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Antifandom and the Moral Text

Television Without Pity and Textual Dislike

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Opposed and yet in some ways similar to the fan is the antifan: he or she who actively and vocally hates or dislikes a given text, personality, or genre. By studying antifan discussion and postings at the Web site Television Without Pity, this article examines antifan interaction with the television text. Focusing on the ensuing splintering of this text into aesthetic, moral, and rational-realistic dimensions, it is argued that antifan engagement with television forces a reevaluation of existing assumptions of textual ontology and of audience behavior and consumption.

Keywords: fandom; antifandom; textuality; morality; television; audiences

Twenty years ago, academic discussion of fandom was rare, often reserved for demeaning asides or jokes about Trekkers and soap fans. But due to the work of those included in this issue and of many others, the fan is no longer the mysterious assumed Other of media studies, and much fine work is being conducted into how fandom works, why it exists, what it “means,” and so forth (see, e.g., Bacon-Smith, 1992; Baym, 2000; Brooker, 2002; Harrington & Bielby, 1995; Hills, 2002; Jenkins, 1992; Lewis, 1992; Penley, 1997). By no means have all the answers been found, and too many within media studies and at large disregard the fan as a weird and pitiful creature, but at least we now have more theory and practical, ethnographic work to explain what is involved when someone, for example, refuses to miss a favorite show, starts an online fan club, or spends a significant portion of the week discussing a show. By contrast, however, very little work exists to tell us of fans’ apparent opposites—those who refuse to let their family watch a show, who campaign against a text, or who spend considerable time discussing why a given text makes them angry to the core. Often with increasing organization, and contributing to campaigns or groundswells that...
sometimes dwarf or rival their fan counterparts, antifans—those who hate or dislike a given text, personality, or genre—are as much a presence in contemporary society as are fans, and yet, academic accounts of them are fleeting and few. Textual hatred and dislike have been understudied and underestimated, as has their intricate and nuanced relationship to textual love. Ultimately, however, given what fan studies have told us of the differential relationships to and understanding of the text, of mediated identities, and of many other densely complex minutiae of consumption, closer examination of the antifan and of textual dislike could itself shed further light on established notions of text, industry, and consumption. As such, this article studies antifandom, and particularly its engagement with discourses of morality, at the online television discussion Web site Television Without Pity (TWoP; www.televisionwithoutpity.com). Given the site’s solitary interest in television, this article will also focus on television antifandom, although its findings may be applied to other media.

Hate or dislike of a text can be just as powerful as can a strong and admiring, affective relationship with a text, and they can produce just as much activity, identification, meaning, and “effects” or serve just as powerfully to unite and sustain a community or subculture.¹ Turning to TWoP to find such activity may at first seem peculiar, given that the site is well known for its fan discussion boards. Nevertheless, as its title suggests, TWoP is also renowned for its sarcastic and at times brutal honesty, encouraging play with and criticism of television. Thus, although significant sections of the site resemble a fan site, with space for character worship, spoilers and speculation, fanfic, and general debriefing of episodes and their issues, TWoP simultaneously creates ample room for networking textual disappointment, dislike, disapproval, distaste, and disgust. In the several years of its existence, TWoP has hosted many discussions about why certain texts might be deemed worthy of hate or dislike. Alongside the glowing appraisals of *Sopranos* episodes, then, and alongside the playful or mock criticism of certain shows’ weaker moments, one can find clusters and even communities of antifandom—of the active and vocal dislike or hate of a program, genre, or personality. By reading through the ensuing antifan discussion, one encounters an at times starkly different dimension of the text than is witnessed when we study the fan’s text. A different and less tidy version of textual ontology and phenomenology than has often been assumed begins to emerge, and we see a mode of engagement with text and medium that focuses heavily on the moral and the emotional, seeking in some ways to police the public and textual spheres. At other points, however, antifan discussion connects with and echoes fan discussion, hence refuting the notion that the two are pure and polar opposites. The multiple connections between fandom and antifandom, the moral and the emotional, the text, and ideals of the public and textual spheres, are therefore the topic of this article.
THE ANTIFAN

When media studies turns to “the audience,” all too often the antifan is forgotten, as scholars more often construct a continuum of viewership from the casual viewer to the fan. Thus, for instance, in proposing a new spectacle/performance paradigm for audience research, Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) offered a taxonomy of audiences, ranging from the casual consumer, to the progressively more involved, active, and productive fan, cultist, enthusiast, and petty producer. Abercrombie and Longhurst’s insistence on examining how audiences act and perform identity, initiating and constructing their identity through audience behavior as much as simply reacting to a text, represents a helpful sophistication of earlier stimulus-response models. However, and particularly if we shift to viewing audiencehood as performative, not purely receptive, the antifan is left conspicuously absent from their schema. Perhaps we are to assume the antifan adopts a spot beyond/before the consumer; yet antifandom can involve densely constructed performances and can in its own way be just as productive as fandom. The Internet hosts many carefully designed sites dedicated to detesting a media personality or text; callers to talk radio or television can just as often spout vitriol against a personality or text as douse them with love; and although fan campaigns to save certain shows are well documented (Brower, 1992; Jenkins, 1992), antifans are often just as active an audience and just as well mobilized—a fact to which the world’s long history of censorship battles attests. Or in a particularly extreme example of the “productivity” and depth of textual engagement of antifandom, numerous artists worldwide face death threats as a result of their textual output. Clearly, then, any spectrum of audience types must include the antifan.

Elsewhere (Gray, 2003), I have proposed a four-part “atomic” model of textuality and audiencehood, involving the close reading analyst, the fan, the nonfan, and the antifan. These positions are discursive alone, and any given individual may well inhabit the space between positions and will likely slide along the scale at different moments. However, central to this model is the notion that different affective relationships to the text result in different proximities to, understandings of, and engagements with that text. Close reading and fandom, for instance, frequently entail a heightened knowledge of and interaction with the televisual text, so that most or many episodes are watched, scenes are studied, and individuals may rely on the “collective knowledge” (Levy, 2000; see also Jenkins, 2002) of a fan community or library to bring them closer to missed or overlooked information and episodes. Nonfandom—the mild, quotidiant, or uncommitted enjoyment of a text—may at times entail closer reading but is more often likely to involve a relatively removed, or even indifferent, distance from the entirety of the text as broadcast. Meanwhile, antifandom will either involve audiencehood from afar, as the antifan refuses to watch, or may be performed with close knowledge of the text and yet be devoid of the interpretive and diegetic pleasures that are usually assumed to be a staple of almost all media.
consumption. What pleasures and interpretive strategies are involved, then, and what form does this antifan text take?

From one standpoint, we could easily regard nonfans and antifans as “bad” readers, and we can see how they “get things wrong.” Indeed, as Barker, Arthurs, and Harindranath (2001) discussed in their examination of an English campaign against David Cronenberg’s film *Crash,* it is quite common for such campaigns to be championed by individuals who have never even watched the text in question. However, regardless of whether they are “right” or “wrong,” nonfans’ and antifans’ readings and consumption can become sociologically relevant and important, as the controversy surrounding *Crash* amply illustrated. What this suggests is that the text is significantly more than just a set program that can be watched at a given time and place. Rather, the text and its surrounding commercial intertexts, “secondary” or “tertiary” textuality (Fiske, 1989a), and existence in everyday talk also become a structure of feeling and a matrix of power, meaning, effects, and identity that can and frequently does separate itself from its mooring of the actual program as broadcast. Bird (2003) has recently written of our need to study the audience in everyday life, acknowledging that the text has left the television, so to speak, and also flows freely through talk, fears, ritual, community, and debate. Learning from this, when we think of the audience or text in everyday life, and when we stop thinking of the text as located, we move toward accepting that individuals and communities who engage in little direct reception of the text as broadcast may well be active consumers, in their own right, of the text as I have argued we must more broadly conceive of it. This also means, however, that close readers and fans are insufficient guides not only to any given text but also to the very nature of textuality. Processes of use, consumption, and identification lie beyond the text as broadcast and similarly, beyond the appendages that fans add to them, and more work is needed to track these processes.

Here, Jason Mittell’s (2004) examination of the talk show offers a helpful analogy. Drawing on Bourdieu’s (1984) idea of textual consumption as enacting a performance of taste and distinction, Mittell studied audience discussion of the talk show as genre. However, to move beyond what he saw as the text-centricity of genre studies, Mittell consulted nonfans and antifans of the genre as well. He explained his methodology by arguing that

generic categories are often made culturally salient and manifest by people who are not viewers of the genre, but rather use “bad objects” to define their own *habitus* and viewing practices. Evaluative discourses constituting generic categories often come from voices who would be excluded in listening only to actual viewers, and thus an analysis of the [talk show] genre’s cultural circulation would be incomplete without these nonviewers’ opinions. (p. 105)

The result is a study of talk shows that accounts for their discursive existence and role in society as a whole, not just among an insular group of fans. As with genre,
however, so with the text itself, as texts too circulate in discussion not only among actual viewers or by fans and close readers but also among antifans. The work by Barker et al. (2001) on Crash, for instance, notes how the film passed from screen into the terrain of news, public talk, and particularly discussion of morality and the media. Moreover, lest antifan consumption be regarded as wholly distinct and separate from nonfan or fan consumption, Barker et al. also examined how antifan discourse “overloaded” expectations of the text (p. 35), predetermining and often limiting the frames through which many viewers could make sense of it. Consequently, many English viewers who otherwise would have been unlikely to watch the film through a moral evaluation frame had this frame foisted on them by the public debate (Barker et al., 2001, p. 28) and were effectively blocked from using other frames.

Certainly, one of the more fascinating research findings of Barker et al. (2001) is that due to their disapproval of the text’s morality, many Crash viewers either “refused” to look at the text aesthetically, concerned with it only as an entity with a given (reproachable) morality and/or faulty and disturbing notions of realism, or their evaluation of its immorality and lack of realism infected the aesthetics, rendering the film’s artistic merit poor by association. These “refusers,” as they call them, could not or did not wish to see beyond the text as a moral entity to examine it as an aesthetic object to be engaged with or interpreted. Thus, Barker et al. suggested that antifandom can erect multiple barriers and filters to decoding, as the text splinters into multiple components or dimensions and the antifan either focuses on one or two dimensions alone or sets them at war with one another. Alters (2003) gave further evidence of the latter option with her work on families whose mothers disapprove of The Simpsons. One of the mothers in particular is quite conflicted between regarding the program as an amusing and astute parody on one hand and inappropriate viewing for her children on the other. Ultimately, however, her reaction to the text’s moral dimension trumps her reaction to its aesthetic dimension and she tries to limit her children’s exposure to it. Thus, we could hypothesize that all texts have moral, rational-realistic, and aesthetic dimensions, but whereas much audience and fan research and theory suggests that reception involves conflating all three dimensions and consuming them as one, antifandom may prove the three to be always potentially distinct, resulting in situations in which the individual consumer is unwilling or unable to interact with all three levels. The text, long considered the basic unit of aesthetics, may at times be solely or predominantly a moral unit instead. Clearly, however, further research is required.

However, if an examination of antifandom stands to tell us more about how texts are consumed and how they carry meaning, it also stands to tell us more about fandom’s and nonfandom’s border territories. Following Mellancamp (1990), Harrington and Bielby (1995, p. 151) called for greater study by fan scholars of displeasure or “unpleasure” and the forms it takes, reasoning that fandom contains significant displeasures as correlates and counterparts of its pleasures. Rather than approach this pleasure-displeasure dynamic solely from
the (assumed) realm proper of textual pleasure and love, however, it may help us to shed light on the entire continuum of reception to approach it also from the (assumed) realm proper of displeasure. After all, although pleasure and displeasure, or fandom and antifandom, could be positioned on opposite ends of a spectrum, they perhaps more accurately exist on a Möbius strip, with many fan and antifan behaviors and performances resembling, if not replicating, each other. Therefore, for example, *Star Wars* fans campaigning against prequel characters (see Brooker, 2002) appear closer in some respects to antifan campaigners than to nonfans, and some antifans’ active need or desire to discuss and give vent to their dislike for a program echoes some fans’ similar need or desire to discuss their text. In other words, a study of antifandom and what it “does” to the text, what it says about consumption, and what pleasures and displeasures it networks could illuminate fandom and nonfandom too, allowing us to place and distinguish their own characteristics and textualities as much as it will allow us to understand the role of antifandom in contemporary society. Clearly, this task is larger than any one article, and although some such work already exists (see Alters, 2003; Barker et al., 2001; Meikle, 2002; Mittell, 2004), here I turn to TWoP and its posters to understand what motivates their online activity.

**TWoP**

TWoP is a commercial Web site, funded and made possible by advertising, which has a relatively unique if simple concept at its core. Whereas Internet fan sites are common, TWoP takes no single program or genre as its focus. As such, although most fan sites set themselves up as destinations solely for fans and those who wish to discuss and read others’ discussion of a particular program or genre, and although TWoP itself has this appeal, TWoP exists more generically as a destination for those who would like to discuss or read others’ discussion of American television in its multiple facets. The site provides three key services: Its own writers recap episodes of their featured programs; there are independent forums for the discussion of, and related fan activities pertaining to, these programs; and there are also numerous forums for the discussion of all manner of other programs and televisual entities. The list of featured programs is fluid, with 105 other shows featured at earlier dates, but at the time of research, all were either dramas (such as *24*, *The Sopranos*, and *Alias*) or reality shows (such as *The Apprentice*, *Survivor*, and *The Bachelor*). Meanwhile, however, the hodgepodge forums currently allow room to discuss anything from news shows to commercials to television movies and other one-offs and provide room for users to pose new board topics.

The site’s FAQ section (list of frequently asked questions) refers at several points to its “demographic,” and although this demographic is never explicitly stated, a combination of cues—from its fairly hip color scheme to its edgy humor and cartoon graphics—reveals its assumed users to be teens to 30-
something. That said, forums often receive postings from a broad base. Moreover, although fan discussion has often been coded as predominantly female (Baym, 2000; Bird, 2003; Penley, 1997), the discussion (and recapping) clearly comes from a mixed lot, with no readily identifiable gender “enclaves,” except in some of the more overtly gendered feminine shows, such as *The Gilmore Girls* and *The Bachelor*. Although the site is open to international posters, with discussion threads usually centered on recently broadcast episodes, this no doubt restricts those viewers who receive American television with a time delay, ensuring mostly North American posters. As for ushership, the site is remarkably popular, and it is common for a discussion topic to receive a reply every half hour and to log more than 10,000 views. Furthermore, one regularly finds new voices joining the discussion. Clear hierarchies emerge, as longtime posters take on special status, but with so many discussion boards and forums available at the site, it becomes remarkably easy to come for one’s favorite show and post regularly at its forum but then to occasionally wander around to see what else is there, almost as one might try a new route home from work just to catch some new scenery. Posting data confirms this, too, as names one may be familiar with on a particular forum pop up in other forums. Aside from promoting cross-pollination, however, this also allows casual viewers and even antifans to “walk” into forums that, in all likelihood, they might otherwise avoid if this involved them seeking out a dedicated fan site. Although a fan site in so many other ways, TWoP therefore has allowed space for all sorts of viewers.

TWoP’s other key characteristic that invites different levels of antifandom is its irreverent attitude. The site prides itself on pulling no punches, and its FAQ section makes numerous references to the value of “snark” or sarcastic criticism. Here, its “recappers” take the lead, frequently commenting on shows and their characters with dry, acerbic wit. For instance, Miss Alli’s “recaplet” of a *West Wing* episode notes that character “C.J. has just learned that media conglomerates are taking over a lot of TV and radio stations. Amazing! Information certainly does reach the Washington area with great speed.” In addition, their list of previously featured shows offers brief commentary on why they “cancelled” each of them, and few hold anything back. *Are You Hot?* is accused of telegraphing “more like a slave auction than something sexy and fun to watch”; *Sex and the City* is described as a “stupid, fluffy, and sometimes stale ‘comedy’ with the shelf life of an open bag of chips”; and *Married by America* is “a show so bad that we suspect that other bad shows took it aside out of compassion to gently tell it how bad it was.” With such comments and a light-hearted attitude, the staff set the stage for free reign with commentary. Thus, since inception, the site has amassed a collection of derisive and/or mocking commentary, making it a prime site for a study of antifandom.

As such, during the early months of 2004, I immersed myself in TWoP, regularly visiting the site to read discussion on numerous boards and forums. Many of these boards housed fans, with few antifan comments, but the TV Potluck forum proved particularly rich with antifan discussion. Meanwhile, during this
timeframe, the Apprentice board was practically hijacked by antifandom for one of its stars, and antifan discussion of The O'Reilly Factor proved active in the News Shows forums and, thus, I focused on these three boards. Angry or upset fan discussion often bordered on antifandom, but for the purposes of this study, my definition of antifandom as active or vocal dislike or hate of a given text, personality, or genre, was adhered to rigidly, and all such antifan discussion was printed out, examined, and coded for image of textuality suggested and for activity and productivity. Only these three boards were studied in detail and with these prime criteria in mind and, thus, this should not be read as representative of TWoP as a whole or of the limit points of antifandom. Unlike many other studies by fan site researchers, I did not identify my presence to the posters, instead remaining an academic “lurker.” Although lurking rightfully poses many questions of ethics (Jones, 1998), here I did not feel as though I was intruding or violating any trust by doing so. As said, TWoP is a site of gargantuan size, with thousands of viewers passing through it: One poll for Six Feet Under, for instance, received 3,354 votes in 4 days. Posters are fully aware of the public, open nature of the forum; most use pseudonyms, meaning they are both aware of speaking potentially to thousands and already reasonably anonymous; and the performative nature of much TWoP commentary itself belies an awareness of (or even a desire for) a considerable audience. In addition, as I soon learned, the large thoroughfare produces little sustained interaction by a close-knit group and, thus, renders itself unsuitable for dense textual-psychological examination; therefore, this study represents a broad overview of expressions of antifandom, not an intimate or incisive look at the individual posters and their elaborated thought processes. As does all audience research, I am studying the textualized output and versions of the TWoP posters, not the people themselves. Nevertheless, the posters remain unnamed.

**TV MOMENTS THAT ANGRY UP THE BLOOD**

Many of the expressions of antifandom throughout TWoP’s forums were framed explicitly as moral objections to certain texts and frequently suggested the poster’s only meaningful interaction with the text was at this hinge point of morality and what we could call the moral text. The TV Moments That Angry Up the Blood board in the TV Potluck forum, for instance, although limiting discussion to visceral reactions to texts with its title, includes very few expressions of anger due to aesthetic, industrial, or factual reasons. Rather, much of the anger is moral/ethical by nature. One poster, for example, castigated a TV movie on homeland security for taking advantage of a horrible tragedy, and seems more like pissing people off about our intelligence system than reporting the facts. Since no one knows how much information was known prior to the attacks and we’re still trying to suss out
how much the president knew, doing a TV movie about national intelligence right now is ludicrous. I hate it when they come out with TV movies like this just reeks of misinformation with some random writer giving their view of what happened. And does [actor] Tom Skerritt have to be in every freakin TV movie?!

A second poster quickly agreed, saying that she or he too, based on a promo, felt “it looks to be about the most tasteless thing ever,” later expressing disbelief that “anyone would choose to watch this movie for ‘entertainment.’ Gah!” A third poster likewise denounced the show, by first noting that “it was just too tasteless” before adding, “Keep in mind, I watch The Swan and I freely admit it in public. For me to find something tasteless is pretty special.” Yet the homeland security movie soon had a new contender, as discussion picked up a few posts later about Barbara Walters’s 20/20 special on open adoption, provocatively titled “Who Wants to Adopt This Baby?” This program’s previews suggested a game show/reality show format, causing many to balk. The first to comment said it “makes me sick,” voicing that “I thought TV could sink no lower than The Swan, and then Barbara Walters goes and proves me wrong.” The next poster replied with a solitary “Television screen? Meet Doctor Marten,” whereas subsequent posters expressed “disgust” at what is “just revolting” and bemoaned Walters’s career, asking “Who’d have thought Barbara Walters would get to the point of licking the bottom of the barrel?”

It is interesting that none of these posters on the 20/20 special actually watched the episode they derided so freely and vehemently, as all posted prior to its airing. Yet to excuse their comments as unknowing and, hence, unimportant would be rash, as the text clearly took on meaning and relevance to them, inspiring and requiring the language of physical repulsion. What we see here is a fairly clear indication that they have “read” the 20/20 special’s moral text but feel no desire to expose themselves further to the aesthetic text or even the rational-realistic text, unless perhaps out of perverse curiosity. Their reaction to this moral text, however, is strong enough to warrant posting, an act that arguably suggests a desire to warn others and, hence, to spread their reading of this moral text. Indeed, here we see a hallmark of much antifandom: the interest, or even sense of responsibility, in sharing one’s reading and, thus, encouraging an avoidance of the aesthetic text in others too. These few posters provide a window for us into how easily readings of the moral text can circulate through everyday talk before the aesthetic text even “exists” as such and, hence, of advertisements and previews’ role in allowing us to use moral filters more effectively. Meanwhile, it is unclear if the posters on the homeland security movie actually watched the show: All postings date from after its airing, but nowhere in the lengthy postings are there any specific details, scenes, or characters discussed. Either, then, we once again have a case of a moral text without an aesthetic text or a case of the moral text wholly subsuming the aesthetic text to the point of erasure and insignificance.
If these postings on the homeland security movie and the 20/20 special show how important a moral lens is to many viewers, they also show how this lens is often deemed inappropriate. Notably, all posters temper their comments somewhat, most with humor. Thus, the first 20/20 poster ends his or her posting with a joke about Tom Skerritt’s omnipresence in TV movies, another frames his or her moral outrage by claiming to watch another show—The Swan—that is often discussed as the nadir of TV morality, and the image of Barbara Walters licking the bottom of a barrel is offered by another. TWoP is a young and hip site, and so these posters are partly just playing by the rules of the game by using such humor. But they also appear to be tempering their comments so as to seem less overtly moralistic and less offended than they are. Moral lenses for textual consumption are preferable in other venues and communities, such as religious groups, but here we see the posters’ apparent awareness that an outright moral posturing may be considered decidedly uncool. Indeed, to talk of morality in media studies itself is to approach a rarely discussed topic (for exceptions, see Baird, Loges, & Rosenbaum, 1999; Tester, 2001), and to utter the word morality in conjunction with television is often to invoke a discourse most dear to right-wing media panic groups. Numerous studies of fans barely mention morality, as the moral text appears deeply submerged, and perhaps morals and ethics are rarely mentioned when everything is perceived to be fine. However, the strong presence of a moral lens through which many TWoP viewers claim to watch some television suggests the significance (even if often unstated or hidden) of this lens in media consumption. Alternatively, some of these viewers may have aesthetic objections to these texts (disliking the news-into-TV-movie genre, for instance) that they hide behind the veneer of a moral objection, because moral objections can at least appear more principled, or even concrete, than can the rather subjective territory of aesthetic evaluation. Moral texts, as such, are not only consumed but their consumption can be performed in numerous strategic manners as well.

Many of these moral texts may prove remarkably ephemeral and solitary for viewers, angering them at one moment, then gone the next, but TWoP reveals certain moments of sustained and communal moral text consumption, and here we turn to the anti-Omarosa campaign. During the course of several months, the forum for The Apprentice attracted hundreds of antifan postings discussing the perceived ills of one of the show’s contestants, Omarosa Manigault-Stallworth. This culminated in more than 200 pages of text and ultimately, a letter-writing campaign to stop Clairol from using Omarosa as a spokesperson for their Herbal Essences shampoo. This was not a case of antifandom of the host text—on the contrary, many posters were clearly hooked on The Apprentice. As has been argued of other stars and celebrities (Dyer, 1979; Fiske, 1989b), Omarosa became her own text and an odious moral text to many. Bit by bit, then, a large number of posters came together to decide that for a variety of reasons, they did not want this person in the public sphere, that she was poisonous to it, and that
they should and could, therefore, ensure her exit. The Apprentice fan dislike of Omarosa built in time, going from relatively playful criticism that treats her more as a character in a show—such as one poster’s “Hee! I don’t like her all that much so far,” or even appreciative dislike in another’s “She’s a snake in the grass. She’s my favorite”—to full-fledged criticism and anger. As viewers of The Apprentice, these fans clearly engaged with the reality show as an aesthetic text and enjoyed doing so, but Omarosa as moral text infringed on this enjoyment and ability to revel in the aesthetic for many. Hence, for instance, after the group had hatched their plan to begin a letter-writing campaign to Clairol, one poster asked incredulously, “A boycott of Clairol!!?” and reasoned further, “C’mon now, it’s just a TV show.” A response 5 minutes later fired back, “No. It’s someone’s real life sabotaged by a really nasty person,” referring to Omarosa’s central role in the show’s final task that saw her on-screen boss lose the chance to be hired by Donald Trump. A short back-and-forth ensued between the lone dissenter and a growing number of others until the dissenter disappeared from the board. Effectively, the moral text had overcome the aesthetic text for many viewers, so that the dissenter’s suggestion to treat it aesthetically, as “just a TV show,” could not be realized with this moral text in the way.

But why the dislike?

Omarosa’s antifan gathering held several subgroups underneath it, a rather odd alliance under the same umbrella. One of the key groups consisted of those who found her completely lacking in integrity or decency. To these viewers, the idea that Omarosa would be “rewarded” for her behavior with product endorsement opportunities was unacceptable. “I am so tired,” wrote one, “of people like that getting money for doing something bad and if this ad with Clairol actually happens, Oma will be rewarded for being a villain/victim. Not a good message to anyone.” Responding, another poster agreed that “if she continues to be rewarded for bad behavior, it sends a horrible message to the children we are raising to do the right thing.” Or as another poster offered, “I found her actions so out of keeping with even the minimum standard of behavior I expect from a human.” As such, when the group heard Omarosa was being considered for a shampoo advertisement, they balked, and the letter-writing campaign was suggested and jumped on. Posters often shared their letters to Clairol, and as one argued, “Ms. Manigault-Stallworth is not a role-model for any sort of positive behavior, and it is baffling why any well-respected company, such as Clairol, would feel the need to do business with her.” Here, and as the campaign grew, the viewers forcefully tried to inject themselves into the huge television-advertising industrial complex to stop what they felt was its latest (even worse) egregious violation against morality.

Others were deeply concerned about the negative image she portrayed of African American women in the workplace. Elsewhere in cyberspace, notably on BET’s Web site, Omarosa had her defenders who saw her as a bold crusader for African American women, but TwoP posters found her reprehensible. A mix of people self-identifying as Black, White, Asian, women, and men...
discussed at length how much she might “set back” African American women. As one poster bemoaned,

There is and always will be prejudice in America, so there will be people out there who may view her as a sick woman, but also will lump all black women together into a group and say “This group is delusional” and will base hiring decisions on that. Open-minded people won’t do this and will instead just look at Assy [Omarosa] as sick and shrug it off when an African American woman comes into their office to interview, but there will be some that use her as a benchmark for all African American women. It’s inevitable.

Another poster posited that Omarosa’s few months in the public eye could hardly “eclipse the positive public role model that Oprah (and her friend Gayle) have been for years, if not decades.” But a respondent immediately came back, explaining,

The reason that Omarosa will trump the positive is that for many people the image she portrayed is the “truth” that the others have been hiding. For them Omarosa will be their opportunity to point and say “see, I told you so . . . the rest are just pretending.”

Self-identifying as native Canadian, this poster went on to explain that she or he experienced similar reactions all the time.

Some added to this grievance that Omarosa “is bad for women in general” and, thus, a great deal of the animosity directed toward Omarosa stemmed from a concern for third-person effects. These moral text viewers worried about other people’s reception (children, racists, human resource departments) or at least performed a concern for others’ reception. Indeed, this shows the degree to which much reception occurs with an imagined community of others: For all of media studies’ rightful interest in uses and gratifications, many viewers, it seems, habitually watch television and talk about it with an imagined audience of all others who might be watching at the same time, even if these others are projections of personal desires and fears from within. A second and subsequent imagined community is then created of others who will be judging one by one’s performed reactions to a text’s multiple stimuli and contents. In some regards, it may be helpful to look at antifandom as both performing and sharing a media literacy education of sorts (claiming all African American women are not like Omarosa almost to try to convince some fellow posters of the fact), and as such, antifandom also points to the general concern for relative levels of media literacy and for the state of the public and textual spheres that often subsume viewers as they watch and discuss television. It is almost as if, above and beyond the level of personal interaction with a text, many viewers are constantly obsessed with the “massness” of the medium and, hence, a good deal of what the text means to them is a reflection of what they believe it will mean to others and what effects it will have on others. The text, it seems, is a remarkably refracted object when it
reaches the viewer’s eyes and discussion. As such, Omarosa’s meaning as moral
text, and her sociological existence to many of these viewers, lies in what they
believe her utility to others is, will, or could be. Concurrently, then, antifandom
can become a powerful means of constructing one’s own self and personal
media fluency and literacy in relation to the deficient viewing of others, and the
moral text may be a text that many viewers feel compelled to consume before
reveling in the aesthetic.

Omarosa as moral text was also shown to connect emotionally and psycho-
logically deep within some viewers. Alongside those whose objections to her
were based on concern, and who voiced concern through rational discourse, a
sizeable third group reviled in anger. Despite other posters’ occasional objec-
tions, numerous posters took to referring to Omarosa as Osama, a baboon,
Bitch, Mrs. WorldBitch, or Crazy Bitch. “HATE,” wrote one, “is the only word
for what she IS as well as how she makes me feel about her,” and another asked
of Clairol’s potential use of her, “Who wants people looking at your product and
thinking, ‘hate, hate, hate!’” Yet another poster proudly stated she or he was
“HOT” when writing her or his protest letter and “can’t imagine listening to that
bitch moan and groan [as per Herbal Essences’ orgasmic ads] everytime I turn
on the TV.” Some even spoke of needing to turn off the television or divorce
themselves from the forum because they could not stand seeing her name . . . and
some did disappear. Others engaged in pseudo “revenge” or punishment fantas-
ies, as one, for instance, emoted, “Bring on the Terminator! This bitch needs to
be taken down.” Many of these postings are too short to allow any meaningful
psychoanalysis, but particularly given their frequent aggressive tone, and
penchant for racist and sexist terminology, they reveal a dire need for a social-
psychological examination of textual hatred. Particularly in cases such as this,
where the anonymity of TWoP allows something akin to an e–lynch mob men-
tality to bubble to the surface, notably darker dimensions of antifandom emerge,
as does the role of pleasure in textual hatred. Employing object relations theory,
both Silverstone (1994) and Hills (2002) examined how texts and characters can
become filled with positive memories and feelings, but clearly they can also
become matrixes and nexuses of rage, anger, and negative experiences and feel-
ings, acting as a primary lens and filter that any subsequent and aesthetic textual
interaction will struggle to pass through and beyond.

“THE HEIGHT OF STUPIDITY”

We would be wrong, however, to regard antifandom as always moral by
nature, as TWoP also provides multiple examples of antifandom provoked by a
supposedly poor level of realism or sense. It is beyond the scope of this article to
discuss what realism is or how one can or “should” evaluate a text’s realism or
coherence, but many TWoP posters expressed considerable dismay and/or dis-
gust at texts that they felt violated realism or common sense. In the Commercial
Thread board in the TV Potluck forum, for instance, many ads were panned for making no sense and lacking any apparent logic. The board contains many diatribes against annoying and “stupid” ads, such as one poster’s question,

What’s up with these fucking Ford Focus commercials where they show the car outside, and have the “car” screaming things like “Cock-a-doodle doo! Cock-a-doodle doo!” Why in hell would you want a car that tries to wake you up in the morning so you can drive it? Stupid car.

Other posts on this site label ads as “damn, fucking annoying,” “the height of stupidity,” “painfully retarded,” and so forth because, as one poster asked rhetorically, “This ad just makes no damn sense, does it anyone? I mean, if there’s logic buried deep, deep down in there somewhere, please tell me.” Ironically, however, despite the poster’s mock desire to dig deep into the advertisement, its violation at the level of what we might dub the rational-realistic text appears to have closed down all other meaning and depth for him or her completely.

Whereas the Commercial Thread board limits itself to short expressions of antifandom, the rational-realistic text lies at the center of much of the discussion of The O’Reilly Factor. Although occasional posts defend O’Reilly or cheer him on, most gouge at the pundit and particularly at the spectacularized rhetoric for which he is known. Take, for instance, this reaction to O’Reilly’s anger at an Amherst high school production of The Vagina Monologues:

The thing I hate about the way O’Reilly treated the “Vagina Monologue” thing was the fact that, as usual, O’Reilly’s analysis is based on distortion and exaggeration. Worse, speculative distortion. If O’Reilly is going to make it out like The Vagina Monologues are something explicitly pornographic (rolleys), then he needs to offer up more concrete examples of what he means, rather than vague, nebulous ramblings. If O’Reilly has a case (and he really doesn’t. Personally I think he saw the “Vagina” in the title and is immediately hoping that unaware viewers jump to a rash conclusion) then he needs to get more specific.

This post continues by pointing out O’Reilly’s hypocrisy in railing against Amherst area parents for seeming unperturbed by the production when he so often fashions himself as a champion for parents’ rights. Similarly, many if not most of the 31 pages and counting of posts on The O’Reilly Factor objected to the show and its host on intellectual grounds of rationality, consistency of logic, and common sense.

It is interesting that although, as has been argued, much of TWoP’s antifan discussion centers on moral (or mock moral) objections, in this board, many of the objections are precisely against O’Reilly’s proclivity to moralize at the expense of rationality. Thus, we see a considerable battle in antifandom between moral, aesthetic, and intellectual expectations and between the moral, aesthetic, and rational-realistic texts. By O’Reilly’s or other shows’ perceived violation of these expectations, we can see how powerfully these expectations act as frames.
through which media are viewed and how they form competitive discourses for “appropriate” programming and viewing. Thus, the text is not as simple as a unit with three successive layers or dimensions; rather, these dimensions regularly do battle, with the victor frequently holding court over and even eventually supplanting the other dimensions, “reducing” a text to a moral text alone, for instance, or as here, to a rational-realistic text.

It may, thus, be tempting to regard antifan engagement with a text as simpler and less rich or varied than nonfan or fan engagement, but TWoP proves otherwise. Fans use texts to perform and construct their identities and can enjoy an active, participatory engagement with the text, both individually and as a community (see Brooker, 2002; Harrington & Bielby, 1995; Jenkins, 1992), but so can antifans. Examining the antifan discussion of *The O’Reilly Factor*, for instance, we might note that for all these posters’ criticisms, many keep going back for more. When one poster can declare that “the show IS O’Reilly, because, face it, there is no show. Just this frustrated White man . . . who thinks he knows all and grandstands and moralizes all of his points,” there would seem to be no reason to keep watching. Some viewers, however, appear to engage actively in their antifandom, watching O’Reilly precisely to raise their blood pressure or, as the predominantly intellectual-rational tone of their posts suggests, as somewhat of an intellectual-rational challenge. Much as some might watch *Jeopardy* to test their intellect, others watch O’Reilly, fully aware that they will disagree with him but watching so as to find his slips. Then, later, the proof of success comes in posting to TWoP and sharing these slips with others. Posts at this board are quite long, as their writers often try to load up the O’Reilly faulty syllogisms, which itself shows a performative element to their antifandom, whereby viewers can prove their intellectual merit by completely deconstructing the rational basis for O’Reilly’s opinions. As further illustrated by the ongoing lists elsewhere on TWoP’s TV Potluck forum Haven’t I Seen This Before? Rehashed Stories and Plots and the forum TV Lessons I’ve Learned, or by the popularity of books such as Roger Ebert’s *Bigger Little Book of Hollywood Cliches* (1999), witty and analytical textual deconstruction is a popular activity for many and an activity that allows its players significant room to strategically engage with only the rational-realistic text to lay claim to intellectual, comic, and cultural capital. Or alternatively, for those who have no choice over whether to watch a text or not—one TWoP poster asks of *The O’Reilly Factor*, “Why oh why must people at work insist on watching this shit?”—attacking the rational-realistic text potentially becomes a game they can play to pass the time, turning an unpleasant viewing experience if not into a pleasant one, at least into a redeemable one.

Moreover, as is abundantly clear in the Omarosa board, antifans can turn displeasure into pleasure through the construction of an antifan community. In and among the expressions of hatred directed toward Omarosa, this board also hosted friendly chitchat: members would go away for a while, only to announce their return later and be welcomed back by many; posters frequently complimented each other on good arguments, even adding personal tag ons, such as
“you always know exactly how to put it”; and in general, they got to know each other and enjoy each other’s company with time. After Clairol announced they would not be using Omarosa for their advertisement, a communal sense of achievement was obvious with much back patting (despite no clear evidence that they had indeed forced Clairol’s hand), and the publicization of the campaign by the press (see, e.g., Walls, 2004) only further secured their bond and group pride. Many posters kept with the forum long after The Apprentice had ended and Omarosa had largely disappeared from public view, as many of these antifans appeared reluctant to leave this warm community they had created. Several even wrote of how they had brought others into the community by convincing friends and family of Omarosa’s evils. As such, Omarosa as antifan text became as vibrant a matrix for consumer activity as do many fan texts, even inspiring creativity and “poaching” (Jenkins, 1992), such as the board set up for mock advertisements for future Omarosa endorsements. These included advertisements for kitty litter, lithium, “Assorama” perfume, and contact lenses “to hide bloodshot eyes (or demonic origin).” Some ads even merged with fan tributes to other programs as, for instance, Omarosa became a staffer of Angel’s demonic law firm, Wolfram and Hart, and of Smallville’s sinister Luther Corp. The Omarosa antifans also shared the commitment to shepherding the text’s travels through the public sphere that is a hallmark of fandom. Fiske (1989c) and Jenkins (1992) famously posited the fan as an “active audience” member due to the fan’s rejection of passive consumption and commitment to taking the text off the screen and into everyday life. But these antifans’ efforts to take Omarosa “out” of the public sphere and of everyday life display a similar heightened form of audience activity. Although fans may wish to bring a text into everyday life due to what they believe it represents, antifans fear or do not want what they believe it represents and so, as with fans, antifan practice is as important an indicator of interactions between the textual and public spheres.

CONCLUSION

In many ways, television antifandom is a correlate of television fandom, with the two sharing significant attributes, behaviors, and performances. This could well have been made to appear more natural an affinity in the present study due to the choice to study antifans in an environment in which they are alongside and often are also, and arguably therefore conditioned by, fans; but many markers of fandom, from the desire to discuss the text with others and to foster communities based on it to the productivity and creativity and to the centrality—even if fleeting—that the text takes on in the individual’s life, can all be seen as abundantly in antifandom. Clearly, however, antifans are not fans, as their framing and expectations of the text, their level of direct interaction with it, and the feelings it inspires in them are frequently biometrically opposed to those of fans. This study has attempted an early examination of those framings and expectations,
interactions, and feelings so as to propose a splintering of the text into dimensions of the moral, the rational-realistic, and the aesthetic. This splintering is most evident with antifans but can potentially occur with any group of viewers, and likewise, although this article focuses on the splintering of the television text, a similar splintering can be seen to occur with other media texts at a basic level. Many fans of Passion of the Christ, for instance, seemed wholly united on that film’s moral text, even before seeing the text in some cases or, in other cases, in the face of the aesthetic text’s bloodlust that might regularly appall, horrify, and anger some of the same viewers. Nuanced differences in kind provoked by differences in media format may well exist and, thus, require further study as, for instance, different modes, time formats, and expectations of consumption may further modify text and model. At the level of television antifandom, however, TWoP’s quick fire format and large, anonymous usership renders it hard to fully flesh out this splintering and the minutiae of how it happens and how it works, but an involved study of antifans elsewhere, as this study suggests, could well lead us to develop our notions of how “morality,” the joys of vicissitude and dislike, media’s symbolic power and challenges to it, third-person effects, and media object relations work. Meanwhile, as public resentment of certain media figures and trends grows; as the barrage of media saturation increases and, hence, almost requires active distancing from some texts to stay afloat; and as the Internet allows antifan campaigns to coordinate and amass strength as never before, antifandom promises only to increase. As it increases, it changes the nature of fandom and nonfandom too, as all such positions must negotiate themselves against the performances and positioning of others. Therefore, the need for critical analysis of antifandom is considerable, and as we continue to map the depths of media love, we would be wise to likewise study its twin of media hatred.

NOTES

1. For more on textual love and affective relationships with texts, see Grossberg (1992) and Hills (2002).
2. Crash focuses on the lives of a few sexually experimental individuals who, among other things, are aroused by car crashes. Mere news in 1996 of this upcoming film and its content appalled several English cultural critics and politicians who banded together, calling for a ban on the film.
3. For invaluable guidance to and around the Television Without Pity Web site, many thanks must go to Adriana Padilla.

REFERENCES


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