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## FINDING A DEAD DOVE IN THE REFRIGERATOR: THE ANTI-SHIPPER'S' CALL FOR EXCLUSION OF SENSITIVE CONTENT AS A MEANS OF ESTABLISHING POSITION IN THE FIELD OF FAN PRODUCTION

**Abstract:** The author of this paper uses Pierre Bourdieu's field theory to discuss the anti-shipper movement and its call for exclusion of problematic content from online repositories of fanwork. Anti-shippers, who oppose indiscriminate inclusion of potentially harmful content and its creators in the field of fan production, are a relatively new and vocal faction inside the field. While the research on antis has focused on their methods of harassment and its effects on fan community, this paper discusses the conditions inside the field before the movement's emergence, focusing on the affordances and terms of service of online fanwork repositories. The author proposes to treat the question of exclusion of sensitive content and its creators as one concerning the field's autonomy, and presents the anti-controversy as a way for newcomers to establish their position in the field and change its problematic.

**Keywords:** fan studies, anti-shippers, pro-shippers, field theory, censorship, online repositories

In 2021, a member of media fandom had offered custom pins for sale. The pins read "pro-shipper," and contained, among other symbols, a pride flag and pink triangles. The use of Holocaust imagery was intentional, as the point of the pin was to present pro-shippers – a fan community consisting mostly of women, queer folk and people of color – as an unjustly persecuted minority. In the years leading to the creation of the discussed pin, numerous members of that community have had their personal information, home addresses and current locations leaked. Their inboxes were flooded with death threats, slurs, and images of gore, they have been publically told to kill themselves, called rapists and pedophiles. Renee Ann Drouin, a scholar who created a survey to collect testimonies from the victims of online harassment against

pro-shippers, has soon become a victim herself. The perpetrators did not fit the typical profile pointed out in research on harassment: they were not white heterosexual cisgender men but members of the exact same disenfranchised minorities as the victims. The mass harassment campaigns did not target the community based on the minority status of its members, or on their political views. The first pro-shippers to get harassed loved an animated series about a giant robot superweapon, and wanted the wrong characters to kiss in the series finale.

The term “pro-shipper” stands for “problematic shipper” or “anti-anti-shipper.” Shipping (a shortened form of “relationshiping”) is a fannish act of wanting two or more characters to enter a relationship (a “ship”), either romantic or sexual, or believing that they already are in one. While the term was coined in the 1990s, the practice was much older, and it has laid at the heart of female-dominated fandom since early 1970s, organizing the imaginations of fan communities, dominating their literary work (fanfiction), visual art and music. Today’s anti-shippers, often called simply *antis*, are not against the act of shipping itself. Their goal is to purge the Internet of content deemed problematic and to stop people from creating more of it. The meaning of the word “problematic” in online culture, however, is not clear. As Samantha Aburime points out, “The term’s vagueness makes it hard to be sure of each individual person’s specific standards.”<sup>1</sup> The most famous and probably most aggressive faction of *antis* had emerged from the fandom of *Voltron: Legendary Defender*, the animated series mentioned in the first paragraph. In the beginning of the anti movement, the prefix stood for “anti-pedophilia” and “anti-incest,” both claims being much more easy to understand for people outside fandom, and, taken at face value, much more precise than the misleading “anti-shipping.” The *Voltron antis*, however, took a firm stance against pedophilia and incest by fighting people who were rooting for two adult men said to be “like brothers” to enter a consensual relationship. The fight against problematic content has quickly stopped being about exclusion of the content itself, and its goal has become to eliminate from fandom spaces the people responsible for such a content.

It is extremely easy to ridicule the entire ordeal, especially if one does not understand the importance of fandom to the members of the community. It is equally easy to paint the anti movement as juvenile and needlessly aggressive. Most of the research on the subject focuses on the negative impact the actions of *antis* had on pro-shippers’ lives. Until the emergence of the anti movement, media fandom had been painted by academics as a safe space for marginalized groups to explore any issue without judgement. It is not only the harassment that does not fit this image: the *antis*’ demands are rarely welcome by scholars familiar with the history of fandom’s struggles against censorship.

<sup>1</sup> S. Aburime, *The Cult Structure of the American Anti*, “Transformative Works and Cultures” 2021, vol. 36.

Dominika Ciesielska and Maria Rutkowska point out that “in the context of shipping understood as a struggle for representation, fandoms treat it as a form of political activism, which causes the practice to be entangled in questions of progressive politics and morality.”<sup>2</sup> Similarly, Drouin, who herself describes antis as “combative and moralistic,”<sup>3</sup> quotes a respondent who spoke of the antis’ “twisted perception of social activism.”<sup>4</sup> Victor Larsen in his research describes the tactics of antis as “weaponizing the language of social justice, [...] making their cause appear as activism rather than a petty ship war.”<sup>5</sup> His choice of words is interesting, since the entire controversy is presented as yet another “petty ship war” – a conflict between supporters of competing ships and a common occurrence in fandom spaces – whose nature is just obscured by the language employed by one of the sides of the conflict. I would argue, however, that there is more to it, especially given the fact that some antis do not have a favorite ship of their own. It might be also tempting to treat the entire controversy as one of the manifestations of the “cancel culture” phenomenon, however the notion of “cancel culture,” not unlike the meaning of the word “problematic,” is nebulous, vague, and at least for now, highly subjective. The most discussed instances of “cancelling” involve people who are powerful in some way, famous or at least recognizable in the field of power, while in case of the anti- and pro-shipper conflict, none of the parties have much economic or symbolic capital on their own. Thus, I propose to look at the controversy as a new way of establishing one’s position specifically in the field of fan production.

While the actions of antis and the response to them have been documented and analyzed, there is still little discussion on what has led to the conflict over censorship and indiscriminate inclusion of content in the Internet repositories. In this paper, I will analyze the online clash between antis and pro-shippers as a result of the tensions inside the field of fan production, pointing out a pattern unusual to Pierre Bourdieu’s theory: the newcomers being the ones fighting for the field’s heteronomy. In order to do so, I shall briefly discuss fandom as a field, and the way it has been influenced by online platforms and their affordances. Then I shall proceed to recapitulate the fight to establish the field’s autonomy, and I shall discuss the arguments raised against said autonomy. As Bourdieu points out, the salons “distinguish themselves more by whom they exclude than by whom they include.”<sup>6</sup> In case of fan production, it was not only the online platforms who served as the salons, but in a truly unusual

<sup>2</sup> D. Ciesielska, M. Rutkowska, *Między interpretacją a moralnością. Anty-shiperzy we współczesnym fandomie medialnym*, “Literatura Ludowa” 2021, vol. 65 (2), p. 59 [translation mine – A.U.].

<sup>3</sup> R.A. Drouin, *Fans Are Going to See It Any Way They Want. The Rhetorics of the Voltron: Legendary Defender Fandom* (PhD diss.), Bowling Green State University, 2021, p. 60.

<sup>4</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>5</sup> V. Larsen, *It makes me, a minor, uncomfortable. Media and Morality in Anti-Shippers’ Policing of Online Fandom* (MA thesis), Ghent University, 2021, p. 77.

<sup>6</sup> P. Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art*, trans. S. Emanuel, Stanford University Press, Stanford 1995, p. 52.

development, also the newcomers without any established position trying to assume this role.

## The field of fan production in the larger field of power

Bourdieu defines a field as

a network of objective relations (of domination or subordination, of complementarity or antagonism, etc.) between positions [...]. All positions depend, in their very existence, and in the determinations they impose on their occupants, on their actual and potential situation in the structure of the field – that is to say, in the structure and distribution of those kinds of capital (or of power) whose possession governs the obtaining of specific profits (such as literary prestige) put into play in the field.<sup>7</sup>

While his most influential work on the subject, *The Rules of Art*, is focused mostly on the literary field, Bourdieu points out numerous times that the term might apply not only to any field of cultural production, but to science, politics, and economics as well.<sup>8</sup> Thus, the notion of fan production – or fandom in general – as a separate field is nothing new. John Fiske's classic *The Cultural Economy of Fandom* makes use of Bourdieu's field theory to discuss the acquisition of field-specific capital via detailed knowledge of the object of fandom, the ownership of collectibles and autographs, and textual production. Fiske argues that albeit most fans recruit from disenfranchised groups (women, teenagers, working class people) and are therefore subordinate in the larger field of power, fandom has established its own hierarchies and economy.<sup>9</sup> Bourdieu's framework – along his other notions, such as distinction – has been used in numerous papers and monographs on fans and their practices,<sup>10</sup> and there is no need to discuss the sole notion of fan production as a field again. Nevertheless, it would be interesting to take a look at the way the field's autonomy has been established and what are the forces – inside and outside – working against it.

The attractiveness of Bourdieu's approach stems from the fact that the sociologist was not prone to reductionism, treating cultural production, artists with their dispositions and positions, salons, patrons, publishing houses, academia, and other institutions as equally important elements of the field. The field theory allows to dis-

<sup>7</sup> Ibidem, p. 231.

<sup>8</sup> E.g., ibidem, pp. 199, 214–215.

<sup>9</sup> J. Fiske, *The Cultural Economy of Fandom* [in:] L.E. Lewis (ed.), *The Adoring Audience*, Routledge, New York 1992, pp. 30–49.

<sup>10</sup> Among others, B. Chin, *It's About Who You Know: Social Capital, Hierarchies and Fandom* [in:] P. Booth (ed.), *A Companion to Media Fandom and Fan Studies*, Wiley Blackwell, Hoboken 2018, pp. 243–255; A. Seregina, J.W. Schouten, *Resolving Identity Ambiguity through Transcending Fandom*, "Consumption Markets & Culture" 2017, vol. 20 (2), pp. 1–24; S. Krawczyk, *Gust i prestiż. O tworzeniu pola prozy fantastycznej w Polsce* (PhD diss.), Warsaw University, 2019; A. Urbańczyk, *Fan labor jako praca. Kulturowa ekonomia fandomu w dobie internetu*, "Teksty Drugie" 2018, no. 5, pp. 276–289.

discuss the influence of specific platforms and repositories of fan-created content, their owners and their terms of service being factors which shape the field, just like fan creators and their audiences do. The possibility of publishing or banishing fanwork from Internet spaces should hence be described as one of the “objective relations.”

Any field of cultural production, be it literature, fine arts, or fanwork, is subordinate to a much larger, “global” field of power, understood as “the space of relations of force between agents or between institutions having in common the possession of the capital necessary to occupy the dominant positions in different fields (notably economic or cultural).”<sup>11</sup> Given the subordinate position of cultural production, its field might be easily influenced by what lies outside of it. Factors like money, popularity, and institutional prestige or lack thereof tend to affect the positions of the actors inside the field. The field’s relative autonomy is obtained through a long struggle, and in case of cultural production, its goal is to come up with a negative of the economic relations known from the field of power. The disregard for financial gain or outside prestige aid those looking for legitimacy in their autonomized field which “presents itself as an inverted economic world: those who enter it have an interest in disinterestedness.”<sup>12</sup> The authors, however, especially the ones recognized outside the field, remain influenced by the lure of monetary capital, political gain, or even ethics, continuously compromising the field’s autonomy.

The relationship between fan production and what any other field would consider legitimate is complex. Fanworks are often discussed as subordinate to the source material, given the fact that they derive their characters and events from the legitimate culture to a great extent, and they make no attempt to hide the fact.<sup>13</sup> A change in the source material affects at least some of the fanworks, changing the work’s status from canon-compliant to canon-divergent,<sup>14</sup> or forcing fan creators to “catch up” and modify already published stories. Furthermore, while at the moment, according to the dominant interpretation of fair use, fanwork is not illegal, it does exist in a gray area.

Even though there are cases of people placed high in the hierarchy of this field who at times are able to profit from their work financially, their clientele is most often limited to other fans, and the gains seem really meager in comparison to the ones of renown artists from any other field. Fanwork, by definition, is unprofitable because

<sup>11</sup> P. Bourdieu, op. cit., p. 215.

<sup>12</sup> Ibidem, p. 216.

<sup>13</sup> Abigail Derecho, however, argues that this phenomenon differs from intertextuality, and proposes to treat fanfiction as a branch of archontic literature, i.e. literature which makes its relation to given works explicit and is not subordinate to the source text but a part of an archive it creates. A. Derecho, *Archontic Literature: A Definition, a History, and Several Theories of Fan Fiction* [in:] K. Busse, K. Hellekson (eds.), *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet*, McFarland, Jefferson 2006, pp. 61–78.

<sup>14</sup> Canon being understood as “the events presented in the media source that provide the universe, setting, and characters”, K. Busse, K. Hellekson, *Introduction: Work in Progress* [in:] K. Busse, K. Hellekson (eds.), *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities...*, op. cit., p. 9.

of its legal status,<sup>15</sup> and is mostly rewarded by comments, reblogs, and other signs of appreciation which have value in the community but not outside it. On one hand, it makes the field of fan production a perfect incarnation of art existing independently from the economic market, as per the demands of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century artists who wanted their respective fields to be fully autonomous.<sup>16</sup> On the other, it means that the field differs significantly from the others since the creators inside it are quite immune to the temptations of external gain. The fact that the authors inside the field are rarely able to profit from their work, however, does not mean they are not influenced by the field of power in other ways, and does not mean that everyone in the field – especially the owners of the platforms and repositories – is disinterested. Neither does it mean that other factors, such as one’s political, religious, and ethical beliefs have no effect on the field. Thus, while the field’s autonomy is safe from the creators “selling out,” it still extremely fragile.

The problems of fans’ ethical beliefs and of monetary gain of the platform owners are intertwined in the issue of exclusion of content – the greatest challenge to the field’s autonomy.

## Censorship and the struggle for the field’s autonomy

Media fandom stems from a group of American women who liked the TV series *Star Trek* but, being women, were unwelcome at science fiction conventions in the 1960s and 1970s. Excluded from the existing fandom, they have formed a new one, circulating their own self-published novels and fanzines full of poetry, art and short stories. While the male-dominated SF fandom was focusing on military hierarchies, fictional technology and actual science, the media fandom’s interest was piqued by the characters and the (actual or presupposed) relationships between them. Soon, this model of consumption and production has spread to the female audiences of different shows, and specific types of fanfiction narratives established in *Star Trek* fandom have followed. Even though a lot of content published in the fanzines depicted friendship and adventures typical to the source material, other zines have started being dedicated to descriptions of violence, torture and suffering (in case of the hurt/comfort subgenre), or to erotica, and – most importantly – slash, that is: homoerotica featuring men. Even though slash has become one of the key phenomena defining the media fandom, and has been discussed by countless researchers, in the first decades slash fanzines were circulated in secrecy, sold from under the counter during conventions, and often printed in blue on a yellow paper so that they couldn’t be Xeroxed and distributed outside a small clique.<sup>17</sup> Slash writers were – rightly so – afraid of being exposed in

<sup>15</sup> J. Fiske, op. cit., p. 40; A. Urbańczyk, op. cit., p. 278.

<sup>16</sup> P. Bourdieu, op. cit., pp. 81–82.

<sup>17</sup> C. Bacon-Smith, *Enterprising Women: Television Fandom and the Creation of Popular Myth*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia 1992, p. 5.

the field of power and losing their jobs or facing problems at home because of the transgressive nature of their work.

For those reasons parts of fan-created content were hidden from both the field of power and the rest of the developing field of fan production. The situation did not change significantly with the introduction of the Internet, since most of the fan-created content was distributed via mailing lists which served as fandom's versions of literary salons. Not everyone had access to them, and their existence was often kept secret. In the middle of 1990s, fans had started creating collections of stories dedicated to a given piece of media, character or a relationship, making the content previously reserved to fanzines and mailing lists widely accessible.<sup>18</sup> It was, however, up to the creators of such lists or thematic archives to decide, which story deserved to be included and which warranted exclusion.

The situation had slowly began to change with the establishment of FanFiction.Net, the first multi-fandom and non-thematic fanfiction repository in 1998, and then with the emergence of platforms such as DeviantArt (focused mostly on visual art) and LiveJournal (a blogging platform which allowed to create separate communities). For the first time, fanworks were uploaded by their creators, available to an audience broader than the inner circle, and did not have to go through any selection or editing process. The power relations have changed abruptly, since anyone was able to publish regardless of the gatekeepers' opinion. Most importantly, it also meant that the field had lost the little autonomy it had while it existed underground. The aforementioned platforms belong not to fans but to corporations who can afford hosting millions of fanworks, and whose interests lie in the global field of power.

With the introduction of such platforms, fanwork suddenly has found itself in the economic market. While fans still did not profit off it, the owners of the servers did, selling space to advertisers, which in turn allowed non-fans to shape the field by creating and enforcing terms of service. Content found in violation of said terms could have been deleted without notice, and it did happen on numerous occasions. The terms of service of discussed platforms were informed mostly by the advertisers' interests. Since they rarely wished to be associated with content deemed problematic, many long-established aspects of fanfiction (e.g. explicit erotica, graphic depictions of violence, or even mentions of underage sex) were prohibited. While it does not seem controversial from the outsider's perspective, it did go against the decades of tradition of a field which had existed independently from the questions of both marketability and morality. Moreover, the events known as "purges"<sup>19</sup> kept coming unexpectedly and, since the rules were not clear and changeable, it was very difficult to predict what content could be suddenly deleted from a platform. Such was the case with LiveJournal, where most of the media fan communities were located in 2000s.

<sup>18</sup> A. De Kosnik, *Rogue Archives: Digital Cultural Memory and Media Fandom*, MIT Press, Cambridge 2016, p. 91.

<sup>19</sup> There were two instances of FanFiction.Net staff removing stories on a massive scale: in 2002 and in 2012. However, the most notable purge, known as Strikethrough, happened on LiveJournal in 2007.



After the platform was bought by a Russian corporation in 2007, the administrators started removing stories, pieces of fanart and entire communities without notice, as to exclude from the platform anything that did not conform to the Russian law. Along communities dedicated to dealing with trauma of child sexual abuse, queer communities, and thousands of fanworks featuring queer relationships have disappeared overnight, decreed demoralizing. The fandom's heteronomy had never been this obvious before. With the microblogging platform Tumblr (one of the most important fandom spaces at the time) introducing a ban on "not safe for work" content in 2018, it would seem there was no chance for any form of independence, had Archive of Our Own (AO3) not been launched.

The destruction of LiveJournal communities has led some fans and researchers to form Organization for Transformative Works, and create Archive of Our Own, a new platform whose name itself (a reference to Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*) suggested autonomy and self-sufficiency. AO3, whose popularity in the field has grown very quickly, was created in 2008, and is maintained by a network of volunteers, its hosting financed by fundraisers carried out among fans. The advertisement-free AO3, being independent from any corporation dictating terms of service and the nature of archived content, allows any registered member to upload their work and choose its category. Given that there is no external need for censorship, any work can be included in the repository, although it is expected of the creators to use the open tagging system to detail potentially triggering content, and to choose from the warnings provided by the interface. One of the most crucial informal rules established in the field over the past decade is "tag your shit."<sup>20</sup>

Formally, the tagging system's goal is to help people avoid content which they might find traumatizing. Stories (or, less often, pieces of fanart or comics) containing depictions of violence, torture, abuse, pedophilia, incest, rape, suicide or suicidal ideation, self-harm, homophobia, racism, and other content deemed problematic by the advertisers, exist on the platform alongside child-friendly stories about the characters baking cupcakes cheerfully. While in theory the tagging system protects the audience from content they might not wish to encounter, its purpose is to deflect the responsibility as well. In case of properly tagged stories it is up to the reader to make their choice. One of the most popular tags used in potentially triggering pieces of fanfiction reads "Dead dove: do not eat," a reference to a scene in the American sitcom *Arrested Development*, in which one of the characters finds a bag with this description in the fridge, and scorns himself for being surprised by its contents. With the gradual migration towards AO3, having established those informal rules, and depending on funding from inside the community, the field of fan production has finally gained a relative autonomy without the need for exclusion of content or its creators.

While the tagging system may serve as a means of protecting the audience, the AO3 interface for nearly a decade had facilitated search for stories containing spe-

<sup>20</sup> D. Ciesielska, M. Rutkowska, op. cit., p. 63.



cific warnings but did not allow excluding them from the results. It was extremely easy to find specific tropes but not to avoid them. Until 2018, to exclude triggers from search results one needed to have an account on AO3 (which necessitated being invited by a member of the community or waiting for weeks in a queue), and to be familiar with the interface enough to be able to tweak personal preferences. It is not difficult to see why some newcomers would perceive the warnings as a catalogue of kinks rather than warnings.

## Cue the antis: the fight for heteronormativity

Media fandom has never been homogenous: even in the beginning, the women who formed it, albeit mostly white, heterosexual and cisgender, were of different age and social background. As the community grew, it has become more diverse. Since the original, male-dominated SF fandom was not welcoming to the members of disenfranchised groups, they were drawn to media fandom, less concerned with authority and more open to transformative reworking of source texts. By the mid-2010s, at least according to the demographic surveys carried out by fans themselves, only 38% members of the AO3 community were heterosexual,<sup>21</sup> and there were more non-binary people than men.<sup>22</sup> In case of the survey on antis carried out by Drouin, the participants were even more diverse (white cis heterosexual men constituting less than 2% of the respondents).<sup>23</sup> Interestingly, the antis' demographics did not differ from those of pro-shippers except for one thing: antis tended to be much younger, many of them in early or mid-teens,<sup>24</sup> meaning that the vast majority of them was relatively new to fandom.

A field is rarely static, even if one were to consider it fully autonomous and isolated from the field of power, which it never is. While one of its defining characteristics is that it influences everyone in it, it is also a “a field of competitive struggles which tend to conserve or transform this force-field,” and “the generative and unifying principle of this ‘system’ is the struggle itself.”<sup>25</sup> In case of the field of cultural production, one of the key forces which can affect its shape is the influx of new authors and critics aspiring to legitimacy.<sup>26</sup> The field of fan production is no exception to this rule. For the last few years, however, it has been exceptional in the specific way the newcomers seek validation and legitimacy.

<sup>21</sup> Lulu, *AO3 Census*, Tumblr, published 5.10.2013, <https://bit.ly/3mdrvqh> (accessed: 3.06.2022).

<sup>22</sup> Hidden Butterfly, *Fandom Surveys Demographics*, Tumblr, <https://bit.ly/3NTK9iY> (accessed: 3.06.2022).

<sup>23</sup> R.A. Drouin, op. cit., p. 41.

<sup>24</sup> Ibidem, pp. 71–74; *Discourse Demographics Survey*, Google Forms, published 25.10.2017, <https://bit.ly/3GKXK9Z> (accessed: 3.06.2022).

<sup>25</sup> P. Bourdieu, op. cit., p. 232.

<sup>26</sup> Ibidem, p. 225.

Bourdieu has pointed out that one of the key struggles for legitimacy in the field of cultural production was between “those who espouse conservatism because of the dominant position they temporarily occupy in the field [...], that is to say, they defend [...] the established symbolic order” and “those who are inclined to a heretical rupture, to the critique of established forms, to the subversion of the prevailing models and to a return to the purity of origins.”<sup>27</sup> In cases he discussed, it was mostly the newcomers who were engaging in transgressive practices, pushing for the field’s autonomy while the actors with already established positions, more dependent on the structures lying in the field of power, were drifting towards heteronomy. Given the fact that fanwork is rarely rewarded in any way in the field of power, in this specific case the defenders of status quo were the proponents of the new and very shaky autonomy.

There have always been tensions in the media fandom. If early research rarely touched upon the subject, it was, by Henry Jenkins’ admission, because of “not wanting to air the community’s dirty laundry in public.”<sup>28</sup> For decades, shipping has been a bone of contention in almost every fan community, given that fans rarely support one relationship unanimously, and proponents of one ship treat the supporters of another as competition. The *Voltron* fandom, however, was the first one to introduce into the shipping discourse the question of morality on such a scale. From there the new way of looking at fan-created content has spread to other fan communities.

Although antis claim not to be motivated by shipping,<sup>29</sup> most researchers paint their movement as a case of a ship war gone too far.<sup>30</sup> The entire controversy did start with a rivalry between fans shipping the *Voltron* characters: either Keith and Lance (who were around the same age), or Keith and Shiro (Shiro being a few years older than Keith). The tensions were stronger than in case of many other ships. *Voltron* was created by people responsible for *Avatar: The Legend of Korra*, in which the titular character enters a same-sex relationship in the series finale, and so the fandom had quickly come to believe that the new show would feature queer representation as well, and the only question was who would end up with whom. Given that it was a rare instance for one’s non-heteronormative shipping preferences to be legitimized by the source material, the probability of this happening on *Voltron* has made the competition between shippers more fierce, and caused the discussion to steer towards issues related to the field of power. Suddenly, shipping has stopped being about fan fantasies. While slash has been discussed by researchers as an inherently political

<sup>27</sup> Ibidem, p. 206.

<sup>28</sup> H. Jenkins, “Textual Poachers,” *Twenty Years Later* [in:] H. Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*, Routledge, New York 2013, p. XXIX.

<sup>29</sup> A.R. Drouin, op. cit., p. 57.

<sup>30</sup> D. Ciesielska, M. Rutkowska, op. cit., p. 60; most notably, V. Larsen, op. cit., p. 77. There are multiple similar statements quoted and unchallenged by A.R. Drouin (op. cit., pp. 64, 81, 95, 110).

practice,<sup>31</sup> the political statement present in it had been implicit. In the wake of the anti movement, the inclusion and representation of minorities, and the ethics of any form of exploration of characters' power dynamics have become the most prominent aspects of fan production and the discourse surrounding it.

In case of the *Voltron* fandom, the polemic may seem absurd, given that the ship denounced as pedophilic consisted of two adult men, and perhaps that is the reason why the controversy has become so well-known and well-researched. There are, however, many popular ships opposed by antis which do explicitly qualify as abusive, pedophilic or otherwise "problematic." Such is the case with narratives about sexual relations between the *Rick and Morty* characters Rick Sanchez and Morty Smith, Rick's fourteen year old grandson, or *Gravity Falls*' ancient demon Bill Cipher and twelve year old Dipper. After the premiere of Netflix adaptation of *Jessica Jones*, one of the most popular heteronormative ships in the field was that between the eponymous character and Killgrave, her rapist. Elizabeth Orson in her paper on *Jessica Jones* fandom points out that "by supporting a fictional abusive relationship they [fans] are furthering narratives that silence victims and perpetuating violence against women."<sup>32</sup>

Many fanworks explore toxic relationships, abuse, rape, torture, gore, necrophilia, or bestiality, even when they have no foundation in the original text. The source material itself is surprisingly often addressed to young audiences who may encounter the sensitive content while looking for works dedicated to their favorite show. Thus the argument between the factions within the field boils down to two questions: does fiction affect reality, and, assuming it does, does that warrant censorship and exclusion of content which some may find harmful? While the answer to these questions is beyond the scope of this paper, the ones given by the sides of the conflict provide both the stakes and legitimization to the actions of everyone involved.

Antis call for a ban on any content which may be harmful to the audience, especially to minors, abuse victims, and people from disenfranchised communities. They are wary of any relationships with power imbalance, and they often call out fetishization of gay men in fanworks, particularly in case of heterosexual women writing slash, a genre which indeed has been called "pornography by women, for women."<sup>33</sup> Antis perceive creators of fanworks as able to affect the ways in which others interact with the field of power. Thus, antis expect the field of fan production to conform to the same ethical norms which should govern the field of power. Although the goal of the movement is to make the entire field of fan production a safe space for minori-

<sup>31</sup> H. Jenkins, *Textual Poachers...*, op. cit., pp. 185–222; C. Penley, *NASA/Trek: Popular Science and Sex in America*, Verso, New York 1997, p. 148.

<sup>32</sup> E. Orson, *Exploring Abusive Shipping in the "Jessica Jones" Fandom*, "Focus Media Journal" 2016–2017, vol. 37, p. 81.

<sup>33</sup> J. Russ, *Pornography by Women, for Women, with Love* [in:] J. Russ, *Magic Mommas, Trembling Sisters, Puritans & Perverts: Feminist Essays*, Crossing Press, New York 1985, pp. 79–99.

ties, and antis use language normally associated with the left, this entanglement with the field of power has some unexpected results. Aburime notes:

Antis' foundation is the belief that fiction affects reality, in that any problematic behaviors or topics in media, fictitious or not, will cause people to normalize those behaviors, resulting in people (specifically minors) thinking that such actions are acceptable in real life. This is a common argument used by conservative groups to enact queer censorship, who argue that children who see LGBTQIA+ characters in television or books will "turn gay."<sup>34</sup>

Aburime's observation is mirrored by the advocates of the field's autonomy, who either describe antis as conservative and puritanical,<sup>35</sup> or point out that, historically, the purges of repositories were caused by people attempting to silence queer communities.<sup>36</sup>

While antis are most known for online harassment, the majority of them does not agree with the methods of the most vocal few.<sup>37</sup> Their tactics have been discussed at length by Larsen, who points out that antis mainly rely on buzzwords to attract misinformed good-faith actors who do not belong to a given community within the field and, lacking knowledge on specific source material, do not question the choice of words when antis write about homophobia, pedophilia, or abuse.<sup>38</sup> What is more interesting, however, is the fact that some antis weaponize the content they wish to exclude from fandom spaces. One of the most baffling anti tactics is not only spamming pro-shippers' and AO3 volunteers' inboxes with images of gore, violent pornography or pedophilic acts, but also using the platforms' tagging systems to make this shocking content appear when one enters a name of a ship deemed problematic into the searchbar.<sup>39</sup> By hijacking the tags, some of the ships can be associated with actual crimes, while the shippers are punished for their interest by being exposed to shocking imagery. It might seem a paradox, antis posting the content they wish to purge from the Internet, if the fight was truly about the content. The goal of such actions seems to be marginalization of people who create it or enjoy it.

The pro-shipper arguments vary. Some members of the community point out that fandom is no one's legal guardian, and fans are not responsible for the well-being and the choices made by people who enter fandom spaces. Such an argument is certainly strengthened by the existence of tags and trigger warnings which make it possible to avoid sensitive content. In most cases, this stance is linked with the belief that no

<sup>34</sup> S. Aburime, op. cit.

<sup>35</sup> freedom-of-fanfic, *antishipping as the cool new trend, or: why are most antis under 25 years old?*, Tumblr, reblogged June 21, 2017, <https://bit.ly/3NjsS2y>. For ethical reasons, I have decided to reference only posts with over a thousand notes, or ones already made public by being discussed and linked on Fanlore.

<sup>36</sup> A discussion on AO3's stance on censorship, Tumblr, reblogged 5.09.2016, <https://bit.ly/3NTKnXm> (accessed: 3.06.2022).

<sup>37</sup> *Discourse Demographics Survey*, op. cit.

<sup>38</sup> V. Larsen, op. cit., pp. 60–63.

<sup>39</sup> R.A. Drouin, op. cit., p. 88; D. Ciesielska, M. Rutkowska, op. cit., p. 60.

moral judgement should apply to fiction and fictional actions. Bourdieu observes: “the literary disposition tends to derealize and dehistoricize everything which evokes social realities.”<sup>40</sup> As a popular Tumblr post explains, “Fanfiction is fiction. Fictional people are not real. Fictional people do not have rights. [...] Reading or writing about something does not mean the desire to do or support it in the real world.”<sup>41</sup>

Some more moderate pro-shippers assume that works of fiction do influence reality to an extent by shaping people’s attitudes towards violence and abuse. However, they point out that there is a huge difference between depictions of problematic behaviors as romantic or natural, or framing them as evil and traumatizing.<sup>42</sup> There are some pro-shippers who expect fanworks to be allowed at least the same liberties officially distributed media are, given that conflict, violence and manipulation are some of the most common elements of any narrative. Others, most often believing the pro-shipper community to be overwhelmingly female and seeing antis as misogynistic, point out that works and behaviors of other communities have not been put under such a scrutiny.<sup>43</sup> They argue that no one expects a male author to nurture his audience so that they never have to encounter content which could make them uneasy. Aburime, despite antis very similar gender demographics, goes as far as saying that “the anti movement seeks to limit the voices of those who are already vulnerable, thus promoting further isolation and violence against them.”<sup>44</sup>

The argument I find most interesting, however, refers directly to the field, and describes it as a territory established and curated by the previous generations of fans. This viewpoint is probably best summarized by one of the Tumblr users:

Fandom is built and maintained by adults. They organize and run conventions. [...] They created the fucking AO3. They pay into the OTW that protects us and our history.

Stop fucking treating adults in fandom like interlopers, they fucking built this city and without them, it would fall apart.<sup>45</sup>

The experience and an already established position inside the field are thus equated with adulthood, while the field itself is presented as the adults’ property. A similar

<sup>40</sup> P. Bourdieu, op. cit., p. 238.

<sup>41</sup> kanna-ophelia on unwritten rules of fandom, Tumblr, <https://bit.ly/3PVVjWa> (accessed: 3.06.2022).

<sup>42</sup> Their argument is best summarized by an excerpt from an essay by non.: “when someone says ‘It’s okay to portray abusive relationships in fiction,’ what they should be saying is ‘It’s okay to portray abusive relationships in fiction if you frame them as abusive,’” non., *Fiction, Reality, Fandom and Adulthood: a media academic and CSA/incest victim’s account*, Medium, <https://bit.ly/3Q29gSA> (accessed: 23.08.2019). The author did not identify with any side of the conflict, albeit her essay has often been quoted by both pro- and anti-shippers.

<sup>43</sup> A discussion on women’s responsibilities, Tumblr, reblogged 16.08.2019, <https://bit.ly/3Nukb5y> (accessed: 3.06.2022).

<sup>44</sup> S. Aburime, op. cit.

<sup>45</sup> call-me-arcturus on adults on fandom, Tumblr, posted 4.10.2017, <https://bit.ly/3xdm5Ca> (accessed: 3.06.2022).

sentiment is expressed by another member of the community in a viral post in which the age difference is even more pronounced and weaponized:

If you want to live in a “Children of the Corn”-style bubble of innocence and purity, well, to me, that’s a startling approach to adolescence, but every generation’s got to find its own way to reject the one before, so: do as you will. But you can’t bring the bubble to the party, kids. Fandom, established media-style fandom, was by and for adults before some of your parents were born now. You don’t get to show up and demand that everyone suddenly change their ways because you’re a minor and you want to enjoy the benefits of adult creative activity without the bits that make you uncomfortable.<sup>46</sup>

The claims made in this specific post were further legitimized by the fact that it has been reblogged by fans with the most social capital specific to the field, e.g. Diane Duane, author of popular licensed *Star Trek* novels from the 1980s. While the approval of the so-called Big Name Fans might carry some weight for people who have heard of them, it has no effect on the newcomers exactly because of their disregard for the field’s tradition.

## Conclusions: The successful change of problematic of the field

In any field of cultural production, the newcomers’ disregard for its tradition is not surprising, and according to Bourdieu’s model, it is a way of establishing one’s position and seeking legitimacy through new criteria. It is, however, unusual to fail to familiarize oneself with said tradition in order to break with it, since

The history of the field is truly irreversible; and the products of this relatively autonomous history present a kind of cumulativity. [...] The entrance fee to be acquitted by any new entrant is none other than the mastery of the set of achievements which underly the current problematic.<sup>47</sup>

In case of the anti movement, many smaller fights have erupted due to this lack of mastery of the field’s cumulative history. In one notable case, a controversy has started with a minor encountering a piece of fanfiction whose tags did not warn about its content. The tags accompanying said piece did inform about pornography, but were understandable only to older audiences since the author has used a term popular in early 2000s and known to those who had been in fandom back then.<sup>48</sup> Some pro-shippers point to this lack of knowledge of fandom history as the sole reason behind the anti movement,<sup>49</sup> claiming that it is the ignorance about fandom’s past

<sup>46</sup> harriet-spy, *Fandom as a whole is not ‘minor-friendly’*, Tumblr, posted 4.06.2017, <https://bit.ly/3tdCO5T> (accessed: 3.06.2022).

<sup>47</sup> P. Bourdieu, op. cit., pp. 242–243.

<sup>48</sup> *Anti-shipper: Beliefs and Comments*, Fanlore, <https://bit.ly/3PSYP AJ> (accessed: 3.06.2022).

<sup>49</sup> dynamicsymmetry’s thread on newcomers, posted 6.09.2019, <https://bit.ly/3mdttHb> (accessed: 3.06.2022).

struggles which fuels the proponents of censorship. Drouin, analyzing the survey responses, points out a prevalent “concept of a young woman/person attempting to navigate the new social contexts they’re entering without understanding the history that predates them.”<sup>50</sup> The antis, meanwhile, complain about pro-shippers’ reluctance to approach the old ways with even minimal criticism.<sup>51</sup> It is difficult to omit the fact that, given the demographics of antis, most members of the community have entered the field after the establishment of AO3, and thus lack first-hand experience of censorship and purges – and sometimes knowledge of them as well.

There are obvious deviations from Bourdieu’s model – namely, the fact that newcomers, by demanding exclusion of content, work against the autonomy of the field, and that some of them refuse to familiarize themselves with its cumulative tradition. The anti controversy should be considered a struggle for control over the entirety of the field. As Bourdieu explains,

When a new literary or artistic group imposes itself on the field, the whole space of positions and the space of corresponding possibilities, hence the whole problematic, find themselves transformed because of it: with its accession to existence, that is, to difference, the universe of possible options finds itself modified, with formerly dominant productions, for example, being downgraded to the status of an outmoded or classical product.<sup>52</sup>

The goal of the online anti movement is exactly that: to impose a change of perception of fan production, completely changing the criteria by which fanworks are judged. Antis, however, are much more radical than any literary group Bourdieu has described: aiming, declaratively, not at obsolescence and declassification of what has come before them, but at the eradication of texts and any trace of them from the field. Whether they will be successful, remains to be seen, and so far there have not been many concessions on the repositories’ part. The antis have succeeded, however, in transforming the problematic of the field and imposing their presence and identity build around new ideals with force not known to fandom before.

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<sup>50</sup> R.A. Drouin, op. cit., p. 73.

<sup>51</sup> E.g. a discussion on Fandom Moms, Tumblr, reblogged 16.07.2019, <https://bit.ly/3zgZEgT> (accessed: 3.06.2022).

<sup>52</sup> P. Bourdieu, op. cit., p. 234.



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