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Chapter 5

Soap Fans, Revisited

C. Lee Harrington and Denise Bielby

In January of 1991, when we launched the project that was published in *Soap Fans* (Harrington and Bielby 1995), television was a low-rent cultural form, electronic bulletin boards were in their infancy, joining a fan club meant snail-mailing a personal check, and buying *Soap Opera Digest* at the grocery store virtually guaranteed a conversation with the checker, bagger, or another customer about which soap(s) you watched and what you thought of the latest romance, infidelity, or long-thought-dead lover who suddenly hit town. Soap operas themselves were thriving—dominating daytime television, a still-flashy presence on primetime schedules, and surrounded by bustling ancillary industries including daytime magazines, network-sponsored conventions, and an active publicity machine bringing soap stars to local amusement parks, county fairs, and ribbon-cutting ceremonies at shopping malls. Our decision to study the social organization of the US daytime soap fan community was born out of our love for the genre (we each had a decades-long viewing history), our awareness of soaps' rock-bottom status on cultural taste hierarchies despite their popularity, and our initial experiences with organized fandom (if memory serves, a *General Hospital* (ABC) luncheon in Los Angeles) which convinced us that soap fandom was a site, and a community, ripe for research.

In hindsight, the project was massive. As detailed in our Appendix to the book (and in light of recent calls to bring systematic empirical analysis and methodological discussions back into fan studies; Evans and Stasi 2014), our data included 700+ viewer questionnaires, 20+ formal in-depth interviews with fans, another 30+ interviews with fan/industry insiders (soap actors, writers, producers, journalists, photographers, fan club staff members, etc.), participant-observation including hundreds of casual conversations at organized fan events, and analysis of fans' electronic bulletin board discussions on Prodigy, CompuServ, Genie, and America-Online. For the duration of the project we read every fan magazine available at supermarkets and subscribed to several more, and watched all 11 daytime soaps aired by NBC, CBS, and ABC. How we ever found time to write the book is a mystery. Our aim was to contribute to "the sparse but growing literature on audiences, fans, and fandom" (as one reviewer put it; Gamson 1996, 1744), drawing on the unique case of daytime soap opera to offer an alternative insight into fan identities, communities (subcultures), and industry-fan relations.

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Our project was launched prior to, but shaped by, scholarship published in the early 1990s (e.g., Bacon-Smith 1992; Jenkins 1992; Lewis 1992; Penley 1991a, 1991b) now routinely cited as the watershed era in fan studies. It was also influenced by several key works on late twentieth-century celebrity (e.g., Braudy 1986; Gamson, 1992, 1994; Schickel 1985), foreshadowing the explosion of celebrity studies soon to follow. Finally, it was shaped by powerhouse scholarship of the 1980s/1990s in cultural studies, audience reception studies, literary theory, and feminist media criticism, including that by Charlotte Brunsdon, Christine Geraghty, David Morley, Janice Radway, Dorothy Hobson, John Fiske, Ien Ang, Tania Modleski, Robert C. Allen, Roger Silverstone, and Stuart Hall (among others).

Soap Fans was well reviewed in sociological outlets (Adams 1996; Gamson 1996), seen by our disciplinary peers as astutely capturing connections between micro-level processes (e.g., fan pleasures) and macro-level concerns (e.g., industry-fan relations). Moreover, it was clearly received by sociologists as "about" media fandom (Grindstaff 2008; Grindstaff and Turow 2006), whereas it is often omitted from histories of fan studies (e.g., Busse and Gray 2011; Jenkins 2014). Until Matt Hills's positive engagement with our book in *Fan Cultures* (2002), it was more likely to be cited by cultural sociologists and soap opera experts than by fan studies scholars (whom we suspect received it as "about" soap opera[1]). *Soap Fans* can reasonably be positioned in the first wave of fan studies (Gray, Sandvoss, and Harrington 2007, 3) in its attempts to re-claim and normalize this maligned fan community (though that positioning is inexact; see below), and also in the third wave for its serious treatment of the inter- and intra-personal pleasures and motivations of fans (2007, 8). The ultimate aim of our project was to explore the social, industrial, *and* psychological dimensions of fandom.

Re-visiting the book some 20 years later, our aim in this chapter is to explore areas and ways in which fan studies did (and did not) take up issues proposed in *Soap Fans*, as well as the under-examination of key aspects of fan cultures in our early research. This re-visitation will hopefully shed light on the present and future trajectories of fan studies, which have come under increased scrutiny lately. The core of the chapter will examine three related issues: (1) fan-industry relations; (2) fan-object specificity; and (3) fan identities, practices, and communities.

Fan-Industry Relations

Our analysis of soap fandom was squarely situated in the infrastructure and processes of the daytime industry and of celebrity culture. This was an atypical strategy in 1990s-era fan studies that remains atypical today, given the general lack of dialogue between fan studies and celebrity studies. Our overall goals of the book were as follows:

> We take a different approach in this book [than prior fan studies], focusing less on fan-to-fan relationships than on how fanship and fandom are shaped by the cult of celebrity and by fans' relationships with the entertainment industry. We move outside the context of the fan world itself to explore how that world interacts with media production in general. Not that we ignore the private world of the fan; in fact, we pay particular attention to how one integrates being a fan into one's day-to-day leisure activities, experience of pleasure, and personal identity. (Harrington and Bielby 1995, 5)

Influenced by Diana Crane's (1992) concept of culture worlds, we analyzed the fan worlds of soaps as one constructed by fans' personal and private engagement with favored texts and by social activities organized by fans and by the industry (Grindstaff and Turow 2006, 117). Significantly, in the daytime context of that era, fans did not define themselves in opposition to the industry

and the industry did not stigmatize its own fans (Harrington and Bielby 1995, 182–183). As such, our book fits uneasily within fan studies' first wave, which approaches fandom as marginalized, resistant, and/or oppositional to entertainment industries (Gray, Sandvoss, and Harrington 2007), even as we aimed to normalize the fandom and its practices (a hallmark of first wave scholarship).

Rather than a marginalized community, we found a fascinating symbiosis between soap fans and the daytime industry. Fan pleasures were sanctioned and legitimized by industry members as leisure (not deviant) activities—one reviewer of our book described soap fans "as unoppositional as [they] can be" (Gamson 1996, 1744). Moreover, their textual investments and participatory status in the soap "family" (see below) were authenticated and made visible in the pages and websites of daytime magazines, and soap actors collaboratively constructed strategies to engage with and manage their fans: "Soap fanship is distinctive in that fans and industry participants reciprocally construct the subculture, doing so across a range of sites and through myriad social processes. That cooperation differentiates soap fandom from those that must struggle to overcome industry efforts to suppress them" (Harrington and Bielby 1995, 176).

We used a family reunion metaphor to describe soap fan-industry relations of that era. Most media fans, such as those described by Jenkins (1992) and Bacon-Smith (1992), represented "the overeager, uninvited strangers at the reunion to whom family members nod hello … and wonder who invited them" (Harrington and Bielby 1995, 182). In contrast, soap fans were expected guests at the gathering. Industry members viewed them as participants in daytime storytelling, integral to the production and success of the soap opera form in both economic and non-economic terms (182), and an explicit function of the daytime press was to mediate between the industry, soap viewers, and the broader public. We found a greater degree of communication and a more formalized set of expectations between soap fans and industry participants than had been documented in prior research.

The family reunion metaphor was appropriate, in part, because daytime TV itself was (and is) stigmatized in the larger entertainment landscape—considered a lesser counterpoint to prime-time TV, film, and theatre. Soaps' paradoxical status (popular but ridiculed) results from two related factors: (1) its gendered narrative form and viewership; and (2) its never-ending format, which makes it resistant to being interpreted according to standard literary protocol (Allen 1985, 3). Industry members and soap fans were "in it together" and knew it—they understood the importance of cultivating mutually beneficial and respectful relationships given their common ghettoized position(s) (Harrington and Bielby 1995, 183). As soap fandom migrated online alongside other fandoms beginning in the late 1990s, and as soap fans are now fully engaged in the range of creative practices associated with participatory culture, our family reunion metaphor may be a thing of the past, or may need redefinition given significant changes in the meaning and construction of modern families. These are empirical questions, subject to further research.

Given current discussions within fan studies over the commodification and exploitation of fans and fandoms,[2] we emphasize that the family reunion metaphor was not a misreading or naïve reading on our part. We were certainly aware of and documented fan-industry struggles and negotiations underway at that time, from daytime journalists debating whether and/or how much space should be given to fan voices with their so-called expert opinions, to electronic bulletin board users' cognizance of industry lurkers who could co-opt fan expertise without acknowledgment or compensation, to actors gritting their teeth at their employer's non-negotiable expectation that they attend network-sponsored fan events on weekends. Chapter 5 of our book was devoted to an analysis of fans' claims to moral authorship/ownership over soap opera texts, a larger concern in fan studies today regarding both copyright infringement and other legal and extra-legal issues. But soap fans *were* insiders of sorts; as noted above, given their comparably ghettoized positions (daytime, within the entertainment landscape; soap fans, within broader

popular culture) the industry and its fans relied on one another to an unusual extent in the entertainment world (Harrington and Bielby 1995, 183). Again, whether soap fans currently enjoy an insider-y status compared to other media fan communities remains an empirical question.

As part of our emphasis on fan-industry relations, we argued for an understanding of fans and fandom in the context of celebrity culture. Somewhat surprisingly, fan studies and celebrity studies have developed along separate lines; as noted, there is little engagement between the two areas of study.[3] We were interested in the "dangerous stalker" stereotype of media fans at that time (e.g., Schickel 1985) and, more importantly, in sociological research on the construction and meanings of celebrity. Celebrity is a central site around which many media-based fandoms are organized. However, in soap fandom, it takes a unique form because the genre forges unusually close and enduring ties between actors, their on-screen characters, and soap viewers. Our family reunion metaphor was explicitly contrasted to Gamson's (1994) description of celebrity/fan relationships as a "hunt" during which fans collect autographs, or pictures, or sightings of celebrities and compare their spoils with one another. Various institutional resources, including daytime industry patronage, the role of the soap press in both giving voice to fans and rationalizing soap fandom to the wider public, and the organizational structure of soap opera fan clubs helped transform the hunt into a reunion.

Soap Fans introduced the gradual emergence of soap stardom as a distinct realm of celebrity culture. The origin of TV soap stardom is probably the 1970 publication of the first dedicated soap opera magazine (*Daytime TV*). Other historical milestones include: (1) the 1976–1979 AFTRA (labor union) contract that finally required soaps to list cast credits weekly (though as Butler [1995] points out, they scrolled so quickly as to be nearly indecipherable); (2) the presence of soap actors at fan club luncheons beginning in the late 1970s; (3) the 1981 on-screen wedding of super-couple "Luke" and "Laura" on *General Hospital* (ABC) which landed the actors on the covers of *People* and *Newsweek* and drew the highest Nielsen ratings in US soap history; (4) the national conversation about Susan Lucci's bid for an Emmy for her role as Erica Kane on ABC's *All My Children* (she finally won in 1999 after 19 nominations); and (5) the 2000 launch of SoapNet (now canceled) which aired original ancillary programming that helped celebrify soap actors and other industry insiders to viewers. Due to the characteristics of the genre itself (described below), soap celebrity was marked since its infancy by a sense of intimacy, familiarity, and know-ability in the celebrity-fan relationship.

Soap stardom—admittedly C-list or D-list—is alive and well in the United States today, though there is a surprising lack of research on the topic. As Harrington (forthcoming) documents, most scholarly work on soap opera treats celebrity as a side-note (if at all) and the same is true in reverse for research on celebrity.[4] There are at least two reasons for this research gap. First, the decline of US soaps over the past two decades coincided almost directly with the rise of celebrity studies, offering celebrity scholars little motivation to study a seemingly disappearing form of stardom. Second, as noted earlier, soap operas have a marginalized or ghettoized status within the US entertainment landscape overall, perhaps further contributing to scholars' disinterest. This marginalization is in stark contrast to other parts of the world—for example, soap opera is central to the star systems of Australia (Turner et al. 2000) and Brazil (Coelho 2005), and a cornerstone of the economies of British cultural production (Couldry 2000). In those cultural contexts, and in contrast to the USA, soap stardom generates sizeable scholarly attention.

A convergence of trends beginning in the mid-1990s shaped both the fate of the US daytime TV soap industry and the research interests of celebrity scholars—including the rise of cheaper-to-produce reality and lifestyle programming, the widespread adoption of the internet and the migration of fandom online, changing audience tastes toward short-form storytelling, embracing social media, and the popularity of and visibility of DIY entertainment across multiple

formats and platforms. These combined trends have opened up entirely new discourses of soap opera celebrity that transcend the daytime TV context. For example, De Kosnik (2011) suggests that celebrity stories themselves have come to replace traditional TV soap narratives. As contemporary media fans draw on celebrity gossip to "perform as storytellers for and with each other" (235), the celebrity stories they co-create "might be regarded as the soap operas of the digital era since they deliver more of the enjoyments traditionally associated with the soap genre than do most currently airing daytime dramas" (234). Media fans today devote significant time and labor to creating or co-creating their own soap stories online. De Kosnik suggests that the title of the celebrity soap generated via these activities might reasonably be entitled "The Lives and Loves of Famous People," with each individual celebrity "one player in that soap's enormous ensemble cast" (238).

In a different context, Bignell (2014) points to the emergence and influence of docusoaps that transform our understandings of soap opera and soap stardom. Docusoaps such as *The Hills* (MTV) and *The Only Way is Essex* (ITV2) "impose on real events the conventions of soap opera, including editing techniques of parallel montage, character-focused narrative structure, and basis in a single geographical space and community" (101). In addition, the melodrama long associated with the soap opera genre has been adopted on docusoaps "in order to connect with audiences on the level of emotional realism rather than the realism of observing everyday situations" (111–112). The focus in docusoaps is less on plot per se than on the reverberations of plot development on interpersonal relationships and personal (character) development, which comes to shape celebrity in particular ways. For discussion of the past, present, and future of US soap stardom, see Harrington (forthcoming).

Fan-Object Specificity

Both fan scholars and celebrity scholars have long debated the relevance of object specificity in light of broader constructions of fandom and fame. Many scholars have moved away from examining specific fandoms—*Star Trek* or *Sherlock* or the Spice Girls—to focus instead on fandom and participatory culture as transcendent phenomena. For example, Jenkins (2014) writes: "From the start, the field [of fan studies] faced choices between studying 'media fandom' (as a specific configuration of tastes, interests and practices) or many different kinds of fandoms" (96). Similarly, a core question for celebrity studies is "the extent to which one continues to delineate distinctions between different media forms where the construction of fame is concerned" (Holmes and Redmond 2010, 4). To what extent are media distinctions still relevant in the current entertainment and technological landscapes? In *Soap Fans* we argued explicitly in favor of fan-object specificity, writing "Fans of different narrative forms are not interchangeable, and the activities through which they engage texts are not the same" (Harrington and Bielby 1995, 4).

In our analysis, the soap fan community's distinctiveness reflected that of the soaps themselves: "The genre's structure, including its genderedness, helps shape the soap fan community into a form of fanship (individual fan activity) and fandom (organized fan activity) oriented toward private uses and pleasures" (19). The immediacy and intimacy offered by television as a whole are exaggerated on soap operas in that they offer unique opportunities for fictional and "real" selves to unfold in tandem (e.g., Ford 2011; Harrington and Brothers 2010). US soaps' open-ended format and lack of episodic closure allow characters to develop and grow much as viewers do, generating deep fan engagement with ongoing stories of human vulnerability and resilience (Newcomb 1974).

In groundbreaking research of the 1980s and 1990s, feminist scholars convincingly argued that soaps resonate with their (mostly female) viewership in their valorization of traditional feminine

subjectivities and practices of gender socialization. Soaps' emphasis on dialogue, problem-solving, intimate conversation, domestic or domesticated settings, close-up camera shots, and storylines centered on familial and romantic relationship networks offer uniquely pleasurable rewards to female viewers (e.g., Brown 1987). In this perspective, soaps are not regressive but explore radical potentialities of sex, gender, and sexuality by recognizing traditional feminine principles as "a source of legitimate pleasure within and against patriarchy" (Fiske 1987, 183).

If the above paragraphs accurately capture the "object" that is traditional TV soap opera, then fan attachments and fan practices necessarily reflect that object to greater or lesser extent. At the time of our data collection, soap fans rarely engaged in the range of fan practices familiar to us today—blogging, vlogging, GIF-making, cosplay, fanfic, fanfac (Hills 2014), and so on. "Of the hundreds of daytime viewers we surveyed, only a handful ever write original narratives based on soap characters and only one does it on a regular basis, for personal rather than communal uses" (Harrington and Bielby 1995, 161–162). We explained this by noting that soap fans were mostly (to use today's terminology) affirmational rather than transformational fans (Obsession_inc 2009). The characters and narratives depicted onscreen resonated emotionally and authentically with viewers, resulting in mostly non-oppositional readings and a non-oppositional fandom. Moreover, the daily open-ended structure of soaps decreased the need for alternative, user-generated storylines and other forms of fan creativity.

Historically, soaps were the quintessential water-cooler programming, generically marked by on-screen verbal discourse and inspiring real-world conversations that helped cement social ties and that long endorsed women's role in the flow of information (e.g., Brown 1987). Significantly, soap fans' first forays online clearly reflected the emotionality and "talkiness" of the genre. For example, Baym's (2000) influential analysis of the construction of community in online spaces points out that soap viewers were among the first to adopt the Internet for entertainment purposes (6), eager to talk about—gossip about—their soaps. Baym found character development to be the main topic of conversation among the Usenet newsgroup that she studied (rec.arts.tv.soaps), whereas the fans we studied mainly gossiped in-person or over the phone, and preferred speculating on future events (Harrington and Bielby 1995, 25). Regardless of research finding, both conversational topics of fan gossip reflect soaps' central questions: What will happen next and who will it affect?

Ford (2014) furthers our argument that object specificity has value in his distinction between accretion texts (such as soaps) and drillable texts (such as *Breaking Bad*):

> [F]an activity surrounding accretion texts focus overwhelmingly on discussion, debate, criticism, and theorizing. With hours of new source material each week, there is often less need (or time) for many of the fan practices surrounding drillable texts. This volume from an accretion text encourages, in return, a sort of "accretion fandom," where the complexity and intensity of fan activity come not from producing discrete fan texts but from the deep, everyday practices of unpacking meaning and debating issues surrounding the flow of new source material. (64)

In his review of fan studies, Ford (2014) argues that scholars have prioritized drillable texts and their fandoms because they "provide a finite body of rich materials that fuel fan activity" (64) in contrast to the "less audio-visual or 'creative writing' production" that characterizes accretion fandoms such as those surrounding soap opera. Ford ultimately suggests that fan scholars should continue to diversify the types of fandoms they (we) study, along with the differences among them (55).

As noted above, from the inception of fan studies, scholars faced choices between studying "media fandom" writ broadly, or different kinds of fandoms with "the need to create a vocabulary that allowed us to make meaningful comparisons across them" (Jenkins 2014, 96). Jenkins's

decision in *Textual Poachers* (1992) to study the former was crucial in shaping the field and prescient in its anticipation of the dominant configuration of fandom today as a social, networked practice (the understanding of which he significantly advanced, of course, in *Convergence Culture* (2006)). In *Soap Fans*, we argued that object specificity matters but also complicated that notion in two ways. First, we pointed out that soap opera is not *one* fan object. At the time of our writing, there were eleven objects (soaps) generating distinctly different fan communities. Whereas to a non-fan or non-appreciator of the genre all soaps may seem interchangeable, within larger soap fandom, those distinctions matter deeply (Harrington and Bielby 1995, 115–116). Matt Hills (2016) echoes this line of argument in his discussion of competing fandoms surrounding different iterations of the Doctor in *Doctor Who*.

We also drew a distinction between *breadth* viewers/fans and *depth* viewers/fans. The former are engaged with soap opera as a whole, dipping in-and-out of different programs based on story quality, cast changes, or resolution of a plot point. The latter, in contrast, are deeply engaged with a particular soap opera and willing to suffer through weeks, months, even years of dissatisfactory storytelling because it is "their" story. Each type of fan engagement is incomprehensible to the other—breadth vs. depth represents a particular form of intra-fandom conflict, if you will. Drawing directly on the breadth/depth distinction in his recent book, Duffett (2013) suggests that fan scholars "should really be thinking about a kind of continuum that stretches between the least committed fans and the most dedicated ones" (44; see extended discussion of this point in the next section).

We sketched the traditional object of TV soap opera fandom, but in the current media landscape what constitutes the fan-object has expanded in intriguing ways. For example, as noted earlier, De Kosnik (2011) proposes that online celebrity gossip has become the soap opera of the digital era, and Dhaenens and Van Bauwel (2014) suggest that fans' re-edited versions of European soap operas into webisodes that feature stories with gay characters point to the emergence of a new kind of soap fan—one unfamiliar with the original TV text but whose fan-object *is* that soap albeit in a reworked context. Here, the object is both same (the European soap opera) and different (the queer revision of that soap opera).

In our view, the choice of research subject—media fandom or specific fandoms—is not an either/or question. We need both to continue developing a broad understanding of the meanings and potentialities of fandom writ large, and to understand what makes individual fandoms and fan-objects distinct. Growing scholarly interest in evocative objects (*this* teddy bear, *that* rolling pin; e.g., Turkle 2007), generational objects (e.g., Hills 2016), inter- and intra-fandom battles (e.g., Hills 2012), post-object fandom (e.g., Williams 2011), and object development across time (e.g., Harrington and Bielby 2010a) attest to the continued relevance of object specificity in fan studies.[5]

Identities, Practices, and Communities

As mentioned in the introduction, *Soap Fans* was shaped by—but took issue with—the foundational fan scholarship of Jenkins (1992), Bacon-Smith (1992), and Penley (1991a, 1991b). Our initial discussions with soap opera viewers convinced us that there was an aspect of the fan experience under-examined in prior research. Specifically, we challenged the emergent (now dominant) emphasis on publicly visible (and thus quantifiable) fan practices as a measure of who is and is not a fan:

> The popular perception of the fan is shaped almost exclusively by this subset of fans who engage in well-organized and public expressions of fanship. They create fanzines or original artwork, attend fan

> club conventions or luncheons, write letters to the stars, or, in rare cases but with much publicity, stalk a celebrity. But what is the private meaning of being a fan? What are the personal and interpersonal pleasures and meanings derived from the role? What does it mean to call oneself a fan of something? (Harrington and Bielby 1995, 12)

Arguing that "being a fan is not merely about activity; it involves parallel processes of activity and identity," and that "one can do fan activity without being a fan, and vice versa" (86), our book explores the visible *and* private aspects of the soap fan world. This claim is primarily what locates our book in fan studies' third wave, with its focus on the fan experience as *both* personal and communal (Gray, Sandvoss, and Harrington 2007).

Part of our study aimed to differentiate between private, semi-public, and public fan activities.[6] Private experiences might include watching a daily soap, constructing and maintaining a videotape library, gossiping with friends and family about storylines (creation of fans' oral culture; Fiske 1987), and/or self-identifying as a fan. Public experiences might include attending network-sponsored fan events or joining a fan club. Semi-public or quasi-public experiences were more active than private ones but still allowed fans to avoid public scrutiny if they chose: "reading fan magazines and newsletters, writing to those in the production industry, exchanging photos and videotapes with other fans, and communicating on electronic bulletin boards" (Harrington and Bielby 1995, 27).[7] Given the newness of electronic communication, we were further interested in the relationship between fans' online and offline activities (31–32), which we addressed more fully in subsequent research (Bielby et al. 1999; see also Booth and Kelly 2013).

We explored the construction of fan identity by considering how it varied along two dimensions: (1) degree of privatization; and (2) degree of centrality. We were interested in how people came to see themselves as soap fans (becoming-a-fan narratives) and the salience of that identity vis-à-vis other identities: parent, spouse, friend, employee, etc. Drawing on Grossberg (1992), we further emphasized the centrality of affect and emotion (i.e., pleasure) in the construction of fan identities. One of the biggest stereotypes about soap fans at that time was that they could not tell the difference between fantasy and reality—the intimacy and familiarity associated with the genre (see prior discussion) resulted in fans talking about (and experiencing) soap characters as if they were real people. Core to our project was the analysis of this practice as strategic and purposeful—fans deliberately played with the boundaries between fantasy and reality to enhance the pleasures of soap viewing (see Chapter 4 of *Soap Fans*).[8]

The distinction that we posed in 1995—fan as "do-er" vs. fan as "be-er"—remains a core area of discussion in fan studies. Should fans be explored as individuals (e.g., Hills 2002; Sandvoss 2005), as an organized community (e.g., Bussé and Gray 2011; Booth and Kelly 2013; Coppa 2014; Jenkins 2007, 2014), or as something else entirely (Sandvoss and Kearns 2014 propose the notion of an interpretive fair)? Jenkins's *Textual Poachers* (1992) famously describes people "who self-identify as 'fans' full-stop, not as fans *of* this or that show, band, celebrity, team etc." (Coppa 2014, 75). Similarly, Booth and Kelly (2013) argue for fandom as "an identity that transcends the text" (58); in their view, fans engage in comparable practices regardless of the text or object they favor. This perspective obviously counters our claims of fan-object specificity by arguing that fans are members of a larger community rather than individuals with emotional investments in texts (Jenkins 2014, 93). Jenkins writes:

> *[F]andom* is the future. I use the word "fandom" and not "fans" here for good reason. To me, it seems a little paradoxical that the rest of the people involved in this conversation are more and more focused on consumption as a social, networked, collaborative process ... whereas so much of the recent work in fan studies has returned to a focus on the individual fan. (2007, 361; emphasis in the original)

We believe that studying individual fans remains vitally important. Here are some brief, non-exhaustive suggestions as to why. First, as has been widely noted, there is need to bring a wider variety of fan voices or subjectivities into our scholarship—voices of color, queer voices, poor voices, old voices, diasporic voices, voices who are differently abled, and so on. Unless we presume to simply layer the already-mapped subjectivities of fandom (read: mostly young, white, middle-class, educated, online, etc.) onto these understudied communities, we absolutely need to study psychologies of fandom (a point with which Jenkins 2014 agrees). Our own research on older fans in the context of human development theory confirms this imperative (e.g., Harrington and Bielby 2010b).

Second, we remain as convinced today as we were in 1991 that there are a Whole Lot Of People who self-identify as fans and/or engage in fan activities but who have little or no interest in being part of a networked community. In recent research, Sandvoss and Kearns (2014) found that social ties and community membership are *not* intrinsic to fandom. They interviewed people who do not feel part of a community, have no intention of becoming part of one, and "outright reject the suggestion that they may have built any forms of social contacts through their fandom" (95). They further remind us that the vast range of fan-generated texts online are produced by a small number of fans (92), so what looks like a giant (and hugely active) online community might not be all that. Coppa (2014), in her advocacy of transcendent fandom over individual fans as a research focus, suggests that fan scholars revisit a prior scholarly distinction between *fans* and *followers* (Jenkins and Tulloch 1994). Followers are described as those who regularly consume and enjoy media texts/objects but claim no larger social identity on that basis. Followers, who "arguably … use media as directed" (Coppa 2014, 75), might seem to fit our analysis of early-1990s soap fandom as non-oppositional. However, we found, as did Sandvoss and Kearns (2014), plenty of people who want nothing to do with fandom as networked practice *but who self-identify as fans*. Far be it for us, as scholars, to re-write their identities for them.[9]

Third, and relatedly, we remain convinced that there are a Whole Lot Of People (maybe the same people as above) who reserve their fiercest fan pleasures as private experiences. Maud Lavin (2015), explaining why she chose to attend a 1978 Patti Smith concert by herself, writes "Not for sharing, this" (2.6). Love that. Did some fans live-tweet the finale of *Breaking Bad* (AMC)? Absolutely. Did others hold viewing parties complete with Walt and Jesse costumes? Sure. Did others kick their families out of the house so they could watch alone? Yep. For Coppa, it is the social descriptions of fandom among first-wave scholars that resonate with her experiences (2014, 76). They resonate with us as well. But we also recognize and legitimize the non-social/non-networked fans. Scholars may be less interested in them, media industries and marketers variably interested in them, and yes, it's a slippery slope from consumption to fandom (Jenkins 2007, 361) … but they're out there and we ignore them to the detriment of a full understanding of fans *and* fandoms (note the plural in both).

In *Soap Fans* we proposed a continuum of viewer-to-fan positionality. More nuanced fan typologies or taxonomies have been proposed over the years (e.g., Abercrombie and Longhurst 1998), and scholars increasingly call for a movement past familiar binaries (fan/not-fan, fan/antifan) that now operate as conceptual blinders. We are not big fans of taxonomies as they seem to inevitably fail to capture the full range of possibilities. Perhaps, as has been successfully argued in gender studies, we should simply agree to conceive of fandom as a spectrum or constellation of experiences, activities, and communities—and leave it at that.

Finally, and briefly, there are no doubt stealth fandoms out there, fan communities once networked to the teeth but now operating underground—a pushback against industry co-optation and exploitation, sick of haters and shamers and bullies, and strangers, not to mention the endless jockeying to determine which fan knows more, has done more, has been to more, is a "better" fan. Stealth fandom is more methodologically challenging to identify and study than even

non-networked "regular" fans (see Sandvoss and Kearns 2014, 93, 103), but we suspect that it is out there. So, fan-as-private-identity? Check. Fan-as-networked-community? Check. *Soap Fans* focused on *both* conceptualizations—we studied the soap fans who "participated" as well as those who "did nothing" but consume—as does the leading anthology in the field (Gray, Sandvoss, and Harrington 2007). Perhaps a more fruitful set of questions for fan studies to pursue is: when do people participate (if at all), under what conditions, why, and to what end?

Conclusion

Much has changed, both in soap opera and in soap fandom, since the 1995 publication of our book. The daytime TV genre has declined dramatically, from 11 shows airing on broadcast network television in the early 1990s to four as of today. A number of daytime magazines have ceased publication and the publicity circuit for soap stars has shrunk noticeably. Soap fandom was an early migrant to online and digital spaces and remains vibrant, with fans fully engaged in the wide range of creative practices associated with participatory culture. Soaps themselves have moved online, with original web-only series (e.g., *Beacon Hill*) along with a short-lived attempt to resurrect two canceled ABC series (*All My Children* and *One Life to Live*) in web format. We continue to research soap opera fans, particularly in the context of age and aging, along with other aspects of media industries and audiences.

One of the biggest gambles we took in *Soap Fans* was *not* focusing directly on the genderedness of the soap fan community. We drew on the rich tradition of feminist soap scholarship of the 1980s (which Jenkins 2014 points out was a root of first wave fan studies) and recognized (and wrote about) the salience of the gendered structure of soaps to resulting identities and practices of its fandom. However, gender was not at the forefront of our analysis, and our stated rationale—that a more inclusive set of variables offered more explanatory power in understanding the fandom—was critiqued at the time (e.g., Gamson 1996). Since then our approach has generated productive lines of inquiry alongside that of scholars who have analyzed core aspects of gender and sexuality in soap fandom (Harrington 2003; Ng 2008), as well as the salience of intersectional identities (e.g., Scodari 2004), which was not theoretically developed at the time of our writing. Gender is, of course, central to contemporary debates in fan studies and has been explicitly addressed by numerous scholars. For example, see the multi-part and multi-party discussion hosted by Jenkins (2007) on his weblog (http://henryjenkins.org/) as well as ongoing fangirl/fanboy debates (e.g., Scott 2010).

Because there was limited scholarly research on the concept of fandom-as-community at the time of our writing *Soap Fans*, we undertheorized this important concept, taking its meaning for granted rather than questioning it directly. Baym (2000) drew on soaps as a case study in her influential analysis of the formation, maintenance strategies, communicative practices, and normative expectations of online groups, and Hills (2001) builds on and critiques our use of Winnicottian theory in *Soap Fans* to develop his intriguing notion of communities of imagination.[10] In recent years, and as part of the individual-vs.-community debate, fan scholars have begun to directly investigate the varied meaning(s) of community in fandom including the relationship(s) between online and offline communities (e.g., Booth 2010; Busse and Gray 2011; Booth and Kelly 2013; Reysen et al. 2015; van de Goor 2015).

It's an interesting exercise to re-read something that you wrote decades ago. Some of our ideas still seem spot-on whereas others reflect now-dated scholarly perspectives. We agree with Ford's (2014) observation that contemporary fan scholars have an explicit or implicit tendency to prioritize certain forms of engagement and place value on "certain *products* of fandom over the *process* of fandom" (63; emphasis added). Our current research on fandom and aging (e.g., Harrington

and Bielby 2010a; Harrington, Bielby, and Bardo 2011) explicitly addresses this concern in its recognition of the impact of globally shifting demographics on fan experiences. Understanding the life course means understanding how lives unfold across time and engages directly with questions of process, change, and human adaptation—an increasing interest in multiple areas of the academy, given rapid global aging. Ultimately, we agree with Ford's assertion that fan studies "can't have an absolutist answer to what does or does not warrant fandom, or whether certain kinds of activities constitute a 'greater level of engagement' than others" (62). Being a fan and practicing or performing fandom meant many different things in 1991...as it does today.

Notes

1. We are not entirely sure why this is so. Perhaps "soap" in the book's title dissuades fan scholars from thinking it is about anything *but* soap opera. If so, this would support the relevance of object specificity, which we discuss in a subsequent section. Alternatively, perhaps it suggests an elitism within fan studies wherein certain texts or genres (e.g., horror or science fiction) are prioritized over others (e.g., soaps or YA novels). See Ford's (2014) discussion of accretion vs. drillable texts discussed later in the chapter. Our aim, of course, was to contribute to fan studies broadly through discussion of soaps as a case example.
2. For example, see the special issue on fandom and/as labor in *Transformative Works and Cultures* (2014, vol. 15).
3. For recent and interesting exceptions, see Bennett (2012) and Click et al. (2013).
4. For early exceptions, see Fiske (1987) and Butler (1995) for insightful discussions of the construction of soap celebrity.
5. See the special issue on materiality and object fandom in *Transformative Works and Cultures* (2014, vol. 16).
6. See Fiske (1992) on semiotic, enunciative, and textual productivity—and Sandvoss' (2011) discussion of Fiske in the context of fan typologies.
7. Dhaenens and Van Bauwel (2014) draw explicitly on our articulation of semi-public activities in their recent study of queering soap opera through online fan practices.
8. We drew on psychoanalytic theory, specifically Winnicott's (1971) object-relations theory, in this analysis. See Hills's (2002) critique of our approach and the ensuing scholarly debate (Hills 2007; Sandvoss 2005, 2008).
9. Sandvoss and Kearns's (2014) notion of "ordinary" fandom may be useful here—"the commonplace, everyday life media fandom that constitutes the largest group of affective media engagements without high levels of social connectivity arising out of fandom" (92–93). They found that ordinary fans share practices and motivations with more active fan groups "yet seek to distance themselves from the two notions most commonly discussed in the academic study of fan audiences: creativity and community" (97).
10. According to Hills (2001), a community of imagination implies two things: that imagination is an affective process that "underpins the formation and fragility of any such community"; and that this process is located within Winnicott's notion of transitional space (158, n. 1). Hills focuses on affect rather than theories of pleasure (as we did in *Soap Fans*).

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