes real-time engagement in community activities, e-mail and instant message exchanges, and in-person interviews.

3.3.1 Advantages to the method

The primary advantage of the ethnographic method is the ability to place in context specific activities and ideologies expressed by a cultural group, as well as acknowledging the role that the researcher plays within the study itself. Although the time period of studies using this method will vary, the passage of time and the observation of its effects on a group are of particular benefit when examining different factors that contribute to the formation, evolution, or dissolution of a group and its practices. Ethnography is also useful in exploring and presenting contradictions, interrelationships, and multiple meanings in the study, some of which may emerge from the separate positions of researcher and study group. The participatory role employed by many researchers using the ethnographic method may also allow for less dichotomy in issues of language and symbolism. Because the researcher interacts with or is immersed in the group, rather than merely reporting on language or objects with the use of an exclusive, separate language of "objectivity," the researcher may be "bilingual," able to form interpretations for the reader based on the researcher's own experience as a user of the terms and symbols.

Additionally, the ethnographic method is better suited for examining "silences" and gaps in presentation by groups or individuals. These silences may include the

marginalization of minority groups, the absence of certain topics in group narratives, or a common, unspoken understanding among members of a group which may not emerge without direct investigation of the hidden topics.

Lastly, the ethnographic method allows greater flexibility in terms of study boundaries. While quantitative methods such as experiments or surveys must be fixed in advance with often very little possibility for adjustment while in progress, an ethnography may more easily shift to accommodate new information, new perspectives and to follow new leads. Ethnographies, in fact, allow for the emergence of concepts from the study site. They may also reveal the existence of predetermined concepts within the researcher during the course of the research process.

3.3.2 Limitations to the study

The primary limitations to this study are first, its selectivity, and second, its potential for bias. The conclusions I reach will be limited and shaped by the specific locations, discussions and individuals I was able to observe or interact with. Even within the online Buffyverse fandom, ljficwriters is a small group of individuals to observe. Although I believe that many of their practices and concerns are applicable to other coterie writing groups, or to some extent to other fandoms, the generalizability of such findings for other fan groups or LJ users, will vary. The conclusions of this study are more likely to be generalizable to other online Communities of Practice.

Part of this selectivity in generalizability is that only public discourse is available to be analyzed. There are various levels of privacy on LJ. While the majority of posts made are public, many individuals "friends-lock" entries, restricting them to subscribers or to specific known individuals. Entries can also be made entirely private so that no one but the journal owner can access them. As my own subscriber list is small, the number of these more private entries available to me for analysis was equally limited. Furthermore the intention of privacy behind such posts ethically prohibited me from using direct quotation of their content. Below I will discuss the general types of topics that are "friends-locked" versus public in exploring how the community functions.

Vast quantities of discussion occur through e-mail, instant messenger, phone, and (less frequently) in-person meetings. Although I explored some of the general patterns of this off-LJ use as part of interviews, the texts themselves cannot be examined. It is possible that in private discourse a significantly different version of events would be presented which would weaken the validity of what can be asserted from looking at public posts only. To date it seems that most of the conversation that takes place through these alternate methods, insofar as it relates to ljficwriters, is not significantly different from many of the public posts. For one, much of what goes on "behind the scenes" is coordination work, between moderators, between authors and editors, between reader and author, etc., which I can discuss in relation to my own participation in these activities within the group. Another large part of such conversations deals with entirely personal matters and general relationship building between individuals. While the existence of such behavior is important to recognize, the content of these private discussions is not necessary to understand the general meaning and role of these activities outside the public spaces, and is not addressed in this dissertation.

3.3.3 Researcher position

The second limitation to any study is the potential for researcher bias. This is also a critical concern with a study that requires long-term involvement with the group under observation. In identifying ways in which bias could occur I will outline here my own position in relation to ljficwriters.

Fanfic writing groups were not unknown to me prior to 2004. I had been aware of fandoms and fan fiction since the age of ten due to my own interest in different media products. During the summer of 2002 I had been watching Buffyverse shows for two years and had grown increasingly interested in them. I went online to get more news about the series and came across *Whedonesque*, a group blog. For nearly a year I read the blog with little interest in posting anything myself. For one, I had no news to contribute and it was a news-oriented blog. Second, I often had either nothing to say to given posts, or else I came to the posts some time after they had been made and no one was reading or responding to the older posts anymore. The opening page only had room for about 10-14

posts, and comments to anything that had already gone off the page were rare. Unlike LJ there was no way to be notified when someone had responded to your comment or posting.

Although at first my main interest was in being tipped off to news stories or episode reviews, over time I read as much for the comments on the posts as the news links themselves. By the time I was interested in joining the conversations on *Whedonesque* I could not, because sign-ups were only open for short periods. The blog owners set this limit as a way of managing waves of new users who needed to acclimate to the rules and methods of posting. It was not until January of 2004 that I was able to open an account there, the same time I began my study.

3.3.4 Study beginnings and community involvement

In January 2004 as part of coursework on qualitative methods, I began observing Buffyverse fanfic discussion on several sites, and after four months, began focusing on LJ in particular. Compared to posting boards and more general fan sites such as *Whedonesque*, the various individual and group blogs on LJ provided far more context for the discussions which took place. Because there is no one moderator, no set rules of discursive engagement, and multiple blogs on which one can engage, the site provided more self-reflective conversation. People could express their reasons for being a part of the group, for being at that site, for writing fanfic, and for being attracted to that particular set of characters and their storylines. Interview possibilities are limited by time and participation rates, and tend to be most effective when combined with observation. A study site where people engage in self-reflective behavior as a matter of course provided more opportunity to learn about people's professed motivations and the diversity of opinions within the group. Sites such as *Whedonesque* had more strictures on what could be discussed or even who could participate.

One thing that was rarely posted about on *Whedonesque* was fanfic. On the one hand, I understood this, as it was a news-oriented site that dealt largely with outside information that mentioned the shows, or people connected to them. In part, this was what kept me coming to the site. It was easy to browse, it was focused, and it was

moderated rather closely for both tone and topic of discussion. But this outward bent, towards the show and its production, meant that many inward topics, about fans and their activities, were often absent. For example in January 2003, by which time I was reading on a weekly basis, there were 53 links posted on *Whedonesque*. Of these, only one dealt with creative fan production (as opposed to episode reviews or analysis). Interestingly the post mentioned LJ in the comments section.

The Buffyverse fan community on LJ was in many ways what *Whedonesque* was not. It was individualistic, it was awash in colors and images, it was gabby, it mixed all sorts of topics together in my subscription list. LJ showed, though not whole people, at least more varied sides of the participating individuals. Conversations could be had with one person or a group over a longer period of time, and the LJ space was filled with creative individuals, some of whom produced prolifically. Creativity and emotional reactions (to anything – life, fan activities, one another) were at the heart of the discussion. And it was also overwhelmingly female.

The differences between the two locales and participating groups fascinated me. I suspected that the nature of activities on *Whedonesque* and LJ, as well as the technology being used, accounted for the differences. This was the beginning motivation for my observation of both locations.

Although I had been a lurker in fandom for a few years, I was neither writing fanfic nor on LJ prior to the start of the study, and my own role within the community was neither a focus nor motivation for the study itself. My selection of ljficwriters for observation was to some degree motivated by my own interest and familiarity with the fandom. However it is not unusual to have a degree of connection to groups observed in ethnographic study, whether it be a connection of gender, geography, ethnic background, personal interest, life experience, or in the case of Internet use, technological familiarity.

In order to retain a certain level of distance during the observation period almost all blogs to which I subscribed occurred because those individuals had first subscribed to my own blog, and I thus subscribed reciprocally. I did not want to intentionally go out and select particular individuals to follow for three reasons. The first reason was that I felt I would get a better idea of typical behavior among ljficwriters if I were not the one determining who was "interesting" enough for me to be watching. If other participants

subscribed to my blog of their own initiative, I felt I was more likely to get a random collection of individuals as my primary study group. The second is that I would be determining which group blogs I would be reading, so my own interests would already be present to some degree, although this would be mitigated since I had no control over who participated in those group blogs and thus which set of individuals I would be observing in those cases. The third factor affecting my decision on subscriptions is the terminology LJ uses for this action. LJ calls it "friending" and the practice of reading one's RSS feeds as reading one's "Friends List." This introduction of emotional terminology into a reading practice has led to emotional reactions when individuals subscribe or unsubscribe to someone's blog. The visibility of the subscription list on LJ and the ability to make comparisons exacerbates issues of popularity and self-esteem among LJ users generally. To not subscribe reciprocally is often seen as a personal rejection of one individual by another. Among ljficwriters, to subscribe to an individual's blog and then never make comments is also seen as a sign of disinterest, and may generate mistrust as to who this "stranger" is who is reading one's writing. As was shown in Chapter 2, knowing one's audience is important to this coterie group. As such there exists a sense of obligation to acknowledge the postings of those on your subscription list on a regular basis. Such high levels of interaction lead to the development of closer ties among different individuals, and LJ is as much a social networking tool as a blog.

My concern about widespread subscription was that to develop too many of these ties might channel my observations into more personal matters than overall group observation, and thus reduce my available study time for broader issues. A large subscription list would also lead to a more personal level of interaction with a greater numbers of ljficwriters, which would present ethical problems in then studying "friends." It might also shift the balance in my own position as both researcher and community participant. My level of interaction with ljficwriters has therefore been almost entirely public in comments and posts with only a few exceptions, and in the first few years of observation I avoided making public comments about specific issues of community dissension so as to not position myself within the group. In effect I attempted to be as peripheral a participant as possible while still undertaking common group activities such

as editing fanfic, making fandom related posts and comments, and creating and moderating a group blog.

3.3.5 Observational methods

When I began my observations at LJ in February 2004 I scanned through the blog of a particularly popular writer in the group, keeping a list of discussions that seemed informative about ljficwriters and its practices. I followed links to other blogs, and recorded discussions at those locations as well. I lurked at various ljficwriters forums for five months before opening my own account at LiveJournal. Once I had an account, I was able to learn firsthand how the site features actually functioned, and I was able to start developing a community presence through comments made to other people's blogs and at group forums. I was also able to start subscribing to particular forums and blogs with my new account, which made scanning the community much easier but which was also time consuming. I felt the obligation to read and comment on posts made at those personal and group blogs regardless of their relevance to my own areas of interest for the study. Despite the hundreds of group forums and the 2000 or so individual journals maintained by ljficwriters, my personal subscriptions have been limited to some 50 individual blogs and up to 40 group blogs during this four year period. The sheer quantity of daily posts that take place at the site makes intensive reading difficult. Small as my reading list was compared to many others within ljficwriters, it still generated some 20 to 100 posts a day, many of which linked to other discussions and posts elsewhere, requiring hours of reading. In this respect I became a community member rather rapidly as the pressure to "keep up" on posts within one's reading list is widespread. One often sees apologetic comments from other participants about being absent from LJ or "behind" on other people's posts.

My time spent at LJ changed during 2004. At first I spent 2-6 hours a week reading, scanning and recording discussions there. Although in retrospect it is clear that LJ was becoming an increasingly important site for Buffyverse fanfic writers, in early 2004 this was not at all clear to me. There was a great deal of activity within the fandom over the first half of the year due to the unexpected cancellation of the series "Angel",

and this activity took place on a variety of different Internet sites. It was a rare chance to see the group in concerted action and I prioritized time documenting activities related to this event rather than in exploring LJ specifically. What did become clear in early 2004 were the differences between LJ and other sites. While most of the posting boards and news sites were actively discussing the cancellation action, speculating on possible outcomes, and organizing or fundraising to protest the event, there seemed to be virtually no discussion about the situation on LJ. I found this disconcerting, and only later realized that the site's personal nature meant that anything related to the cancellation was bound to be dispersed among the many other activities, locations, and topics of discussion scattered across people's blogs and group forums. The fact that LJ has no centralized location, and no single focus of activity meant that coming across such conversations was likely to be as random as overhearing a particular topic of conversation on a street corner. I did, however, have one clue that the issue was on people's minds. There was a wide selection of icons that bore witness to the importance of the topic.

User pictures, called icons by ljficwriters, are a very popular feature of LJ for fandom users. These pictures can accompany each posting and comment made by an account holder anywhere on LJ. While a further discussion of icons will be made later in this dissertation, it is sufficient to say here that they emerged as a form of back-channel communication among ljficwriters that highlights many of the group's key discussions and concerns. Later in 2004 I began recording discussions of icon use and saving specific examples of icons for study.

By August 2004, I decided to focus on LJ as the study site and made very occasional visits to other fandom sites except for *Whedonesque,* which I continue to read daily. I made my first blog post at LJ in August 2004, which discussed my interest in studying the community in relation to my coursework at the time. My posts became more frequent over the next few years moving from about once a month to once or twice a week. This put me in the middle range of posters in ljficwriters, as many post a few times a week or even several times a day, while others post very irregularly. I had very little readership of my posts judging from comments received, and LJ's statistics show I made 12 times more comments at other blogs than I received at my own. This is likely because I am not a creative producer on LJ as I neither write fanfic, nor do I create fan

videos or graphics. My posts were largely reviews of those works by others, discussions of fan topics, and more general posts about issues in the news.

When I began my own blog I was averaging 1-2 hours a day at LJ, and over 2005 spent as many as 5-7 hours a day on the site reading, commenting and recording posts and comments. Time spent per day or week has varied by the level of activity, both my own (in making posts or spending time on community activities), and the postings of others. In early 2005 I began to "beta read" (serve as a volunteer editor) for a fanfic writer in the group and exchanged sporadic e-mails with her about community, personal, and writing issues. In fall 2005 I launched a group forum with her that focused on garnering recommendations and recognition of some of the best fan-produced material of the year within ljficwriters. This was a fixed-length project, scheduled to run for 6 weeks, but took five months of discussion, advertising, soliciting the help of other group members, creating the site, and then moderating it. The forum garnered several hundred subscribers and a few dozen contributors with rather mixed results. I have since done beta work with a few other writers who I work with through email or instant messaging, and the group blog has been reopened each year for posting.

One decision I made early in my observations was not to focus on the fanfic texts themselves as an object of study. I have read the equivalent of several hundred novels of fanfic from this group and to some degree the nature and content of the texts must be discussed and understood, given that they are a central purpose for most ljficwriters to be on LJ. However the focus of this study is on the reflexive use of technology by this group and the more general functions of this CoP, and my feeling is that neither this study nor the texts will be well served by attempting to incorporate literary studies into this endeavor. I will not be doing textual analysis of the literature itself. There are various recent publications that do focus on fanfic texts and they will be cited when relevant.

3.3.6 Interviews and other data collection

I conducted two preliminary one-hour interviews, one by phone and one by instant messenger, with group participants to discuss icon usage, fiction writing, reading

habits and what brought them to LJ. By using further semi-structured interviews I planned to gain a better understanding of observations being made at the study site.

Due to the scattered and international locations of ljficwriters, in-person interviews were likely to be difficult and cost-prohibitive. However in 2006 an opportunity presented itself. A fanfic writing convention for those in the Buffyverse fandom had been held successfully in 2004 and was being held again in Atlanta in July 2006.

I began by launching a survey at my LJ covering how ljficwriters used LJ on a day-to-day basis. LJ offers polling software to paid account users and polls are a common event in ljficwriter circles. My intention for the survey was to pilot test types of interview questions and potential areas for exploration prior to asking for interview volunteers. The response was unexpectedly large. I had over 240 responses in 72 hours. Respondents came from the following countries: US, Canada, Great Britain, Ireland, Italy, Australia, New Zealand, Sweden, Brasil, Belgium, Chile, Portugal, Denmark, Spain, Switzerland, Finland, France, Germany, Japan, Phillipines, Norway, Estonia, and Mexico. The rapid dissemination of the survey also allowed me to point to the survey itself when asking for volunteers, who then had some idea of the types of issues I was interested in discussing with them. Survey takers were anonymous and any comments made to the survey post were screened so that I was the only person able to view and respond to them. This was equally true of an icon survey I conducted during Summer 2006 for some general data collection on icon use by ljficwriters (Rebaza, 2008).

I joined the group blog on LJ for the writing convention and made my request for volunteers. I had 17 respondents, of whom I was able to successfully schedule 12. After arranging a time and place for the interview I sent each of the interviewees a consent form by email, which they returned with an acknowledgment that they had read the form, consented, and had no further questions. All the interviewees were over 18.

I interviewed the 12 volunteers over a 3-day period, and was also able to attend a few of the convention panels. The interviewees were interviewed in either their hotel room or mine for privacy, and each interview was done one-on-one. The interviews lasted approximately an hour each but varied depending on the interviewee and also the interview schedule. Since conference scheduling began at 10 AM and continued until

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midnight, interviewees often squeezed interviews into lunch or dinner breaks or more open periods. The interviews were semi-structured, with a list of 10 questions that were asked of all participants and with additional questions generated as the interviews progressed. The questions were as follows:

1. When and why did you first start using the Internet?
2. When do you remember first hearing of LJ, and what was the context? (Were you involved in other online sites at the time?)
3. What motivated you to open an LJ account?
4. What were the most important learning experiences you had about using LJ?
5. What were the most important learning experiences in participating in the Buffy fandom on LJ?
6. What would you miss the most about LJ if you no longer had it available to you?
7. Fandoms have tried out and used a number of technologies over the years. What sorts of lingering effects do you think LJ use might have, if any?
8. Do you write fanfic? Would you write if you couldn't use the Internet? LJ?
9. What about reading online, how do you think reading through LJ affects your reading experience?
10. What sort of routines do you have for using LJ?

Results from surveys I conducted were always shared with ljficwriters to encourage further feedback and discussion of the findings, as well as returning information about the community to its participants. Interviews were not shared, however, to preserve the interviewees' anonymity. When quoted in this dissertation, all interviewees will be identified by interview number (i.e. Int1, Int10). Each of the interviews was recorded, transcribed, and broadly coded for common elements.

3.4 Analytic framework

Grounded theory is used as the basis for data analysis. As data were collected, patterns of activity, topics of discussion, and issues of contention began to emerge. This emergent problem is the basis of grounded theory.

"This understanding revolves around the main concerns of the participants whose behavior continually resolves their concern. Their continual resolving is the core variable. It is the prime mover of the behavior seen and talked about in a substantive area...It emerges as the overriding pattern" (Glaser, 1998, p.115).

As Hine notes, ethnographers have always been selective in what is recorded in field notes and virtual ethnography is "an adaptive ethnography which sets out to suit itself in the conditions in which it finds itself" (Hine, 2000, p. 65). It is inherently partial and strategically relevant. What focuses the selection of material then is the research

question(s) meant to be explored. Hine lists research questions for CMC studies as including

"How do [users] understand [the Internet's] capabilities as a medium of communication, and whom do they perceive their audience to be?
How are identities performed and experienced, and how is authenticity judged?
Is 'the virtual' experienced as radically different from and separate from 'the real'? Is there a boundary between offline and online?" (Hine, 2000, p.8).

I highlight these questions specifically as these were questions that also guided my observations and, in a slightly different form, comprised my subquestions to be examined which were:

a) Is ljficwriters a community?
b) What are the norms?
c) How are the boundaries created/enforced?
d) How is it regulated?
e) Is there a hierarchy?
f) Why do people join?
h) What do they get out of it?

The material I selected to record and revisit is by necessity partial considering the number of individuals involved in the activities, the diversity of virtual locations, the length of time of my observations, and the 24-hour cycle of the community across international time zones. I originally began keeping a chronological record of postings and discussion that were either explicit examinations of practices, issues of conflict, or which discussed issues and terms I did not as yet understand and wanted to explore further. I later reorganized these notes into categories rather than temporal observations and discovered that they fell into the following areas:

1) Demographics of the group
2) Motivation for fiction writing
3) What is fandom?
        (a) Effects and repercussions of fan fiction
4) Gender issues
        (a) Outside and internal opinions on fan fiction and writers
5) Issues of contention
        (a) Canon
        (b) Etiquette
        (c) Hierarchies
        (d) Plagiarism
        (e) Shipper wars
        (f) Fanfic content
6) Practices
        (a) Writing Process

(b) Reading Process
(c) Icons
(d) Other
7) Technology and its effects

Some of these categories, such as Practices, are quite broad; others, such as issues of canon and plagiarism, quite specific. I then used these categories as guides to see what other discussion and activities continued to appear outside them, and in what ways they might be connected.

As per Glaser, in grounded theory one must ask three questions of the data being collected, "What category does this incident indicate?", "What property of what category does this incident indicate?", and "What is the participant's main concern?" (Glaser, 1998, p.140). The core category that emerged seemed to be of identity formation, both of self and the group. The texts being produced, the nature of conflicts, and the questions being explored all seemed to hew to both participants' place within the group and more broadly within society. Because the issue of self and group identity appears to be so central to this group, social identity theory and the Community of Practice framework, discussed earlier in Chapter 1, were both applicable in forming an understanding of the community.

The conflict between individual and group, particularly online, has been explored in past studies through the use of a social identity approach, beginning with Tajfel and Turner (1979). Social identity theory (SIT) is concerned with the effect of economic, cultural and historical conditions (more broadly) and local context (more narrowly) upon individual and group behavior.

"Social identity theory tries to explain social behavior in terms of the processes of social categorization, social comparison, and social identification. Behavior can be explained as a function of the level at which they categorize themselves in any given context...One basic assumption of social identity theory is that people try to maintain a positive sense of themselves as individuals. This objective can be accomplished, theoretically, by either personally differentiating the self from other ingroup members at the individual level, or at the group level by positively differentiating the ingroup from other groups" (Branscombe and Spears, 2001).

Also related is self-categorization theory (SCT), which increases the emphasis on environmental context and strategy in terms of how people make comparisons about self and group, and which elements of identity they decide to emphasize and align with. Turner (1987) focuses on three levels of self-categorization that shape identity:

superordinate identity (self as human being), social ingroup identity (group identity), and subordinate identity (personal identity). One of the reasons SCT is useful in an online context is because many of the cultural cues that affect categorization of others offline are missing in a virtual environment. In SCT every individual has multiple selves which correspond to their membership in various different groups such as family, profession, race, gender, nationality, etc. Individuals then respond to cues which activate these various selves in different contexts, shifting among them to always present a positive sense of self. In an online environment many of these cues cannot be seen, and other cues, often quite minimal, emerge to trigger identification of in-group and out-group behavior. Other instantiations of the social identity approach which have relevance in this study are (1) the influence of culture and motivation in formulations and attributions, (2) how different kinds of emotional experiences can occur depending on whether the self is construed at the personal or the social identity level, (3) helping or gift behavior; and (4) status dimensions in intergroup relations. The social identity approach can be used to understand where individual identity is given precedence among ljficwriters as opposed to group identities, and where the boundaries of each lie.

3.5 Research questions and contributions of the study

In Chapter 1 I laid out several questions about ljficwriters that would be explored through the CoP framework. They were (1) what is its end product? (2) what are its main values? (3) what motivates the participants to take part (4) how does leadership emerge, and (5) is this a new model of participation?

What does a study of this community add to our knowledge about social interactions in technologically mediated environments? In part I believe the answer comes down to identifying what makes a Community of Practice (CoP) successful at both the community level *and* at the individual level. A great deal of CoP literature deals with the advantages of the workplace CoP for their hosting institutions (Wenger 1998, Davenport & Hall 2002) or ways in which to create or maintain a successful CoP in that setting (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002, Ardichivili, Page, & Wentling, 2003). By comparison the usefulness of a CoP for individual learning has been less emphasized

since its initial discussion (Lave & Wenger, 1991). For example in discussing the ultimate purpose of a CoP for the individual, Wenger stated "We all have our own theories and ways of understanding the world and our communities of practice are places where we develop, negotiate and share them" (Wenger, 1998, p.48). In Chapter 2 we saw how central personal development might be for coterie writing circles both in the past as well as in the present day. The practices that lead to this development are what will be explored in coming chapters.

In the more work oriented view of the CoP, the end product for ljficwriters would likely be measured by how many of the writers went on to become commercially published authors or utilized their skills directly in professional environments. However, to set this framework on ljficwriters would be to miss the point of what motivates this largely female group to meet and interact. Many participants are not interested in the development of skills per se, or skill development is only one of several reasons why they write and share. What then, makes an individual experience in ljficwriters successful in terms of motivating participation and feeling rewarded by the activities?

A subquestion is how does participation in ljficwriters affect other parts of women's lives? In other words, "How are personal versus group boundaries drawn, and over what?" Where do individuals pull back from participation, or as defined through SCT, under what conditions is personal identity given precedence over group identity? In discussing the identity building aspects of a CoP, Wenger stated "We define who we are by the ways we reconcile our various forms of membership into one identity" (Wenger, 1998, p.149). How do participants in ljficwriters do this?

In order to participate fully in a CoP, an individual must attain a certain competence level in their practices. Success within ljficwriters must depend on a certain skill with and understanding of the virtual location, without which one remains outside of its boundaries. So a second subquestion would be "How does the technological medium affect practice?"

This study targets a variety of concepts and areas of research: the activities of women in virtual communities; the application of the social identity approach in online behavior; the creation of Communities of Practice; the historical continuity of coterie writing groups; and the interaction between technology and use. This dissertation

provides additional evidence for how technology shapes group practice, and how it affects conventions. Given the group under discussion, results are also likely to contribute to fan conceptualizations in cultural studies. Although the following chapter will focus on the CoP framework and its applicability in explaining processes found among ljficwriters, this dissertation's purpose is not to weigh in on the CoP literature and set out new models for its use, nor does it speak directly to blogging as practice or blogs as artifacts, although LJ is a blogging platform and some participants do see their activities as blogging. Rather the central purpose of this work speaks to contemporary coterie activities, asking "Are coteries still alive in the 21st century?" and exploring their existence and characteristics as seen among ljficwriters.

Chapter 4: A Community of Practice

"I've never been able to explain to anyone outside of this community just what it's like to know someone through text, through LJ, and to know you'll likely never meet them. It's hard because I never have the language for that. Friends doesn't explain the distance--both geographic and personal: the parts of our lives we do not and sometimes can't share. Acquaintance doesn't convey the intimacy of conversations that sometimes resemble sleepover confessions and, at other times, the jaded asides of bored academics at a conference who'd rather talk about the last speaker's cute ass.

I can't explain any of that to people outside of the community, but you all know, and she did, and I like to think that, as fluid and unusual as our relationships are here in fandom, they are also valuable even if they fail to fit into the neat categories that describe RL (real life)."
[Anon 22][4/12/2007] In Memoriam post to the death of a community member

4.1 Introduction

The above quote not only speaks eloquently to the difficulties of communication and relationships online, but also incorporates several of the elements that are the focus of this dissertation. In discussing the deceased, Anon 22 finds it necessary to invoke the shared space (indeed the technology) through which they met and interacted. She also presses upon the shared experience of her readers of what she asserts is a "community." She finds its nature difficult to express and notes the relationships formed within it are fragmented and shifting between elements she has in her offline life and things she can only get in this shared online space. The quote is also interesting because while being focused on death, a very specific one, it inevitably extends an invitation to those new to the community. The post asserts that relationships, however imperfect and temporary, can be made, can be fit into one's experiences, and that in time a shared understanding of the space does develop. Overall, her post situates the reader as an insider even while she explains that what makes the readers a group is difficult for her to define. She uses the terms "fandom" and "LJ" in her definition to demonstrate what the group is about and where it resides.

This chapter's purpose is also to situate the reader by bringing together the concept of community ("fandom") through technology ("LJ"). By building on the literature review in Chapter 2, the historical practices discussed there will recur here as we follow how ljficwriters came to be. This will begin with a discussion of the CoP model to determine why it is a useful framework to help define this group. Following, is

a discussion of the origins of the ljficwriter group on LJ. This will include reviewing the forms of Internet technology used by fanfic writers to publish their work, how the ljficwriters group ended up on LJ, and why this migration fits in, historically, with the concerns of earlier coterie writing groups. The chapter will continue by seeing how language situates ljficwriters within a constellation of overlapping group memberships, defining ljficwriters through both its uniqueness and its similarities to other online users. The chapter concludes by returning to Anon 22's topic of relationships online, and examining how interviewees conveyed their importance. By the conclusion of the next chapter we should come to an understanding of how an individual, new to the technology and the culture of this group, may come to grasp why Anon 22 could assert "but you all know."

4.2 The Community of Practice

The CoP model was not originally devised to look at online spaces or participants in leisure activities, but was rather a framework devised to understand how learning takes place within groups and how this might be applied to educational or workplace settings. Originated by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger in 1991, Wenger went on to develop the CoP model for use in formal business or government organizations, a focus of the majority of CoP research that followed. In contrast, work branching out from Lave's studies has continued to emphasize educational uses. Yet informal settings and groups such as online leisure communities have not been explored to the same degree, and debate exists as to whether or not the CoP model is even applicable to online settings (Kimble and Hildreth, 2004) since co-located members may be central to such groups, and learning may be more tied to offline actions than online activities. Research done on virtual communities has brought about different models to explain what is taking place in these settings. For example, Gee suggests a model for online leisure groups which he terms "affinity spaces" (Gee, 2005). In Gee's example, game participants come from varied and obscured backgrounds, develop emergent leadership, and find multiple ways in which to take part in activities and exchange knowledge. These factors could be seen to apply equally well to the ljficwriters group. However, as in Lave and Wenger's

original work, Gee is concerned primarily with educational settings and uses his example to contrast a specific online leisure group with an institution rather than other online groups. Not all online groups share the same elements. Some are more formally constructed as opposed to loosely associated, or may engage in more ephemeral or more concrete activities. Some have greater or lesser levels of anonymity, and groups may also have shorter or longer-term goals. Not all virtual communities will fit Gee's model.

Similarly, not all online groups may be usefully examined with the CoP framework and this dissertation does not make that claim. However, ljficwriters embody a number of elements that are fruitfully discussed through this lens. The first is that, as the CoP was designed for offline groups, so were the practices of ljficwriters first created by individuals who met in person. This suggests that the CoP model may be successfully implemented with similar groups whose method of meeting and communicating with one another differs, but whose goals and activities are largely the same. Another element that suggests applicability is the constitution of relatively "tangible" (and, once completed, relatively static) products, fan creations such as fiction or videos, which can be considered a "reification" of the CoP processes, along with other forms of documentation such as group blog membership requirements, how-to posts, and "meta" discussions of the group's behaviors. Such materials are all digital creations, perhaps created individually while offline but shared, located, consumed, and responded to online.

Wenger's (1998) map of the CoP model discusses the roles of various participants within it, including core members (who may or may not be considered group leaders), newcomers, and brokers to other CoPs. The CoP model considers locality, the site of interaction, as an element of participation and practice. The CoP model examines the negotiation of participants to determine what it is they are trying to accomplish and through what means. Most importantly, the CoP model examines identity development as both an individual and a member of the group, which requires that the group has a sense of itself *as* a group. This identity development is seen as both a negotiation of self and group, a merging of various memberships into one identity, and as a learning trajectory, identifying self through past experience and future practice. This past experience may not simply constitute specific individual actions but also social

connections and engagement, and personal alignments. One of these alignments may simply be to consider the group "a community" and one's self as a member thereof.

While many members of ljficwriters would define their group as a "community", the meaning of this term is less clear. The term has shifting academic definitions, many of which seem to spring from focusing on a particular time or place, or sometimes a particular social structure, such as the family. However this seems to be the best term with which to examine the shape and significance of relationships that occur regardless of time, place, or group type.

By using the CoP framework we can focus on how people learn through both practice and social interaction with others engaged in the activity. Specifically it is a "conceptual framework from which to derive a consistent set of general principles and recommendations for understanding and enabling learning"(Wenger, 1998, p. 4). The CoP framework presumes that the group as a whole creates an output to which various different social interactions and tasks contribute. It also presumes that social interactions are inherently instructional, that knowledge is a matter of competence over particular tasks, and that the group cannot exist without participation and active engagement. Lave sees disengagement, ignorance, alienation, creative obsession, and expertise as characteristics of communities of practice as a whole, constituted as they are by individual participants at various stages of membership or in specific circumstances. The division between meaning and meaninglessness represents barriers to membership, and access to participation in the group, whose full members have achieved *cultural transparency,* their knowledge of objects or activities being understood without need for translation (Lave, 1996). The end product for the individual is to create meaning and a worldview, though such meaning may vary for each participant.

The issue of participation is a key one for looking at online groups because without participation and engagement, one's presence cannot be recognized, either by an observer or by the other group participants. For example, a visitor to an online site may show up to a webmaster as a traffic statistic. If the individual has gone so far as to register an account for a site, they may show up as being logged in. However, without some form of interaction with others in a group, there is not only no effect on the group by the individual, but there is no opportunity for the visitor to create an identity as part of

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their presence and observation. Identity building, along with meaning, practice and community, are central components for a CoP.

The CoP is also well suited to examining an online leisure group such as ljficwriters due to its emphasis on agency and intention. Theories of social structure focus on institutions, norms and rules. However in an environment where people congregate separate from any institution or specific set of governing rules and norms, it is exactly their agency and intentions, and the conflicts that arise in a clash of these separate motivations, that gives rise to a group norm. In fact, were norms to be imposed from an outside structure, in the case of ljficwriters, the corporate body of LiveJournal, the group might well dissolve or suffer major restructuring as a way of coping with these new restrictions or dictates.

The CoP framework is particularly focused on issues of social practice and identity. Specifically it looks at the "social systems of shared resources by which groups organize and coordinate their activities, mutual relationships and interpretations of the world" (Wenger, 1998, p.13). In the case of ljficwriters, these "shared resources" include the TV shows and the fanfic created, as well as online tools, primarily those which LJ presents. The social systems are also the collective knowledge of the group and the assistance they are able to offer one another, especially to carry out common tasks.

Other aspects of CoPs are that the communities are consistent over time, are engaged in interpretive and informative practices, and they develop and maintain group norms. CoPs include different levels of participation and a reification of practice (Wenger, 1998). All these aspects were observed during the data collection period and will be discussed in coming sections. Overall this dissertation will look at how learning, boundaries, and meaning arise from the practices of the group, and how these aspects are tied to the technology that LJ has made available. The CoP framework will be presented as a way of exploring the activities and motivations of a coterie writing group, and understanding such a group in its present form.

To begin this process the following section will look at how the particular group in this dissertation, ljficwriters, came to be located on LJ and what practices and concerns they brought with them to the space.

4.3 Moving across cyberspace

Fan groups did not originate on LJ. Instead these groups migrated over time from scattered offline groups to online locations as Internet technologies developed. From newsgroups to mailing lists to posting boards and then blogging sites, fan groups shifted their central activities to new technologies and sites that could best accommodate their needs. They were able to do this due to both a network of social ties as well as a history of shared practice. Wenger defines practice as "the source of coherence of a community." This relationship has three "dimensions" which are "mutual engagement, a joint enterprise and a shared repertoire of ways of doing things" (Wenger, 1998, p. 49). The shared repertoire of writing and reading practices separated fanfic writers and readers from larger fan groups who had minimal interest in fanfic. The mutual engagement of these writers and readers in their activities kept networks of people together in their joint enterprise of establishing locations and organizations that would enable them to carry out their work. Ljficwriters formed on LJ for several central reasons which will be discussed in this section: (1) female writing and discussion, (2) cost, convenience, and improved service, and (3) new possibilities.

4.3.1 Control of female-centered space

As Bury (2005) discusses in her examination of fans' use of mailing lists in the early 1990s, many women who wished to have discussions on topics that did not fit with the majority of users or who wanted to share their creative work, felt harassed and were sometimes banned from forums such as newsgroups and male-run boards. Such restrictions are still an issue for many female fans, as this post from 2007 reveals:

"I've spent a majority of my "fandom life" within male dominated fandoms - first generalist Science Fiction newsgroup then Roleplaying Games clubs and forums. The kind of places where women make about 10 to 20% at most of the overall population. I've had to suffer to a lot of sexism, outright misogyny and sexual teasing. I went along with it because I wanted into the fandom and I did not know anywhere else to get it and also because I'd been ostracized and bullied enough previously that the attention as the token girl and object of sexist and sexual jokes seemed actually an improvement
…
But it's only when I joined…fandom in 2004 on Livejournal that I really found myself within female dominated fandoms. Fanfics as a fandom is extremely majorly made of women, I do not think men make

more than 5% of it. In many ways the resulting dynamic rather surprised me. There's a lot I enjoyed from it. The welcome of feminist and queer-friendly values for one, and the warmth of people. No more dissing the female SF writers, or fantasy as a whole, or other ridiculous stuff. " [Anon 11][5/22/2007]

Another poster was more succinct:

" When I was new to blogging, I found LJ to be the most user-friendly and fully featured. The best part was - and is - all the friendly voices and relative lack of alpha posturing. I prefer a space where women can speak with women, and speak as women." [Anon 12][1/22/2006]

Bury's book focused on just one aspect of female fans' efforts to participate in ways that interested them, something which Larbalestier (2002) examines over a longer time period. What was important to the female fans was the mutual engagement in certain topics and practices that could not be easily shared in other settings. Bury found that the central issues that precipitated the move to mailing lists were female control of topics, privacy of discussion, and moderated membership (in one example, membership was restricted to 50 people to better facilitate discussion). In addition to these aspects of control over discussion and access, another factor for many women was technological ease of use. Mailing lists provided little difficulty since all one needed to do after signing up was to read one's email, so technological expertise was not a particular issue for Bury's participants. However the unequal distribution of technical knowledge among fanfic writers in general is part of what led to LJ's greater use.

First and foremost, however, was the issue of a separate female space. While this was not possible on newsgroups, posting boards that had moderated membership and private posting blossomed, particularly on OneList. This site was eventually absorbed by Yahoo and became YahooGroups. Some future LJ users left the site in protest over changes being implemented, especially when Yahoo also took over two other sites heavily used by female fans: (1) Geocities, where a lot of fanfic was archived, and (2) WebRings, which fans used to create reciprocal links to one another's work.

The issue of linking was fairly important as in the late 1990s search engines were not as effective for finding fan works as using a directory or links site. This was even truer for non-text fan works such as videos or art, which can still be difficult to locate if they are scattered about on random websites. The one-to-one, reciprocal type of behavior seen in Web Rings was a precursor to the sort of social networking that is now at a zenith in LJ use. Web Rings were set up to link together web sites hosting similar types of

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content. This allowed fanfic writers and readers with very specific tastes to form subgroups centered on their shared interest. Because individual websites also offered the same sort of personal control of content and presentation now seen on LJ, they differed from posting boards and mailing lists where control was generally in the hands of a list owner or moderator.

Eventually many fans left posting boards and mailing lists and moved to LJ accounts. In part this was because the fandoms they were involved in started to decline, which often happens after a TV show or book series the fandom is based on ends. As traffic on lists or boards began to die out, some of these writers joined new fandoms. Increasingly, these new fandoms had shifted to blogging/networking sites such as LJ. There were also technological reasons for the decline of lists and boards. As one fan posted:

"Mailing Lists aren't really real time…You have to wait for the mail to be delivered. They're not interactive – you can't comment on just one particular post. You can't put up clips or vids, song samples or pics. They're just mail. You can't link to something offsite, and you can't go back and edit. They're clunky. No one joins them because no one even browses through them any more." [Anon 13] [12/20/2006]

The poster goes on to note that thanks to LJ's tagging system and incorporated Scrapbook feature, individual websites are no longer necessary:

"An LJ is a blog, a personal website, a fanfic archive, an art gallery, and soon, I suspect, a vid-hosting site. LJ mail has begun to spread in popularity. All anyone ever needs any more is an LJ." [Anon 13] [12/20/2006]

Indeed since the above post was made, LJ also includes a chat function. The fact that LJ can be used as a multipurpose site is not only a matter of convenience, but it also provides a lower barrier for people inexperienced with online technology. Instead of having to find, sign up for, and learn various different tools, they were able to learn to perform multiple tasks using the same platform. It was also easier to find help in using those features since everyone one interacted with had the same options at hand, and a fellow group member was usually available to walk you through the process if the FAQ was not detailed enough. For many women, some of whom needed help even to post entries, this convenience and assistance was quite welcome.

Even for those who were more web-savvy the site's time saving options were attractive:

" I came to livejournal because I'd been keeping an online journal off-and-on since 1997-ish and got sick of hand-coding all my entries and the archive and such. I got my first LJ back in 2000…The fans came to me and it was AWESOME." [Anon 14][8/26/2006]

LJ's time saving features would not have been of much use, however, had another feature of Internet access not changed around 2000. This was the more widespread option of flat-rate Internet service.

4.3.2 Cost, convenience, and improved service

Mailing lists and posting board digests allowed those who paid by the minute or hour to minimize their connection time and thus participate by reading and composing responses and story posts offline. By comparison, LJ's web-based platform and various features such as embedded video, collapsed comment threads, and commenting required constant online use. The widespread implementation of flat fee Internet service, and later the growing use of high-speed service, meant that asynchronous, text-restricted formats were no longer a financial necessity.

Aside from dissatisfaction with corporate buyouts of earlier sites, affordability of use, and the all-in-one convenience of LJ service, the formation of ljficwriters was facilitated by LJ offering features that fans were already employing. These features were the privacy available in closed boards or lists, together with various personalization options:

"LiveJournal seems to merge the best aspects of both types of venues. Your friends' list plus various filters act as very flexible mailing list - locked posts for the more private conversations, everything in one convenient place instead of spread all over the net, anything sent directly to you ends up in your mailbox if you want, and the "list membership" is tailored to your specific preferences, not just anyone with a common interest. At the same time it has all the benefits of a bulletin board - open to the public, and easy to access and master, potentially reaching a large audience." [Anon 15][12/20/2006]

Anon 15 mentions both technological and social convenience as positive aspects of LJ use. In this next quote, Anon 16 moves from discussing customization of reading

material and freedom of posting to mentioning icons (user pictures) as key features drawing people into opening accounts.

"I love having the freedom to initiate whatever discourse I want, especially as I generally find it hard to compartmentalise (a side-effect of my chaotic lifestyle), and tend to see my involvement in fandom as part of my real life, and not something outside of it (a lot of my RL friends are, in any case, LJ friends). It is nice to have a place where you can refer to all of that, and not be off-topic or breaking any rules.
…
 Plus, icons! Never let it be said that I underestimate their allure. It is the thing that often pushes people on from free accounts (only three - or is it six these days? I forget) to paid accounts (many, many more)." [Anon 16][11/9/2006]

LJ allowed users to personalize not just their reading options, but also their viewing options. This ranges from setting a certain format for viewing all RSS content to blocking images, previewing links, and creating stylesheets for one's blog. Since LJ could also host and archive images, this change allowed certain aspects of fan creation to flourish, and additional fan interests to develop:

"Then there's the whole icon/wallpaper/etc aspect. I'm more into graphics in the world of LJ fandom than I was in List fandom." [Anon 17] [8/26/2006]

The freedom to customize one's online space, and to express one's self with user icons, and to post on any topic of discussion, whether it was related to fanfic or not, was a response to the tight moderation that existed on lists and boards. Given that this moderation itself had been a reaction to the free-for-all that inhibited many fanfic writers on open sites like newsgroups, the movement to LJ was a pendulum swing in the opposite direction as people chafed under mod restriction. LJ fan fiction groups and personal journals served as an escape valve for opinions and disagreements that were otherwise barred from the lists or boards.

"I originally thought I could use LJ as a place to post thoughts that were too inflammatory for lists. Because there were only a few people I knew over here, and it's not like the rest of fandom paid any attention to this place, right?" [Anon 18][8/26/2006]

This freedom was also important to individuals who had never made the migration to boards or lists because they preferred the anarchy of open sites to the restrictions of moderators.

" I am much happier on LJ, which has a lot of the benefits of Usenet without some of the hassles. It has its problems - discussion fragments, it's hard to track back, etc. - but I feel much more in control of my fannish

experience here than on mailing lists, which could be deleted at the whim of an angry mod." [Anon 19][8/26/2006]

For some people even the privacy of lists or boards hadn't been enough. LJ's personalization/privacy options offered an individual the ability to control their reputation in a way that they couldn't on a site where they had no input on its archiving.

"it's easier to hide your idiocy on LJ than it was on mailing lists. Those ML archives from 1999-2002 are there forever, displaying my very painful and humiliating growing up from high schooler to college student. Doing that online is just never a good idea." [Anon 20][8/26/2006]

While concealment is a concern for many, exploration was a draw for others. Aside from being able to belong to multiple fan discussion groups while being in the same "space," LJ users can also keep in touch with offline friends, or pursue new interests without having to go anywhere else.

"Initially, I came specifically for fandom and fanfic. I have to admit, things have evolved. I still love my fannish friends, but I've added folks with other interests, and probably spend more time with them than I do reading fic. Wow. I never would have expected that two years ago." [Anon 21][8/26/2006]

By briefly reviewing these previous movements of fanfic writers across Internet platforms, and their words regarding the benefits of LJ features, it becomes clear that various factors contributed to LJ's significance as a site for fanfic writers (and thus readers):

(1) **Female writing and discussion.** Many of these writers felt harassed, silenced, or were deliberately excluded from forums that were unmoderated, or which were not moderated by fellow fanfic writers. As was seen in Chapter 2, there have been historical precedents for this marginalization. The move of readers and writers online did little to change the problems faced by female writers and writing groups.

(2) **Cost and convenience.** New forms of Internet access and lowered technological barriers for different forms of engagement meant a move towards sites with multimedia capability. Having one login and learning about one platform to perform multiple tasks was an improvement over previously fragmented services that fanfic writers employed, and not all knew how to use.

(3) **Improved service.** LJ allowed fanfic writers to combine important factors such as individual control, personalization, and variable levels of privacy in discussion. On LJ, users could create a female-centered writing space while neither surrendering

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control of discussion to moderators, nor being subject to harassment. It also allowed members to emphasize socializing as the predominant group value.

(4) **New possibilities.** Being able to embed video and utilize graphics allowed vidders and artists to share their work more widely. In the case of artists, LJ increased demand for their work since it provided a place for users to employ visual creations such as banners, icons, and layouts as they customized their blogs, group blogs, and posts. This also meant that people who were not only fanfic writers, but also artists and/or vidders, now had a single platform where they could interact with their different audiences simultaneously.

This section has explored some of the elements Anon 22 put forth in the chapter's opening quote about who makes up ljficwriters. As members of previous fan groups which interacted and created work through earlier online technologies, they arrived at LJ carrying earlier practices with them, both those formed within fanfic groups as well as elements of practice from even earlier coterie writing groups. To discuss these practices, this dissertation will use the Community of Practice (CoP) concept to examine ljficwriters in terms of its (1) end product (2) core values (3) participant motivations (4) leadership structure, and (5) participation cycle. In the next section, this will begin by looking at how the ljficwriter group is situated amidst other online groups through its use of language, and what this reveals about group membership.

4.4 The fannish lexicon

Before fan groups ever coalesced on LJ, certain practices were already in place which contributed to the selection of the site as a location for interaction and archiving. These practices function both to facilitate exchanges among group members while at the same time forming boundaries for the group. This is done both to protect the participants from external intrusion, but also to maintain a sense of unity.

Especially within a community of writers where text is the primary and sometimes-exclusive form of communication, everything starts with language. Ljficwriters are well aware that there are layers of verbal and behavioral practice that

make up the community experience, even if terminology and exchanges vary from one group to the next, and from the group as a whole to small clusters of individuals. This vocabulary is something that: (1) is learned by newcomers (often in various stages as they enter the community), (2) creates a boundary between members fluent in it and outsiders baffled by it, (3) unifies the central interests and paths of a group, and (4) allows the users to derive meaning from the manner in which vocabulary frames their discussions, so that it becomes another form of play. Through these four aspects of language use, we can see elements of a CoP at work.

4.4.1 Words plus images

" I still adhere to some "older," mailing list related things--I use colons for actions, for example, ::wave:: as opposed to *wave*, and sometimes when I do not want to be bothered HTMLing something, I _emphasize_.". [Anon 25][12/20/2006]

While many members of ljficwriters are young enough that LJ has been the only site where they have interacted with other fanfic writers, most early adopters who came to the site between 2001 and 2003 had previous experience on mailing lists, posting boards, and early text-only systems. Some of the practices they brought to the LJ space reflected earlier Internet culture, and habits begun in text-only systems. One practice which began prior to LJ and has continued with new additions is that of lacing discussion with emotional cues**.**

Fanfic writers plumb their own emotions as part of their writing, and seek to draw it out in their readers. Fanfic itself is often a highly emotional style of writing (Bacon-Smith, 1991), and the online setting contributes to a hyperpersonal style of communication between readers and writers. Walther describes hyperpersonal communication as occurring when: 1) the receiver idealizes communication partners by magnifying the partners' positive values; 2) the sender is selective in self-presentation; and 3) the interplay of idealization and self- presentation becomes a dynamic process and creates a self-reinforcing cycle. People can develop a rapid sense of closeness and rapport in their computer-mediated interactions (Walther, 1996). Especially as acquaintances develop within the group, these emotional cues, particularly those of

excitement and enthusiasm, become even more pronounced, and serve to create a community atmosphere which, as a whole, reinforces such expressions.

Coloring communication with emotional cues such as emoticons (\o/, ☺, <3), speech emphasis (bold type, capitalization, underscoring, separation with periods) and gestural substitutes (*wink*, ::nods::, waves) was a practice widely observed in early Internet research. Some studies have shown that women's use of such cues are more prevalent both offline and online (Witmer & Katzman, 1997) which suggests their use may be more widespread in a female-dominated environment. Indeed a look through ljficwriter posts shows that they pepper their text with symbols, multiple exclamation points, all capitalized text, and written gestures such as "*hugs*" or "*pets*." These older habits are now integrated into newer options on LJ that extend the functionality of visualization in two ways: mood themes and icons.

Mood themes consist of dozens of graphic images with attached labels such as "sleepy", "bored" or "thankful." Although there are a variety of standard mood sets available to any LJ user, fan artists create customized mood themes that reflect the fandoms or characters they are interested in. Like other kinds of graphic elements on LJ (such as banners, icons, or layouts), mood themes are publicly posted for the taking by other users. However mood markers have a limited use. They can only be attached to a user's blog post and thus indicate a very general attitude by the user. Ljficwriters have developed the use of another LJ feature to better reflect specific tone in conversational exchanges: icons.
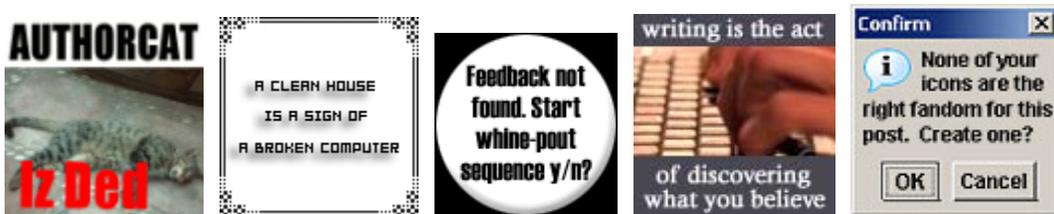

Figure 4.1: Icons as expressions of group practice

Icons are available not only to accompany posts but any comment made anywhere on LJ. These 100 x 100 pixel images are made in vast quantities (dozens of icon posts are made daily) and then taken and uploaded by interested users to their own LJ accounts.

These icons are sometimes merely attractive images that please the user. They may also be used as identity markers. Utilizing the same default icon in one's LJ account, allows each post or comment a user makes anywhere on LJ to be easily spotted, giving the user a recognizable "face" across LJ locations. But icons also serve to highlight community practices and thus signal membership by the users, reinforce intragroup similarities, and signal key aspects of participation to newcomers. The five icons shown above, for example, all reflect shared beliefs and aspects of community members.

The first icon in Image 1 refers to the concept in literary criticism of the "death of the author" and how literature belongs to the public. This stance forms the basis of fanfic writing as it liberates texts from their original creators to create new interpretations. Fanfic authors use their work as response, modification, and opposition to the texts whose characters and settings they use. As one fanfic writer put it, the original texts are "the bones" upon which their group is founded. The canon provides a foundation, but it is the fanfic writers who give the text meaning and continuing life by fleshing it out in stories, videos or artwork that further explore the canon characters, and add new layers of interpretation. In this icon a concept in literary criticism appears as a form of commentary on the practice being engaged in by writers and readers in their discussions.

The second icon reflects the gender identity of many in the group, playing on the cultural role of women as housekeepers, while demonstrating their priorities to a device, the computer, that continues to carry male connotations. This icon foregrounds a growing demographic shift in Internet use which has men as only a slight majority online, a trend which, if it continues, is likely to make a computer a more gender-neutral cultural symbol. Currently, the ways in which men and women utilize the Internet still produce statistical differences. In a study sponsored by the Pew Internet and American Life project, data was collected online and by phone between 2002 and 2005 from over 20,000 individuals in samples that closely mirror the U.S. population in terms of age and sex. The study reported that:

"Men are more likely than women to use the internet as a destination for recreation. Men are more likely to: gather material for their hobbies, read online for pleasure, take informal classes, participate in sports fantasy leagues, download music and videos, remix files, and listen to radio" (Fallows, 2005).

One can see from this description that the overwhelmingly female ljficwriters group does not fit this statistical generality. While the female priority for the Internet as communication tool is evident in the group's highly social nature and multi-modal forms of engagement, in other aspects its practices fits the above quote describing men's behavior. Ljficwriters is a hobby group; it revolves around reading and writing; it offers advice and how-to's for writing improvement; it is a form of communal fantasy play; it hosts remixes in the forms of text, graphics and video for download; and it offers music files in "fanmixes," which are collections of music set to a certain theme for a show, character, or pairing. In the same way in which we see a preference for gender symbols in the icon, computers over housework, ljficwriters can serve as a site for the refutation of strict gender roles, and the exploration of alternative forms of identity. Identity development is one of the core functions of a CoP.

The third icon reflects one of the reasons why ljficwriters may prefer the computer to housework, which is the appeal of feedback from other group members to one's work, and the disappointment that may ensue when it is not forthcoming. A detailed discussion of the importance of feedback is found in Chapter 5.

The fourth icon again exemplifies the development of identity, this time through the use of engagement and imagination. The icon suggests that writers in the group are discovering who they are by virtue of their participation, part of the process of a CoP as described below.

"In terms of participation, engagement requires access to and interaction with other participants in the course of their own engagement…In terms of participation, imagination requires an opening. It needs the willingness, freedom, energy, and time to expose ourselves to the exotic, move around, try new identities, and explore new relations" (Wenger, 1998, p.185).

As the icon states, by writing, and being stimulated to write through participation in the group, ljficwriters are discovering what they believe about themselves and the world. This is an ongoing practice in the group, reflected in the icon's creation, content, and use.

The final icon in Image 1 demonstrates the common group practice of using icons considered "appropriate" for the posts and comments they accompany. This practice marries the messages and tone of icons to the textual conversation in progress. Through icon use, ljficwriters continue older practices of gesture and expression that were previously text-only, infusing that communication with emotional content. Many icons

either implicitly represent common facial expressions, or explicitly duplicate textual "gestures" with captions such as :"Oh noes!", "Disapproves" or "Deathglare". Such icons are utilized by participants during conversational exchanges to emphasize their messages or intentions, or to provide a substitute for textual reaction to a message. Figure 4.2 presents several examples of emotion (from left to right): anger, shame, befuddlement, and shock. The second icon incorporates the netspeak practice of using asterisks (*facepalm*) to set off an action, and the third and fourth icons also show the incorporation of emoticons (0_0 and D:) into the icons themselves, demonstrating continuity between older and newer practice, and between community-centered practice, and the wider world of online netspeak. Wenger refers to this as an interplay between the local and the global in a CoP, which defines "a global context for its own locality" (Wenger, 1998 p.228). This merger of the global and the local will be further discussed in the next section. For a wider exploration of icon use in conversation, see Rebaza, 2008.

Figure 4.2: Icons expressing emotion and tone

4.4.2 Words as boundary

Boundary relations in a CoP involve insiders and outsiders to the group and within ljficwriters words are part of the creation of this boundary. Wenger notes that the "nuances and jargon of a professional group distinguish the inside from the outside as much as do certificates." But "participation and reification can also create continuities across boundaries" (Wenger, 1998, p.105). While some jargon employed by ljficwriters is unique to the group as a whole, or even to small subsets of that group, a sample of their jargon also demonstrates overlapping memberships in different communities. Just as

with icon use, jargon serves as a boundary between insiders and outsiders. However unlike icons, words can be used anywhere, and can easily be imported from anywhere. The varied sources of terminology used among ljficwriters indicates the overlapping boundaries of other online groups, and the various positions of a given ljficwriter, not only to the ljficwriter group, but to other groups on LJ, other groups online, and other groups offline. Language can demonstrate multiple memberships and the existence of the ljficwriter CoP in relation to other communities, is part of what Wenger terms the "constellations formed by interrelated communities of practice" (Wenger, 1998, p. 17). These constellations are formed by a variety of factors such as having members in common, sharing artifacts, having proximity of interaction, having overlapping styles or discourses, facing similar conditions, and having related enterprises.

This section will look at four types of jargon pertaining to (1) fan practices (2) online culture (3) LJ use and (4) fanfic which newcomers must learn to be fully acculturated into ljficwriters.

4.4.2.1 Jargon as global action – netspeak and crosspollination

Fan jargon is one of the clearest markers of interrelated communities on LJ. Some of it is common to most fan groups, and some is common only to small groups of fans. Each fan, however, may belong to multiple groups, not only on LJ but elsewhere online or offline.

The mélange of netspeak, and specialized discourse that fans brought into the LJ space continues to expand, since users are now speaking in "one space." Ljficwriters may import fan terms from other online groups, or may originate terms within the group itself. Fan terms describe actions, events, or objects occurring within the group. Examples include *squee* (the sound of excited squealing, or simply enthusiasm over some event or topic), *shipping* (the fannish following of a particular romantic pairing), or *OTP* (one true pairing, a fan's favorite romantic pairing). Some terms such as *pwned* (humiliated defeat) or *noobs* (newcomers) appear in conversation because they are imported from other fannish spaces such as game sites, and reflect geek culture. These terms may see adaptations in their setting among fanfic writers. An example was this

disclaimer in a story heading: "All of your characters are not belong to me." This statement is a variation on a popular phrase ("All your base are belong to us") in use over the last ten years, originally drawn from a poorly translated Japanese video game. In the ljficwriter setting, the author was using it as part of the *fanfic* practice of disclaiming ownership over copyrighted aspects being used in a fanfic story. We can see this as a variation on the icon example shown in the previous section, which merged general emoticon use into the ljficwriter practice of icon use, thus linking local practice with the global (or at least wider) practice of adding emotional cues to text.

One recent area of jargon overlap is the language used for *macros*, a widespread form of Internet play in which users label pictures with ungrammatical captions (a popular example being LOLcats). Macro-speak has appeared among ljficwriters on icons, in discussion, and in picspam posts (posts of mostly pictures organized by a theme). An example of such a post would be a series of TV character photos with captions such as "Angel is turning EBIL, how can we tellz?" Another example can be seen in Figure 4.1 with the "Authorcat Iz Ded" icon. Thus a wider Internet practice, applying stylistically humorous captions to photos, is merged with local practices of icon use and the posting of photos related to Buffy or Angel.

One problem with jargon overlap is that it is difficult to determine the direction of a practice. That is, are terms being derived within the group and spreading outward, or are members of the group applying terms used elsewhere, locally? One example is the practice of combining character names to indicate a romantic pairing that a participant enjoys (i.e., Spuffy for Spike/Buffy, or Spangel for Spike/Angel). Offline this practice is also used now by gossip writers and celebrity reporters referring to celebrity pairings (i.e. Brangelina or Bennifer), making it more difficult to tell if this is a fan practice that spread to the media, or if it became used in various different settings simultaneously.

LJ itself facilitates language overlap due to its orientation on the individual, centering the site not around group blogs but among networked users. Ljficwriters are only one group utilizing LJ, and each user may have a diversity of readers since fanfic may be only one of the many interests they post about. No longer is a fanfic writer's audience present for a single topic discussion as might be expected on a posting board or mailing list devoted only to fanfic. Instead an ljficwriter's readers may also include

members of various interest groups or even offline friends or family. When that ljficwriter makes a post, they may get responses from people belonging to a variety of groups, not just fellow ljficwriters. Crosspollination of terms can thus occur more rapidly.

Crosspollination also means there are more opportunities for confusion, as terms that were once limited to a small group of 50 regular readers who understood their meaning get spread to several hundred readers who may either not understand them, or have a different interpretation of the term. For example the presence of many manga and anime fandoms on LJ (which focus on Japanese comics or animation) have spread terms such as "yaoi", "hentai" or "lemon." Some fans have argued that the term "yaoi" is now used interchangeably with the Western fanfic term "slash" even while the exact meaning of both terms are still contested among their originating groups. In other cases, terms travel due to the international composition of fan groups. For example, British characters use British terminology, which gets replicated and expanded in fanfic, and then also migrates to use by fans themselves, regardless of their nationality. Lastly, abbreviations or nicknames that refer to particular shows, fandoms, or actors get adopted by fellow ingroup members as a convenient shorthand, but mystify outside readers. Within ljficwriters the abbreviations BtVS and AtS are used to denote the shows "Buffy the Vampire Slayer" and "Angel the Series."

Along with being a nexus of overlapping practice, jargon is also a reified practice in a CoP. The crossing of terms from different communities demonstrates participation in multiple communities of practice, with ljficwriters as brokers who introduce elements of one practice into another. Just as emoticons did not originate with fanfic writers, some terms are common among ljficwriters because they are part of "netspeak," an online vocabulary especially common among younger or longtime Internet users (Randall, 2002). As fanfic writers moved online, fannish terms began to mix with online terms and practices. As fans migrated from one platform to the next, bits and pieces of past practice have migrated with them. The current language use by ljficwriters reflects a mix of influences from their multiple roles as online users, as fanfic writers, and as participants in other online settings.

Examples of netspeak in use by ljficwriters include such frequently used acronyms such as *LOL* (laughing out loud) or *OMG* (Oh My God), but also other terms specific to online activities such as *IM* or *YM* (AOL or Yahoo instant messaging)*, capping* (creating image captures)*, spamming* (posting too frequently), or *crossposting* (copying a post to more than one online location). The term *teh* which mocks a common misspelling of the word "the" not only continues to be used ironically, but also finds use in terms such as *pretteh* or *sexeh*. Even further, "pretteh" has moved from adjective to noun, indicating attractive actors who are objects of discussion (i.e., "I'm all about teh pretteh"). Another example is how *pron,* which originated as a way to evade automated censorship of sexual discussion by switching the letters in "porn," has led to *smex* and *smexing,* even though on LJ adult language is not censored.

Overall the use of netspeak among ljficwriters indicates a variety of memberships. For example younger users, accustomed to texting and instant messaging, are particularly likely to use abbreviations in conversation. Use of older netspeak terms continues to be employed by longtime netizens. And since netspeak tends to be in use in a wide variety of online locations, this type of jargon is particularly portable across group boundaries.

The learning that all this usage entails is an example of legitimate peripheral participation (Lave and Wenger, 1991), the root concept of a CoP in which novices learn introductory tasks that prepare them for wider participation in a group. However merging wider and local practice is just one aspect of language use among ljficwriters. The next section will shift focus from imported global terms, to local terms created for use on LJ in general and among fanfic writers, specifically.

4.4.2.2 Jargon as localized action – technological and authorial language

To use LJ's various features and to interact with others on what is a designated social networking site, an ljficwriter must acquire a vocabulary of terms specific to these activities. LJ is an institution which hosts numerous overlapping groups, some of them CoPs. All of these groups will share common terms referencing LJ features.

LJ has expanded netspeak abbreviations and terms with ones specific to the LJ site such as *cutting* (inserting an lj-cut tag to minimize a long post), *friending*

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(subscribing to an individual or group blog), *flist* (one's reading list of subscribed blogs), *flistmate* (another person who is on one's flist), *friends cut* (eliminating blogs from one's reading list), *friends crawl* or *friendsfriends* (following links on someone else's reading list), *friends lock* (restricting reading access to those who have friended you). and *mems* (saving an LJ link to the Memory feature, a bookmarking tool).

Some terms originated with early LJ adopters, and have faded out when new users failed to take up the term. *Fake-cut* is a term used in relation to the <lj-cut> command. This command is employed to keep long or image heavy posts from filling up a reader's RSS feed of other LJ blogs they are subscribed to. The term "fake cut" was used to announce that the link displayed was not an lj-cut but that the post content was either offsite or at another LJ blog. This term was one I saw used often among ljficwriters when I began my observations in 2004, and one I took particular note of because of the time it took me to understand its meaning. By 2008, it was a term I rarely came across. Given that the term "fake-cut" describes a local action performed on LJ daily, the observed decline in its use may indicate that its original users ceased to use it or left LJ, and that newer users have not adopted it.

Along with terms reflecting local technological practice among LJ users, there are terms that reflect the local practice of fanfic writing. If a reader is to find the sort of reading material that interests them, it will become necessary to learn the terms by which those different types of fanfic are described. Similarly, if they are to write and post fanfic, they will have to learn terms related to those practices.

Some terms are specific to fanfic itself, and the types of stories that readers are looking for. The major categories of fanfic are *gen, het* and *slash* (the romantic, or non-romantic orientation of a story), *AU* (alternate universe, a story that deviates strongly from the original text), *RPF* (real people fanfic, as opposed to fictional characters) and *crossovers* (stories that mix characters and settings from different fandoms). Some terms pertain to the types of emotions evoked by a story, such as *angst* (a story that centers on emotional distress), *fluff* or *curtainfic* (stories that are light and cheery, or center on a happy domestic setting), or *darkfic* (horror stories with violent or unpleasant themes). Some terms pertain to specific events such (*noncon* or *deathfic),* or story type (*crackfic* or *songfic)*. Some terms pertain to story structure such as *epic, drabble, series,* or *ficlet* or

warnings about story content (Adult, PG-13). Although not widely used, there was even a system devised in 2005 called Fan Rated Ratings in response to a copyright challenge made by the Motion Picture Association of America to use of its ratings system for non-movie materials (http://tfrrs.tripod.com/). The Fan Rated system uses terms such as FRAO (Fan Rated Adult Only). So if a reader is to find a story of an appropriate rating, length, topic, and tone, learning the terms used are a must.

Other terms such as *listmom, compiler, reccer, archivist* or *beta reader* refer to roles that fans have taken on in regards to running resources or creating fanfic. Fans who create videos (*vidders*) or art have their own lexicons pertaining to their work. A useful, if incomplete, example of the extensive terms in use, and their origins, can be seen at The Fanfiction Glossary (http://www.subreality.com/glossary.html).

While the above terms are fairly common among many fanfic readers, there are even more specific terms used by ljficwriters alone which refer to both the shows they are fans of, as well as their fanfic practices. Examples would be abbreviations of romantic character pairings (i.e. S/B, B/A. S/A/B) or particular types of fanfic (i.e. human AU, vamp!Xander) which only exist in this group. Other shorthands might be abbreviations of TV episode titles, or particular types of character portrayals (i.e. Buffy bashing, Ripper).

This brief tour of the various types of vocabulary in use among ljficwriters demonstrates the learning complexity that newcomers may encounter in attempting to participate with others and locate information. Section 4.2 referred to Lave's "barrier of meaninglessness," the lack of comprehension experienced by newcomers to a group as opposed to the "cultural transparency" experienced by oldtimers who were largely unconscious of their practices as practices, but simply as action. This discussion of jargon serves as an example of how each individual has to learn to create meaning from the group's exchanges through the experience of their participation. In the following section, various individuals speak to their experiences in breaking through the language boundary in order to participate.

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4.4.2.3 Words as boundary – deciphering the code

"One of my problems is, I mostly do not have anything to say except, "I really liked this story. Thank you for sharing it." That seems stiff and formal in the context of the hip patter of the typical LJ comment. It's exactly how I feel at cocktail parties. Everyone knows one another and they know exactly what to say. " [Anon 88][4/1/2007]

Knowing what to say can be a matter of both protocol and terminology. Anon 88 appears stymied by both – not knowing *what* to say or how to say it ("hip patter"). What she is sure of is that everyone around her is not suffering from these problems. In fact, her experience is common as most newcomers to ljficwriters must learn the terms discussed in previous sections in order to participate and become members of the group. During interviews conducted with ljficwriters in July 2006, several interviewees mentioned how language use in the group was part of their learning process, and how they eventually integrated its use into their own practice. Throughout this dissertation interviewees are referred to by number to preserve their anonymity (i.e. Int 9).

Int 4 described what seemed like code words when she began reading entries on LJ:

"Yeah, the acronyms, yeah, little words like slash and het and gen, and FF or B/B or what do all these little symbols mean, all these little codes and letters? And when I finally figured out what all those different things mean, that helped a lot. "What does OTP?" I did not know what that meant for a long time, because that blew up everywhere: "This is my OTP." "What is OTP?" Ohhhhh, one true pairing, ok." [Int 4]

Learning the language served several purposes, however. In some cases it made her interact with people by asking questions, and in others she learned to find resources.

"I would ask some people if I couldn't figure it out, other times they would have glossaries somewhere that would say this is what this meant. Sometimes I would just stick it in Google and stick in term, stick in glossary, and hopefully one of those thousands of hits would bring up some information. Eventually figured out what slash meant, what OOC meant, just, if I couldn't find a glossary I would eventually track down someone who used it and be like "What does that mean?" and they'd explain it. Got me one step closer." [Int 4]

As Int 4 says, discussing terms got her "one step closer", not just to understanding the language around her, but closer to becoming a member of the group by incorporating their discourse. Int 6 also marked language acquisition, not only as a rite of passage, but as a clear boundary separating insiders from outsiders:

"I think a lot about language, about fannish terminology and I've noticed that there's some people who continually do not get it. You can always tell a newbie because they do not speak properly, they have not figured out how to speak whatever the fandom is. They also have not figured out etiquette. I think that's the thing most of us get by osmosis or whatever. So I think that those are, like in-jokes and things, when I was figuring out what terms meant through context." [Int 6]

Int 6 offers a different acquisition pattern than Int 4, who used formal resources and asked questions. Int 6 cites learning by "osmosis" -- immersion in many conversations, connecting terms across discussion locations, and noting the nuances of use. Part of their difference in membership development may be that Int 6 had been fairly involved in another fanfic group first. However, she noted that very few practices carried over.

"There are many many people in that fandom who are *only* in that fandom, they're not on LJ they're not actually communicating with a lot – you know how there's so much specific language and slang that emerges in fandom? And I think that on LJ, the terminology goes quickly, but in Roswell fandom they do not know what an OTP is. And they do not use those terms." [Int 6]

Int 6 raises again the issue of insiders versus outsiders, in this second instance not that of newcomer and experienced member, but of ljficwriters and a different fandom group. She also suggests how difficult it can be to master language, because its development "goes quickly." As discussed in earlier sections, crosspollination, new activities, and new individuals mean that the language in use is always in flux. In the interview she elaborates other differences between the two groups, such as the greater openness of ljficwriters to reading different writing content, and the more socially liberal attitudes of its members. Her experience raises an interesting challenge to critiques of the early CoP model as a framework that too narrowly defines all entrants to a CoP as novices, regardless of the experience they may bring in with them (Fuller and Hodkinson, 2005). Int 6 had relevant experience in writing and distributing fanfic and was also conversant in the texts of her new fandom, Buffy. But her past experience only changed her trajectory within the group, it did not mean she skipped the novice stage. As further chapters will demonstrate, there are a variety of particular practices under continual negotiation within ljficwriters, and each new member comes to the group with different skills and an incomplete familiarity with the group's functions. Int 6 still had to learn both new language and new practices as part of her membership development. She further notes that even now, as a full member, she has difficulty communicating with ljficwriter subgroups, and those same difficulties inhibit other members.

"I think it makes me sad that a lot of people do not comment to vidders because they do not vid so they do not think they have a vocabulary for it? To a certain degree I'll sometimes say "I do not speak vidder" because I won't be like a vidder giving feedback. They're like "at 2:01" they're like "you did this and this" and I can't do that, but I can talk about images." [Int 6]

Int 6 notes that the lack of familiarity with video creation by non-video makers in the group impacts vidders by decreasing the amount of feedback and interaction regarding their contributions. Although others may appreciate their work, not all feel comfortable in discussing it, sensing an insider/outsider barrier in the form of practice but also in the use of language ("do not speak vidder").

Other interviewees noted an insider/outsider barrier arising as well, only in reverse. Frequent interaction among ljficwriters has affected the way members interact with people elsewhere, with group members spreading terms to outside locations. For example, Int 2 notes that the use of language in general, its tone rather than specific terms, makes ljficwriters a different space for her than other sites she visits..

"I think on LJ is a lot less formal. Everyone, at least in my experience, everyone is very real and very colloquial and willing to say anything."[Int 2]

Int 11 notes that her constant use of ljficwriters terms and style have begun to alter a much longer, individual, practice of emailing old friends.

"I notice our language use changes a lot, and I do not know if it's an LJ thing or a fandom thing because for a long time for me it was the same thing. But just picking up different things, all caps-lock words, not ironically, just in certain ways. Or saying "the internets" all the time? We all know what we're making fun of but it just starts to sound normal, or putting a period between every word – best.week.ever. And of course the acronyms, though those are kind of knowing. Just the style of speaking, because I used to write mass emails to all my friends, when I first went to college for four years…But the first one I wrote after I got into fandom on LJ sounded very different than the rest of them. I used double colons for an action, I can't do that, they [her friends] do not know what that means. And I hadn't realized how ingrained that had become! It's a dialect. I do not know where the different parts of that come from." [Int 11]

Int 11's final sentence reflects back earlier discussion in section 4.4 regarding the interwoven nature of language use among ljficwriters, combining fandom terms with netspeak, fanfic discussion style with LJ-specific actions, and the constant and untraceable crosspollination of usage in various locations. She cites various elements discussed earlier, including gesture ("double colons for an action"), style ("all caps-lock words"), acronyms, and tone ("We all know what we're making fun of"). She also indirectly notes what it means to become a member of a CoP, as the practices, in this case

the language use, become a part of her behavior – no longer something adopted, but something instinctive, something culturally transparent.

While language use is one of the most visible markers of a defined group, the various specialized terms of subgroups also speaks to the relationships that develop among individuals, and how these relationships form small networks within the larger CoP. The following section begins to explore the nature of people's connections, and the range of interactions people have as members of ljficwriters.

4.5 Relationships

This chapter began with a quote regarding the nature of relationships among ljficwriters, which was brought to the fore when one of its members passed away. In the quote, Anon 22 struggles to define what sorts of relationships exist among members of the community -- more than acquaintances, but not always the same as offline friends. The importance of personal relationships is central to a coterie practice, and is also relevant to a CoP. When writing about the uses of pseudonyms in coterie groups, Ezell focused on the circular nature of writing and reading among the members:

"[T]he coterie literary environment encourages easy and continual open exchange between performer and audience, in which the audience would join with the masquer to dance and the coterie readers wrote their responses to the texts of others in a continual literary flow. As demonstrated in Monck's circle, whose dynamics are frozen in print, the pseudonym served as the occasion for elaboration of identity, not only the suppression of it; the writer existed both as reader and recipient of verses involving her" (Ezell, 1994, p.23).

The use of the pseudonym in a coterie group is not the same as complete anonymity. Contrast the environment described above with the frustration of one writer interviewed:

"I hadn't had any feedback forever, and I just got one the other day, and it was a person who said "I really liked this, this and this in your story but I did not like the way you did this, this and this." And I was like "Ok, well that's interesting, I never heard anybody say that they did not like that part." And I'm curious to know why that person did not like it, but it's hard to have a conversation with someone when they're posting anonymously." [Int 3]

Because the visitor did not have (or use) an LJ account to make her comment, she became completely anonymous to Int 3, rather than simply 'masqued' through her pseudonym. Her anonymity also meant that she would not be automatically notified of

Int 3's reply, and that she might be only an occasional visitor to any of the writers hosted on LJ. This lack of a named account on the site makes it difficult for a visitor to participate in "a conversation" and breaks the cycle of reciprocity intrinsic to a coterie group. During interviews, various participants spoke about how their desire to read began, sometimes in spite of themselves, to lead to connections with other readers and writers.

"I tend to be quite shy. I friended a couple of people and did not really know how that would work. And one of the people I friended to begin with, posted a nice little post in her journal that said "I just added a new friend, welcome!" It was sort of, really great, and then going forward when this person actually came to friend me and commented in my journal and said hi I'm friending you, and started doing that, and it quickly became obvious that that was the thing to do, that you commented on someone's journal when you friended them rather than just adding them and moving on."[Int 8]

Although the pattern of commenting to someone when you subscribe to their LJ is not universal, Int 8 reveals how important the personal response of a writer can be in making newcomers feel both welcome and "seen" in their participation. These small exchanges also begin to establish the importance within the group of having connections to other participants, to have not simply an exchange of goods, as with two writers exchanging stories, but to develop a social framework around those exchanges. This social component is not just central to the development of a coterie, but also to the development of a CoP.

"It is this social participation situated within a temporal context that is highly influential in shaping the learning of the novice. The process of learning, thus, involves life experience and the generation of meaning, the development of identity, a merging with community" (Davis, 2006).

In the case of Int 8, her positive experiences with others has led her to push past her shyness, and even take the lead in making connections.

"I commented on fic more because I could always come up with something to say and things I liked and particular lines that really interested me. The personal ones I sometimes felt I was sort of intruding by commenting on their lives. As I got to know them better and I actually did start commenting and getting into personal conversations on the fic-type posts, I felt more able to comment on the personal ones. To the stage that now I'll quite happily comment on their personal posts of someone I've just friended. If they do not like it they can get over it. I think that's sort of the shy taking a step back and not wanting to put myself out there, and getting knocked down. Eventually I built a bit of resilience to it and go "Well if they knock me down I can just go off and do something else.""[Int 8]

As Int 8 has learned from her time within the group, social overtures are generally welcome, and if she is occasionally rebuffed she can "go off and do something else," it is

not she, nor her overture, which is out of place. As Davis suggests, the social component of the group has led to an altering of her identity as a shy individual, and she has merged with the community as a member who understands its practices, and what is considered acceptable.

In the case of another interviewee, her participation among ljficwriters did not affect her shyness, but it did affect her openness about her own interests to friends she already had. Unlike Int 8, Int 2 had not started an LJ for the purpose of reading fanfic. But once she encountered it, it led her to learn new things about her existing friends.

"I got into LJ not really thinking about fandom. It was to keep in contact with real life friends that I did not really talk fandom with. I ended up talking fandom in my LJ and realizing my real-life friends were into it as well." [Int 2]

The ljficwriter community that Int 2 encountered once she opened an LJ account, led her to participate by posting her own stories and ideas in her blog. To her surprise, her offline friends were themselves fans, but like her, had never spoken openly about their interests. The connections she made with other readers and writers led her to make stronger connections with her existing friends, as they found more points of common interest. The practice of using one's blog to post about all sorts of topics is what led Int 2 to develop ties in a way that had not happened at other online fan locations she had visited.

"I do not know, [the other sites] just did not seem as interactive. The Buffy fandom, particularly via LJ…are very interested in each other – "How did you come up with this idea""What are you doing this—" I know about people's kids, I know about people's work, and I know what their favorite ships are. It just seems like on LJ, because it's a blog as well as a place to post fic, they're going to tell me more about their personal lives. Which makes me care about them more." [Int 2]

The sense of connection Int 2 speaks about is also evident for other interviewees whose circumstances have led to ruptures in their offline social network. The camaraderie and constant availability of interaction among ljficwriters has helped many participants compensate for the difficulties in maintaining a social life offline. Below, five different interviewees speak about how the social aspect of ljficwriters has been woven into their different lives as a night-worker student, a relocated stay-at-home mother, a relocated office worker, a new mother trying to finish her degree, and a grad student whose active social life interweaves her time on LJ with her offline activities.

"I work all night. I work from 10 PM to 6 AM right now, and I'll probably sleep for a few hours or depending on the day I may check my email first. Sometimes if I've written something over the period of the night, first thing in the morning I'll post it so that after I sleep maybe somebody will comment on it when I wake up … I do not have any time to watch TV…But around the world stuff that I did not know, like when there were the London bombings in the tunnels, I found out about that through LJ, because everybody was talking about it, everyone was "Who are all our friends in London? Let's make sure they're ok" And other stuff that happens in the world, like the hurricane Katrina stuff I first found out about online… And then I'll go to school depending on the day, do some schoolwork depending on the day, I'll usually find some time to read fanfic between classes…Sometimes I'll get online in the evenings and see if anybody's on IM or see if anybody's posted recently online, and sometimes I'll be able to strike up a chat with somebody…and then I'll get ready to go to work."[Int 4]

"I'm quite liberal, and I come from a liberal area in Wisconsin, and I've moved to a very, very conservative area in Dallas, it's very conservative, and I can't talk politics with anybody and I can't talk religion with anybody, and I've found kindred spirits online. That's amazing, I would have gone insane, when I had small children, I would have gone insane without it. It was an outlet when you can't talk to grownups. This is my way of talking to grownups… I'd miss the community feeling, I'd miss knowing what's going on in other people's lives. I mean, you can email everybody, but it's something about that immediate response and also being able to see what other people are saying and commenting off of other people's comments." [Int 3]

"I have this addiction to a connection with people who do know who I am. And there are a couple of people who I know to a greater degree at my job now but it took some time to develop that. And I had an actively hostile co-worker that I was in very close proximity to for not quite a year. So I totally developed this, a rhythm of posting something every day and a chapter every day, and it's one of the reasons I think I've become the drabble queen because I can bash one to several of those off a day, but that's kind of key, that's how I break up my day at work, is having that commentary come back in on it." [Int 12]

"In a normal day my daughter goes to day care from 7:30, 8 whatever, and I have to pick her up before 12:30. And so, it depends on whether I'm teaching or not. If I'm teaching, I always have an 8, 9 early in the morning class because she'll be at day care, and sometimes I'll come home and check [LJ] before I get her from day care, but in general what I'll do is check it while she's taking her nap, from like 12:30 to 2-2:30-3:00 depending on how long she's taking her nap or how long I can convince her that she needs to lay in her bed! Again, at night, but not always, sometimes I won't check it at night, sometimes I will, sometimes it's my husband's night on the computer, or I have somewhere to go, or we're going to watch [TV] together or something like that, but it's very rare that I do not check it at all during the day." [Int 1]

"During the school year [I'm on LJ] even more all the time because I'm on a regular schedule, I have class in the morning and then because I'm a TA I have an office on campus and so I can go up to my office and check [LJ] between classes which I usually do if I'm bored, because I can't get into anything but I can read 4 or 5 entries and move on. And I like to know what's going on because my best friend in school and real life, and we're living together, she's very active on LJ…So I have to read her stuff because she's going to talk about it later in the day when I see her. And another friend of ours now reads them too, and the fourth friend, there are four of us in the program, is clueless sometimes when we start chatting about something because I'll be "Oh like that guy with the thing" and she hasn't read it." [Int 11]

Each of the interviewees above weaves their participation online with their offline schedule of work, school, and family. Each relies on it in slightly different ways, but each also expresses a need for a welcoming connection to others. In some cases ljficwriters are "others" quite different from the people who surround them, and in some

cases they are the very same people. However, all of the interviewees above reflect their involvement with ljficwriters as part of the social fabric of their lives.

Perhaps the most telling discussions of how pervasive and central the social connections among ljficwriters are to the existence of the group, is the way that even those who were somewhat unwilling to make those connections nonetheless found themselves doing so over time, even though their primary intent had been simply to read or post their writing. Below Int 7 spoke about starting an LJ account at the same time as a friend, and discovering a need for connection she hadn't anticipated.

"we're both very new to fandom and we both really decided it was going to be fandom things, nothing really personal, nothing really about our lives, nothing like that, but it always ends up creeping in and LJ is so social, that's the one thing we discovered, you end up meeting people, getting to know them, becoming friends …it seems like people from all over, well mostly North America and the UK but I have people on my friends list from Brazil and Sweden and Australia, and I think that's really neat, I really like that, and the different perspectives on things…it's a community it's not just about, and I also love, because I came from reading a lot of pre-1900s authors, they're all dead!…I think that's why I give all these unbelievably long comments, is that I get to actually tell authors what you think about, and get their replies back!… I was also seeing that people did not stick to one [type of story writing], which I probably got the sense when I was looking at fic on archives, but I do not think it ever really stuck for me. And the longer I'm on LJ I can see that there's always people who cross over, but it seems like there's smaller communities within the larger communities, I think I was saying to someone one time, everyone is one degree of separation from someone else."[Int 7]

Int 5 also talks about not only the growing desire to interact, but the opportunities her participation offers her in expanding her thinking and her perspectives.

"Probably the biggest thing LJ does for me, is allow me to drift into either other genres I might not think about reading, but I've also made real life friends through LJ that, I probably wouldn't have because I am not super social… LJ it's interesting, it gives me insights, and there are a few people on my friends' list who are very political. And so that's very interesting because they tend to make much more social commentary than what I would ever occur to…I've met people I talk to pretty regularly in Australia, and that's always kind of fun because they have a totally different world!"[Int 5]

Int 7 and Int 5's experiences speak to Davis' earlier quote above how the social aspect works to enculturate new members into a CoP. Int 7 discusses how she negotiates the meaning of what she reads with the authors whose work she is reading, and unlike all the other literature she reads, she is able to get responses and develop conversations about her interpretations and observations. Int 5 talks about how her own identity is altered as she takes part in the group. She realizes, for example, what she thinks about issues because others she knows are more political and raise topics for discussion that she has never considered before. She also recognizes her own identity as an American when she

interacts with Australians who "have a totally different world." Over time both find themselves merging with the community which "creeps in" or overcomes their "not super social" personality.

Int 10 pulls together the relationship aspects of coterie groups and a CoP in her comment below. Unlike many ljficwriters, she shares little about her life in her posts, which would seem to discourage the sort of connections and incidental discoveries that were cited by previous interviewees. But as she points out, the very nature of writing is deeply personal. In a group where everyone is both reading and writing, there is a fundamental offering of self to others involved, and a reciprocal acknowledgment, even discovery, of one's self in the responses.

"I love interacting with people through their comments. I do not make many personal posts, which is a funny thing to say because writing is very personal, so it's an interesting artificial distinction to say these people make a lot personal posts, these people do not. I consistently post stuff I work hard on that means a lot to me, that has pieces of me and my life in it. Operating with the artificial distinction, I do not make a lot of personal posts, but I really do enjoy the feedback that people leave, especially if it's detailed that gives me something to respond to, and I do really feel close to certain of my readers who do give really good feedback on posts that I make. (Discusses one reader in particular) she would really get to the crux of what the whole story was about: "Wow, yes that's what the story was about I never knew!" So I really love people who comment consistently and with a little bit of depth …The community feel I think helps with my writing, I feel more inspired by stuff I read on LJ, than I do that I read on websites because of the community feeling surrounding it and the opportunity to give feedback to the author…The longer I go without reading something that really jumps out at me, the harder it is for me to have energy and inspiration to write…I do not care much about what LJ itself does in terms of its programming, a new bar, new format for the user info page, some people are very traumatized by that…I think I am really attached to this system of fandom in LJ, I'd have a hard time knowing how to continue being in fandom in its absence."[Int 10]

Despite the use of her blog as primarily a literary posting site, Int 10 has made deep and lasting connections through its use. Aside from various friends, she met her girlfriend through their exchanges on her blog, and the two have now been a couple for three years. They are one of several couples I am aware of within the group; at least one other also met through their participation in ljficwriters and have since married. Although it's difficult to know how many in the group make lasting connections to others, a full cycle of life events can be seen to take place among the members, from the births of babies, and the celebration of marriages, to the mourning of those who have died. The community member memorialized at the start of this chapter is but one of several participants who have passed away during the observation period of this study. Each of them knew at least one person in the group well enough for that friend to be in contact with loved ones, and to provide details of the member's passing.

Although a female writing coterie such as ljficwriters can be seen to fit many of the functions of a CoP, and the effects of a CoP on the individual participant can be quite personal in the way it affects one's identity and self-perception, there is an additional fulfillment of emotional needs being accomplished here which is largely unaddressed in CoP literature. With its focus on workplace and institutional settings, and professional and educational groups, CoP literature tends to approach the effects of participation in a largely businesslike manner, with learning being a practical affair with practical outcomes. By looking at a writing coterie as a CoP, we can see not only the mental but emotional dimensions of participation. We see women in their multiple roles as students, workers, parents, and spouses, utilizing ljficwriters as a social outlet, as a form of affirmation for their work, and as a way of understanding themselves as well as others. Further chapters will also explore emotional dimensions of their efforts to maintain their community and feel personally rewarded in their contributions to it.

4.6 Conclusion

Chapter 4 began with a discussion of the CoP concept and the ways in which its framework can be used to examine both ljficwriters' processes and outcomes. Section 4.3 then situated ljficwriters as both a continuation of coterie writing groups of the past, and as users of online technology to carry out their practices. This was followed by an examination of how the group's most fundamental tool, language, provided examples of practice in action as regards the visual vocabulary of icons. Section 4.4 also presented examples of the various community memberships that ljficwriters exhibit while present on LJ. As shown in this chapter, the levels of vocabulary use range from common netspeak, (understood by many online users), to specific terms relating to LJ use, (understood by many LJ users), to fandom terms, (understood by many fandom participants), to fanfic terms, (understood by many fanfic readers), to specific fandom or fandom subgroup terms, (which are understood by no one else). It is easy to see how these different layers of jargon create boundaries, among, for example, people who use LJ but are not in a fandom, or online users who are not familiar with LJ. A given ljficwriter may employ six different levels of vocabulary in a single exchange, quite aside

from any professional jargon, second language terms, or personal affectations they may bring in from their offline speech. The jargon use is also always evolving. Even ljficwriters who have been in fandom or writing fanfic for many years can encounter new terms, either from an encounter with another group, or because the term has just been coined.

One aspect of the ljficwriter CoP revealed by this look at language is how important networking is to the group. LJ offers the opportunity to bring together information on multiple interests into one location. As a result ljficwriters is a community with very porous boundaries, where individuals on the margins may be able to participate in limited ways due to familiarity with the common technology, or because they know about fandoms in general. But competence and meaning only develop with repeated and increased exposure to terms describing practices and preferences within ljficwriters that the newcomer may not yet share. Eventually the use of jargon becomes in itself a form of play as users exploit this common knowledge in self-parody, or in other creative forms to further create a sense of unity as fellow readers and writers. For example an excited statement that might have several exclamation points following it (!!!), gets referred to as "eleventy-one," with group members mocking their own practice of hyperemotional exchanges. This sort of wordplay demonstrates an expectation both of typical behavior within the CoP and an understanding of language use commonplace among ljficwriters.

Another example of this self-reflective practice can be seen in this excerpt from a fanfic titled "Common Knowledge." Here the main character is at a fan convention, observing the meetings of fans going on around him.

"It's interesting, too, to watch the fangirls when they do not know he's watching, like experiencing a new culture. He's making a list of words to figure out later: "otipi," and "pixpam," and "capping," and "arpeayes." He's especially curious about the meaning of "elljay," because it seems to be some kind of sign-countersign ritual." [Anon 34]

This example demonstrates three things. The first is that it presents, within the group's primary product of fanfic, a representation of the community itself and one of its central practices, the use of language as a "sign-countersign" ritual. Secondly, it demonstrates language as a form of action within the group, describing and expressing activities, as well as concepts. Thirdly, the excerpt represents ljficwriters' awareness of

themselves as a group with its own cultural markers, ones recognized but not easily understood by outsiders. Vocabulary represents competence in site use, an understanding of fandom activities, and knowledge of the source text around which fans gather. Its acquisition requires commitment to and ongoing participation in the CoP.

The visual and textual vocabulary discussed in this chapter is an example of CoP practice and features of a CoP. It is something that (1) is learned by newcomers (often in various stages as they enter the community), (2) unifies the central interests and paths of the group, (3) creates a boundary between members fluent in it and outsiders baffled by it, and (4) provides a way for meaning to be expressed in both practical action and in play. As such these communicative practices demonstrate elements of a CoP at work.

The discussion of language also describes how a coterie may be formed. In section 4.3 the motivations for the formation of ljficwriters on LJ was discussed as a combination of the historical concerns of female coterie writers for separation, privacy and control, as well as specific technical features which would serve those needs by enabling them to perform various functions in a single location. The discussion of language use demonstrates that control and separation are not absolute. Language reveals the porous nature of the group's boundaries, as it is constantly influenced by words and practices from other groups in other locations, and its members spread its own practices elsewhere in turn. Nonetheless, there are spaces and discussions that reveal the distinct nature of the coterie itself, as discussed by Int 6 when speaking about her contrasting experience in two different fanfic groups. What the CoP framework allows us to see is how membership in the group develops and how specific practices hold a coterie group together and perpetuate its functions. And as explored in section 4.5, the emotional and social aspects of participation in a coterie group, allow us to better understand the personal rewards and connections that develop in a CoP.

Chapter 5: Breaking down the gift economy

"In general, people report being happier when they are actively involved with a challenging task and less happy when they are passively consuming goods or entertainment. This is especially true for high involvement activities that people undertake to give their life meaning." (Hemetsberger, 2002, p. 13)

5.1 Introduction

The quote above seems tailor-made for a discussion of ljficwriters, who, as a coterie group, are involved in a variety of challenging tasks that turn their consumption of entertainment into an active and communal experience. A CoP is a structure where people can develop personal meaning from participating in such activities. In discussing the application of the CoP model to ljficwriters in the last chapter, we began by looking at how language is used to create boundaries, to recognize other community members, and to understand the influence of overlapping CoPs. When looking at the terminology that ljficwriters employ, we can also determine that writing, reading, and locating fanfic on their favorite shows are key concerns for participants, because these are the terms they have created that are unique to their group. The exchange of these "goods," that is the fanfic, artwork, videos and other creative production of participants, is the basis of their interactions. Discussion of their favorite shows is also important, but there are many locations online where this can be done. LJ is distinctive as a site for fan interaction not because of discussion, but because of the production of new products incorporating elements of those favorite shows. If this exchange is the central purpose of ljficwriters, what are the rewards to participants for doing so? What are the norms that govern these exchanges? Does the group itself acknowledge that this is their central purpose?

A CoP exists for an agreed-upon purpose, to create or somehow help develop knowledge and foster learning. But the overall group purpose may differ from individual motivations in that group. To expose those, it is helpful to look at the group's norms, and see when people align themselves with the rules of the group and when they deviate, as those deviations are opportunities to understand how people negotiate their individual versus group identities. What are the deviations that can be found among ljficwriters?

This chapter will focus on answering these four questions to better determine the fit between this group's characteristics and the CoP model. Specifically, this chapter

will explore the "gift economy," an emergent concept in various discussions recorded during the observation period.

5.2 What is a gift economy?

One of the first explorations of what became termed the "gift economy" originated with French sociologist Marcel Mauss in 1924 as an observation on how gift exchange was significant in the development of social relations. Mauss (1990) drew his data from studies of non-Western cultures, and according to some researchers this focus on gift culture as something starkly different from the central operations of capitalist society persisted. When applying the concept to activities online, Benkler (2006) criticized the focus of anthropologists whose discussion of gift economies were

"about the periphery, about societies starkly different from modern capitalist societies…And yet sharing was everywhere around us in the advanced economies. Since the 1980s we have seen an increasing focus, in a number of literatures, on production practices that rely heavily on social rather than price-based or governmental policies" (Benkler, 2006, p. 117).

Others studying wealth creation and cooperation on the Internet suggested that while gift and capitalist economies were intrinsically opposed to one another, they co-existed in many places. Barbrook (1998) noted that the same mesh of economies existent offline continued to exist "symbiotically" online:

" When they're on-line, people constantly pass from one form of social activity to another. For instance, in one session, a Net user could first purchase some clothes from an e-commerce catalogue, then look for information about education services from the local council's site and then contribute some thoughts to an on-going discussion on a listserver for fiction-writers. Without even consciously having to think about it, this person would have successively been a consumer in a market, a citizen of a state and an anarcho-communist within a gift economy" (Barbrook, 1998, p. 29).

Free exchanges of information and goods from individuals to a group, or from one individual to another seemed to be critical to the development of online spaces. Originating as a theory of social relations, gift exchange took on economic dimensions as it was applied to online groups of near strangers with diminished social ties. While actions may seem altruistic they also carry debts of obligation between individuals, or from individuals to a group, that provides some kind of knowledge or support valuable to that individual. Thus the reciprocity may not be directly from one individual to another

but may work on a "pass it forward" model where individuals share as needed, and can expect that, from somewhere in the group, they will receive knowledge or goods in exchange at a future point. Key to the gift economy theory is the social transactions that accompany the more tangible ones. This personal aspect is something that contrasts the gift economy with, for example, the market economies of states or nations. The CoP model also places an emphasis on the personal and social in the development and exchange of knowledge, as participation is key to both membership in and the existence of a CoP.

"Members of a healthy community of practice have a sense that making the community more valuable is to the benefit of everyone. They know that their own contributions will come back to them. This is not a direct exchange mechanism of a market type where commodities are traded. Rather it is a pool of goodwill – of "social capital" – that allows people to contribute to the community…This kind of reciprocity is neither selflessness nor simple tit for tat, but a deeper understanding of the mutual value that extends over time" (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002, p.37).

Individuals build an identity within the group by offering contributions of value to other members, through either the sharing of knowledge or by taking on particular roles in the group. The CoP is an entity that employs the practices of gift exchange as part of its model, with the development of a successful group offering benefits to all.

If we take a historic look at coterie writing groups, we can see that they would only occasionally serve as examples of a gift economy. In some cases writers received financial stipends from wealthy patrons, making coterie writing more of a professional pursuit that was simply an alternative to mass printing. In other cases, the writing circles were limited to a small group of known individuals who shared a variety of ties and obligations that were not centered on the exchange of writing. In a more recent era, fanfic writers had informal networks of exchange well before fanfic was available online. These transactions differed from current circumstances however, because gift exchanges were often done in a face-to-face environment, and creating and distributing work involved real costs quite apart from an Internet connection. Not everyone remained unpaid either, as even today some zine editors make a reasonable profit, and some fan artists sell work for a healthy commission.

These historical examples are thus imperfect models for the vast networks of writers and readers in online fanfic groups, who may number in the hundreds or

thousands, most of whom do not know one another, and none of whom receive payment for their coterie work. Rather, we must look to how other online communities of relative strangers function. As Kollock discusses, key issues to consider in examining how a gift exchange works online are the motivations of the participants, the importance of boundaries, and the size of the group (Kollock, 1999). These factors overlap with those presented by Hemetsberger (2002) in her paper on cooperation in virtual communities. She maps out five key elements of exchange processes, which are (1) Intrinsic motivation, (2) Extrinsic rewards, (3) Meaning of exchange, (4) Common goals and values, and (5) Communal relationships. Each of these has related concepts such as (1) task involvement and control, (2) personal-use value, social approval, and gaining knowledge, (3) expected reciprocity, and gift-giving, (4) shared passion and values, and (5) a sense of community (Hemetsberger, 2002). Kollock and Hemetsberger's central factor of individual motivation is the primary lens. Kollock's other factors of group boundary and size can be considered part of Hemetsberger's fifth element of communal relationships. These five factors will be seen occurring repeatedly in this chapter as we examine ljficwriters interactions as a form of gift exchange.

5.2 The myth of equality

Related to the concept of gift exchange is the concept of the public commons. Originally a term to describe collectively owned land, it is now often used by those making legal and policy arguments regarding public interest in online spaces. As Bollier states:

"A discussion of the commons and enclosure helps bring into sharp focus a dramatic but largely unexamined phenomenon of contemporary American society: the forced privatization and marketization of large swaths of shared wealth and social life…The commons also consists of intangible assets that are not as readily identified as belonging to the public. Such commons include the creative works and public knowledge not privatized under copyright law. This large expanse of cultural resources is sometimes known as the public domain or—as electronic networking increases its scope and intensity—"the information commons."" (Bollier, 2002, p. 1-2)

One can use the CoP model to see how the information commons and gift exchange can be connected. A CoP is itself an information commons, one which all users both utilize and make contributions to. Participants do so by offering gifts of

knowledge or action to other members. While the openness of a common to all community members implies a certain equality among members, this idea is more properly the concern of a female coterie group than of a CoP. This is because gift exchange as an economic model features prominently in theories of cyberfeminism. Gifting has been postulated as intrinsic to the way women build community, and the unilateral aspects are emphasized in opposition to an exchange model (Katlo, 2006). By making gifting one-sided, there is not only less emphasis on commodification, as might be seen in a direct exchange, but the status of the participants may be less obvious when gifts aren't directly comparable.

Many ljficwriters do embrace the idea of non-commercial spaces, and the open sharing of creative production and expertise as a gendered act, which would seem to exemplify Hemetsberger's fourth factor of "common goals and values." However, if we look at "intrinsic motivation" and its related process of "control" we can see that these common goals arise in part from individual concerns over control of their work. This concern relates to a key phrase in Bollier's quote above: "Such commons include the creative works and public knowledge *not* privatized under copyright law" (emphasis added).

The work that fan creators do, whether with images, video or text, exists in a legal gray area. Although some influential source creators gave tacit approval to these fan creations early in their development, there has to date been no legal case providing a precedent for how to treat non-commercial fictional works (Nolen, 2006). So to avoid legal complications, fan creators have felt they had little choice but to keep their work non-profit, and keep self-promotion to a minimum to avoid unwanted outside attention. It is notable that video creators are the group most at pains to keep their work "underground." Even in an era where TV networks host contests for fans to create show promos, and viral marketing is used to sell movie tickets, some vidders still keep their work password protected. Video archives are extremely rare compared to the many, many fanfic archives online. This is due not only to the videos' usage of television or film footage, but particularly the use of music. In terms of legal risk, the recording industry has been far more active in pursuing legal damages than studios and authors, who are more likely to send simple Cease and Desist (C&D) letters to fan webmasters

(for more discussion on legal issues, see C&D in the Glossary). In the case of all fan creators, legal cases are less of a persistent threat than the removal or loss of their work. This occurs through deletion from image hosting accounts for violating Terms of Service agreements (which preclude the unauthorized hosting of copyrighted material), through the removal of videos from video hosting sites such as YouTube, or the loss of written work from websites and archives. To date, no fanfic has been lost as a result of a copyright claim regarding the *writing,* but some websites have been removed for use of copyrighted images or other material, thus removing the fanfic indirectly.

The maintenance of personal control over one's work therefore may be at the root of the "common goals and values." While the legal realities may be the seed of the anti-commercial and community-oriented sharing that goes on among ljficwriters, this personal concern has also shaped a social culture which frowns on self-promotion, acts of commercialism, or promotion of the group as a whole to outside entities. While small acts of non-alignment with this common culture may pass without comment, a blatant violation of these norms will generally bring a rapid and vociferous reaction of other group members. What these reactions throw into relief are the personal motivations that support these group values, and the sort of discourse that promotes them. However much a community spirit is celebrated in ljficwriter discourse, it is not a community of equals, and people participate largely for personal gain. But by promoting a dialogue of equality, the forms of status and payment in the group are obscured, allowing the group's transactions to align more closely with the feminist culture of unilateral "gifting" and away from a more complex and bilateral "exchange." A case of blatant violation of the group's norms is useful in revealing tensions surrounding quantifications of reciprocity.

One of the first cases I observed that explicitly discussed the gift culture as a central tenet of ljficwriters took place in 2005. The controversy centered on a well known fanfic writer (abbreviated as CJ) who had been the principal writer in an epic story that was very popular. The project had stalled before its conclusion, and as the story's archivist she regularly received messages from readers asking about its progress and begging her to continue it. Occupied with other issues, and planning on launching a professional writing career, she offered to continue the fanfic if readers were willing to donate money so that she could have financial support for her writing time. The idea was

not, in itself, unique, even on LJ. A science fiction writer named Diane Duane, herself once a fanfic writer, was making the same offer in her LJ regarding an original series she created which had been dropped by her print publisher (http://www.the-big-meow.com/How-Publication-Will-Work). The fanfic writer CJ, however, was attacked at such length and by so many, that in 24 hours she deleted her LJ, took down the fanfic archive, and has not been seen since.

Following is one person's commentary on the incident:

" I mean, there's nothing wrong with contracting for goods and services, but I think we would all of us be justly shocked if our spouses started charging us for sex, or if our friends started charging us for all the therapy that they provide us. [Anonymous] said, wearily, that this may be the new face of fandom, and in a way she's right: I mean, it's possible that "fandom" has gotten so huge that people no longer feel a sense of community with the people for whom they write. But I do not think so. In the above announcement, this woman is discussing her life, goals, and impending wedding in a way that implies that we care--she is treating us, as [Anonymous] said: "like a community, not an audience." That's where, I think, the quite understandable outrage is coming from; she's trying to appeal to the "community" while fucking with its rules--primarily with the **gift culture**. If she were working within the world of commercial publishing as I stated above, that would be fine (and I do think that one can be in both of those worlds at the same time; there'd be nothing wrong, to me, with her pimping her pro-novel on her LJ--or advertising her skills as a soapmaker or a baker or a doctor, for that matter.) But that's not what she's doing: she's either changing rules on us midstream or suddenly revealing that she was never playing by our rules anyway, and both of those things make me feel hurt, angry, and stupid--and I do not even know the woman. She's taking advantage of fandom's communal history of caring, and I think that's abusive." [Anon 35][8/10/2005] (emphasis added)

There are a number of interesting issues raised by Anon 35's post, which itself prompted substantial discussion. All of these issues can be related to Kollock's key factors in a gift economy: (1) the size of the group, (2) the importance of boundaries, and (3) the motivation of the participants.

Anon 35 states outright that how the "fandom has gotten so huge" is a factor in CJ's violation of norms. Why is size a factor? There are two primary reasons. The first is that when there are too many people who do not know one another it is difficult to have a sense of personal obligation to others, both because they are unknown to you, and also because you may not encounter the same individuals often or at all. In a situation of relative anonymity, it is much easier to take what is offered freely without returning anything one's self. This is more difficult to do when a group is small and interactions are frequent, as one's lack of contribution becomes quite visible. The second reason is that it is difficult to "indoctrinate" newcomers with a group's norms when a group is large, especially if it is growing rapidly, because there aren't enough older, experienced

members to pass along, or even enforce, the rules with all the new people coming in. So Kollock's point about group size would seem to be supported when it comes to issues of reciprocity, or expectations of reciprocity.

The second issue Kollock mentions is the importance of boundaries. Anon 35 talks about two sets of boundaries in her comments. One is the boundary of personal relationships, and the other is of professional relationships. She begins by talking about people's expectations of spouses and friends when it comes to exchanging personal services. Later she talks about "the world of commercial publishing" and other professional roles, and how CJ's behavior "would be fine" in that circumstance. However CJ cannot "change the rules midstream." She cannot behave as a professional writer within this group of amateurs and bring a different set of norms to bear on her interactions with ljficwriters. Similarly those with whom one has close, personal relationships cannot suddenly behave with a professional distance and treat one's intimates as if they were strangers. Anon 35 thus points out that different groups have different norms and when crossing the boundaries of one group to another, one can not simply import a different set of expectations and impose it on a group which does not function in the same way. One can be an "insider" of more than one group simultaneously, but one cannot bring one set of norms to bear on all those groups. Each group is different, and what is acceptable when taking or contributing goods or services will vary from group to group. This can be considered an example of CoP practice *as* boundary.

For coterie groups, the issue of boundaries is even more explicit, in that keeping exchanges of creative work and discussion within their boundaries is an important element of who they are. As this reply to Anon 35 points out, selfishness and self-promotion is not just seen as a violation of the group's norms, it is seen as a danger to other group members.

"But there was a part of my reaction that was anger, and it was exactly as you described - the feeling of being taken advantage of, and the total selfishness of not recognizing (or not caring) that what one fan does impacts us all." [Anon 36] [8/10/2005]

Most people who discussed "fallout" or the "impact" of CJ's actions were concerned about a fear of legal attention, and the implicit contract they felt they had with

many source producers. This implied contract could be summed up as "do not ask, do not tell." As long as copyright holders did not know about fan works, or could pretend not to, everyone could go about their business as they had for the past 40 years. This "do not ask, do not tell" practice has been under particular strain in the last five years, as reading and posting fanfic has become so common that the general media has begun to take note. One fan on LJ makes a weekly posting citing all the references to fanfic in the online or print media during that week. There are usually 5 or 6 articles linked in each post. This visibility has become a source of anxiety, especially to older fanfic writers who have long held their societal invisibility as central to their activities, and a shared risk in those activities as central to group membership.

" Folks who do not produce creatively (whether that's stories, art, vids, recs sites, archives, even simply sending feedback regularly, whatever...)... well, they are taking on little personal risk by consuming fan-produced creative output.
…
Folks who do produce creatively... they are taking on just as much personal risk as any of the other fanwork producers. There's an egalitarian interaction going on... I'm stepping up to this ledge and so are you, and therefore none of us are going to stomp or rattle the railing. All for one, one for all. …
However... now that fandom is getting noticed more outside of fannish circles, I've got a gut reaction whenever someone who does not produce fannishly at all themselves draws attention to someone else's fanwork. The consuming-only consumers of fanwork, in contrast to the producers-and-consumers folks, are not opening themselves up to the same level of risk, and it irks me like an acid mist burning my skin."
[Anon 37][9/18/2006]

Anon 37 does everything short of drawing a wall in her post marked "fan producers" and "outsiders." In Anon 37's description, one of the ways a member of the group marks themselves as being a member of the group, is by engaging in any of a variety of fan activities with other fans – in other words, by participating and making themselves known to others in the group. Those who simply lurk and make use of the created works (who do not even "send feedback regularly") are on the border of the group. They know of it, they take part in it silently, but they do not contribute. And then outside that border are those "outside of fannish circles" whose attention brings risks to those within the border. Offering work created inside the border, by someone else at that, to someone outside the border is a violation of the group's practice of gift exchange. Those outside the group do not share in their practices and will not be offering gifts of their own. They may also not place any value on the gift itself.

Aside from the issue of gift exchange, Anon 37's concerns are closely related to concerns of female coterie writers past and present. Today, as in previous centuries, women can suffer repercussions from accusations regarding their moral character. This is particularly true for women who hold positions of public trust, such as those who work with children. As discussed in Chapter 2, in previous centuries if someone in a coterie circulated the work of a female writer to some sort of public outlet, such as a print publisher, this would have been seen as threatening to her reputation (and depending on the content, perhaps her person). One of the reasons a coterie writer then and now would be concerned about a known audience, is that the expected audience would be receptive to the content in their writing, and would also have a similar understanding of norms of privacy within the group. Neither then nor now are most coterie writers concerned with achieving a mass audience. Their concern for readership rests largely on being well regarded as writers among their fellow writers, and thus developing social contacts.

" A reader is not obligated to comment, but I write fanfiction to *interact* with fans, and feedback keeps me writing. For those of us who are original fiction writers (like I know you are) I spend enough time alone writing that fandom is an opportunity to engage with readers, and writers when I review. Because fandom does take away from original writing time, if no one wants to comment they've read my fandom stuff, I'll just stop and channel into my own stuff instead." [Anon 89][6/5/2008]

Anon 89 demonstrates coterie aspects of ljficwriters in her comment, but also gift exchange aspects. She is addressing a known audience ("like I know you are") and is concerned with social transactions. Her non-fanfic writing is referred to as "my own stuff." Although her act of writing it makes either kind of story "her stuff," fanfic is represented here as something not solely hers, but rather as communal as the interaction she hopes to derive from it. She has given the fanfic away. The economy in place within the group is tied to issues of a communal culture and material that feeds into ideas of equality among members, and leads to the suggestion that everyone can participate equally within the group. Compared to the "commons" of fanfic writers, issues of status, power and hierarchy are placed on those outside the group, on those allied with forms of for-profit cultural production. It is at that point that production becomes personally owned ("my own stuff").

However only some among ljficwriters do any kind of writing for profit, and not all are writers or participate in the same way. This leads to a discussion of the third of

Kollock's factors in gift exchange, which is personal motivation, and how this contributes to the particular sorts of exchange a given group will have. This factor will be explored in the following section.

5.4 Motivation in fanfic production and consumption

Kollock's third factor of gift exchange is also Hemetsberger's first element of exchange processes: intrinsic motivation. This factor arises in a CoP when the intrinsic motivation of a member leads to certain forms of engagement with practice, and this engagement shapes the trajectory of their participation. Shared trajectories tend to guide practice, as in the case of generational discontinuities within a CoP. People who experience a certain temporal iteration of a CoP as well as certain levels of participation, are likely to hold a shared view of that group, its values and purpose. Intrinsic motivations may differ or align with an external reward for participation, but the reward cannot be solely external. A CoP is not something that is legislated, but is voluntary.

"[t]he kind of personal investment that makes for a vibrant community is not something that can be invented or forced…the success of the community will depend on the energy that the community itself generates, not on an external mandate" (Wenger, McDermott and Snyder, 2002, p. 36).

Thus personal motivation has to be a central element guiding the group's interactions. How can we see the influence of personal motivations in gift exchange among ljficwriters? What can the dispute over CJ's behavior tell us in this regard?

One question would be how well personal motivations tie into the idea of the non-commercial space, and the concept of giving one's work away freely and receiving similar work in return. In the discussion started by Anon 35, some group members rejected the practice of non-commercialism, and suggested that this ethos had less to do with any kind of historical precedent or female space, and more to do with a person's system of political belief.

"I think fandom has some very socialistic and communistic elements in terms of how they operate, much more so now than before the Internet... and there tends to be backlashes to certain behaviours that upset the fannish applecart." [Anon 38][8/10/2005]

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The above comment connected the CJ incident to a macro political viewpoint. The suggestion here was that the "community value," of non-commercialism, excluded members of the community whose political views were different. Anon 38 also suggests that individual values ("some…elements") are being discussed as if they were a group value. To back her claim she cites a lack of historical precedent for this belief system ("before the Internet"). As has been discussed at the start of this chapter, the coterie tradition is not synonymous with a gift culture, neither in past centuries nor in the beginnings of mass media fandom in the West. So, Anon 38 was correct in claiming that a gift culture was not *intrinsic* to a coterie group, and that this norm could, in fact, be something that was being imposed on the group by individuals motivated to promote certain political frameworks in their activities. However, the diversity of voices speaking on the CJ incident suggested that this norm's existence and maintenance sprang from diverse individual concerns, which could not all be explained by political activism.

For example, other comments invoked a political issue much closer to home than capitalism versus socialism – the issue of social hierarchies. The CJ controversy had thrown into sharp relief an issue of constant tension in the group, which was the unease over the unequal power held by widely-read writers referred to as Big Name Fans (BNFs).

" I think this also feeds in to why people complain or worry about a hierarchical fannish structure. When people start to think that someone else in fandom is more important or more popular than they are, there can be an implied judgment on the friendship between two people - either the 'inferior' person needs to become creative enough to be friends with the 'important' person, or the 'inferior' person needs to emphasize the fact that there is most definitely NOT a hierarchical structure. None of us want to think that we are, somehow, less important to our friends than they are to us." [Anon 39] [8/10/2005]

CJ's request for money would be of little use if her writing were not widely popular. A "Small Name Fan" would never have the opportunity to make much money from their work, certainly not enough to support themselves. Her request, therefore, made it clear to any reader that what she was asking for was predicated upon her unusual position in the group. Anon 39 points out that the reason the issue of hierarchy is so divisive is not just that it disrupts the myth of equality, but that friendship itself becomes commoditized. She describes a problem where individuals in the group are attempting to somehow equalize relations with one another so that friendship, as opposed to a status

transaction, can occur. When one person draws status from their ties to another, "friendship" is at risk of becoming self-serving rather than a personal bond. Also, the ethos of a non-profit, non-commercial community is challenged if the socializing and networking that goes on within the group becomes less of a gift exchange, and more of a struggle for a place on the hierarchical ladder. Indeed, it is useful to contrast the concern within ljficwriters with maintaining a myth of equality, and a fear of commoditizing relationships, to the examination Thomas Gold made in 1985 about the changing nature of relationships in China as their Cultural Revolution waned. He describes the former state of comradeship as "a universalistic morality in which all citizens are in important respects equal under the state, and gradations on the basis of status and degree of closeness cannot legitimately interfere with that equality"(Gold, 1985, p.657). The political regime in China had been concerned with maintaining a myth of equality as a way of stifling dissatisfaction and maintaining political stability. Gold asserted that the spirit of comradeship waned thanks to a growing economy with increased financial opportunities. "Looking at the macro and micro levels in 1985, this article concludes that instrumentalism and commoditization had supplanted both friendship and comradeship as primary characteristics of personal relations."

While most of Gold's focus is the discussion of how these changes impacted marriage and the family, "there is a popular perception that even friendship is tinged with commercial considerations – 'making friends out of self-interest' 'disbanding when the need is exhausted'" (Gold, 1985, p. 666). By comparison, during the Revolution people who were considered "deviants, or targets of campaigns sought a 'haven of friendship' to succor one another, strengthening the place of friendship" (Gold, 1985, p. 669). In Gold's analysis, the introduction of profit, or the potential for profit, into the Chinese society affected personal relationships by placing a greater emphasis on hierarchy and personal gain. Prior to the profit motive however, some of the strongest friendships were among those who felt under threat in the society. While the typical coterie writer could not be seen to be in the same danger as people deemed enemies of the state, the sense of shared risk expressed so clearly by Anon 37 in her quote earlier could indeed create stronger relationships among group members. A myth of equality might also be a way to ensure

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stability and satisfaction with one's role in the group, which a focus on hierarchy might disrupt.

Another reader, who apparently felt her viewpoint to be so controversial that she commented anonymously, was sharpest of all regarding whether anyone in ljficwriters thought of the group as having a gift culture, or had actual friends:

"The question for me is whether the flist people were actually friends? Or were they people who did not actually give a fig about her, but consumed her fic? Does she actually owe these people the consideration of community?…What I do know is that the people who start invoking community are the ones who are particularly benefitting from that concept. Some of the biggest proclaimers of community I know are usually the biggest jackasses to those who are outside of the perceived circle of 'gift exchange'." [Anon 40] [8/10/2005]

Here we see Kollock's issue of boundaries tied together with the issue of motivation. Some people are seen as being within the circle of exchange, and some outside of it. Anon 40 suggests that participants are not motivated by their personal commitment to equality, nor by gaining meaningful relationships with others. In further anonymous comments, this poster pointed out that there were constant efforts to either drive certain writers out of the group, or at least to impose a certain group aesthetic on their writing. In either case, the shunning behavior did not suggest that writing viewed as defective was a "gift", nor that all writers received the benefits of being part of the group, even though they were participating in its practices. Anon 40's view differs from that of Anon 37 cited earlier, who saw all creative producers as standing together inside the "fannish circle." At least in Anon 40's view, the larger group circle had smaller circles of hierarchy within it, from which she felt deliberately excluded, and which were formed around something other than the exchange of creative goods.

Yet another commenter found the controversy not only insulting in its revelation of hierarchy, but she was also concerned that a new model established on this form of hierarchy would destroy the current one, and her own ability to participate.

"In addition to your arguments (that fandom is a gift culture), two things bother me. One - a request for payment in exchange for fanfic rankles my sense of fairness. Why should she get paid (especially enough to quit her job) for something the rest of us do for free? The free access to fic is what keeps fandom going." [Anon 41] [8/10/2005]

Anon 41 is looking at the exchange model as a way of maintaining the myth of equality. Why should CJ be different from "the rest of us" and receive a different form of

exchange, one considered more valuable in many cultures? But maintaining a gift culture is also a practical matter. Writers need to keep fanfic free due largely to the legal hazard of charging for stories with potentially infringing elements. However, readers need to keep fanfic free because the economic impact otherwise would make the practice cost-prohibitive. Even though the average user may read only 3-4 stories a week (Rebaza, 2009), this amounts to quite a lot of reading over the course of a year (and this reading may also vary tremendously during the year thanks to people's changing schedules). Few of the individuals, whose household incomes hover around the U.S. average of $35,000, could afford to be paying for so much reading material, especially since they tend to be heavy readers of published fiction as well (Rebaza, 2009). Even small costs might prove a significant disincentive to many readers, particularly given the problems of introducing currency issues into an international community of participants. Intrinsic motivation here must be balanced with issues of external reward, in this case the matter of personal use value. In addition, there are some clear cases of community value for the free exchange of fanfic. For those interested in gay and lesbian storylines, the sort of fiction they want either cannot be found in the marketplace, or is not produced in sufficient quantity. For them, fanfic is a resource that has a community value outside of economic considerations. By reframing well-known stories, fanfic may express desires completely ignored in mainstream media. The sense of unity provided by the representation of a minority group is a value which influences the form of gift exchange present in ljficwriters.

Although the wholesale conversion of the fanfic exchange model to a market model of paying for access and use would be a loss to the group as a whole, ljficwriters does accommodate the external reward elements of exchange for some members. There have been a number of fanfic writers who have entered the professional marketplace, sometimes with revised versions of stories originally published in their fanfic groups. In addition to the previously named Diane Duane, various other writers have gone pro either as writers or editors, usually in the science fiction/fantasy, romance, or erotica genres that dominate fanfic production, using their time in the group as a form of apprenticeship. At the ljficwriter's convention I attended in 2006, one featured guest was an editor for Tor Books, a publisher specializing in fantasy titles, who was there to discuss book submissions and meet with writers who had submitted writing samples. When past cases

of fans turning pro have occurred, the group as a whole has been quite supportive of these efforts. Two of the writers I observed between 2004 and 2007 published their first novels during this time and others sold short pieces to erotica eBook publishers. In all these cases, the writers continued to write fanfic, and were active on LJ. Their substantial readership within ljficwriters offered them a promotional base for their for-profit work.

However, the gift culture identity of a group changes if a substantial number of the participants are not just amateur writers, writing to an audience of similarly engaged readers, but professional writers essentially providing free samples while also marketing their paid work. As it stands, most fanfic writers do not want to go this route. In some cases, writers are in satisfying professions and they only want to write on occasion. Other writers lack the motivation to pursue a writing career for personal reasons or due to family obligations. Some writers already write as part of their profession, and like to write fanfic exactly because it is an escape from the demands and deadlines of their usual work. As a whole, the intrinsic motivations of control over one's work and life generally outweighs, for most, the external reward factors of professional publication.

What is also important to note is that however many ljficwriters may harbor a desire at some point to pursue professional writing, this does not mean that they *began* their participation in the group with such an intention. Some participants developed new ambitions in response to the encouragement and opportunities to develop their writing that they received as members of ljficwriters. The effect of time and participatory experiences on motivation demonstrates the interconnections of Hemetsberger's five elements of exchange in affecting behavior. In the case of the amateur/pro axis in the group, one can see the greater influence of extrinsic rewards for some and the common goals and values for others. Hemetsberger details extrinsic rewards as incorporating personal-use value, social approval, and gaining knowledge. For some writers, gaining knowledge from the group about their work would be of personal value as a form of expression, a hobby, a chance to engage with others, etc. For others the personal use may come in applying that knowledge for financial gain and social approval from outside the group. In a capitalist society, approval tends to be given most abundantly for activities that reap financial rewards. Therefore learning how to improve one's writing and appeal to an audience can be seen most strongly as an extrinsic reward when it is taken out of the

CoP itself and applied to other settings. On the other hand, for the pros coming to write fanfic in the group, the communal relationships and shared passions and values may be the most important factor in their participation since the group offers opportunities for play, flexibility, and reader interaction. What is important for the community as a whole, however, is that all fanfic writers are on a level playing field, their writing finding approval on its own, divorced from considerations of outside publication status, or other social status markers which have little bearing on the work of the group.

In this respect, anonymity among coterie groups like ljficwriters is much more intrinsic and easier to maintain than among coterie groups of the past, in which participants (and often their histories) were well known to other members of the group. Certainly in cases where some coterie members were patrons of other participants, hierarchy could not fail to be a visible issue, although whether talent or wealth was the primary value might not be as clear. In this respect, among ljficwriters the anonymity afforded by their use of pseudonyms may serve various purposes. Among those mentioned in Chapter 2 was hiding their membership in the group from outside viewers, and using names to signal commonalities and group affiliations. Another reason among ljficwriters may be to hide offline status markers from one another to avoid signaling differences. One interviewee addressed the contentious issue of hierarchy and the desire to obscure differences by friends of hers.

"[I]t's interesting to me how much of that's occuring and people won't admit that it's happening. It's sort of similar how in some ways in our culture you're not supposed to admit to your strengths, especially if you're a woman, like you're not supposed to talk about and own the things that you're good at, or be proud of yourself? It's not exactly the same things, but there's these things that everybody knows that you're not supposed to talk about. Like I think most people know who the big name fans are, but you can't actually talk about it and nobody will ever admit to being a BNF. Some people will but a lot of people won't, things like, much of my friends' list are BNFs, and they're my friends, and I can tease them about it, but they are most of them "Oh I'm not that big of a fan" and I'm like "Come on, like you totally are"." [Int 6]

Int 6's friends wanted to avoid the appearance of self-aggrandizement and inequality that could lead to the sort of backlash CJ engendered. Some ljficwriters pointed out that CJ was only one of 14 writers engaged on the project she headed, and her suggestion that she alone be paid to complete the work violated communal relationships and a sense of reciprocity. This lack of reciprocity, what Hemetsberger considered part of the "meaning of exchange," was discussed here by Anon 42.

" I think part of the problem with CJ was not just that she was asking for money for fanfic, but because she was asking for money to "live her dream" which we discover means to have a wedding and all the time she needs to persue her writing career without ever having to fund it herself. Fandom already has some cultural expectations in place as far as things like having a whip-round to help charity, or even a specific fan who's fallen on hard times. But for CJ to ask for sympathy because - gasp! - she has to work for a living just like everyone else does was too much." [Anon 42] [8/10/2005]

CJ violated the practice of gifting by altering the relationship of writer and audience, and taking money out of a communal context and into a direct one-to-one setting. As Anon 42 mentions, fans have passed the hat before to help a fellow fan in need, offering assistance as a form of community action. Other cases of group action have involved raising substantial amounts of money for charity through donated items or auctions of commissioned fanfic, vids or artwork. These auctions do not provide money to the fan creator, rather the payment goes straight to the charity as part of the total funds raised. However even in the charity auction model of collective fundraising, some group members suggest that connecting money and creative production devalues the group's identity as amateurs that create for the sheer joy of it, and that this threatens the boundaries between themselves and professionals.

By looking at the discussion on the gift culture initiated by Anon 35 at the start of this chapter we can see concerns about maintaining equality in the group, one in which "fandom" is seen to be a *community*, made up of a group of friends who share work with one another as a way of enjoying each other's company and having fun. As various dissenters pointed out, however, ljficwriters is not a community where everyone is a friend, where everyone's participation is valued, where everyone agrees that a non-profit ethos should be their core value, or whose personal motivations are the same. There are conflicting intrinsic motivations at work, some of which are accommodated and some which, when denied, lead to outward trajectories of participation. What emerges from ljficwriters is a picture of the group as a *resource* in which benefits are spread unequally, most contributions are made by a few, and attention is a scarce commodity. This focus on the resource aspects of the group puts it more firmly into a CoP model than the idea of friends simply sharing things for fun. CoPs embody valuable resources – resources of knowledge, of support, and of production. These products may be intangible as in a mentoring process by one individual to another, or tangible in the form of products, documentation, or skills.

In this section fanfic has been discussed as a tangible resource for participants in the ljficwriters CoP and its role as a form of currency in gift exchange. However creative products are not the only desired resources in ljficwriter transactions. Feedback, and its role in the group as a product of exchange, underlines a repeated tension in the group regarding professional quality, playful experimentation, and universal participation in the production of fanfic. The following section examines the role of feedback in the CoP, and how it is used in the process of gift exchange.

5.5 Status, payment, and the meaning of a gift

The development of social capital as described by Bourdieu (1977) is a process by which people are rewarded or disadvantaged depending on the strengths of their social connections. In a gift economy, contributors are rewarded with social capital through accrued attention and value from their contributions to a group. The problem is that not all contributions may be valued equally. There is no reason why group members could not participate in a variety of ways and yet be equally rewarded for their contributions. There are many roles which have sprung up in fanfic circles that add value to the group. However a fairly narrow hierarchy exists. Part of this stratification has to do with the value of feedback in the group, and its importance in gift exchange.

Among ljficwriters, those with more status and more social connections generally have a greater ability to mobilize others in the group into action. Int 6 describes one way in which this can work:

"[The BNF] pimped my existence on her journal, she made a post where she was like "I made friends with this girl, these are the things that she writes, friends list, meet this girl." So suddenly I got friended by like 50 people overnight and I was like "What?" But I thought it was very cool especially because people are always talking about how BNFs are evil, and this, that, and she's supporting, she's being mentorish, she betas my stories, she promotes me and she does that all the time, and I know lots of people who do that." [Int 6]

As a result of their social connections and visibility, these well known individuals are also able, if they are so motivated, to help the community grow by attracting new participants and successfully developing group projects. They also serve as network hubs for the group, connecting participants on an individual level, as well as serving as

navigational guides to other groups and individuals. However as Int 6 points out, the role of these "Big Name Fans" (BNFs) is a contentious one, and they are often criticized on the basis of receiving a disproportionate share of community resources compared to lesser known participants. What this section will examine is (1) How do BNFs accrue status? (2) Is participation equally rewarded? and (3) How do the affordances of the LJ site affect the practices of ljficwriters in this respect?

5.5.1 Feedback as gift or attempt to seek status?

One response to Anon 35's post about the gift culture finally raised the issue of what actually constitutes a "gift".

" In a true gift culture, wouldn't saying thank you be de rigueur?" [Anon 43] [8/10/2005]

One of the most frequently discussed topics among ljficwriters, occurring on a weekly basis, is that of feedback. As Kollock wrote, the currency of a gift economy is status. Providing goods of value is its own reward when those goods are utilized and credit is bestowed on the giver. There is also, within the CoP model, the idea that information is offered freely to others in the expectation that it both keeps the community working and that at some point in the future, the giver will benefit from someone else's contribution (without participation there is no community).

The question above by Anon 43 implies what everyone proclaims. If stories and other contributions to the group are gifts, then acknowledgment of the gifts is a reasonable expectation, as well as a form of payment to the giver. Offline or on, gifts are meant to receive some sort of acknowledgment from the person being gifted. However, not everyone is grateful for what they receive, not everyone is particularly concerned with acknowledging gifts, and not everyone sees acknowledgment as being expected. This is a source of constant frustration for contributors. One respondent ponders why this is:

"In a gift culture, the more valuable a gift I give to the community, the more I add to my own status. Who thanks people for doing things that increase their own status? I suddenly wonder if those who thank are

those whose own status or position is in some way improved or maintained via the thanking. " [Anon 44] [8/10/2005]

In writing about gift giving, Malinkwoski argues that one responds to gifts because of fear that the giver may stop giving in the future (Yan, 1996) which suggests that those who do provide the return gift of thanking, do so because they are concerned about no longer receiving future gifts. In fact one poster made such a connection explicit by indicating that giving thanks could be beneficial to the giver.

"I am guessing we want more of whatever we like. Often, commenting can get us *MORE* of what we want. …
My point is **not** to feel forced to comment or, god-forbid, act all entitled with demands for more fic. My point **is** that chatting with a writer/vidder/artist and giving feedback *may* result in more awesome." [Anon 89][6/4/2008]

Here Anon 89 acknowledges that feedback benefits the reader by providing the writer with incentive to provide more of what they enjoyed. But what Anon 44 was concerned about in her comment is that feedback is often not seen as payment to the writer or artist for something they have contributed, but is itself a form of status seeking by the reader. If the reader is able to make a connection with the writer they may become friends, the writer may read the reader's own fanfic and promote it, or the writer may agree to serve as a "beta reader" (volunteer editor) or even co-writer with the reader. All of these outcomes would serve to raise the reader's profile in the community. This need not be an entirely self-serving action. Many writers are popular because they are seen to be talented, witty, intelligent, friendly, or cool, qualities which attract friends in all sorts of circles. However, there is no question that many new writers quickly identify who is well known in the group, and begin to make themselves known by commenting on other people's work and ingratiating themselves with new acquaintances. In some cases the new writers will mention specific writers by name in general posts, as a way of both attracting the attention of the author and of other readers who know them. It is standard for ljficwriters to write the names of other group members (i.e., girlfriday) as an active html link, i.e. <lj user="girlfriday">. This LJ code allows a reader to click the link and go straight to that writer's blog. It also makes the name-dropping stand out on a post as one scrolls by. The feedback process thus becomes part of a complex dance of social obligation and identity construction that occurs in nearly every transaction in the group.

Although it is not often said so bluntly, the following writer, in an advice post about getting feedback, pointed out that feedback is part of the status dance:

"Names count. BNFs get more feedback, that's just a fandom law of nature. Sometimes it seems all out of proportion to the quality of the fic, but there are a couple of factors at play. One, people want to read the popular writers on the assumption that they're popular because they're good. Also they want to get some attention from the BNF and so leave feedback in hope of opening some kind of dialog." [Anon 45][1/1/2006]

Anon 45 points out two issues here, the second of which will be discussed in the next section. The first is an acknowledgment that people are not gifted equally within the community. Some individuals appear to accrue more gifts (and thus more status) than others, in the form of feedback. On LJ, feedback is a very visible thing. A visitor scrolling through a group or individual blog can see how many comments were made to each post since the number is listed at the bottom. They can then click on the entry and read all the attached comments and the author's responses. While some authors do receive comments privately, through email or IM, these are most often from friends or from people who, for whatever reason, wish to stay out of public view. Email feedback is rare since anything that makes feedback less quick and convenient tends to decrease response. For example, authors have generally discovered that linking to their fanfic on an outside site tends to get them much less feedback than posting it directly into their blog, even though all a person usually has to do is hit the back button and then click on "comment."

" I know to expect less for any [site] where the feedback isn't public. Maybe it's because people are at heart exhibitionists and like seeing their feedback on display. I do not exclude myself from this. :D" [Anon 46][4/1/2006]

"See, that's just so weird to me, because I remember for years and years it was, "keep feedback private please" or "only private feedback please" etc. How LJ has changed us all...Of course, I give a lot more feedback now that I can just click comment and say, "I liked this!" instead of having to fret over composing a thoughtful email I never would get around to writing." [Anon 19][4/1/2006]

As Anon 46 and 19 point out, the LJ structure accentuates the amount of social capital each individual has in terms of accumulated feedback and attention by its visible display, and this, in turn, has affected the existing practices in the group by making the social hierarchy equally visible. If, in the past, most feedback was infrequent and private, it would be difficult to compare how popular any given writer was, even though in

practical terms one might guess based on name recognition in conversation, or the number of times someone's work was recommended. But now most feedback that is given is given publicly, and this public attention itself then affects response to the story. As Anon 45 stated above, people assume that popular stories, those displaying lots of feedback, are popular because they are good. LJ's transparency regarding feedback thus itself affects the perception of gift quality among ljficwriters. Two writers participating in the same fashion may gain entirely different levels of visible status, and this may, in turn, affect their future participation. For those receiving few to no gifts in return for their contributions, there may be little incentive to continue contributing.

"I know new writers in a fandom are probably turned off by lack of comments. I was beta'ing this amazing story last year and the girl got like 3 comments on it and she just gave up on writing it… we as a fandom tend to priviliege already popular performers and not really raise up new writers or unknowns to let them know their work is just as valued and their talent is just as good." [Anon 90][6/5/2008]

Feedback can serve as both gift and status depending on the situation. A person who comments to a BNF and receives a personal (rather than cursory) reply may feel a status boost, especially if the conversation continues. A writer who receives a relatively high amount of feedback may also garner status and visibility in the group. However feedback is also a return gift. Strathern (1992) suggests that gift economies "differ from barter or commodity exchange because the gifts are judged qualitatively and not quantitatively, as in the case of commodities" with the gifts serving as relationship objects (Yan, 2006, p. 13). This seems true then of both fanfic and feedback, with feedback providing a qualitative judgment of the gift, and the fanfic itself serving as an object of the relationship.

Another factor in the status vs. gift view of feedback is what happens, not in a given instance, but over time. Those who are strongly rewarded for their participation are likely to continue doing so, and will thus also make an increasing number of social connections to others. These connections are a second form of status accrual that LJ makes visible, and which doubly rewards successful contributors.

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5.5.2 The social capital of "friends"

The previous section discussed feedback as both gift and status mechanism among ljficwriters. This section examines status in terms of social connections. As was shown in the quotes by Anon 19 and Anon 46 in the previous section, LJ has changed what gets read by displaying clearly the relative popularity of certain kinds of stories. Whereas once feedback was largely invisible, sent to writers in ways more difficult to tally, now feedback is public, simple to deliver, and a reification of participation. Feedback though, is not the only thing that LJ has made public. One's regular readers are now also a matter for public viewing and comparison. Those writers with more contacts have more social capital, and those with fewer have less.

In a CoP there is a longterm view of community building through the idea of "passing it forward." In this view a writer who posts their story is not expecting feedback for their own work but is doing so in exchange for someone else's story (or artwork or video) somewhere down the line. Their contribution is thus a way of perpetuating the community, adding value to it, and getting their own future needs met. It is a generalized reciprocity. Even though in the long run most ljficwriters do indeed expect someone else to provide entertainment that they can enjoy, in the short term their focus is on their own work. A few writers in the group have been so prolific it seems impossible that they have time for any reading at all. They are thus unlikely to be contributing to the "payments" for other people's "gifts" even though in the CoP model, they are adding considerably to the group's value as a resource. They are also likely to be benefiting from a large friends list when story popularity translates to social popularity.

Friending, or blog subscription, can be seen through social network theory as a way of turning *relations*, that is, connections between participants based on the exchanges of support (feedback) or goods (fanfic), into *ties,* the maintenance of a relation. Adding someone to your reading list allows for repeated connections to be made, either as a weak tie (Granovetter, 1982), with few exchanges between blogger and reader, but with a possibility of developing into a strong tie, thanks to the addition of relations (such as a greater number of shared interests, or working together online or offline). The social network approach "provides a way of examining community in terms

of what connects people rather than what is seen from the outside to constitute a cohesive unit" and also allows for the examination of each individual's multiple group memberships (Haythornthwaite, 2007). Among ljficwriters, for example, we can see BNFs as network stars, attracting and connecting people, sometimes simply through their own writing, or perhaps through a group blog they moderate or a project they have launched. Through LJ's options we can even see around whom a given group of people congregate.

Every LJ user has a profile page. This page lists the individual blogs one is subscribed to, the group blogs one is subscribed to, and then the individuals who have subscribed to you. There is also the option of having a "mutual friends" listing, which shows the overlap between those reading you and who you read. Because these are all active links, every time you look at someone's profile page, the subscriptions you and that person have in common appear in bold type. At a glance you can see who this person "knows" and whether or not they're reading what you are. In addition, LJ suggests new people to you in one of its modules. By looking at your reading lists and comparing it to the reading lists of people you're subscribed to, LJ points out to you who they're reading that you're not. So if you are subscribed to 40 people, and 25 of them subscribe to person A, LJ will suggest to you that you "friend" person A, (as well as persons B through F who have significant but lesser overlap). This LJ option thus has the effect of increasing the readership, and thus status, of a small number of individuals within a network without any direct action on their part. By comparison, on the older posting board or mailing list models, everyone was subscribed to by everyone else, and personal connections were visible only during written exchanges between those individuals. Ljficwriters' selection of LJ as their platform has thus provided transparency in social networks and individual status, while decreasing the amount of participatory labor for the most successful members.

Writers who have a large list of regular readers have three kinds of advantages over people with small reading lists in terms of how much work they have to do to be visible in the community. The first is that when a person subscribes to you, it is because they are interested in what you're posting. They add you to their reading list so that they can reduce their own effort in finding your material. This visible expression of interest

can catch the attention of other readers who see that you are popular, and may be more likely to subscribe to you as well. The second advantage is that because your subscribers get to see all your work and presumably like it, they are more likely to recommend your stories to their own list of subscribers. This gets you new readers you were not even aware of (until they show up and comment). The third advantage is that even if your subscribers aren't recommending you, the fact that you show up on their reading list may still introduce you to more readers. This is because of a practice known as a friends-crawl or friendsfriends. In this practice a reader who has, perhaps, exhausted their own reading list goes looking at the reading lists of people they've subscribed to in the expectation that the people they like to read will know other people they might like to read. Thus each person who subscribes to you is likely to lead to additional subscriptions down the line.

The power of popularity to spawn further popularity was the subject of research regarding music choices among teens. Researchers found that the use of popularity rankings to select material was a time saver for listeners in terms of finding material of value, but speculated that choosing popular music or books might also have a social component, since users could discuss those choices with friends who were likely to also have enjoyed the same material (Salganik, Dodds and Watts, 2006). By comparison new writers who no one has subscribed to yet must go to considerable effort to accumulate a list of readers, and will likely have a difficult time "catching up" to the popular writers who no longer need to put in time marketing themselves for the reasons stated in the previous paragraph. The new writer must post their story in multiple group blogs in the hope that someone will take a chance on a new name and try their story out. Writers with large subscription lists are, by comparison, established brands who can, if they want, post only to their own subscribers and let the readers come to them. But if a new writer attracts the attention of one of the BNFs, and thus either receives comments from that individual or, better still, is recommended by that person, the response to their work can be immediate and enormous, as was described by Int 6 in the previous section.

Even if the BNF does not work on behalf of the new writer, simply having them as a subscriber can be helpful when people look at profile pages and recognize a name

they may themselves have on their reading list. This may provide a sense of familiarity that encourages more subscriptions within social networks:

"Seeing someone within the context of their connections provides the viewer with information about them. Social status, political beliefs, musical taste, etc., may be inferred from the company one keeps. Furthermore, knowing that someone is connected to people one already knows and trusts is one of the most basic ways of establishing trust with a new relationship" (Donath and boyd, 2004, p. 72).

If the new writer is lucky, in time they may serve as a network hub themselves with their own subgroup among ljficwriters. Success can be a mixed blessing for the writer, however, as any rise in status tends to be accompanied by increasing social obligations and conflicts with other group members. While writers who fail to make connections may become discouraged and leave the group, writers who have achieved a tipping point of subscribers may feel overwhelmed by demands for their attention and also leave the group or pull back in their participation. Int 6 spoke about what happened after her friends' list grew dramatically and her stories began to be well received:

"[I]t was weird because then I suddenly felt more watched and I started getting very confused, when people were interacting with me in ways where I felt like they wanted something from me, like somehow that I could do maybe what [the BNF had done for me]… so I've had the opportunity for [BNFs] to talk to me about both the negative and positive things that have happened to them. That's one thing why I'm wary, right, because I know these stories, my friends, who are "It's really overrated, people have attacked me, it's really weird, I don't know why people have to be this way."[Int 6]

As Int 6 points out, coping with one's success is a needed skill as well. Although being a highly read writer is the central factor for success within the group, having a social personality and a lot of time and energy helps as well. Some writers are read not so much because their stories are of high value to the reader, but because the writer is good at encouraging others and making friends. Some of these individuals use ljficwriters as their central social outlet, and thus have a lot of time and interest for other people. Other writers network in a strategic way to gain a larger readership for their own work. When praising the work of others, they hope to create an obligation for those to praise them in return. In general, achieving status has to be done through creating social connections as well as contributing objects of value to the group, and looking at the subscribers a person has can help place them within the network.

This section has discussed the relevance of subscribers to status among ljficwriters, and the effect that LJ's transparency regarding subscribers and reading lists

has contributed to the evaluation of and concern with this aspect of participation. Compared to feedback, individuals are more likely to see their participatory efforts rewarded in terms of subscribers, since gaining readers can sometimes be unrelated to the quality of one's contributions to the group, but instead to one's personality and efforts at networking. Nevertheless, to those who produce work with popular appeal in the group, they are likely to receive double the status benefits, as their subscribers are likely to produce more feedback than those whose posts are of less interest to readers. In addition, while a large list of subscribers is considered a mark of status in the group, subscriptions alone are not considered a resource, or "gift" within the group.

One final aspect of status and gifting among ljficwriters has to do with the thorny issue of how gifts are valued, and how gift exchange does not always bring the expected results.

5.5.3 The gifts few want – value as a gift exchange factor

In discussions of gift exchange and how they function in virtual communities, one issue not often examined is what counts as reciprocity. If feedback, for example, is considered a gift among ljficwriters, and is a commodity of value in accruing status, is all feedback considered equal? In short, when do participants disagree on the value of a gift and how does this affect gift exchange?

Under Hemetsberger's framework, feedback among ljficwriters can be considered an extrinsic reward for work done. It constitutes a form of social approval, which is why it adds status to the receiver, and can also be a form of knowledge accrual by the writer, since it tends to provide information they can utilize in future work. However there can be disagreement among ljficwriters as to what the ultimate purpose of feedback is, and thus how it should be given and responded to. As was mentioned in previous sections, feedback can be given to writers to serve various factors of gift exchange. It can serve as a form of reciprocity for gifts received, it can express shared passion and values by demonstrating engagement with the material, and it can be done to enhance a sense of community, as a way of demonstrating participation or making a social connection. However, these differing motivations can engender different responses causing an

imbalance in the exchange. In this section three types of action regarding feedback, non-response, negative response, and non-participation, are discussed as a way of examining gift valuation and imbalances in exchange.

5.5.3.1 Non-response

"It might not really matter if lurkers are invisible because I think it's clear that fandom is deeply social and lurkers aren't very important to fan economy as it stands. In fact if writers had a better sense of how many people read then it might not be positive. Comments might be a way of filtering the audience, making it on a managable, human scale. Knowing 50 liked your story is more managible than knowing 500 people did.

But it's important to remember that many lurkers do care a lot about fandom but aren't social and won't be no matter how gently entreated to comment.

It's possible that fandom is as important to people who never comment as to those who do." [Anon 88] [4/4/2007]

Anon 88 points out several issues in her comment regarding lurkers and feedback. To begin with, her definition of lurkers is not as someone who is not familiar with the community nor the fanfic being written, but as someone who does not comment. It is their reluctance to speak that makes them a lurker – "invisible." She points out that the amount of interest and engagement is not what separates those who do speak from those who do not. But this amount of concern is easy to miss if the person is silent. And as she points out, the "deeply social" atmosphere of ljficwriters implies that those who do not care about connecting do not really care about the group at all.

However missed opportunities for connection happen on both sides. It is not just readers who fail to engage with the writer, but sometimes writers who pass up chances for engagement. For those trying to make a social connection, the assumption in offering the feedback is that the writer will respond in some way, preferably expressing some form of reciprocal interest. A surprising number of writers, however, make little effort to respond to overtures made in their feedback, responding to comments either haphazardly or not at all. Although the reasons for this silence vary, in some cases the disparity has to do with hierarchical factors. Anon 88 offers the first reason –that it simply isn't possible for writers to respond to everyone if all people accessing their posts actually did make themselves known. For BNFs who get many comments on any and all posts, giving even a cursory response to each comment can be quite time consuming. Their readers may

have a great deal of time, by comparison, because they are not receiving similar levels of response to their own posts, or may not even be making many contributions. By contrast, the BNF's time is often under considerable demand. Not only are BNFs creating further writing/videos/artwork, but they are being contacted socially by their extensive network of subscribers. They may be asked to beta for others, participate in projects, launch projects, or make other contributions to the group, and they are expected to provide feedback to other contributions just like their readers are. BNFs are the core of this CoP and are often the creators or coordinators of the community's activities and resources. Feedback, however appreciated, is an additional responsibility for them to respond to, and in some cases is not something they are personally motivated to do.

In some cases this lack of motivation has to do with how some writers interpret the meaning of the exchange. For them, feedback is reciprocity for the gift offered (the fanfic, video, etc.) One does not then turn around and thank someone for giving thanks, as this could become an endless cycle. For the reader who sees the feedback as a form of communal relationship, however, a lack of response to their "conversation" is rude. Each side is interpreting the form of gift exchange differently. The result of these conflicting interpretations is that many readers are discouraged from leaving feedback at all, since it appears the writers do not value it.

"I'm posting anonymous because I do not want flames…I feel like the fandom I'm in is very definitely segregated between the writers and readers, and I do feel that readers-only are much lower down on the level of importance to the fandom, in the eyes of the writers. Of course, without the writers, we wouldn't have any fic to read, but I do feel there's a pecking order, and the feedback they *thrill to* is from other writers. The feedback from nonwriters in my fandom usually barely gets acknowledged. Of course, if you're a beta, you get to move up a little in the pecking order, but the writers reign supreme, and the readers-only, are pretty much nothing." [Anon 51][7/17/2006]

Anon 51 is correct about the social structure of fanfic groups. While all writers are definitely not equal, those who do not write or contribute creative material at all tend to stay unknown, have few "friends", and would have little power within the group to initiate projects or activities. As far as Anon 51 is concerned, a lack of response to feedback is a direct reflection on the status of the person giving it. She doesn't perceive mixed interpretations of gifting, or a simple lack of time, as the cause. What her post suggests is not only the value of having readers with community status ("the feedback they thrill to"), something discussed earlier in this chapter, but that the feedback writers

respond to, is feedback that has pleased them. This introduces the idea of gift valuation – not all feedback is an equally pleasing gift. This is a second example of conflict in gift exchange factors: the gifts that provide the most social approval, due to the status of the giver, are an "extrinsic reward" to these writers. To Anon 51 the feedback is a form of communal relationship – she complains about "segregation" and being "nothing" rather than being a part of the group through her participation. Conflict in the valuation of "gifts" occurs when the giver and receiver are prioritizing different factors in gift exchange. This ties back to the purpose of the myth of equality. If everyone were equal, their gifts would also be received equally. What upsets Anon 51 is that her participation through feedback isn't acknowledged in the same way as that of others with more status, and her efforts also aren't benefiting her in the same way either.

The post that Anon 51 was responding to expressed distress about this stratification in the group:

"I'm so sick of the way fandom does its best to segregate readers and writers, as if we writers are never readers and as if people who do not write are somehow unable to understand what they read. I really hate it when I do a meta post and people with good, insightful things to say preface their remarks with "of course I'm just a reader" as if that means their contribution to the discussion has less value than that of a writer. Mind you, it's not the people who say that that drive me crazy, it's that fandom--which supposedly prides itself on its welcoming and friendly nature, so yeah, way to go fandom--has made them feel somehow less than valuable." [Anon 45] [7/17/2006]

Anon 45 agrees with Anon 51 in their prioritization of communal relationships in gift exchange. This may be because she sees feedback as equally valuable regardless of what it is in response to. For example, she cites her "meta post" – a contribution she made, not of fanfic, but of analytical discussion. She wants feedback not as reciprocity, but as a form of conversation and engagement. She values commentary from all readers and dislikes the effects of the social order on individuals' feelings of self-worth. Part of this differing valuation of feedback, therefore, suggests that the roles a contributor plays in the community affects which form of gift exchange factor they prioritize. For people who are "just a reader" feedback is the only gift they have to offer. It has to be seen as valuable, because otherwise the giver herself is diminished. For people who contribute in various ways, such as writing meta or being a community moderator, feedback is valued for the sense of community it engenders. But perhaps for people who create the most valued contributions, fanfic, extrinsic reward becomes a higher priority.

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This prioritization of fanfic as a gift of high value, and feedback as a lesser gift that must be given often, can be seen in the following response to Anon 45.

"I do think…that people who read and do not write should probably be even more diligent about leaving reviews on liked fic. It's a way of giving back to the author and the fandom, encouraging activity and participating without being a passive recipient. Nobody is hurt by passive reception, and it's fine, but since one is not contributing by adding fic, it's best to contribute in some other way - by reviewing, by participating in discussions, or something else." [Anon 52] [7/17/2006]

Anon 52 suggests that because feedback is a lesser gift, it needs to be given in greater quantity ("should…be…more diligent") and that even so, other contributions would be more valuable. She qualifies by saying "nobody is hurt" by lurkers or those who give only occasional feedback, but the implication is that no one is benefiting from such "passive reception" either. Feedback seems to have been taken out of the context of gifting altogether and is presented as a direct obligation in the form of payment. Her suggestion is that readers, especially those who do not review or join in discussion, are "free riders" who utilize the community's resources but are not a part of it. If those individuals are outside the circle of exchange, she is exhorting them to become members and gift back.

5.5.3.2 Negative response

Another aspect of gift exchange embodied in feedback is that of "common goals and values." Feedback from readers is a form of expressing connection with the writer through the text, and demonstrating the value of writing to the group by expressing a personal response to its content. In many cases, feedback is purely emotional, an expression of enjoyment with the story/video/artwork, in whatever way that the viewer was moved. However sometimes the response comes in the form of "concrit", or constructive criticism. These responses are usually positive in nature, otherwise they would simply be criticism, which is a separate issue addressed later. Concrit offers advice or specific corrections to the text, and sometimes simply evaluates the text from a more technical or professional standpoint. We can see why this might violate the "common goals and values" aspect of gift exchange, by demonstrating a different set of goals for the gift than the writer might have.

It is understandable that no writer or artist wants to be told that their work was deficient in some way, much less to be told so in a public and inconsiderate manner. However because of the gift value of feedback, positive comments take on even more desirability. Through the lens of gift exchange, criticism could be considered a devaluation of the "gift." This is particularly true if the person doing the critique is herself a well-known or well-regarded writer. A recommendation from such a person can bring many new readers. A critique may keep some away. In the simplest terms, it is impolite to criticize a gift, and the onus in many societies is on the recipient to be tactful and polite when receiving something disappointing.

So why does anyone provide criticism? The reasons appear to fall into two camps and demonstrate the presence of separate goals and values that end up being expressed as different factors of gift exchange. In the first case there are writers and readers in the group who see ljficwriters less as a group of people exchanging contributions (a literary potluck) and more as a training ground for writers (a cooking class). These two groups were referred to by some ljficwriters in Chapter 2 as the "social" and "literary" writers. In some cases the "training" perspective is deliberate when writers go on to professional careers. In others it is simply a belief in self-improvement, an enacted view of the group as a CoP where fiction writing is the central purpose and the point of participating is to reach full competence in this activity. Concrit is then offered as a way of encouraging promising writers to improve their material so as to provide a "better" quality of content for the group. In some cases writers are happy to receive encouragement and advice, and mentoring roles may develop. In others, writers feel that their gift is being rejected as unworthy, and their presence in the group is not welcome. Faced with these responses, some concrit givers will give critique where it is wanted and withhold it where it is not, tempering the form of gift exchange to suit the perspective of the recipient.

However another camp of "concrit" providers continue to give advice, regardless of the trouble it causes, in a stubborn attempt to drive people to improvement or to force others into reviewing their own work in the same sort of manner:

"Not only do I enjoy editing and giving crit and writing reviews of things I read or watched, but I also do so because that's how I want my own work to be treated."[Anon 47][7/16/2006]

Anon 47 is discussing the factor of intrinsic motivation conflicting with the common goals and values expectation of other ljficwriters. Her motivation is task involvement with editing and critiquing, and she also gains knowledge from receiving such critiques in return. Unfortunately, the person she is offering concrit to may not recognize changes suggested to her work as an improvement. Her encounter with Anon 47 would be a clash of gift exchange factors. But in some cases concrit is less "con" and simply "crit" with feedback being used with no consideration to community values at all. "Disconnected" CoPs as ones where people "treat interactions as simply transactions" and members "do not connect in personal ways that show enthusiasm, enjoyment, and a willingness to give and reciprocate" (Wenger, McDermott and Snyder , 2002, p. 146). The people doing so are "disconnected" from the CoP, even if they are interacting with its members and inside its boundaries. The following is one example of how this can happen:

" I'm reading..I love it so far. I do not really comment on people's work unless I do not like it. And from what I can see, you've been getting big ego boosts every chapter. *grins* But count me among your audience" [Anon 48][9/9/2004]

"that's interesting. i do not tend to comment on people's work unless i DO like it.
anyhow, there's no such thing as too much ego-boosting for the insecure fanfic writer. thanks for making an exception in my case."[Anon 24] [9/9/2004]

Most people in the group are like Anon 24, and are compelled to comment when they have enjoyed reading something, feeling moved into the "common goals and values" form of gift exchange. But Anon 48 reveals that some readers expect to be entertained and use commenting to reject the "gift" they have been given. For Anon 48, feedback is not tied to the work, or to the setting in which it exists (the ljficwriters community), but tied to the *person* it is being given to ("you've been getting big ego boosts"). Feedback is presented here as tied to the author's bid for attention, not their work. To Anon 24, feedback constitutes confirmation that their work has connected with the reader (the "insecure fanfic writer"). Anon 48 sees only the status that Anon 24 is gaining ("count me among your audience"). There is a lack of reciprocity here, the meaning of the gift exchange has been altered.

Anon 48's approach to feedback is not unique. Some readers tend to leave it not to gift the author, but to signal when their expectations have been met or denied –

feedback as a form of evaluating their *own* participation in the group. These readers may have thought the story was well written, but more importantly they found the type of story they wanted to read, with the characters they like, and an ending they wanted it to have. Contrary to the viewpoint of the "cooking class" writers, what some readers want is not necessarily a story written with more skill but more of the same dish they have already been served. The feedback may be encouraging to the writer, but the primary purpose seems to be for the reader to signal their own success or failure in locating reading material they wanted.

" I've noticed that I am much more likely to get fb for a multi-part fic, or one that I hint might have another part coming (either with a "TBC" or just by leaving it open-ended in some way) than one that's clearly a one-shot. I suppose this is because readers want to encourage the writer to either finish the piece or write more of a storyline they've enjoyed." [Anon 49][7/16/2006]

Feedback such as "write more!" or demanding specific material moves away from the elements of reciprocity, shared passion, or communal act, since it does not engage with the writer's role as a community member and their own intrinsic motivations. The readers are concerned only with their own success in mining ljficwriters as a resource of creative goods. This can be seen clearly in the following comment:

"the best bit of rudeness was someone who e-mailed me saying that I should stop talking about my physical problems on my lj and post more fic, because she likes my fic. Then I got a second e-mail with suggestions for the kinds of fics she likes. I did not even reply to it, I was so busy gawking at the chutzpah." [Anon 81][1/24/2006]

This one-way form of feedback, where the reader is not engaging with the writer as a person but simply voicing demands, also occurs in reverse among writers who demand a certain level of feedback from readers before continuing stories. The writers are not looking at feedback as a gift but as a signal of their success in using ljficwriters as an attention resource. In the following example someone describes one of their strangest feedback encounters:

"My favorite was: *I read your story and liked it, now go do the same to mine."*
No, really. This was followed up a few times by, *"Why won't you like my story as much as I liked yours???"* " [Anon 82][1/24/2006]

One can see in this example, that the feedback has become disconnected from the writing itself; it is not in any way a reciprocal gift, but a mark of the writer's success in

utilizing Anon 82 as an attention tally. Neither these readers nor writers are utilizing ljficwriters as a CoP because to do so requires members to interact reciprocally:

"unless you interact you do not form a community of practice. Moreover, these interactions must have some continuity…a shared understanding of their domain and an approach to their practice. In the process, they build valuable relationships based on respect and trust. Over time, they build a sense of common history and identity" (Wenger, McDermott and Snyder, 2002 p. 35).

The commonality spoken of above does not mean homogeneity. Members have differences; this is inevitable when each has their own trajectory, intrinsic motivations, and past history in the CoP. Indeed, each member develops a unique individual identity in relation to the community, which involves a personal sphere of influence, specialties and styles, and different roles. What the "disconnected" readers and writers are doing, however, does not involve relationships based on respect, nor a shared understanding of domain or practice. As has been shown in this chapter, gift exchange factors may vary among ljficwriters, but they do all utilize the concept as a part of their CoP experience. The "disconnected" readers and writers who fail to recognize the gifting function of feedback, nor the exchange processes among members, are utilizing fanfic purely as a commodity in a one-way conversation.

5.5.3.3 Non-participation

In the previous sections we have reviewed examples of one-way conversations, either due to non-response, or a use of feedback outside the function of gift exchange. The final issue regarding feedback is when the lack of reciprocity comes from the readers. Some of the lack of feedback can be attributed to lurkers as Anon 88 pointed out in the previous section. Lurker numbers are impossible to determine since they are by definition non-participants. However, there is a way of estimating their percentages by using site hits with IP tracking, which can tie hits to a given user on LJ. By using one called lj-toys at my own LJ, and by comparing hits on any given post to the comments I have received, most of the time 5% or fewer of my readers take the time to comment on a post. Some posts receive no comments at all, despite 30 or more people clicking on a link to the post. This seems consistent with the observations of other ljficwriters who track their website statistics and also compare those to comments.

What the use of tracking reveals, though, is that silent visitors are as likely to be active members of the group as lurkers. Part of the difference between the cooking class and potluck writers has to do with their view of the function of feedback in the gift exchange. Potluck writers see it as part of communal relationships, feeling that any contributions should at least be given token notice. Even if the commentary amounts to "I liked this" or "good story" what they wish is for their participation to be seen, and those acknowledgments to be seen by others in turn. Whether or not the person saying "I liked this" actually liked or even read the story is likely to be secondary to the fact that they took the time to comment, and that others can see that the story received some readership.

The cooking class writers are likely to use feedback as an extrinsic reward providing knowledge and social approval to the writer. One would assume then that potluck writers would give feedback far more often. But the feedback statistics suggest that neither the "cooking class" readers, nor the "potluck" readers as a whole adhere to their declared intention of how the community should function. Stories that are well written but aren't what people are looking for do not get the level of attention most writers want, and people often do not want to engage as often as the communal relationship aspect of gift exchange would require. As in the case of the BNFs who were discussed at the beginning of this section, people can also suffer from gift fatigue, leading to an imbalance in terms of gifts offered and received. Although complaining about not receiving the right sort of gift, or frequent enough gifts, tends to be considered gauche and entitled among ljficwriters (as it might anywhere), it is occasionally spoken of.

"Do not⋯write in an obscure fandom and/or write an obscure pairing. Not only do you have the obscurity going against you, but you have fewer places to post your fic. Again, fewer readers mean less feedback. [Do not] write fic about unpopular topics." [Anon 45] [1/1/2006]

In the post above, Anon 45 gives advice on how to get more feedback. She states that if you want people to be happy with a gift, you should pay attention to what it is that they like. If you write something primarily to please yourself, it is a matter of luck if it pleases someone else. Looked at this way, the ljficwriter CoP functions *not simply to provide people with an opportunity to write and read, but to satisfy people's emotional needs.* And it is in this respect that focusing on gift exchange factors most strongly demonstrates

ljficwriters' connection to past female coterie writing groups. The desire for personal relationships, connection, validation, and the ability to hash out one's greatest hopes and concerns in a place separate from the home or workplace, is a function of *both* the social and writing elements of this CoP.

Discussion about stories on ljficwriters tends to revolve around using stories as a form of therapy for moods the reader is experiencing, as well as an exploration of self and others. One ljficwriter hosted a survey on how people related to the texts they read, which provided the following examples of what draws people to stories:

"I'm always interested by what my likes/dislikes reveal about me, though I can't say that the revelations have always been very comfortable… One of my things is people with father issues. "

"I relate to characters who struggle with their identities or have to constantly be on the defensive about their background/heritage or keep it low key because of the responses they've experienced or were warned about, what that entails, the effect it has, etc…I also notice that I fall in love with the idealist and selfless hero in practically everything I watch because it helps validate values that may not be as "cool" or in fashion in entertainment media."

"the revelations i've experienced have sometimes been about characters i disliked and how my hostility can mask similarities between me and the character. that kind of thing makes me say OUCH."

"For my part, analysing characters and relationships on shows and finding clues to my own kinks, hang-ups and hot-button issues functions as my self-psychoanalysis and it quite literally keeps me sane. Truly, the power of mythology works magic."

"I do not like characters with no moral code. I do not care if their particular moral code is completely different than mine, I just need to know that they will follow, to a certain degree, their own set of rules."

"I tend to fall especially hard for characters who are willing to morally compromise themselves in order to do what is necessary and/or protect their loved ones. Characters who will get their hands bloody, do the dirty work, make deals with the devil or morally indefensibly choices for the greater good/the sake of a friend."

"A character who is divided against him/herself is almost always compelling to me. A character who feels called upon to take on a task/responsibility much larger than what s/he feels capable of, likewise."

"I'm a sucker for characters who sacrifice their own happiness for others…And now that I'm typing this I suppose it does relate to me slightly (though I'd never considered it before) because I've given up my freedom in order to care for a bedridden, disabled parent." [All 5/9/2007]

Looking at the diversity of responses highlights why the use of gift exchange as a form of expressing shared passion and values is so prevalent. Some gifts in ljficwriters are more equal than others because the point is not really to write well, but to write something that others in the group want to read because it promotes a sense of connection and a development of personal identity. These connections described above demonstrate why

the CoP is valued and why "what makes them successful over time is their ability to generate enough excitement, relevance, and value to attract and engage members" (Wenger, McDermott and Snyder, 2002 p. 50). Self-serving writing (or feedback) does not help maintain the community, and the community rewards that which sustains it.

One member of ljficwriters, Anon 50, has run an annual survey about feedback since January 2003. In 2003, she got 164 responses to the survey, and in 2007 received 316 responses. What Anon 50 found was that most writers expected feedback to acknowledge the *participation effort* they were making by contributing stories to the community, being acknowledged for work, not for quality. Conversely in looking at the reader side of feedback, less than a third saw feedback as an obligatory part of community participation. This was made explicit by the 78% who said they provided feedback only for stories they enjoyed. Tied to this enjoyment was the 90% who said they gave feedback to encourage writers to provide more of what they were already writing. On the whole, both writers and readers seemed to see feedback as important not as a teaching tool for improvement, nor as payment for story writing, but as a barometer for how much enjoyment a story provided to its target readership.

If indeed the true purpose of feedback is to signal the alignment of contributions with group goals, Hemetsberger's "common goals and values" factor of gift exchange, then the group is functioning normally by propelling to prominence writers who please their readers. This form of status development through feedback and "friending" also provides an incentive to newer writers, who will seek to emulate what is popular in order to develop their own identities as writers in the community. The forms of gift exchange used among ljficwriters ensure a repetitious production of story types that fulfill its readers' emotional needs, and it is this emotional fulfillment, through both stories and direct interaction, that is the central motivation of both individuals and the group as a whole.

5.6 Conclusion

This chapter has examined the functions of gift exchange processes in ljficwriters, as one of the functions of a CoP and has also, through looking at how ljficwriters assess

value in terms of participation and production, revealed that the satisfaction of emotional needs is behind the social and productive practices of the group. This core purpose ties ljficwriters closely with female coterie groups of the past as explored in Chapter 2.

According to Hemetsberger what governs factors of gift exchange include 1) Intrinsic motivation, (2) Extrinsic rewards, (3) Meaning of exchange, (4) Common goals and values, and (5) Communal relationships. The most significant of these factors is intrinsic motivation, the thing that guides people to undertake tasks that give their life meaning. Gaps in expectation can occur when members are prioritizing different factors in their transactions, but all five of Hemetsberger's factors can be seen in action within the community. This chapter began by asking what are the rewards to participants for contributing to the group's central purpose and what are the norms that govern these exchanges? These rewards involve feedback or other roles in the group such as moderators, promoters, betas, and archivists, which support the gifting of creative work. They can also involve social approval through status, a feeling of community, knowledge gained or expertise developed, control over one's work, and personal use.

What was also demonstrated in this chapter is how LJ's affordances affect group practices and norms in the area of gift exchange. LJ's structure encourages and even exacerbates the tendency of ljficwriters to cluster around BNFs and pool readership and attention to a concentrated group of individuals. LJ does this in numerous ways. LJ makes the number of comments to a post visible. LJ makes the number of subscribers visible, and encourages subscription to mutually read individuals. LJ also provides a platform that prioritizes person-to-person navigation while diminishing any kind of centralized organization or even searching ability. In response to this people oriented, decentralized space, ljficwriters have enhanced the sort of individual network hubs that are BNFs as a way of holding the community together. Status accrues to those who deliver what is valued, and is denied to those who do not meet the needs of a large proportion of the group.

Through the discussion in this chapter, it can also be seen why the myth of equality is something that is promoted within the group even though its members are aware of its lack of truth. The myth serves to obscure status and hierarchy issues, which detract from the wider benefit the community derives from the free exchange of gifts.

Instead these status and hierarchy concerns tend to be the focus of the "disconnected" participants in the group, who are not involved in exchange or connection but in self-promotion. Similarly free-riding consumption exists in "disconnected" readers, who want to mine the community for its resources without contributing through participation. Parry and Bloch (1989) propose that what determines the form of exchange in a society is whether the relationship among the participants is short-term or long-term, with short-term focused on competition and long-term focused on social relationships. This seems to be reproduced among ljficwriters in observing the disconnected participant who sees the accrual of feedback as a competition, while participants who are committed to the continuation of the group use their work to build relationships, some of which may be quite long-lasting. While both types of participants may be attempting to satisfy their emotional needs, the short-term or long-term focus affects how they perceive and prioritize exchange objects such as stories or comments.

The myth of equality may yet persist for its use in uniting a group so disparate in terms of nationality, age, race, and life experience. The revelation of participants in their blogs as multifaceted people may serve to highlight differences that were once more easily obscured through other forms of communication.

"In looking for the cause of the erosion of the myth of a common value system, it seems to me that so long as our perceptions and knowledge of other groups were formed largely through the written media of communication, the American myth that we were a giant melting pot of equalitarians could be sustained…Under the impact of electronic media, however, this psychological distance has broken down and now we discover that these people with whom we could formerly compromise on interests are not, after all, really motivated by interests but by values…Thus we have arrived not at an age of accommodation but one of confrontation"(Crowe, 1969, p. 1105).

Concerns about confrontation, dissension and outsiders will be explored in a different light in the following chapter on the "safe space," focusing on one of the central historical concerns of female coterie groups.

Chapter 6: The safe space

"What makes a space 'safe'? Who decides that the space is safe and is there a responsibility from anyone to maintain that 'safe' label?" [Anon 91] [6/24/2009]

"Personally I do not think of fandom as a safe space for much of anyone who's not a straight able-bodied cis white male, which is ironic since that's virtually no one in fandom." [Anon 92][6/24/2009]

"One thing that I like about being a guy in LJ/DW fandom is that I can't take for granted that I have a clear and secure place in every conversation, or feel confident about how to enter into those conversations and participate in them. It's not that LJ/DW fandom is the only place in my life where that applies, but in other contexts that uncertainty is temporary and situational; here, for me, it's foundational and structural." [Anon 32][6/9/2009]

6.1 Introduction

In reviewing the history of female coterie groups in Chapter 2, the central issue that emerged for groups of women writers who banded together was the privacy and separation their coterie offered from either the mass audience of commercial publishing, or mixed-sex coterie groups. Fanfic writers who moved online into the world of Usenet and other public venues often retreated to more cloistered online spaces, such as mailing lists or moderated membership posting boards, as a way to avoid conflicts and attacks from a general and mixed-sex audience. The privacy and control available as part of the LJ software enhanced the portrayal of LJ as a "safe" space for conversation and creative expression.

While this representation has been somewhat true, ljficwriters is not a group that remains free of "combative", "prejudiced" and "unhealthy" behavior. In discussing the CoP model, Wenger (1998) describes the groups as entities that help resolve conflicts, are supportive in developing knowledge and joint enterprise, and mentor newcomers as well as maintain a communal memory. Although this does not signify that a CoP is supportive to any given individual, it does recognize that cooperation, commitment, and various levels of participation are unlikely to occur if large numbers of individuals do not somehow feel part of the process, or do not feel that the group's joint enterprise is in line with their own needs and efforts. At the same time, the development of a group's practice, and the molding of their joint output, may involve numerous conflicts that represent different priorities within the group and different types of identity politics.

Over several years of observation, it seemed that some variation of a safe space was important to most ljficwriters, and that, overall, the concept was something that united them *as* a group. The frequent reiteration among ljficwriters of the "safe space" concept over the four years of this study was "a shared discourse reflecting a certain perspective on the world" (Wenger, 1998, p.126), one of the features of a CoP as well as a concern of female coterie writers. This chapter will explore the various aspects of this "safe space" concern to ljficwriters, as well as challenges to the concept, both from within and outside the group. This chapter will begin by attempting to define the features of the safe space, and then examining the central role that LJ's features play in this practice, as well as specific efforts at norm enforcement by the group. The chapter will conclude with a look at ljficwriter efforts to redefine the safe space concept, and in doing so, altering the trajectory of female coterie practice.

6.2 Defining the safe space

The concern for safety among female coterie writers as described in Chapter 2 came from the social prohibitions on female activity that imposed moral judgments on behavior ranging from the acceptability of one's social circle, the acceptability of subjects for writing, or the public visibility of one's identity. In many cases the prohibitions and moral judgments came from men, leading to the use of the female writing circle as a space separate from them, with a greater latitude for expression and behavior.

Many among ljficwriters suggest that such spaces continue to be needed to provide the opportunity for personal expression that many women feel are inhibited in other locations in their lives. In a discussion about the definition of a safe space, several commenters offered their interpretations:

"[A safe space is] a specifically guarded space intended to provide respite and room to recover, designed for the benefit of those who have suffered a given (or a spectrum of given) harms. Which meant, I had understood, that what was a safe space for one group might not be a safe space for another." [Anon 94][6/26/2009]

" [W]e should strive to make fandom a safe space, even knowing we won't succeed, because the trying in itself will make it safer. We should have clearly designated spaces that are free of X, and police those spaces for X. We should be able to express ourselves about any subject, even distasteful, immoral and dangerous subjects. No, we do not get to say 'You can express yourself about X, but only in a certain

tone/academic way/labeled packaging.'" [Anon 95] [6/26/2009]

"Unfortunately, people aren't just defined by one single trait. A safe space for abuse survivors can turn hellish for a POC, a safe space for gay people can turn hellish for transgender people.
…
The idea of a true "safe space" as something that exists in reality is ridiculous, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't try to make it safer, especially because we are accepting so many different people. We're inclusive of a lot of things that are considered fringe or minorirty issues and as such, we have to be even more careful than regular communities to make it a place where everyone can feel, at least, that they aren't going to be attacked or intentionally hurt." [Anon 96] [6/26/2009]

In attempting to define the safe space, the respondents identify various factors. One factor is the view of the safe space as a space separate from the larger culture, one populated by cultural minorities. This factor could be identified as *separation*. The second factor is that the safe space provides a freedom of *expression* possibly stifled in other venues. The third factor is that of conscious action to create the space ("try to make it safer" "designed for the benefit" "police those spaces") or *norm enforcement*. This chapter will focus on identifying how these three factors reoccur in ljficwriter behavior and dialogue defining the safe space.

Side by side with these three factors are the contradictions that occur in attempting to make the safe space a workable concept. As the opening quotes to this chapter showed, individuals have a tendency to feel the safe space best benefits someone else, with different characteristics from their own. Among the above quotes from Anons 94, 95 and 96, there is an acknowledgment that the strictures and freedoms that make one group comfortable may make another group uncomfortable. The space is never safe for everyone at all times. For example, the "policing" efforts inherent in maintaining the safe space may also end up promoting anxiety about what is appropriate to express.

"I do not see fandom as a safe space, and I do not want it to be one. The point of coming here, I thought, was to hang with other fans and possibly exchange creative outputs. It's been slowly turning into some strange controlling domain. Frankly, I thought the old space was safer. It's getting harder to express myself, and people who insist I must always think of their needs [or some mythical other's needs] before I think of my own are crossing the line for me." [Anon 97] [6/26/2009]

Anon 97 did not elaborate as to what she felt the "old space" was since no one responded to her comment. But she manages to acknowledge, even in her dislike of the safe space concept, that a central issue is one of *expression*, and freedom from attack on that expression. Interestingly, the silence in response to her comment may have been an

example of the safe space practice in action since, despite her disagreement on the importance of the safe space, no one attempted to stifle or challenge her concerns.

The caution in expression that concerns Anon 97 is shared in a different way by a male member of the group, who is most impacted by the *separation* of the safe space. His comment below makes apparent how his minority status within the group, and yet privileged status outside of it, serve to create an environment of unexpected self-awareness.

"[W]hat I found here is that I make mistakes. Sometimes people tell me that I've made a mistake, sometimes I figure that out on my own, a lot of times I'm not sure, and other times I probably never realized that I made a mistake at all. Some of my mistakes have stemmed from not thinking about my words from someone else's perspective; some of them have come from being inappropriately glib; some of them have come from arrogance, or ignorance, or just a self-serving desire to be part of a conversation regardless of whether I had anything to contribute. And sometimes my mistakes are in not saying anything. And of course I make all of those mistakes elsewhere in my life, but the experience of participating in a community that is both online plus predominantly female has sensitized me to them differently. " [Anon 32][6/9/2009]

Anon 32 speaks here of constant errors in his behavior, of violating norms in the group, some of which he has learned to recognize over time. This reflects both the norm enforcement and expression issues ("being inappropriately glib") inherent in the safe space concept, but also the rarity of his experience in being segregated from a larger male dominated cultural environment. Like earlier commenters Anons 95, 96 and 97, Anon 32 recognizes that the complexity of their virtual space affects his encounters.

"LJ/DW fandom is also my first sustained experience in a predominantly female community. I wish I could talk about what it's like to be a male in a primarily female community, but it's generally hard for me to separate out which, novel and distinctive to me, aspects are about gender vs. online dynamics, along with which parts are specific to online female-skewing media fandom culture vs. general features of online female-centric spaces." [Anon 32][6/9/2009]

Anon 32 identifies three factors in his post (which was overtly about his 3 year "anniversary" of maintaining an LJ account) that he feels shape his experience in the group. The first is being a man amidst a group of women who predominate, and thus define the cultural aspects of the group. The other two factors are their location and medium of communication (LJ), and the purpose of the group (fandom). He notes that these three factors can commingle in different ways – gender and space, or gender and purpose. However, to him as a man, what is most apparent is that it is a female-centered, and not male or mixed-sex centered space.

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Anon 32 identifies two of the three aspects of this dissertation first laid out in the Chapter 1 – the influence of the online space on the group, and the purpose of the group and how it emerges out of particular practices and concerns. The next section will begin exploring these factors by discussing how the LJ space and tools are utilized by ljficwriters to create a "safe space."

6.3 LJ Affordances as the safe space

Early in 2004, when the LJ population was booming, the sense of LJ among fanfic writers as a place of safety was particularly strong. Up until the end of 2003, LJ only permitted new accounts to be opened if applicants had an "invite code." These codes could be handed out from existing LJ account holders to friends or acquaintances. This practice tended to develop close social networks on the site since everyone there had had contact with someone on the site before starting their own blog. It also restricted rapid growth since each LJ account holder only got a few invite codes at a time. In addition to restrictions in simply opening an account, certain forms of privacy were inscribed in LJ policy. Among banned actions on the site (to this day) is revealing identifying information about another user:

"It's our philosophy that all of our users should have complete control over their own information at all times, and choose what information is publicly available. If someone is posting another person's full name or email address, it removes the person's ability to control who has access to that information, so we require its removal." (http://www.livejournal.com/abuse/policy.bml#iop)

For a group whose privacy concerns were paramount, a service that restricted making public relatively simple information such as a name or email address, and would delete the account of repeat offenders, was one that was closely in sync with ljficwriters' longstanding concerns. The LJ that most ljficwriters knew at the start of 2004 was a place with layers of privacy and control unavailable at other online locations. The LJ affordances were, if not an optimal solution to ljficwriter concerns, at least one that provided a good balance between individual control and group participation.

The move to LJ by ljficwriters, as detailed in Chapter 4, was driven both by the desire for technological advantages and in response to restrictions and freedoms in the

online spaces that they'd previously employed. This did not mean that on LJ fanfic writers were as well served as they could be. In the following post, an ljficwriter points out that the complexity and lack of direction in the LJ site layout and interface is difficult for newcomers to master. This leaves some central activities by the group ill served.

"fandom seems to have moved to livejournal almost completely, even for those things that aren't necessarily best served by LJ. In fact, very little except the pure socialising part of fandom - which is, of course, an important part, no contest about that! - is *really* best served by LJ. " [Anon 57][5/22/2007]

Given the discussion of gifts and the value of the community in Chapter 5, it is not surprising that Anon 57 singles socializing out as the predominant concern of ljficwriters. However in order for this socializing to occur, people need to feel comfortable in expressing themselves and in making contact with others. And it is the control LJ provides to individual users in terms of access and networking that has made members enthusiastic about its use. As Anon 57 goes on to point out, the presumed primary purpose of ljficwriters, to exchange writing and other creative goods, does not actually seem to be that well served by LJ's selection.

"But, my general reservations about fandom's near-complete move to LJ (and f-locked LJs, for that matter) aside, my issue here is mainly with fanfic. I find the posting of fic to LJ and *only* to LJ, as seems increasinbly the practice in fandom, a bit antisocial…And I do not *understand* the attitude behind it, either. I mean, *why* would people not want their fic to find the widest possible readership? And how can they not care if it will still be easily accessible to new readers in a year or two?" [Anon 57][5/22/2007]

Anon 57 stumbles upon the answer to her own question when she mentions "f-locked" or friends-locked LJs. She misses that writers are less concerned about wide and indiscriminate access to their writing, and more concerned about being able to do with their writing what they want. Since each blog is under individual control, if a writer decides to depart LJ and delete their contents (as did CJ, who was discussed Chapter 5), they are able to do so in moments. If the stories were archived as part of a mailing list, or a website under the control of an archivist, deleting them, editing them, or changing who could access the works might be anything from a time consuming to impossible process.

Issues of safety, privacy, control, trust, communication, and identity building have all been central concerns of female coterie writers, and these are all issues affected by the selection of LJ as a site for interaction. The following sections will examine which affordances LJ offers that contribute to these user needs, how users employ the

technology to maintain both an individual identity and a group one, and how individuals learn about ljficwriters' traditions of privacy and common cause.

6.3.1 Filtering one's view of the world

In response to Anon 57's questions about LJ's poor usability as a fiction archive, another ljficwriter suggests an answer:

"The reason I tend to stick almost exclusively to LJ for everything (meta, fic, art, vids, etc.) is because LJ gives you the most control over your fannish environment. i.e. with LJ, I can controll what I see to a greater extent than I can with a forum or mailing list. On LJ, if there's a person whose posts are consistently rude or vulgar or annoying or just boring, I do not have to friend them. Contrast that to a mailing list or forum where, unless the poster actually crosses a line (a line determined most often by the mods who aren't me), I just have to skim their posts….Now, of course, greater control over what I see also means I'm probably missing out on some great stuff, but that's a tradeoff I'm willing to make."[Anon 58][5/22/2008]

Anon 58 points out that LJ allows more possibilities for personal control over one's online experience than previous technologies did, and one of the ways it does so is through filters. The specific example she provides is control over what one reads and who one must interact with. Unlike a mailing list, where one is generally subscribed to a topic, on LJ one starts by being subscribed to people. Even though group blogs exist and function as a form of mailing list, the personal control one has with LJ settings allows one to ban individuals from posting to one's blog, and to filter one's reading by whatever categories one wishes to. On LJ one can sort one's subscriptions into different "filters" such as "offline friends" or "crochet groups" or "work buddies." Instead of having all one's RSS feeds aggregated into a single reading list, one can separate them out by categories or by personal importance. Also, since LJ functions as an aggregator for non-LJ content as well, one could also have an "on-LJ" and "off-LJ" filter.

As Anon 58 notes, a filter is used primarily for social reasons, to prioritize the people and things one most wants to read as opposed to topics and individuals of less interest. It is not uncommon among ljficwriters to see people's profiles listing subscriptions to hundreds of personal and group blogs. Unless most of these subscriptions are to inactive blogs, it would seem impossible for the typical person to actually be reading that much content. In fact, they do not. While many people in ljficwriters do attempt to keep up with all their subscriptions, others simply have a large

body of content and scroll through, stopping only to read something of interest. Others filter their reading into those sources they wish to read regularly and others they check only when time permits. And some eventually find their reading lists unmanageable and start pruning.

The practice of filtering contrasts with Anon 57's comment about how the social aspects of LJ seem to have taken precedence for the group over the stability and visibility of their writing. Certainly the widespread "friending" that takes place, and large subscription lists, contribute to the idea of LJ as a site for social connections and networking. However, as Anon 58 points out, it is difficult to know how much of those large lists people are reading, or how often. At one time if people were responding to one post on a mailing list you could be sure yours had at least been scanned. There was a communal experience in what all members were seeing. On LJ, each person builds individual reading lists and it is difficult to be sure what people are looking at, even if they're subscribed to your blog. The fact that you have made a post, and another ljficwriter is subscribed to you, is no guarantee that they have actually seen or read your post. If they have sorted your blog into a filter they do not look at frequently they won't have seen anything you've posted recently, and you have no way of knowing this.

LJ filters have allowed privacy and individual preference in reading to be prioritized over the communal experience common in earlier communication platforms. Wenger discusses this "non-participation" as equally important in identity development because "[w]e not only produce our identities through the practices we engage in, but we also define ourselves through practices we do not engage in" (Wenger, 1998, p.164). Indeed, participation and non-participation are balanced for each individual, and their mix determines placement in the social group, framed by the things that engage us and the things that are ignored. In the following section, other examples of how individuals balance their participation are discussed, focusing on how much access and information individuals provide about their activity, and to whom?

6.3.2 Stealth practices

This section will review how ljficwriters use some of the affordances LJ provides

in order to enact the separation and expression aspects of the safe space. Much of this deals with how much of themselves an individual ljficwriter allows to be seen and known, and who they choose to observe and interact with in return.

Any post an LJ user makes can be set to Private, Public, Friends or Custom. Private means only the person posting can see it. Public means that any person on the Internet can see it. Friends means that anyone the blogger is subscribed to can see the post. And Custom means that the blogger can pick and choose who from their subscription list can see the post. This means that no two people subscribed to a blog are necessarily seeing the same content, since the blogger can determine, down to a single individual on their subscription list, who can see a given post. But in general practice most people's posts are either public or "flocked" (restricted to anyone on their subscription list).

The trend to have "friends only" blogs has been growing. In 2004 when I began this study, most ljficwriters had public blogs. Although people made flocked posts, there were few LJs that were completely blocked from view. However in late 2005 I noticed a trend of LJs going semi-private or entirely closed. This seems to have increased in 2007 due to external reasons which will be discussed later in this chapter. Ljficwriters had always enacted a greater amount of privacy in their disclosure of personal information compared to other Internet users. In a study on privacy of personal information on Facebook, the authors noted that individuals listed an astonishing amount of information about their offline identities openly in their profiles, including names, location, birthdays, personal photos, relationships, personal opinions, and even phone numbers. This disclosure varied a bit by sex, with women more likely to restrict particularly invasive information.

"Across most categories, the amount of information revealed by female and male users is very similar. A notable exception is the phone number, disclosed by substantially more male than female users (47.1% vs. 28.9%). Single male users tend to report their phone numbers in even higher frequencies" (Gross and Acquisti, 2005, p. 5).

In this same study few people, just over 1%, bothered to restrict their profile access to local users, such as others on the Carnegie Mellon campus. What was not addressed by this or other studies on user privacy in social networking sites were the ways in which users restricted access to their account content, or what percentage of users had what

were essentially private accounts. One clue regarding privacy concerns was an experiment they cited. In the experiment an automated friend request was sent out to several hundred thousand Facebook accounts. The responses allowed the authors to conclude that at least a third of users granted "friend" requests without knowing anything about the "individual" requesting that access, indicating a rather low concern for the privacy of their content. The Gross and Acquisti study was performed during the same period as I observed a growing number of people restricting access to their LJ accounts.

On LJ all profiles are open to viewers, although people do have the choice of leaving nearly all spaces blank, including those for school, location, birthday, email, etc. Ljficwriters vary in their use of the profile, often listing just a country for a location and sometimes hiding birthdays or contact information. None that I have observed so far use a full name rather than a pseudonym. Most ljficwriters tend to list numerous interests, and none have control over their subscriptions being seen by others, since this is an LJ default setting. The profiles sometimes do list substantial information regarding age and activities, but not details such as family member names, workplaces, or other more specific information. Instead, many ljficwriters use their profiles to post fan artwork or other signals of fan interests.

The habit among ljficwriters to be more careful with personal information, at least in terms of their profiles, extends to their posts in only a haphazard fashion. Since posts might describe the type of job the person has, reference friends or family (though usually with only initials or pseudonyms such as "Mr. Darcy"), or discuss the local area in which the person lives, these details could be aggregated by a reader over time. But when it comes to specific identifying information such as personal photos or more detailed discussions of their personal lives, these posts are generally restricted to subscribers, or to select subscribers. So caution for privacy is clearly at work in terms of shielding critical information, but in general most people have at least some posts open for perusal by anyone clicking by. This makes sense in a group whose members want to make personal connections with others and have their creative work looked at and responded to.

The friends only trend thus puzzled me at first. In a group that depends on personal networking and visibility in order to gain readership, why would one become antisocial by moving behind a locked wall? The reason became clearer as I noticed who

the people were who were making these changes. By and large they were individuals who either had been in the group for some time and were doing an increasing amount of posting about their private lives, or they were people who were having social problems with others in the group and wanted to have control over who joined their discussions. In both cases the individuals doing the flocking were either doing less story writing or already had such a large body of readers that they could restrict their posts to current subscribers without worrying about readership. Generally anyone who moves to having a "friends only" blog will leave one post public, and if someone wants to have access to their writing, they can leave a comment on that post requesting access. Depending on why the person decided to lock their blog, the requests might generally be granted or generally be denied. In some cases people made the change to institute a large "friends cut" and deleted anyone they did not interact with regularly. In other cases they simply wanted to restrict their posts to ljficwriters, and the change blocked any lurkers or random hits from outside the group.

Unfortunately friends cuts had a tendency to produce personal drama, as some individuals who thought they were acquaintances discovered that they were not important or interesting to the other person. These cuts would sometimes cause a chain of other cuts as those who had lost access, denied access in turn. In other cases there might be angry comments made, a pleading to be reinstated, or declarations of hurt feelings in their own blog. To avoid this messy fallout, many people use filters as a way of avoiding cuts. Since a user cut off from someone's blog can receive an alert from LJ of any such changes, some ljficwriters choose to simply filter out anyone they do not want to read or interact with. In this way the members who are cut from their reading list do not know about the change.

Of course, technology can always be used to provide a workaround for an unmet social need. In the case of reading statistics and filters, it exists in the form of Lj-toys, which is employed by over 20,000 LJ users. LJ collects individual blog statistics but does not provide them to users. Lj-toys allows users to receive this information by placing bugs on each post they make as well as on their profile pages. They can then see a report listing hits by the IP number, country and often LJ username, of who has scrolled

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by their post, clicked to view it, or looked at their profile. Like LJ, Lj-toys has both free and paid accounts although it does not report how many of each exists.

During the course of this study I have had access only to traffic statistics for my own blog. It has been useful, however, in demonstrating the relatively small amount of external traffic to most of my posts compared to the internal access by other ljficwriters. What LJ Toys has also revealed is the continuing traffic for older posts as well as newer ones, the number of people accessing a post but leaving no comment, the number of people online scrolling through their subscriptions but not clicking to read posts, and also the number of people surreptitiously tracking my blog posts.

Tracking is a feature instituted on LJ late in 2006. This feature was designed in part to allow people to continue "watching" conversations they had taken part in over time. Tracking allows LJ discussions to go on for longer periods as new comments to a post get sent to an email Inbox rather than the user having to return to check for updates. But tracking also allows users who do not wish to openly subscribe to someone to be notified of their posts by email when they occur. Since this tracking is generally invisible to other users, it allows one to subscribe and unsubscribe to individuals without any of the potential social problems associated with "friending".

When the tracking feature was first announced by LJ, comparisons were made to Facebook's implementation of a similar feature earlier in 2006. Unlike Facebook, LJ management did not allow user activity to be tracked across LJ (such as in comments a specific person might make elsewhere) in anticipation of privacy concerns by users. They did suggest that an expansion of the feature might be possible in the future:

"Optionally allow your friends or anybody to track more stuff about you, that otherwise might feel creepy. (like any comment or any post you make anywhere)." [LJ News post] [9/7/2006]

The suggestion was offered as a possibility for people who did not feel it would be too invasive ("feel creepy"), and it would be up to each individual to permit themselves to be tracked ("optionally allow your friends"). However, some LJ users were still concerned about being unable to see who was tracking them.

"I want to KNOW who's tracking me for certain things. Kind of like, obviously I know if someone added me to their friends list. I'd like to know who is tracking certain threads or userpics and things like that. It seems kind of stalkery to be able to do it in private." [Anon 93] [9/7/2006]

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As Anon 93 points out, the person being tracked is not notified in any way that their blog or individual posts are being tracked. I first realized how many people must be tracking my blog because lj-toys revealed to me how quickly some people who were not my subscribers would click on posts I made. Even though I had not crossposted them to a group blog where non-subscribers would be likely to come across them, in some cases people were clicking on the posts within 10 minutes of their becoming available, something quite unlikely for random drive-by viewers. Although I have not collected data on the subject, observations of my lj-toys reports suggest that at least 1 out of 15 readers of my blog do so because they have chosen to track rather than subscribe to it.

Tracking fits rather well within ljficwriters' desire for privacy in reading and access. One of the drawbacks of subscribing to someone on LJ is that it automatically grants access to locked posts one makes, unless one takes the extra step of blocking them from those posts. With tracking one can see a person's posts and gain the benefits of subscribing to them without having to work to keep one's own posts private from them. In addition, since the person being tracked often has no knowledge of who is reading them, tracking frees a reader from the obligation of interacting with the writer through comments. Of course, those using a service like lj-toys are easily able to get reports of who is reading them and who is not, although the relatively small number of lj-toys users versus LJ account holders suggests that only a minority of ljficwriters use the service. Other tracking software may be in use, however, as some people have visible hit counters in use on their blogs.

All of these practices, flocked posts, friends-only blogs, filters and tracking, affect both learning and community building since newcomers can only learn through what is publicly available and through the social connections that are visible. If part of what transpires among group members is kept private, and this is particularly true in the case of wide-ranging disputes, it is difficult for someone entering the community to understand the ways in which disputes are resolved, the ways in which social connections are enacted at such times, and the history of both the participants and the issue in dispute. To be in the know of these things is to already *be* part of the community, and linked into the "backroom" discussions that take place through email, instant messaging, phone calls and custom-locked posts.

While these hidden disputes often create boundaries between newcomer and community members, the practice of locking, filtering and tracking are a way to create boundaries between the individual and the community and thus create an individual "safe space". In the constant balancing act between individual concerns and group participation, the hidden speaking and reading that locking and tracking represent are a way for the individual to create a semi-private identity that is removed from the public (group) one seen in public posts. This semi-private identity is freer to pursue interests and give voice to opinions without engendering the obligations or reactions that more public reading and writing might. This effort at individual seclusion is also a form of identity building through the CoP, and a way to create individual meaning from the group experience. These uses of LJ's affordances can be seen as an example of separation, not just in terms of ljficwriters from the larger culture, but in terms of the individual from the group. It also pertains to safety in expression in behaviors such as locked posts, and screened or deleted comments. The third factor of the safe space, norm enforcement, is the subject of the next section.

6.4 Identity and trust in the safe space

The previous section discussed the ways in which LJ's design allows individuals to enact privacy controls over their reading and writing habits, a central concern for female coterie members. This ability to leverage privacy as needed by each individual also allows each participant to create boundaries that shape their individual experiences of the group, and also allows them to create a separation of personal (individual) and public (group) identities. The individual characteristics of each member influences how they define the safe space concept, as well as how they participate and create a group identity. Having control over one's identity, and being able to trust in the identity of others, is another form of privacy and security that ljficwriters struggle with. This section will discuss several aspects of this issue, including (1) control over one's identity, (2) examples of trust verification processes devised by ljficwriters and (3) examples of norm enforcement.

An important change for some ljficwriters in the move to LJ was the option to merge identities. Thanks to the people-oriented, rather than topic-oriented, virtual space created by the LJ platform, individuals are free to bring together their varied interests within their own personal space rather than having to venture out into separate group areas for each one. As the following poster notes:

"I'm hoping I do not have to split my LJ into separate fannish and non-fannish identities, because one of the best things about LJ has been its ability to integrate the various sides of my life into a healthier whole self." [Anon 57][5/24/2007]

Being able to have one identity in many places allows for a rich context to emerge between a given username and the many roles that person plays in their online and offline lives. For the LJ users who wish it, their online lives need not be strictly compartmentalized since LJ hosts group blogs and networks for a wide variety of interests. Whether one is a nursing mother, a weekend hiker, a political junkie, or a craft store worker, one can be all these things at once on LJ as well as a fanfic writer. This merging of identities can be convenient for those who do not want to have to use multiple online sites to find and interact with people who share their interests. It also allows for people to form closer relationships more quickly if they can determine that the person whose blog they found while searching for fanfic is also someone who shares one's nationality or interest in marine biology.

At the same time, for many ljficwriters there is only so much identity merging they wish to do. While some freely integrate personal and fannish information in their LJ postings, most are cautious about releasing too much identifying information. The ability to connect various aspects of one's life in the same place also heightens the possibility of a privacy breach if someone puts all the pieces of information together. Instead many ljficwriters rely on the privacy practices of the group to protect their individual identities. The accepted practice in the group is to to have the default assumption that personal information about other members is not to be shared. Because of the lack of cues regarding offline context among members, it is difficult to know what any given ljficwriter's situation is. Some people hold sensitive jobs, some post material online that they do not want family and friends to know about, and some have experienced harassment, stalking, or other alarming behavior that they wish to avoid. While some

people freely post about personal or professional incidents, others do not post about personal matters at all, or do so in vague ways. The privacy concerns of ljficwriters would seem to be well taken if we consider the numerous cases of bloggers who lost job opportunities, or who were fired from their jobs due to material they posted online which was easily found through Internet searches (Heath, 2005).

Within ljficwriters, reaction to an unwanted "outing" of personal identity can be fierce and overwhelming:

"The creation of a pseudonym is an act of disassociation. It's telling the rest of the world that you want to separate out Fandom You from Real Life You, for whatever reason.
…
One of the central unwritten rules of the fannish community is that you should respect another person's choices about their degree of anonymity…Because in addition to the expectation of dissociation that pseudonyms create, they also make it so much easier for people to interact, to speak their minds, to be honest, and to take chances. It takes away all the preconceived notions…Ultimately identities and reputations are big, important, and often crushing things, and we all need a break from them once in a while. Having a separate digital identity isn't a rock of shame. It's a pressure release valve." [Anon 60][7/28/2007]

Anon 60 argues that personal identity must be protected, and can only be revealed and utilized by the person in question in a context of their choosing. In her comment above she cites the concern for free expression and the issue of separating identity, aspects of the safe space discussed earlier. She also argues for the value of the pseudonym, whose use for protection has been a factor in its use among female writing coteries for centuries. One reason for this privacy concern among ljficwriters can be attributed to the distressing reactions ljficwriters have found to their work in other locations online, or from people they know. This disapproval, or simple lack of understanding, appears repeatedly in participant comments.

"I was a huge John Denver fan (basically still am). I got teased -- A LOT -- because my fandom was not hip. I wore t-shirts and decorated my room with posters and pictures …[b]ut as time went on, I learned to hide it more, and not tell someone until I was comfortable with them. It turned out that a lot of people I knew did this. Of course, back in the day, there was no internet, so sharing was not as easy... I met a lot of great people online who welcomed me, and gave me refuge." [Anon 98][6/6/2009]

"I showed one of my brothers some art I'd done for banners because he'd expressed an interest in all the Photoshopping I'd been doing. He just looked... bemused and did not get it. My friends... I told two of my closest (oldest galpal and my guy pal who is gay) and they both surprised me with their disapproval." [Anon 99][6/6/2009]

"I would love to share it, because it´s a part of who I am that I actually like and don´t want to hide, but I doubt that friends and former partner will ever take it in a good way, and if they wold not - they might

perhaps spoil the whole fun of it. It is - this far; my haven, my safe world that no one around me would understand or appreciate." [Anon 100][6/6/2009]

"My husband, grown up son and daughter know I'm into fandom and that I write… I do not share with all my friends. Everyone knows I write, but I keep the details vague. My problem is that I'm a teacher so I have to be very careful." [Anon 101][6/6/2009]

"Was not being in fandom sad? Something only losers with no life got into? I felt that pressure but then I met so many truly nice people and did so many wonderful things that I never would've dreamed doing before. It also made me feel better in myself. When I have something else to think about - a fantasy life I can retreat into if I'm writing - that I am genuinely happier. I threw away the depression pills and embraced fandom. I have not needed the pills since." [Anon 101][6/6/2009]

Just as important as avoiding reactions that might be hurtful, the desire for a known audience brought with it the expectation of positive and supportive behavior from other group members, a locale where others share not only one's pleasures, but also understand one's dissatisfactions. Describing an early fan site she'd come across, Int 3 discussed her disappointment with that group, and her hope that the safe environment of LJ would be recreated at future fan locations.

"I'd find people there who seemed like they were looking to pick a fight. And I'd find people that were, that they really did not get what I was getting out of a story, or, whatever. I just did not feel very comfortable in making myself known there. I did not feel like those were my people! And at LJ I feel like those are my people! And I can feel comfortable talking to them and telling them my honest opinions or giving good feedback.…I just hope that will go with it, that comfortable feeling, or safe environment kind of feeling." [Int 3]

Other interviewees also invoked the idea of safety when describing their experience with ljficwriters.

"I would say that I was always a little afraid of online fandom, which is part because you hear a lot of these stereotypes, and there's always been those Internet horror stories of people meeting people because you can't see what people look like, of course how is that really different than when people used to send letters back and forth?…But I think the thing that, despite having read the various kerfuffels and things like that, it's been a really positive experience for me, I really like the way the format is, you can comment, the social aspect is really great, and getting to know a real variety of people. It's kind of a safer setting." [Int 7]

"It was really neat. There was new terminology to learn, there was canon and fanon and research to do and it just, it really felt very – safe and community oriented, like I knew these people even though I did not know them at all." [Int 2]

The feeling of commonality and interest in social connections among ljficwriters led to feelings of safety and cohesion, even though there are regular disruptions to this perspective. In this section, factors that contribute to a feeling of safety and trust among ljficwriters are explored. Following on the mutual protection of personal identity and

feelings of shelter described above, this section explores examples of norm enforcement among ljficwriters that contribute to feelings of confidence in sharing one's work, and in participating with others.

6.4.1 Norm enforcement as a trust mechanism

In this section the issue of identity as a member of ljficwriters or one of its subgroups will be discussed in relation to conflicts that occur in the enforcement of group norms against both fellow insiders as well as outsiders to the CoP. The development of trust among group members is built through community action to enforce norms so that there is an expectation that standards of behavior will be maintained against internal and external breaches. This expectation of common behavior is part of the safe space concept.

"Social capital" as discussed by Putnam (1993) refers to the networks of trust and norms that exist within a group that allows it to carry out its function. One way of maintaining security in a group is to police its borders against outsiders or to exclude members who have violated group norms. In actual practice however, the open and scattered forums of LJ make such exclusion difficult. As detailed in Chapter 4 in the discussion of language crossover, LJ locations have very porous boundaries. Unlike mailing lists or posting boards, there is no single small group of moderators who can verify information about participants or enforce group norms. Rather, reputation mechanisms on LJ are more diverse and depend on the attention of individuals to trust issues, and the use of personal networks to spread information.

LJ's affordances offer some opportunities for trust-building. One ljficwriter practice to enhance trust among group members is to use both text and images to enhance non-verbal cues as a way of avoiding misunderstandings and encouraging positive feelings. This was discussed briefly back in Chapter 4. There is also a linking of mutual acquaintances that takes place, either deliberately or by happenstance, as people comment together in someone's blog. LJ's suggestion module offers a sort of rating on how much a person is liked based on looking at the reading lists of people you are subscribed to, and suggesting other people that many of them read. LJ also allows people to know how long

a person has participated in the group by making the start date of their personal blog visible. By having people list their interests on their profile pages, you can see how your interests match up with theirs (and, by clicking, link to other people on LJ who share this interest). You can also see in a stranger's profile whether they "know" people you do (an implicit peer rating). The practice of "name dropping" in posts with an active link to the person being discussed can be an example of explicit peer rating of that individual.

These various methods are imperfect in truly vouching for individuals who, by the group's own norms, are free to cloak nearly all aspects of their offline identity. Indeed some of the group's largest scandals have come from individuals who manipulated the community's norms to their benefit. This section will look at four examples of ljficwriters collaborating to block actions that disrupt the community, threaten identity building, and make the group less of a "safe space."

6.4.1.1 Fan artists educate about hotlinking

Fan artists tend to face two problems which inhibit them from presenting their work. The first is technological. "Hotlinking," that is, establishing a connection to an image hosted by someone else rather than downloading the image and then uploading it to one's own hosting account, can be a serious problem. Many fan artists have scores of image posts displaying their work. These can all disappear if an artist exceeds their hosting account's allotted bandwidth for the month, or it may cause them increased costs if they pay for their account based on use. As a result, virtually all graphics artists include a warning not to hotlink when they post their images. Because of its frequent visibility, the message gets through to most ljficwriters. For example, in a post where an ljficwriter asked for examples of fandom politics, various people responded with examples of fandom *practices* they had learned. Three different people mentioned hotlinking:

"First, when I was a newbie, I learned about why one shouldn't repost somebody else's art, even with credits :) And that what I did was hotlinking :) Then I was taught not to use sexually explicit icons in public posts. But they are, again, common courtesy things rather than some scary fandom politics." [Anon 63][5/25/2006]

"Even when I was a 'newbie' I did not have any problems. I caught on pretty quickly to the basics (no hotlinking, ask permission for stuff, use disclaimers/cuts with certain things)" [Anon 64] [5/25/2006]

"I do not know what "fandom politics" means. (I know the words, thank you, but not how it differs from the unwritten rules of fandom - is it when someone hotlinks and we tell them why it's bad??)" [Anon 65] [5/25/2006]

These three posters above link the "no hotlinking" practice to "common courtesy." However as the first respondent pointed out, even knowing what hotlinking is makes the "common" part untrue. The second poster also points out that she "caught on" to issues like hotlinking. The third poster says "we tell them why it's bad," making it apparent that it is, in fact, something that's explained frequently. All the posters link this practice to the issue of giving credit for people's work. Anon 63 mentions that work should not be reposted, even with credits, at least not without permission. Anon 64 mentions that need for permission as well.

The credit issue links together the technological problem artists have with hotlinking, and the group norms regarding giving credit to other members for their work. Part of the issue with hotlinking is that people who do it also have a habit of not mentioning that the image they have posted is not, in fact, their own work. Yet ljficwriter fan artists not only ask for credit in return for providing their finished products, they themselves have a complex group of attributions for their work. Icon makers credit the makers of the caps (screen captures from a show or film, that are often the base of the artwork), and the makers of textures, brushes and other applications that are then added to the image. Some even credit other artists who have written tutorials they have used. These credits acknowledge one's place as a member of the group by reciprocally acknowledging the contribution and participation of others. To therefore not be acknowledged in return when someone takes your work, is to have your own contributions and participation erased in favor of promoting someone else's.

Fan artists often offer their work under certain conditions, such as stipulating that there be no further manipulation of their images (for example, by adding text to an icon). When people taking their work do not offer credit in its use, this not only fails to acknowledge the membership of the fan artist in the group as a whole by making their contribution invisible, it also makes it difficult for people who like the work to find more of the same, by being linked to the artist. The artist therefore loses potential connections

to other participants, and it undermines the way the group as a whole develops linkages among its members. Given the discussion of the gift culture in Chapter 5, one can see that this lack of credit negates the ties of reciprocity and is an antisocial act to the community as a whole.

To combat this problem group blogs have been set up to offer advice and support to artists who have their work plagiarized or hotlinked. In the cases of hotlinking, the artist is encouraged to delete the hotlinked artwork from their blog and substitute an image saying "This person is a bandwidth thief." If those users respond to complain about having lost the image they were linking to, they are educated on what to do to avoid hotlinking. Many of these cases have shown that the hotlinking is being done by individuals outside of LJ. The community's ties are invisible to them, and what takes priority is their own self-interest. By contrast, members of ljficwriters learn to prioritize the community over their own convenience in these instances, in order to remain a member in good standing.

The hotlinking issue is an example of a norm that arose for practical purposes. If too many artists had their bandwidth exceeded due to hotlinking, other members of the group would lose access to the icons, banners and other artwork being posted due to the selfish actions of a few. Many artists use free services such as Photobucket for their image hosting, which often comes with relatively low bandwidth allotments. I have myself experienced the problem of losing image access with such services when a post proved popular. The amount of people loading the page added to those who were hotlinking exceeded my monthly limits in just 48 hours. I was not able to use the service again for weeks. Despite the widespread effort to educate visitors on hotlinking, I have also observed icon makers and others cease their posting for a period due to exceeded bandwidth.

Artists must do the work of norm enforcement for the group to have access to commonly used objects such as icons, or decorative blog enhancements such as banners and layouts. However, they must also do so in order to maintain their own ability to participate in the group, and thus develop their own group identities through the use of credit. When credit is not offered, this becomes a case of plagiarism. Fan artists have

company from fanfic writers and video makers on this issue, and the groups have taken similar steps to combat the problem.

6.4.1.2 Fanfic writers shun plagiarists

Fanfic also gets plagiarized, as do videos. This is done most easily by simply deleting the author's or vidder's own credits and replacing it with one's own. In other cases the plagiarist makes minor changes to the original work, such as changing character names, or only utilizing certain segments from the original video. These are instances of blatant plagiarism, and reaction is usually unanimous in condemning these actions. As with hotlinking, there have been group blogs set up where complainants can make their case, and the blog moderators investigate the plagiarism and suggest responses. Some video makers have taken to watermarking their clips, making them easy to spot in a reworked video, and perhaps decreasing their value to others. Another tactic is for community members to flood the comment page at the hosting site, accusing the video "maker" of theft until the video is removed. As with many of the hotlinked images discussed in the previous section, the plagiarism is being done by outsiders to the group, and members of the affected subgroups tend to band together to protest the violation. This public method is used because ljficwriters have no control over content hosted at YouTube or various other Internet sites.

Plagiarized fanfic is often a different story. It is most often posted at outside fanfic archives, but sometimes it is submitted to group blogs on LJ. Regardless of the site, these blogs or archives are maintained and moderated by fellow fans. So unlike the video or artwork cases, ljficwriters usually contact the moderators or archivists of these sites with evidence of the plagiarism, and request the work be deleted. These acts are often successful since the owners of these sites tend to honor the idea of banning plagiarists and do not want to develop a reputation of harboring them. Since they depend on the contributions of fanfic writers, most of whom are not plagiarists and who do not want their own work to be plagiarized, they are likely to listen to complaints and take action. Besides having the offending works removed and the plagiarizer banned from further contributions, the anti-plagiarism blog itself takes action. It keeps a list of the

names of people who, after investigation, are deemed to be plagiarizers. This allows people to keep a lookout for those usernames and to be suspicious of their contributions to the group. Even in cases where the plagiarizers have shown remorse, if they continue interacting in the group they will likely do so under a new name, as trust is not easily regained.

Given the fact that ljficwriters themselves "play in another person's sandbox" by using characters and situations not of their own creation, some accused plagiarists have suggested that all fanwork is itself plagiarism, and that the concept could not legitimately exist within the community. One writer employed the use of community to counter this argument.

"Appropriation is different than plagiarism or "theft." To appropriate, as an artistic act, is to significantly reinvent the source in some way, by creatively introducing yourself into the work. It's about using words and ideas as if they're recombinant DNA...It only gets touchy if you introduce ideas of money and community. Call a copyright holder or set of creators … a community; fandom is another community. Cultural distance makes most appropriation a tenable interaction, both for copyright owners and for fannish creators…Fandom itself is a community, and when you turn inward and talk about appropriation… factors like etiquette become more important, and what we do becomes less abstract, more personal…It feels like infringement, because we're sharing one community. There's no distance." [Anon 66][3/1/2003]

Part of what Anon 66 touches on above is that different communities have different cultural values that separate them. There are different rewards for work done outside of fandom than for work done inside of it. Another writer made this more explicit when she refers to the value of *participatory work*. Both suggest that what is actually being stolen in cases of plagiarism was the effort made by the original artist/vidder/author to participate in the community, whereas there is no equivalent loss by the copyright holder:

"If somebody swipes one of her collages, files her name off of it and claims it as their own they have now stolen her time, talent and effort. Moreover, they've done so without even giving her credit for what she did. Everybody knows a screenshot of Xander ultimately belongs to Mutant Enemy. You cannot be in the Buffy fandom without being aware of that…To show her work without giving her credit or, worse, flat-out claiming it for your own is to have stolen from her… All clips in that vid clearly belong to Mutant Enemy. We watch the vid and we know this. The song of the vid belongs to the artist and their record label. We know that too…[She] doesn't claim to have created the song, nor the television shows she is doing a vid of. She does claim, however, all the work she did in collecting the clips, organizing them, cleaning them up as needed to make them vid-usable and then putting them all together to make the vid itself… We here in fandom believe in giving credit where it is due. Our source material always gets credit. It's impossible for it not to. Our work, on the other hand, can sadly get lost in the shuffle if somebody steals from us and doesn't even give us so much as a footnote to say thanks." [Anon 67][4/30/2003]

Yet another writer discusses the participation value explicitly as she suggests the motivation for plagiarists is to take part in the community and reap its rewards without making the effort that others do to achieve it:

"Stealing someone's fanfiction, in some sort of bizarre bid for undeserved online praise from people you've never even met? Hell, people go outside and talk to someone face to face. Maybe get a friend or two. Maybe then you won't have to steal other people's words to make yourself feel cool…As a writer, I can state with utmost authority that the words I write cost me dearly. I put immense amounts of energy and thought into everything I write... I look inside myself and think about how I really feel, how I see the world, what hurts me and what gives me joy, and it all goes into what I write…When someone else then turns around and copies and pastes those words and claims them as his/her own, they're stealing more from me than just words. They're stealing my ideas, and they're stealing every minute, every hour, every day I spent pouring myself into my writing." [Anon 68][9/15/2004]

Anon 68 discusses both talent and effort, and points to the issue of attention as a motivator for plagiarists. In this we can look back at Chapter 5's discussion of the gift culture to note that attention without long-term investment is generally the motivation of "disconnected" participants. If one has to create one's own contributions to the group, this is time consuming, and takes effort and commitment. If all video makers, artists and fanfic writers had to fear a free-for-all where their work was constantly being copied and reposted without attribution, where their identity had no value because it was frequently disconnected from their contributions, and where it was simpler to repost someone else's story than write one's own, the community would soon lose its members. In such a scenario there would be no long-term gain in sharing creative work, and authors would be in constant mistrust of their readers. The blatant copying of other people's work violates several group norms: (1) Failure to attribute the use of other's work, (2) Theft of attention through feedback, and possibly recommendations, that should have gone to the creator, and (3) Misrepresentation of identity, as someone who was capable of creating the work stolen.

In the case of the vidding community, these last two issues have become important, not just for individual vidders, but for the group and its traditions as a whole. Many vidders are also fanfic writers, and most vidders are fanfic readers, so the groups both overlap and co-exist. The same ethos that has kept female writing coteries in semi-secluded spaces has also applied to vidders. As user remixed content has exploded at highly visible global platforms such as YouTube, the costs of marginalizing themselves in a "safe space" are becoming more apparent to them.

6.4.1.3 Vidders debate the cost of the "safe space"

Although much of the fan work that is plagiarized gets recirculated among other fan groups, in the case of video makers the stolen works often go out to the public at large through YouTube postings. These vids can garner huge audiences who remain unaware of the original creator, or context for which the video was made. One ljficwriter who has had several of her videos reposted in this way has one video hosted by some 20 different people on YouTube. The most popular posting has received over 1 million views and nearly 1000 comments. Most of the people enthusiastically praising her work assume she's a man, because the person posting the video has a generic username and has made no effort to disclaim creation of the work.

While this attribution assumption might be a minor matter to one individual, many vidders who posted and networked through LJ became concerned with their increasing loss of both control and recognition on a much wider scale.

"Over the last several years, it's become increasingly common for vidders to complain of having lost control over the distribution of their work. Further, there has been frustration among more academically-minded fans about the fact that our 30-year history and traditions are not widely known, and that other, male-dominated communities are taking credit for having "invented" this art form and being enshrined in various publications for their creative efforts and participatory cultures, even as our contributions are ignored or even mocked... The corner of the fannish vidding community where I sit has been grappling with some of the most fundamental concerns of media fandom: the need for safe spaces, the need to avoid legal reprisals, the need for pleasure, and the need for respect." [Anon 69][12/4/2006]

Anon 69 suggested that it was time for the vidding community to start making itself known to the public, at least insofar as claiming their place in discussions of new media production and participatory history. Opinions to this proposal varied, most objecting on the familiar ground of needing to avoid legal challenges.

"I do not see any reason why we would have to go more public just because some guys are stupid enough to make their illegal stuff very public. How much some additional feedback or status will really weigh when RIAA is suing you, I must ask. Especially, as the real reason why we are vidding, doing fan art, writing fan fiction etc. isn't feedback or status (or at least it did not used to be), but because we are inspired by some aspect of the movie or tv series."[Anon 70][12/8/2006]

Still others questioned why fans should take risks to have others understand their work and include them in the larger cultural history.

"Because the thing is, the people who watch some of these vids who aren't fans are never going to get it. They are no fan friendly, and just because they're viewing it and a couple people think "cool," the majority

will mock and disparage the vids and the vidders. Nonfans have never gotten us, and they never will. I do not see the point in trying to be big in the mainstream. I work for fandom, dude. "[Anon 71][12/8/2006]

Anon 70 and 71 do not simply object to the violation of the safe space that going more public would entail. They also points out that part of what makes their group unique is that it is a form of private conversation not easily understood by outsiders, which might even include other video makers who do not share their history. Thus being more public with their work is pointless, since only some of it will be accessible to a larger group, and most of it will not be considered a product of any value. Furthermore, on an *individual* level, the vidders will have little to no reward for this larger exposure. As Anon 71 says, she "work[s] for fandom." It is through fandom that she receives gifts, develops an identity, and makes connections to people who "get" her. The idea of taking their private conversations, their coterie, public, seems contradictory to the purposes for which it was devised in the first place.

We can see, here, in this open debate on the purpose, rewards, and costs of the "safe space," how this concept is something that is both useful and detrimental to the group as a whole, but also something more easily set aside on the individual level. In the case of Anon 69 she is free to publicize her work widely, take it to YouTube, and put herself outside of the group in pursuit of wider recognition. In the case of Anon 71, she is free to remain inside the shelter of the more difficult to find and, often temporary, vid postings made in LJ vidding blogs. But here the group as a whole is having to confront the true purpose of what it is they do, thus tying this discussion of the safe space together with the gift culture discussion of Chapter 5. Is what they do an act of communal sharing, a way of having exchanges with other like-minded individuals and developing an archive of resources for the group as a whole? Or is what they do a way of developing individual skills, forming a personal network of supporters, and building an audience for their work? In a CoP, these two things are not mutually exclusive but instead simultaneous products of the community. As mentioned in Chapter 1 of this dissertation, one axis of a CoP runs from formation of self at one end, to functions of the group at the other. In this vidders' debate, we can see that these are both taking place. The argument is not about what a given vidder could do, since they were always free to set their own terms on how public or private they wanted their work to be, just as some ljficwriters

choose to be more or less public with their offline identities. Rather the debate is about how the "safe space" can be made more flexible, and renegotiated, and whether there is any larger benefit *for the group* to do so. In the debate itself is a recognition that the community concept *matters* for the participants and that there is an obligation to concern one's self with the well being of other members and their stakes in the joint enterprise.

Since this debate began, some in the vidding group have begun to speak out in both the media and academic circles. This included interviews (Coppa, 2008), a video history presentation at the DIY Video Summit at USC in 2008 (http://www.video24-7.org/schedule/), and popular magazine articles featuring the work of vidders (Hill, 2008). While these discussions and presentations featured only the work of those who gave their permission for its use, as a whole newer vidders have taken to posting their material openly to YouTube and other streaming sites. The group is, in large part, moving away from vidder-owned, password-protected websites. In some cases this movement has been largely for convenience purposes, to avoid costly hosting fees by using free sites and temporary download providers such as SendSpace or MediaFire. In other cases, vidders have gone more public in a deliberate search for larger audiences and to be part of a broader cultural conversation. Some vidders, however, continue to keep their work on offer only through LJ forums and by request, reserving their trust for the ljficwriter community alone. It is possible that in the near future the concept of the "safe space" will have been redefined by large-scale individual practice in distribution and discussion, moving the group farther away from its history of seclusion, and closer to a more open, permeable community.

6.4.1.4 Fandom wank, the community pillory

The previous three sections have discussed violations of trust and group norms among three groups within ljficwriters, the fan artists, fanfic writers, and vidders, and has detailed collective responses to these violations. Some of these norm enforcement activities have been clear cases of policing, such as targeting hotlinkers or plagiarists. Others, such as the vidder debate, have been an example of how norms are negotiated. These actions have used education and collective complaint in an attempt to bring

members to compliance and to make outsiders aware of their transgressions. To some degree all of these threats to the safe space revolve around the issue of identity, both personal and group. Although a single person's violation or injury may be of little consequence to the group as whole, a growing number of such incidents begins to threaten the stability of the group and the trust that members hold in one another. This group trust is of particular importance in a community which safeguards individual pseudonymity. In such a group one never knows if the "person" one is encountering is a sockpuppet, and how the information one is disclosing to that identity will be used. For the group as a whole to continue, privacy breaches, manipulation, and bad behavior require exposure and response in order for trust to be maintained.

Terms such as *troll* and *sockpuppet* are used to different degrees among ljficwriters. *Troll* is a term for a disruptive poster, generally an outsider simply annoying people to amuse himself, and is a longstanding term online. What is more commonly seen among ljficwriters are *sockpuppets* and *anonymice*. These terms describe the practice of group users hiding their (better known) LJ usernames and instead opening up new accounts under new names for the purpose of becoming anonymous in their usual circles. These "socks" are sometimes benign and sometimes malicious. In some cases people simply wish to be able to comment and circulate unnoticed, particularly if they are otherwise well known. For example, some writers have posted stories under new names for the purpose of gauging reader reaction when a well-known name is not attached to the story. Just as with professional writers, a new name can mean a "rebranding" to a new group of readers. Or it can be a way for a writer to gauge what people "really" think about their writing, once their reputation is removed from the picture. In other cases these sock identities have been used to stir up trouble and controversy, either unintentionally, by airing controversial opinions, or intentionally, to carry out personal attacks.

Having multiple identities on LJ is not unusual, although it can be inconvenient. Creating multiple accounts is time consuming, and users can often trip themselves up by forgetting under what name they are logged in and thus comment with the wrong user account. This can be anywhere from embarrassing to a major identity breach. Some people use a separate account for their personal life, under a real identity, while keeping

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their fan activities under a pseudonym. Users have sometimes revealed the wrong identity to the wrong group by accident. In some cases, ljficwriters have different fan accounts for different fan groups so as to keep all their work for a particular fandom in a separate space (this is especially true for fans who take part in RPGs – role playing games). In cases where fans are using multiple accounts simply for convenience, they often create reciprocal links between accounts as a way of showing they have nothing to hide.

True "sock" accounts are those where the person's main LJ identity is completely disassociated from the (possibly several) false identities, many of whom are little more than a username. These sock accounts often raise suspicion because the blogs have few to no entries. Since the start date of any blog is visible to readers it is easy to distinguish if the user has been around LJ for a long time and is, perhaps, simply an irregular user, or if the blog is new and possibly being used for identity cloaking. (Savvier ljficwriters are also quite capable of IP tracking to connect a blog name to a better known identity). For those who do not want to go to the trouble of creating a sock account, anonymous commenting is an option.

Anonymous commenting exists so that visitors to LJ can take part in conversations. A "mobile" identity, known as Open ID, is also available, so that visitors can maintain a stable identity across multiple platforms. An ljficwriter who wants to make anonymous comments simply doesn't log into their (known) account. Such a commenter is called an *anonymouse* or simply a "mouse." However because anonymous comments are often viewed with suspicion by ljficwriters, all LJs allow their owner to block anonymous commenting. So commenting while anonymous isn't always an option.

The case of anonymous commenting is another example of how LJ's policies and affordances affect behavior within the community. The use of mice or multiple identities is something that would have been difficult in list or posting board culture, since all users had to create accounts (which were often vetted by moderators) and thus had a more fixed identity than on LJ, where opening a new account is free and simple and no one keeps track of it. To make matters even more confusing, LJ allows users to change their usernames globally across the site by purchasing a "rename token." Some users have changed their usernames several times because they wanted a fresh start of some kind. In

some cases this was because their former name had become connected to an offline identity, and the change was an effort to return to a "safe space." In other cases the old username had accrued too much negative baggage within the group. However a fresh start can be a difficult business because fans have devised ways to preserve cases of bad behavior, and communicate them to others. One of the best known, is Fandom Wank.

This group originated on LJ but was eventually forced to leave the site, and two subsequent sites, due to complaints by those appearing in the posts about the negative attention and, sometimes, harassment. Fandom Wank settled at an LJ clone site called JournalFen, which was created in 2002 by and for fans. JournalFen remains small because their infrastructure cannot support the volume of use by all the fans at LJ, and it is currently running an outdated version of the LJ code. Fandom Wank has become a type of boogeyman for the many fandoms based on LJ, as well as in-person gatherings of fans. As was discussed in Chapter 4, the move to LJ was in part a reaction to the power of moderators on lists, boards and archives. To post on LJ was to have freedom to say and do as one wished, while still being able to attract an audience of readers and take part in group activities. Although no overarching moderators exist on LJ, there still exists a sort of policing behavior in the form of Fandom Wank. The group was formed to discuss behavior by fans that members considered foolish, excessive, and boorish. It was essentially a forum for amusement and gossip about the disagreements of other fans. As such, Fandom Wank became immensely popular and survived its multiple moves and change of moderators intact to become one of the most widely read syndicated feeds on LJ among fan groups. While Fandom Wank had no mission to intervene in disagreements, the attention it brought to such events often led people to either move spats into private spaces, or cease whatever norm-breaking behavior they were engaged in. Over time, the fear of "being Fandom Wanked" became itself a sort of deterrent for people voicing unpopular opinions in public posts. Rather than risk possible disagreements that might draw attention, people tended to be more cautious in posting and commenting, and were more likely to keep opinions to themselves.

A particularly notorious example of sockpuppeting that was exposed, in part, through Fandom Wank's historical record, occurred outside of ljficwriters in the Harry Potter fandom. The case was so long running and complex however, that considerable

discussion about it took place among ljficwriters as well as numerous other fan groups on LJ. The Harry Potter case took place over the course of 4 years. An individual took on dozens of LJ accounts and utilized them to attack other writers as well as her own main identity in an effort to gain sympathy and attention. Not simply (many) names on a screen, this individual also met in person with various group members and told various additional stories about herself and some of her sockpuppets that allowed her to move within the central circles of the fandom. Over time, various inconsistencies as well as repeated behaviors raised suspicion.

Hiding an identity within LJ fandom groups can be a tricky thing, regardless of how much effort one puts into it. This is because anonymity is a double-edged sword. It is as difficult to know about others, as it is for them to know about you. For example, it is not always easy to tell who holds what pieces of information about a given user. As much information and networking as is visible through the LJ platform, considerable discussion takes place through private messages sent to the LJ Inbox, or by emails or instant messaging. The strength of all ties is not always visible. People who comment infrequently to one another's blogs may communicate extensively through other means. People who comment frequently may simply be talkative people who have no particular connection to, or interest in, the person behind the blog. In addition, it is not always easy to know what resources other participants have access to. In one example, a person hearing about an event told by the Potter sockpuppett was easily able to challenge the claim, because she lived in the city where the event purportedly took place. The entire Potter sockpuppet story was uncovered due to a sustained effort on the part of many individuals to track, cross-reference, and expose evidence of the manipulation of the group's social hierarchy.

Fandom Wank's role in the event was to document pieces of the scandal over time. It had records of numerous disagreements that the protagonist had played a part in, had records of statements by individuals involved, and maintained screencaps of posts that their makers had deleted or flocked once controversy broke out. People who had followed this individual's messy social trail began to be suspicious of just how often certain events occurred, and of what was being said to whom. By using these public records and contacting individuals involved, the fandom detectives were eventually able

to expose the full story. Once posted, the 200 page assemblage of evidence was probably one of the most read documents by ljficwriters in 2006.

Fandom Wank's visibility in spotlighting bad or foolish behavior, and its use as an archive to collate past norm-breaking behavior by individuals, is a form of trust-verification system enacted by ljficwriters to protect the group as a whole from individuals who would take advantage of what it has to offer. Even though the group's stated mission has nothing to do with policing, in practice it does serve this function by enforcing norms of sensible and courteous behavior among users, and by recording information that can be referred to later. Along with the hotlinking and plagiarism blogs, Fandom Wank is another example of how collective action to enforce group norms has supplanted the hold over behavior previously held by list, board or archive owners and moderators.

Collective action and information sharing is one of the group's main tools for allowing trust to exist among participants, and ensuring that group norms will be enforced. The policing actions detailed in this section serve as examples of this aspect of the "safe space" concept. The final section in this chapter will look at current efforts to redefine the safe space concept in order to protect the group from new challenges in an era where their segregation is being threatened by higher public visibility.

6.5 Redefining the safe space

Ljficwriters have existed on LJ for nearly eight years and have outlasted a number of other online Buffy fan sites, which have since disappeared from the Internet. But as with all CoPs and coterie groups, ljficwriters is sure to come to an end as well. Gongla and Rizutto discuss the endings of CoPs and define such finality when it "is no longer recognized as a separate, functioning system, with a known, ongoing identity" (Gongla and Rizutto, 2004, p. 298). They identified four ways in which CoPs ended: becoming formal organizational units, redefinition of the group, merging with other groups, and drifting into non-existence. Among LJ fan groups, option two, merging with another group, is always a possibility, and to some degree this may be occurring. As creator Joss

Whedon has continued with new shows and creative projects, some members of the group, and some group blogs, have increasingly interacted with or incorporated fans of these other projects. Many of the fans still around from 2001 would now consider themselves fans of the "Whedonverses" as much as simply Buffy fans. However other individuals remain fans of simply one or two of the shows, and do not consider themselves fans of creator Whedon at all. If a merger should someday take place, it will be because these more narrowly focused fans have ceased to participate in any meaningful way.

Gongla and Rizutto discuss the factors of the "drifting into non-existence" ending as occurring when (1) Attrition of members has declined to such a point that there is next to no participation in any activities, (2) There is no response or overture to new members, and core members with deep knowledge of the group have left and not been replaced, (3) Group members may continue to interact, but not about the central output or knowledge of the group, and (4) There is less sharing, development, and identification with the group. Many members of ljficwriters have indeed left, cycling out of the group as part of their continuing personal journeys. Some have left LJ entirely while others have become core contributors to different CoPs on the site. While newcomers continue to arrive, as a whole, the group's participation level in terms of creative contributions and intensive discussion of the shows Buffy and Angel is declining. Personal interactions are frequent among group members, but they are less likely to revolve around Buffy or Angel stories or other works, and conversations increasingly center on new interests. The group may be in the early stages of such a "drift" but for now retains a distinct identity.

The final ending option, according to Gongla and Rizutto, is group redefinition, often brought on by an identity crisis or external shift of some kind. There are signs that this has been occurring over the last few years, altering the nature of participation within ljficwriters. This section will discuss two different events occurring in 2007 and examine how these events have threatened the safe space, and may be leading to its redefinition.

6.5.1 The boys come to town

In May 2007, a company (going under various names, but funded through H.I.G.

Ventures) launched an online fanfic archive titled FanLib and began marketing it, both in the press, and through targeted emails to fanfic authors whose names were culled from other fanfic archives. Some fanfic authors began uploading fanfic and opening accounts, and a few became paid or unpaid ambassadors, promoting the site or responding to questions. But for many members of both ljficwriters as well as the numerous other fanfic groups on LJ, Fanlib's appearance was deeply disturbing.

There were three central reasons for what became a raucously escalating reaction to the site. The first was that this was a for-profit site formed, not by fanfic writers, but former Internet company workers who touted various Hollywood establishments and individuals as "partners," and who planned to "bring fan fiction out of the shadows and into the limelight" (McNamara, 2007). The second was their marketing materials, promising sponsors that any fanfic contests produced would be "managed and moderated to the max" including an "automatic profanity filter" and a restrictive terms-of-service (TOS) agreement, suggesting that content on the archive would be equally "managed." But the final nail in the coffin for Fanlib was likely the tone deafness of these marketing efforts, which centered around pitching Fanlib as a tool for TV networks and brand marketers "to combat the "'missing 18-34 men problem' that has flared up" (Kim, 2003).

As could be deduced from the discussion in this chapter about the safe space, the idea that fanfic would be put in "the limelight" was immediately alarming to many in ljficwriters. The outsider, for-profit aspect also violated the gift culture discussed in Chapter 5 by taking a community-driven product and exploiting it for a third-party's gain. That Fanlib would intrude on fanfic practices by creating outside moderation antagonized fanfic writers who had migrated to LJ to enjoy greater freedom from even their own internal moderators, as discussed in Chapter 4. And finally, to suggest that the target market for all this effort was actually young men, who in virtually all fanfic groups, on LJ or elsewhere, were a distinct minority, indicated that the business owners either had no idea what they were doing, or were making the vast majority of fanfic writers chaff to be separated from the wheat. The Fanlib owners, probably unsurprisingly, were all male, as were all their "partners" and the team at their venture capital firm. For a group embodying the historical practices of female coterie groups, this focus on young men smacked of the same condescending attitude they had banded together to avoid.

Within days of Fanlib's press announcements, new forums sprang up on LJ to discuss the issue, share information, and drive comments to news releases. Icons were created stating the user's opposition to Fanlib, and subverting Fanlib's own marketing images, which were an object of scorn as they were clearly pitched at teenage boys. Fan lawyers looked at the TOS agreement at Fanlib and pointed out that the company provided no legal shelter should individual fanfic writers be sued. Fans engaged with the company founders on their own LJs and at the Fanlib site, and took their complaints to other blog sites and news outlets. Eventually the company CEO, Chris Williams, engaged in a Q&A about Fanlib with media scholar Henry Jenkins, which was posted on Jenkin's blog. Apart from picking apart the information, some fans pointed out that Williams had chosen Jenkins to speak to while refusing to engage with female academics on LJ. The tone of the Fanlib discussion ranged from fearful and hostile, to derisive.

"I mean, what did they expect us to say? 'Thank you, O Unknown Men With No Fandom Backgrounds, for bringing an air of legitimacy to our forty-year-old tradition of women's writing! Without you, why, we wouldn't have known what to do with ourselves! My, what a big TOS you have!'" (McNamara, 2007).

The threat of Fanlib to a female coterie group challenged many of its core concerns – the violation of the safe space, the disruption of the known audience found in a coterie group, and a threat to its exchange practices in the introduction of a for-profit motive in the contests and prizes offered to participants. The implied offer of "legitimacy" by making fanfic mainstream made abundantly clear the outside status of Fanlib's team, whose actions suggested that the absorption or dismissal of the ljficwriter group culture was something desirable.

Fanlib soldiered on for a year, slowly accruing a sizable number of participants, but largely divorced from the fan writers active on LJ. In July 2008 it abruptly announced that it would be closing its doors. In fact, the site was purchased by Disney and converted into Take 180, a video contest portal for its ABC Family site. Chris Williams remained its CEO, but the fanfic element was eliminated. As Fanlib was a private entity there was no information on what sort of profit it would have made from the sale, but the company indicated the fanfic archive itself had not been profitable. Its barely one-year existence was certainly far less successful than fan-driven projects such as the Gossamer archives, begun in the mid-1990s to house fanfic in the X-Files fandom,

Fiction Alley, a major Harry Potter archive, or the largest multifandom archive currently in existence, Fanfiction.net, all of whom had larger collections, and the last of which is one of the most trafficked sites on the Internet.

While in the end Fanlib served to be more of an insult than an injury to ljficwriters, the challenge to group values exemplified by Fanlib's business model led a group of fanfic writers to ponder what participation in their groups really meant.

"this perfectly suits a Marxist analysis. We have to start with what Marx thought of historical materialism: the idea that we're shaped not just by *what* we produce but *how* we produce it, and that losing control of either our products or the means of production cannot help but separate us from our true selves." [Anon 80][5/27/2007]

At least some fanfic writers began to think of the safe space concept as having an additional dimension past separation, open expression, and norm enforcement, that of ownership. There was a sense that community could be destroyed if ownership of both the products and the distribution of the products were in other hands. This questioning of the group's identity and the desire to stay out of the spotlight, resembles Gongla and Rizutto's description of a CoP's actions after receiving exploitative attention from outside groups and thus removing itself from visibility by going underground, only to re-emerge as a redefined group (Gongla and Rizutto, 2004).

Post Fanlib, to many members of the group, redefinition of the safe space involved "owning the servers". Discussions on such an effort were barely underway, however, when a second, more threatening event occurred, demonstrating that LJ was not a necessary component to the work of ljficwriters.

6.5.2 The sheriff comes to town

Only weeks after the opening of Fanlib, LJ began removing individual and group blogs from its site over the U.S. Memorial Day weekend. This purge was in response to complaints from an anti-pornography group, Warriors for Innocence (WFI), which tied into larger public discussion about child predators operating through social networking sites. The incident, termed Strikethrough for LJ's practice of placing a line through the name of a deleted blog, indirectly built on the fact that LJ founder Brad Fitzpatrick had

sold the site to a company called SixApart in 2005. Six Apart soon violated a longstanding promise Fitzgerald had made to LJ users that advertising would never appear on the site. The anti-porn group, WFI, threatened to contact LJ advertisers unless LJ removed what WFI claimed was illegal content on the site. Six Apart, which was struggling to monetize LJ traffic, overreacted.

If Fanlib's appearance had angered ljficwriters, Strikethrough caused widespread panic. In the days following the disappearance of both individuals and group sites from LJ, many fanfic writers began locking down their journals, unclear as to what had caused LJ to delete the sites. Deleted LJ users no longer had accounts from which to post their stories, and there was no response from LJ to demands for an explanation. The absence of many LJ users over a U.S. holiday weekend and during a popular Harry Potter convention also slowed the distribution of information among ljficwriters. Eventually, the head of Six Apart posted to apologize for their poor handling of the complaint. Rather than delete specific groups, the company had culled blogs based on interests listed on their profile pages. The deletions had thus swept up everything from fanfic oriented sites to blogs used by rape or incest survivors. At least 500 deletions had occurred. Some of the deleted blogs were restored. Others, however, were not, as a debate began over legal definitions of obscenity and how U.S. laws applied to fictional material. Diverse issues emerged, such as what counted as an age-of-consent given that laws varied around the world, with some in ljficwriters pointing out that the character of Buffy had been underage when she first had sex with her 200-year-old vampire boyfriend on a U.S. network show. Other members suggested that homophobia was at work, as many of the still unrestored journals had male homosexual content.

It took over a year, and a further sale of the site to Russian owners SUP, before LJ's TOS was revised to specify what constituted objectionable content. By then the damage had long been done. Even for users who firmly declared their intention to stay at LJ in perpetuity, it became clear that LJ was simply another stop in the migration of fanfic writers from one Internet platform to another. Following Strikethrough, many fanfic writers had played it safe and opened a backup journal at one of three LJ-clone sites. One, JournalFen, was a site owned by fans, and it hosted the controversial group Fandom Wank, which was discussed earlier in this chapter. But JournalFen still used

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invite codes, and in any case could not handle an increase in traffic. A second site, GreatestJournal, collapsed under the influx of new users, and closed a year later, directing both new and existing users to the third site, InsaneJournal. Owned by a couple in Florida, the maintainer threw out the welcome mat to fans, and within a year had seen a 500% rise in new accounts and general activity, necessitating two server moves.

The sudden debate about alternate site use was a shift in the perspective of some in ljficwriters who had become particularly insular in their approach to fandom, and who had minimal knowledge of activity elsewhere on the Internet. Although the number of people creating escape plans from LJ increased dramatically, the nexus of activity remained on LJ through further jolts such as the sale to SUP, Boldthrough (an echo of Strikethrough), and the layoffs of half the LJ staff in the year that followed. What discussions of the event, and the debates over leaving revealed, was that nothing mattered more to ljficwriters than their audience. For some, whose accounts were deleted, the decision to move elsewhere had been made for them. Both the banned individuals and group blogs set up at InsaneJournal, and many of their friends and readers made at least a partial move there with them. However even though, thanks to LJ's open-source beginnings, InsaneJournal operated in a close approximation to LJ, and it offered clear incentives such as lower costs for paid or permanent accounts, and an enormous increase in icon space, most people refused to leave LJ.

Part of the problem was the participatory experience that many in the group had been familiar with. The bulk of members in LJ fan groups had arrived between 2003-2005. By that time the fan groups were well established at the site, and activity was already quite visible. There was both regular activity and a wealth of content on the site to lure newcomers in. When comparing a site such as InsaneJournal, whose activity level and content mirrored LJ circa 2002, to LJ in 2007, the new site seemed less like home and more like an empty warehouse. Few people were posting at InsaneJournal, fewer still were posting fanfic or making comments. Some people who began by crossposting to both LJ and InsaneJournal, stopped making the effort when their posts at InsaneJournal received next to no response.

Significantly, hardly any BNFs moved away from LJ. Given a social network and established sites of activity that favored them, they had little incentive to migrate unless

they were directly threatened with the loss of their blog or a central group blog they owned. This factor was additional evidence in how important BNFs had been to the development of the LJ fanfic network and the formation of groups such as ljficwriters, and how their coordination capabilities were key to a coterie CoP. Unlike the move from posting boards to LJ, which happened slowly but which also offered a wealth of technological affordances that favored content creators, the move from LJ offered nothing of the same magnitude, and would instead require sustained effort to rebuild the same level of activity. No one wanted to lose their readers. They also did not want to lose access to the people and groups they were subscribed to. Some tried to set up RSS feeds for blogs they still wanted to read at LJ. But the problem was that the feed would not pick up locked posts. Since, in the wake of Strikethrough, many more people were locking their posts who had never locked them before, and some group blogs had gone into lockdown, those who moved not only lost readers, but had to maintain an account at LJ to read all the people who were staying put. This meant they now had to maintain two accounts and their time was split between the sites. With a dearth of participation at one end, and a need to maintain an account at the other, the move hardly seemed worth it.

The events of Strikethrough were a close example of a CoP that was undervalued by its sponsoring organization. In such a case the larger organization (in this case, LJ) "may withhold resources from the community, and even try to actively disband the community" (Gongla and Rizutto, 2004, p.300). Certainly the random and unpredictable deletions were a form of resource loss, and other acts, such as deleting certain fanfic related interests from their "top interests" statistics, appeared to demonstrate a lack of interest by LJ in continuing to host fanfic groups on its site.

However, many more fans were now aware of the threat they lived with so long as a for-profit entity controlled their site of interaction. Following Strikethrough, arguments began to arise that LJ was not much different from Fanlib. They, too, were trying to profit from the content being freely posted, and were just as likely to censor content they found threatening. The fact that fan groups were just one subset of LJ users meant that they had limited clout in arguing for their rights when challenged. Further deletions in the wake of Strikethrough realized some fans' fears of legal challenges, as both a Harry

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Potter group blog and a group blog for comics fans were deleted as a result of copyright violation claims.

The complaints and arguments began to lead to action. The Archive of Our Own project was launched as part of the newly formed Organization for Transformative Works (OTW), a non-profit group formed by fans who decided to face multiple challenges at once. In order to combat legal challenges, the group recruited lawyers from its membership and promised to represent fans under legal threat. Their first step was to educate video makers on steps they could take when given takedown notices on YouTube. The OTW began to speak to the press to argue for the transformative nature of fan works, and to serve as "experts" on call for issues concerning fans. They formed a peer-reviewed journal to provide a forum for academic work on the history and work of female-fan groups. They created a wiki site to serve as resource for information on fan history, and an Open Doors project to serve as an archive of last resort for resources taken off the web or in danger of being lost. Significantly, the OTW acknowledged its coterie roots within its mission statement:

"The OTW represents a practice of transformative fanwork *historically rooted in a primarily female culture*. The OTW will preserve the record of that history as we pursue our mission while encouraging new and non-mainstream expressions of cultural identity within fandom." (emphasis added) (http://transformativeworks.org/about/believe).

While the OTW has not and probably will never "speak for" all fan groups, its creation marked a change in both the cycle of fan group activity at LJ, and the nature of participation in general. The OTW faced an interesting dilemma of challenging some group practices, such as efforts to remain subversive, away from public notice, personally anonymous, and divorced from financial issues, in order to support other needs, such as preserving fan works, and building a foundation for fighting legal challenges, thus extending the provision of a "safe space" to new domains. Some fans argued that the choice was inevitable when faced with growing visibility thanks to the Internet, a "remix culture" which threatened to historically appropriate the group's practices, legal challenges based on content and ownership, and the growing instability of ljficwriters' "home" on LJ. Either the group moved to yet another site where they could keep their heads down and hope to avoid unwanted attention, or they could stand and fight. The OTW was the response of the "stand and fight" crowd, and marked a significant shift in

the way the safe space concept was defined. In doing so it also challenged the historical tradition of female coterie writers by eroding the coterie practice of separation in an effort to preserve its cultural legacy.

6.6 Conclusion

This chapter on "the safe space" fits within the CoP framework by exploring concerns about identity offline and on, and the separation and alignment of self and group. It also explores one of the central preoccupations for female coterie writers in their various historical iterations.

Section 6.2 of this chapter explored definitions of the safe space concept as presented by community members, and identified three central elements – separation from the larger culture, the ability to express one's self freely, and the need for norm enforcement. It also identified two central aspects of ljficwriters, their use of an online space and their interest in sharing fan creations, as factors related to the group's identity and practices, and thus affecting the safe space concept. Section 6.3 discussed how practice is intertwined with the affordances offered through the LJ platform, specifically in terms of cloaking personal identity and controlling the extent of one's participation and visibility. These practices include locking posts, or surreptitious reading of other blogs. LJ's structure allows people to pick and choose their interests and the people they want to have contact with, offering people the ability to merge together different parts of their lives. At the same time, locking and surreptitious reading allows people to keep different parts of their identities, and social contacts, separate. Filters also allow people to see only who and what they want to see, regardless of what may be stated on their profile pages in terms of interests, subscribers, and people and groups they are subscribed to. The visibility of these ties allow for networks to form and people to locate groups and individuals sharing their interests. Filters and tracking allow for people to maintain an identity and visibility separate from the networks they have helped form. It is also a method of non-participation, itself an aspect of identity building in a CoP.

In section 6.4, issues of trust, as it relates to both identity and behavior, were discussed as a form of alignment with group norms. As Wenger states, alignment

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"requires the ability to coordinate perspectives and actions in order to direct energies to a common purpose" (Wenger, 1998, p.186). The proceduralization of actions and the devising of control structures is a form of identity work for a CoP, which offers structure through communities and economies of meaning, as a way for individuals to identify and negotiate forms of membership. Wenger lists seven examples of alignment such as "negotiating perspectives, finding common ground," which we saw in the case of the vidders debating the meaning of the "safe space." We also saw "creating boundary practices" and "imposing one's view, using power and authority." in the case of fan artists challenging hotlinkers, fanfic writers challenging plagiarists, and readers of Fandom Wank investigating and pillorying sockpuppet identity betrayals.

The case of the vidders in section 6.4, many of whom decided to venture out from their "safe space" on LJ in order to reach a wider audience, is one example of how challenges to the safe space concept began to affect a variety of practices and values within ljficwriters. The final part of this chapter discussed a move towards redefinition of the safe space and the group, as specific external threats led members of ljficwriters to organize formally in order to extend the safe space through ownership. Chapter 7 will discuss what the wider effects of ljficwriters may be in terms of female use of the Internet, their similarity to other CoPs, and their place within a historical tradition of female coterie writers.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

"I am sick of the silence of women. I want to hear you speaking all the languages, offering your experience as your truth, as human truth, talking about working, about making, about unmaking, about eating, about cooking, about feeding, about taking in seed and giving out life, about killing, about feeling, about thinking; about what women do; about what men do; about war, about peace; about who presses the buttons and what buttons get pressed and whether pressing buttons is in the long run a fit occupation for human beings. There's a lot of things I want to hear you talk about." (LeGuin, 1989)

Chapter 1 of this dissertation laid out three components of discussion: the female writing coterie, the historical precedent for the ljficwriters group; the Community of Practice, the framework from which to examine ljficwriter purposes and practices; and LiveJournal as the site of interaction and tool for engagement used by this group. This section will draw together discussion from the preceding six chapters to claim that the exploration of coterie practices in previous studies has focused largely on external factors shaping the group, and has left unexplored the influence of technological choices, and the learning framework within which the groups function. This omission has led to a greater focus on the groups' exclusion and differences from larger societal institutions, leaving their dynamic, transitory, and internal processes unexamined from a more local context. The result is to position coteries as informal networks of production in contrast to official structures and organizations. This dissertation argues that coteries instead serve as a middle ground, neither an alternative to other structures, nor, in many of their functions, significantly different from similar groups in other settings. Coterie groups functioning as CoPs serve individual development in highly localized ways while offering broad platforms for interaction through linked practice. They serve as engines of engagement for individual purpose, and as mechanisms through which people meet emotional needs, rather than as development sources for larger societal interests.

7.1 Female writing coteries

"I think it's both that we're women, and that we're fannish, and that we're coming from a mindset that says there is no fundamental difference between a content provider and content consumer. In fandom, the fangirl who squees over your latest fic is often also the writer whose work is ten times more brilliant than yours. We see it as a community. But if you're coming from a hierarchical mode, wherein having gotten something published (be it in some fifth-tier press with distribution only in the Dakotas and East Orange) means You Have Something To Say, and commenters are Those Who Should Listen. Whereas on LJ we try to listen to one another. I think this is by far the smarter way to go, but from the outside it is probably easy to write off as less significant -- because what can *conversations* mean when you could make a *statement*?"[Anon 84][3/9/2009]

In the above quote, Anon 84 describes ljficwriters in a manner encompassing female writing coteries over time. She encapsulates themes first enumerated in Chapter 2 and repeated throughout this dissertation.

(1) "we're women": This fact informs everything that follows, and contributes to the development of certain practices such as their anonymity, the concern with maintaining a "safe space", and the sense of being in a minority position in their larger culture. This sense of being different, and of being pressured by outside forces to conform, leads to the expression which opened this dissertation of "mutinying together" across time through shared writing and reading. This sense of identification with the group and its expertise is what contributes to ljficwriters being a CoP as opposed to merely being a social network or a community of interest. "It is not just a set of relationships. Its domain gives it an identity, and the commitment to care for this domain gives it a cohesiveness and intentionality that goes beyond the interpersonal nature of informal networks" (Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder, 2002, p. 43). This domain includes the creation and exploration of self as female in one's society.

(2) "we're coming from a mindset": The historical continuity of women's writing coteries is expressed here as a trajectory from a time when the relationships in the creation of writing were reciprocal: reading and writing, production and consumption, recipient and giver of gifts, all of this occurs within a "community." Anon 84 distinguishes their emergent roles from that of a hierarchical model, specifically one of commercial publication, which she denotes as a voice of authority versus silent listeners. Ljficwriters engage with their own production and the production of others, melding together pieces of each in order to create local meaning and individual significance.

"Consumers, both individually and collectively…are not impregnated with media messages; they select material that matters to them from the much broader array of media content on offer. They do not simply pass along static content; they transform the content so that it better serves their own social and expressive needs. Content …[is] not the product of top-down design but rather of a multitude of local decisions made by autonomous agents negotiating their way through diverse cultural spaces. " (Jenkins, Li, Krauskopf, and Green, 2009).

Although ljficwriters fit the above model of active participants in the cultural landscape, what is missing in the description is the influence of the collective. When Anon 84

describes them she notes that, in their group, speaking and listening is done together. They collectively interpret and transform content and thus jointly own their production.

(3) "easy to write off as less significant": The practice of coterie writing, while a precursor and alternative to the early days of commercial publishing, has perhaps never declined over time. Without the visibility of the Internet, it might not have been possible to see how widespread the practice continues to be. If the history of fanfic writing in the West is any indication, it seems likely that small groups of individuals have always shared their work. Their scattered, informal, and at times, deliberately underground nature prevented them from being recognized. What Anon 84 emphasizes is the lack of cultural status such practices have developed, a reversal of what was true at the outset of publishing. This decline may encompass a number of factors for ljficwriters – its female composition, its predominant choice of subject matter, and its differing economic model. The size of readership is not likely a factor. Instead, Anon 84 notes, being formally published anywhere, regardless of how small the impact of one's writing, is considered to be a preferable state for an author by the larger commercial culture. However, what she focuses on as contributing to the low status of the group is that it operates by many to many, not one to many, and that the group takes precedence over the individual.

Within her paragraph, Anon 84 denotes recurrent themes of importance to female coteries, described in this dissertation as pseudonymity, a known audience, personal connections, a safe space, and a platform for the negotiation of identity and cultural roles. These practices and concerns were formed in reaction to the broad reach of outside forces, such as capitalism or misogyny, which depreciate or prevent the contributions of many individuals in a society from circulating to the wider group. In Chapter 2, Bury (2005) was cited claiming class performance as a cause of dissension and division in female coterie groups. In Chapter 5, one ljficwriter suggested that conflicts over broader political agendas in the group were at the root of dissension in the CJ scandal. While I believe these are legitimate examples of how "outside forces" shape female coterie groups, what the analysis of ljficwriters in this dissertation shows is that what predominates in the operation of female coteries is the importance of *local* hierarchies to

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their organization, success, and practices. Previous discussions of female coteries or individual writers who published in this manner tended to place the writer and groups within an economic or cultural macrocosm, and emphasized their choices in relation to outside factors. While these factors undoubtedly contribute to the formation and continuation of coterie groups, the internal functions of these groups have not been as closely examined. What's more, the influence of the method coteries have used to coordinate, interact and distribute their work is a significant factor in their development, and this too requires greater attention. For this reason, ljficwriters has been examined through the CoP framework, and aspects of LJ structure and affordances have been a focus of discussion.

7.2 LiveJournal

" I think it's interesting to look at how we got to making this form of communication our primary means, let's sum. Briefly. You have cons, which involved actual face-to-face contact, combined with the use of zines, which involved actual physical possession of paper with words on. Discussion at this point involves talking, but is heavily supplemented with written communication. Enter the internet and the birth of the BBS, which provided centrality, threading, and zero privacy. Along comes e-mail and mailing lists, threading and centrality are reduced but privacy has a heyday, from private e-mails to private lists. We're still gathering in groups, though, and while there's a degree of self-selection going on the membership of any list is still a fixed quality which is, importantly, impervious to change by any one list member. Blogs came along, but were site- and single fan-oriented in the same way a "Rants" or "Essays" page might have been on a personal website. And then we had Livejournal." [Anon 20][7/24/2004]

Above, Anon 20 presents a condensed version of the discussion in Chapter 4 on the migration to LJ, and the history of fan practices which led to the development of ljficwriters. The LJ location is significant, not simply because it forms a technological boundary for the group, but because of the factors in its selection. Sections of Chapters 4 through 6 have explored how different features on LJ have both accommodated and altered previous fan practices to develop features unique to this group at this location. Anon 20 lists the ways in which the medium of interaction has simultaneously created problems and offered solutions. There have been issues of privacy, access, organization, inclusion and exclusion, functionality, and most importantly, the balance of self and group. This is highlighted in her final sentences: "impervious to change by any one list member" and "single fan oriented."

For ljficwriters to function in an optimal manner, the technology of location and interaction must allow for fluctuation between prioritizing the needs of a single individual in the group, and the operation and direction of the group as a whole. As Anon 84 said in the previous section, ljficwriters is a group of many to many. This does not mean that all members are equal, nor that each participates in a similar manner. What it does mean is that each individual needs to have a portion of control and participation in the group as a whole, while not being able to influence the group to such an extent that they cease to have "conversations" and begin to have speeches. It is within conversations that meaning is created and discovered, and the formation of individual meaning is at the foundation of a Community of Practice.

7.3 The Community of Practice

"I think of LJ as the small intestine of the internet…I can see a bit of information enter the system, and the little villi that are people encounter it, touch it, taste it; if we think it's valuable, we push it along…boosting the signal. If you do not get it, you might think it's an echo chamber, as you get the same message from multiple directions, but you're wrong: it's the nature of decentralized information transmission. You're going to get it in waves, you're going to hear it more than once...It's always reaching someone new for the first time at one end while the people at the other end are so over it…We reach consensus about what's important without ever agreeing: we make our own decisions about what's important, and a transmission emerges." [Anon 85][3/11/2008]

Anon 85's description above of how ljficwriters functions, sets out the practices, participation cycles, and products of a CoP. A CoP builds knowledge through discussion, examination, repetition, and transmission to others. It is not unidirectional, nor formally structured. There are cycles of participation – there is always someone new, learning and asking questions for the first time, while someone else is on an outward trajectory. Achievement is reached by consensus, but not necessarily by agreement since leadership is emergent, informal, and shifting. A CoP consists of individuals making their own decisions, choosing non-alignment and non-participation sometimes, separating the individual identity from the group. But "a transmission emerges." The group has its end products, which are, as with the group as a whole, constantly in flux.

A CoP has five stages of development – potential, coalescing, maturing, stewardship, and transformation (Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder, 2002). In the "potential" stage a CoP begins with a social network. In the case of ljficwriters, pockets

of the group developed around BNFs who migrated to LJ, drawing in their connected readers and fellow writer friends. The group had common ground in their fan practices and their joint interest in writing and reading. In the "coalescing" stage trust is a central issue, hence the joint enforcement and maintenance of the safe space. Establishing the value of shared knowledge is also a central development, hence the negotiation of values in gift exchange. In the maturing stage, the CoP often moves from relative obscurity to a visible position to onlookers, and experiences a swell of newcomers. Among ljficwriters this led to conflicts between the "cooking class" and "potluck" writers, and to the rise of new practices and an expansion of the group's boundaries. It also led to the fourth stage of "stewardship", with conflicts between ownership and openness as people began locking more posts and making their blogs friends-only. A turnover in leadership occurred as many of the original BNFs moved on to other groups or moved into more peripheral roles in ljficwriters. The pursuit of centralized identity, integrating one's interests and memberships on a personal level, also led to a greater interconnectedness with other fanfic writing groups by ljficwriters at large. Another important factor in developing ties to other LJ groups were the external crises of Fanlib and Strikethrough. These threats brought together fanfic writers from many groups across LJ to begin working together on joint responses to the issues raised in these events.

Ljficwriters is currently in the "transformation" stage. Members are developing different interests and losing commonality. Social and personal matters are becoming a more common topic of posts, rather than writing or discussion about the shows that brought the group together. Ljficwriters is in the process of deciding what parts of their practice will cease to exist, which parts will be reinterpreted for new settings, and which parts will continue. In these stages and processes they can be paralleled with CoPs that exist in work settings, professional groups, educational institutions, and other online spaces. While ljficwriters' historical legacy of female coterie writing is shared with other fanfic groups, their systems of interaction and growth are shared with learning groups in other domains whose end product is identity development.

As the quote from Glaser in Chapter 3 explains, behavior in a CoP constantly resolves around their central issue of concern. "Their continual resolving is the core variable. It is the prime mover of the behavior seen and talked about in a substantive

area...It emerges as the overriding pattern" (Glaser, 1998, p.115). This is a group continually discussing itself, as individuals and as a group, looking for patterns, and expressing their relation to things in conversation and through their creative works.

7.4 Identity development

"My initiation as a woman poet occurred when I was in my first year of graduate school…We were visited that year by a gentleman poet, to whom students were invited to submit work for scrutiny and commentary…[he] stopped at a tame little poem in which, however, my husband and I were lying in bed together, probably nude. "You women poets are very graphic, aren't you?" he said, with a slight shiver of disgust. Not having previously encountered this idea, I reacted in a complex way. Certainly, I was hurt and disappointed. At the same time, something in me was drawing itself up, distending its nostrils thinking, "You're goddamned right, we are graphic." I had not seen myself as a we until that moment." (Ostriker, 1983, p. 126).

Both female writing coteries and CoPs embody identity development as the central output of their existence. As discussed in Chapter 5, ljficwriters' relationship to their favorite shows and characters spring from unresolved issues in their present or past which they seek to understand through their own creations, or in seeing these characters analyzed and reinterpreted through the work of others. And as discussed in Chapter 2, women have often been forced to create their own stories to share common experiences of being female because, in general, their cultures restrict the discourses women wish to see in cultural production. In the following post, a writer examines what it is she wants to do with her stories.

"I wanted my Buffy to achieve some kind of balance between the mundane and supernatural aspects of her life…Show!Buffy was a superhero *and* Everygirl; I wanted to write about an adult Buffy who's a superhero *and* Everywoman, in a scenario in which the conflicts of adulthood could ground the monster metaphors in the same way that adolescent conflicts grounded them in the show. Which meant a Buffy with a day job, a relationship, and, eventually, a family. The conflicts between work and family which many women struggle with are darn near tailor-made for grounding those metaphors. My Buffy's children really are little monsters… on the show, adults are usually either clueless or corrupt. So what happens when the adolescent characters become adults? Plus motherhood isn't portrayed as an attractive proposition in the Jossverse …And yet... the majority of women are mothers. The implication that adult, sexually active women can't be heroes, only sacrifices, is a peculiar piece of subtext for a supposedly feminist show. It's not solely a Jossverse phenomenon - there's a huge tradition of coming-of-age stories in Western fantasy/horror, but very few being-of-age stories. When characters of either sex achieve adulthood and start families, they're generally shuffled offstage in favor of the next generation of angst-ridden teens." [Anon 86][5/6/2007]

The desire expressed by Anon 86 to see a wider range of women's experiences in popular culture is an echo of Virginia Woolf, who also discussed motherhood in writing.

"We think back through our mothers, if we are women…we can imagine what it would signify to women, and men, to live in a culture where childbirth and mothering occupied the kind of position that sex and romantic love have occupied in literature and art for the last five hundred years, or…that warfare has occupied since literature began." (Woolf as cited in Ostriker, 1983, p. 131).

The striving of ljficwriters to understand themselves and their orientation to the world around them through the texts that resonate with them, is also at the root of the core conflict emerging repeatedly in coterie groups over time. This was discussed in Chapters 2 and 5 as a clash between groups such as the "cooking class" and the "potluckers" with part of the conflict revolving around what the purpose of the group should be. These differences emerged in a struggle over the treatment of characters and type of content produced among different writers. Any piece of writing reflects the individual preoccupations of each writer, but in fanfic writing communities all stories utilize *shared* objects and themes. Though each community member utilizes pieces of the canon text in her work it is never quite the same canon for each individual. Rather, each writer is drawn to specific things also seen by only some other members of the group. When members read and view another writerr's work, they are seeing that person's reflection of the canon text, or perhaps even a reflection of a reflection, as influenced by other fanfic writers. These discontinuities in perspective, and differences in focus, can be jarring and cause negative responses. Ljficwriters experience what Sartre describes as a threat to one's sense of self, caused by recognition of the Other.

"I see a man walking by some benches in the park…I am suddenly aware of the fact that he sees the grass and benches from his own conscious point of view, one which is not directly accessible to me. It is as if the Other steals the world from me." (Sartre as cited in Warburton, 2006, p.224)

A jarred reader can feel their sense of identity in question, challenged, by works that are incongruent to their own values and concerns, especially since they are interacting in a group meant to address the absence, manipulation, or expression of these values and concerns in a canon text. Their reaction is primarily *local* and connected to the work in progress at the CoP, and less a matter of cultural hierarchies of taste or class values.

In Chapter 3, I briefly introduced Social Identity Theory (SIT) as relevant in examining the behavior seen in ljficwriter interactions. SIT is concerned with the effect of economic, cultural and historical conditions (more broadly) and local context upon

individual and group behavior. In SIT, "local" may mean what occurs within a single instance of interaction. In studies of coterie groups there has been a focus on the broad aspects of SIT on the formation of such groups and the motivations of their participants. In this dissertation, a more local examination of behavior has taken place, both in what has been observed in individual instances, but also of local at the group level.

Especially when it pertains to female use of online space, this focus on closer concerns of self and group contributes a different understanding of motivation that is individual and relevant to the particular site of interaction. For example, in Chapter 4, the comparison of a Pew study on male and female behavior online to the activities of ljficwriters, a group composed almost entirely of women of varying ages, showed the group was atypical in most respects to the reported behavior of women online. What the Pew study did not address was the importance of group norms and goals in behaviors, and how identities were enacted through these forms of engagement. Just as women segregated themselves to write in historical coteries, so women have done so again in fanfic groups. Within the boundaries of these groups they have felt freer to learn, explore and discuss in ways that develop identities through not just the reading and writing of stories, but also through the use of technology.

"The thing I love most in the world is learning something new. That's why I have my very own somewhat crappy icons, and my very own mediocre-but-improving vids, and my very own hacked-from-template website, and my very own Parrot-assisted wordpress blog with attendant MySQL database.
…
Do you know how I have managed to learn new things? Because of fans. I wouldn't be an iconner without [name deleted 1], a vidder without [name deleted 2], a website creator without [name deleted 3], a blog-installer without [name deleted 4]. The OTW is following in this tradition of generosity. They may not have their archive up and running yet, but that is because they are *teaching fen how to make it*." [Anon 87][7/31/2008]

Anon 87 demonstrates that while women may come to ljficwriters to write and read, they take on new roles, with learning taking place along various dimensions. Some may begin by grappling with how to even post their writing, and finally become proficient enough to teach others how to create resources on LJ. Some, like Int 5, work in the IT field, but needed encouragement to write.

"I went well, I'd like to start writing again because I had quit years ago, because I just had work, life, other things to deal with. I went well, this would be a good thing for me, 300 words, I can do 300 words! So I

signed up to that LJ group, as a prompt to myself to try to get writing again. I did a few, and I was like ok, I think I can do this. And [my friend launched] a challenge to do a story a day for the entire month. And I was like "Ok, I can do this, I can do this… 90,000 words later I finished the story." [Int 5]

The personal growth of Anon 87 and Int 5 provides a new aspect to the historical examples of what occurs within female writing coteries. This new feature is an axis of learning and identity development. While one could reasonably intuit that being a member of a writing group would lead to that person doing more and better writing, the sorts of development that occur relate to a variety of interactions that take place as a result of that participation. Some of these results are emotional, as in ljficwriters who see their stories told by others, or who feel rewarded by causing that sense of recognition in a reader. Some results are social, as people develop connections that expand their personal networks. Some results are practical, involving the growth of technological or organizational skills. Some are simply informative, as people learn about issues, parts of the world, or experiences that are new to them. The example provided by ljficwriters suggests that women's use of the Internet may develop largely through collaborative uses whose focus is not primarily technological, and that CoPs that utilize technology for individual development could change female participation in technological domains.

Anon 87 cites the efforts of the Organization for Transformative Works (OTW), discussed at the end of Chapter 6, a project which marks a break from the past in terms of female writing coteries. In its mission the OTW carries on coterie values such as collaboration, teaching, learning, organizing, creating, and maintaining a safe space for its own. Added to these aspects of the coterie is a new mission of preservation for future users, and communication with outside entities. To some degree this new mission still revolves around coterie concerns with identity development. What marks this as a break from the past is that the OTW plans to make this identity building external rather than internal by focusing on the collective rather than the individual, and presenting that collective identity to groups outside of the coterie. These outsiders may be academics, the media, content providers, or the culture at large. In its creation, the OTW helps situate members of these coteries to their place in the world in a formal and collective fashion, in an extension of the informal identity work done in earlier coterie iterations.

This focus on a collective identity is also reflected in the prominence of preservation efforts in their mission, which are being expressed through the collective archive Anon 87 spoke about, as well as their Open Doors project, which is intended to serve as a repository of last resort. This preservation effort is driven by a concern for a historical legacy that is recognized beyond the small groups involved, as well as a recognition of the cycle of participation in a CoP. Future members of a CoP can only take advantage of the group's collective works if there is some concerted effort to preserve these documents outside of individual archives, which are prone to deletion, neglect, or abandonment when the creator moves on. In its development, the OTW expands the female coterie idea of collective ownership of group work by focusing on joint preservation projects for future members, and a recognition that work shared derives its meaning not only from the author's intention, but the value invested in it by its readers and viewers. In this way the individual identity building that occurs when a writer creates their work and shares in the work of others, unfolds into a larger act of collective identity building when that work is recognized as being of the group, and collective action is taken to document and preserve it for future use.

7.5 Contributions of the work and future directions

As reviewed in this chapter, this dissertation adds to the understanding of CoP operations in online leisure communities with particular attention to the fulfillment of emotional needs as well as learning development. It offers a case study in the reflexive interaction of technology and practice on a widely used Internet platform. By focusing on an online fan community, this dissertation also contributes to the literature of fan studies and the conceptualizations of fans. Lastly, this dissertation demonstrates how coterie communities can be formed out of overlapping trajectories of individual participation, and how identity develops in a balance between private self and group membership. By detailing the practices, concerns, debates and actions underway in one coterie group, ljficwriters, we can conclude that the historical custom of female writing coteries has a current virtual (and vibrant) presence.

There is still considerable study to be done in the area of female fanfic coteries, which can follow several directions. The first would involve looking at the relationship between leisure CoPs and hosting institutions. While this connection tends to be more direct and visible in CoPs existing in business or educational settings, the connections of a group such as ljficwriters to a hosting institution such as LiveJournal are more complex and difficult to parse. While this dissertation has looked at the effect of LJ as a technological platform for ljficwriters, less attention has been paid to its effects as a hosting *organization*. However, as the events of Strikethrough proved in Chapter 6, the consequences of being affiliated with a given organization can be profound for the existence of a leisure group. The larger organization's decisions to offer or withhold particular affordances within a technological structure embody assumptions about a user base, which this dissertation has shown, can have recurrent effects on the practices of a CoP. The CoP's weak or conflicted relationship with its sponsoring organization may also affect the responsiveness of the larger organization to their needs, affecting their longterm development. The current efforts of a group such as the OTW to "own the servers" and allow the female coterie CoP to become their own host may provide an interesting opportunity to compare the model of a CoP writing group which is its own organization, to a similar group which must contend with a sponsoring organization that has more commercial concerns in its activities. Would a CoP under the auspices of the OTW continue to be a CoP or would it, in fact, become part of a formal organization? How would such a relationship affect practices, especially in comparison to another group, which might have a positive but still commercial relationship with its sponsoring host?

Secondly, a great deal still remains to be explored regarding individual trajectories of participation within a female coterie CoP and specific aspects of identity development that result. To do so would necessitate a closer reading of fan texts than has been done in this dissertation, and a longer view of particular individuals across multiple CoPs to understand, not only the reasons for entrance and exit into a particular CoP, but for a continual cycle of re-entry and departure across different groups over different time periods. Such an investigation would seek to answer what particular needs are being met or denied within a particular group, and whether entry into subsequent similar groups

produces the same cycle. Are different needs are being met and denied each time? In addition, what specific skills and knowledge is being applied and added to with each cycle? In what ways are experienced female coterie writers novices in their new CoPs, and in what ways are they no longer apprentices?

A third direction would be to investigate the development of writing in informal leisure communities such as ljficwriters in comparison to more professionalized writing circles, which nonetheless have similar aspects of coterie writing such as a known audience and an insular writing approach. Damrosch (2007) proposed that academic writing is a limiting form of coterie writing which creates material that is obscure, is imbued with assumptions about the interests of its audience, and does not make much of an effort to argue for its own value in a larger culture.   Among poets, the limited interest in the marketplace for the poetic form of writing creates a tendency to work in coteries, although within poetry cricticism, coterie writing is considered inferior. "Coterie has been alternatively an antiquarian interpretive mode or a dismissive tag applied to poems or poets who stray beyond what is understood as an appropriate level of referential particularity, usually manifested in proper names." These references to individuals living or dead tend to "regulate entrance into an actual group" and thus decrease the universal aspects of the work (Lytle, 1999).   This critical view of coterie aspects as involving marginality, and a communal approach in the face of rejection by a larger establishment certainly applies to a fanfic group such as ljficwriters. However, what a "coterie view" also provides is a different examination of writing, not as objective and ahistorical, but as social and contextual. Creating a coterie approach for examining diverse types of writing would focus analysis on all types of publication, whether scientific or popular, as driven by social factors with individual rewards.

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Appendix: Glossary

anonymice (or mouse) – someone deliberately cloaking their LJ identity by posting anonymously.

archontic literature – term coined by Abigail Derecho and derived from Derrida's 1995 paper on archives of virtual constructs surrounding a text. She uses the term to signify "ethical projects that oppose outdated notions of hierarchy and property."

banners – Images used at the top of an LJ blog. *Fan artists* create these and other photo manipulated graphics such as computer wallpapers (sometimes called walls), and graphics that can be used in LJ page layouts such as sidebar animations, color bars, mood themes, and "friends-only" graphics.

beta (beta reader, betaing) – is the process of preview-reading either a finished work or a work in progress (*wip)* and providing feedback to the writer. This is usually a general review or copy-proofing of the draft. However some betas may work with authors on general plotting and intensive line-by-line rewrites.

BNF (Big Name Fan) – BNFs are polarizing figures in many fan groups, not necessarily due to any actions on their part, but largely due to their visibility and the hierarchical structure of fandom that that visibility reveals. How people become BNFs is debatable, but in general they have to both have produced work that is very well known within a group of fans, and exercise the power of their name recognition in active engagement with other writers and readers. In some cases, writers produce well regarded work which is widely known, but do not engage much with others, either due to lack of time or in order to concentrate on their own work. Thus, even though they might have a fair amount of clout in reader circles they are less likely to carry the BNF label. Although there is a negative cast to the label, BNFs are often organizers, social network hubs, and mentors to others, and tend to offer considerable time to the group at large by creating resources.

Buffyverse – the characters, stories and settings seen in the television series' "Buffy the Vampire Slayer" and "Angel."

C&D (cease and desist letter) – is the most commonly seen form of copyright enforcement by copyright holders against fans. A variety of fan websites have received such formal notices, generally from major television and film studios, usually in regards to the use of images and logos from copyrighted works. Offending acts have also included the use of images or terms on merchandise (such as t-shirts or mugs), or sites hosting misinformation and libelous statements about actors. There have also been numerous cases of fan videos being removed from hosting sites such as YouTube for copyright infringement. Although in many cases those users had their entire accounts deleted, no further legal action has been taken against the video makers (or those posting the videos) as of this date. Most importantly, no case of which I'm currently aware has

actually targeted fanfic. The most visible case of a fan being sued recently involved, not fanfic, but a Harry Potter reference work. Of note in that case, is that an online version of the contested work was available for years, and even used by copyright holder and creator J.K. Rowling without complaint. Rowling only filed suit when a print version was planned which might compete with her own forthcoming reference work. This suggests that fanfic writers' use of the online medium and the current difficulty in monetizing digital literature, may have a great deal to do with the lack of interest by copyright holders in pursuing such cases. The Potter case is currently on appeal.

canon – is the official text of a *fandom*, such as the episodes in a TV show, or the novels in a book series. Canon is a contentious issue since fans do not always agree what counts as part of canon, what the canon actually depicted, or how closely a given piece of fanfic fits in with events and characterizations in the canon.

capping – (screencapping) is the process of creating still images from a visual source such as a television episode. Many online screencap sites exist to provide fan artists with base materials to create *icons* and other types of fan art. Screencaps are also sometimes used for discussion purposes, as illustrations of a point, or, in the case of cinematography communities, a source for interpretation. They may also be used for humorous posts, such as *macros*.

challenges – are similar to *ficathons* in that certain criteria are laid out in the challenge and any authors interested in participating must write a story that meets those terms.

community – is the LJ term for a group blog. To avoid confusion with the community in the CoP model, the substitute term "group blog" or "forum" will be used in this study.

compiler – someone who creates a list of links of material posted, either to a specific group blog, or to many group blogs in that fandom. This practice exists because some group blogs have such frequent posts that readers prefer to get a digest of links instead. Compilers for fandom newsletters perform a very important function since, due to the decentralized nature of LJ, there is no easy way to scan everything that has been posted to a fandom on any given day. These compilers create huge reading lists and then scan through them to compile a daily list of links to relevant material.

concrit (constructive criticism) – is a contentious topic among ljficwriters. Writers posting their work may ask for concrit on their writing, may request it not be given, or may simply ask for any kind of feedback – helpful or not. While most writers want to know what others thought of their work, constructive criticism is not always seen the same way by readers and writers. In many cases readers confuse what they want to see versus what is an actual flaw in the work, and in others writers confuse an attention to detail by the reader as nitpicking or an attempt to impose professional standards on amateur writing.

crack (crackfic) – is fanfic that is non-serious in nature. It is often humorous or silly and doesn't attempt to explain wildly unlikely events taking place in the story. Stories often

carry the crackfic label in their headers to warn readers the writer is not intending to be taken seriously. Sometimes however, the readers impose this label when they feel the story was not sufficiently rigorous in the telling and the writer was taking too many unexplained shortcuts.

cutting (or cut-tag) - LJ employs a few LJ-specific HTML tags, including what's called the lj-cut. This tag is used to minimize the size of one's RSS feed since posts can be very long or contain large images. Utilizing the cut tag is often mandated by moderators of group blogs, and even individual readers feel free to pressure non-users into employing them. The cut tag essentially hides the bulk of a post behind a link, which a reader must click in order to see the full post.

drabble – (also ficlets, flash fic, etc.) The drabble is a story form of 100 words exactly, which is used frequently among ljficwriters as a form of skill maintenance, and a low barrier beginning for new writers. Other forms of short fiction include ficlets which are generally 1000 words or fewer, and flash fic, which may be stories between drabble and ficlet length, or stories written within a brief time period such as two hours. All these forms allow writers to write frequently, which provides for wide and consistent participation.

fan artists – may work in traditional fine arts mediums and share their work by scanning the images, or they may specialize in photo manipulations of some kind. The most common kind of artwork created is *icons*, but there are various kinds posted on a daily basis.

fanfic (fan fiction or fic) - stories utilizing characters, settings or individuals from popular culture, such as television shows or films.

fandom - a collective of individuals who seek out information and interaction in respect to a particular interest -- whether it be a media product, activity, or an individual.

ficathon – is a type of writing festival. In ficathons stories are written to fit a chosen theme, and each writer submits characters or story elements they wish to see in a requested tale. The requests are then assigned to another writer and all participants post the results on a designated day. In *challenges* stories are not written for particular people but simply to meet certain criteria designated in the challenge.

flist (or friends list) – the various people and groups whose blogs one subscribes to. One reads one's flist through LJ's RSS reader that is sometimes called the Friends Page. This page can also be *filtered*.

filtering – is a practice whereby an LJ user creates separate reading lists of their *flist*. This is often done for time management purposes as many people have large subscription lists and use filters to prioritize "must read" from "when I have time" blogs, or for separating out blogs on particular topics so that they can quickly scan everything on that topic. Sometimes filtering is also done for social purposes, so that they can avoid reading

the posts of people they find boring or annoying without actually notifying them of their disinteresting by *defriending* them.

flocking (friends-locking) – is a privacy setting available on LJ that allows a user to determine who can see their posts. This can be either entirely private (only the user sees it) or entirely public (anyone online can see it). In between these two extremes, the user can determine who on their subscription list can see the post. They can either allow the whole group to see it (the default setting for a friends-locked post), or they can select individuals through checkboxes or a custom-chosen group (such as "My Family") through *filters*. Although there are ways to determine whether or not someone has made a post that you cannot read, by and large this process remains invisible to the viewer and someone else may be getting an entirely different view of a given blog than you are.

friending and defriending – is the practice of adding someone to one's reading list (or *flist*). These people may then be termed flistmates or flisties. When one no longer wants to read their blog, one defriends them or institutes a friends-cut, which is a large-scale defriending. Such friends-cuts often occur due to a decrease in compatible interests, or for time-management purposes.

gen (gen fic) – fanfic that does not focus on a romantic pairing, and which is most likely to adhere closely to *canon* events and characterizations.

het (het fic) – fanfic focusing on an heterosexual romantic pairing.

icons – are 100 x 100 size images which can be selected to accompany any post or comment an LJ user makes. Icons are extremely popular among ljficwriters and are used to various purposes. They are rarely, however, a photo of the user herself, but much more often pictures of favorite fictional characters.

IM (also PM, YM, MSM) – refers to the use of instant messaging software, whether from AOL, LJ, Yahoo or Microsoft respectively. This is often used as a signal to continue a conversation "behind-the-scenes" of a public post (i.e., "It's a long story, IM me.")

ljficwriters – Buffyverse fanfic writers who congregate primarily on LiveJournal and employ that particular technology as the central medium of exchange.

lj-toys – A website not affiliated with LJ, but which allows people to track activity on their LJ blogs such as pages accessed, number of hits per day, and visitors' IP addresses.

locking (also friends-locked or flocking) – is a practice where LJ users can restrict access to their blog posts, either to particular individuals, or to anyone who is subscribed to them. This ability allows writers to tailor their messages to particular audiences and also to prevent the drive-by Internet user from seeing their posts.

machinima –a recent form of videomaking involving hacked video game code to utilize the animated characters in fan made videos. Although some machinima makers are women, on the whole it has been a male art form.

macros – may use cats or other animals, but in fan circles is more likely to employ *caps* of characters from TV shows or films. Macros are photos with humorous captions written on them in childish, ungrammatical language (i.e., "Do not want" or "I can has cookie?"). In an example of how pervasive this practice has become, when LJ angered users in 2007 with a site policy decision, the announcement's comment threads were bombarded with fan macros protesting the decision.

memes – are, along with the reposting of online quizzes, a staple in many an LJ blog. These are generally lists of things a person likes, or answers to questions, whose central purpose is so that those reading or responding to the lists can learn about mutual likes, dislikes, and random facts about the other person. These are not unlike chain letters which end with the recipient naming specific individuals to respond to the meme in turn.

OTP - (one true pairing) a fan's favorite romantic pairing, consisting of two characters who they feel are one another's only soulmates.

Memories – An LJ feature instituted prior to the tagging feature. Each LJ post has a button which, when clicked, will create a bookmark for that post within the reader's Memories file. They can use keywords for the bookmark and change the title to whatever best suits them. The Memories function has often been a source of frustration since it is clunky to reorganize, it is sometimes unavailable due to processing load, and it has word limits in both its description and keyword fields. Many fans have begun to use del.icio.us as an alternative.

picspam- posts consisting mostly of photos organized around a theme (i.e., "Cordelia screaming" or "Giles polishing his glasses.")

podfic – Essentially audiobooks, recordings of fanfic read aloud and posted online as either mp3 or m4 files.

recs (reccing, reccer) – the practice of recommending material to others, whether fanfic, discussion posts, artwork, etc.

shipping - the fannish following of a particular romantic pairing.

slash (slashfic, femslash) – fanfic that contains or is centered on a same-sex romantic pairing. Although f/f pairings are also slash, they are more often designated as femslash.

sockpuppet – is a false or duplicate identity taken on by LJ users for either benign or malicious purposes. In some cases users simply want to be able to interact on LJ without the baggage of their better-known username. In others, users employ false identities in order to deceive others, stir up trouble, or bring sympathetic attention to their primary username.

spamming – on LJ does not tend to consist of unsolicited commercial offers as is commonly the case with email. Rather it is a term used for excessive posting. So if a user posted several posts to a group blog (or even their own blog) in one day, many users would consider it to be "spammy." Ljficwriters are sometimes seen apologizing when they post frequently (i.e., "Sorry for spamming, but I just had another thought about…")

squee - the sound of excited squealing, or simply enthusiasm over some event or topic.

tagging (tags) – The tag feature was instituted on LJ in 2005, allowing people to choose terms to attach to their posts in order to organize their blogs. Although many ljficwriters now use them, there is no general agreement on terminology or use, although they have been used to particularly good effect in group blogs, making them more easily searchable. Unfortunately LJ has placed restrictions on tags, first by limiting retrieval to the first 100 uses of a term on any given blog, and then by providing unlimited retrieval but restricting the variety of tags that can be used to 100. Many users are unaware of the restrictions and often employ a variety of whimsical terms to describe their posts.

vids (vidding, vidders, vidmaking) – fan videos which began by cutting together film or television footage using VCRs and now utilizes software to assemble a variety of static and live action material from many sources. Fan videos are set to music, generally popular songs, and tell stories, either compressing many story elements into a short summary, or telling stories that never existed in the original *canon*. Fans who make videos are called vidders, and have their own online and offline groups to share technical discussions and critiques. Vidders have overlapping histories with fanfic writers, as many do both, and both groups are largely female. Vids also have a distinct history from more recent forms of film making such as machinima or live-action fan films, which tend to be dominated by men, or from animation video making which tends to be more mixed sex.

Whedonesque – group blog not located on LJ that is a central news source for the Buffyverse fandom. This blog is sometimes referred to by ljficwriters as having a different culture and participant base from their own.

WIP (work-in-progress) – is an unfinished fanfic, either because it is being posted in installments or it has been abandoned as a project.

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EDUCATION

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May 1995	M.A., University of South Florida, Library and Information Science
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AREAS OF RESEARCH INTEREST: Online communities of practice, online publishing, media and information policy, folklore, computer-mediated communication, cognitive development in information acquisition and use.

WORK HISTORY

2007 – 2009
Instructor   GSLIS, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign

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