

SHERLOCK FANDOM ONLINE:
TOWARD AN ETHIC OF ADVOCACY FOR ASEXUAL IDENTITY

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Texts & Technology
in the College of Arts & Humanities
at the University of Central Florida
Orlando, Florida

Summer Term
2016

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ABSTRACT

This study applies theories of texts and technologies to examine ways in which fan culture and mainstream entertainment media can shape and be shaped by each other through digital interactions and negotiations. Further, it considers ways in which these interactions have potential to foster community building and advocacy efforts beyond the limitations of the screen. The analysis focuses, in particular, on the subject of asexuality as it is represented in BBC's 2010 television series, *Sherlock*, tracing the multiple ways in which the traditional boundaries between fans and entertainment professionals have been breached as each group works to engage the other while pursuing their separate objectives, including social change, personal and professional acceptance and/or acclaim, and commercial profit.

The dissertation traces four distinct but interconnected types/sites of interface among fans, advocates, mainstream media, showrunners, and celebrities, including 1) mainstream media articles related to *Sherlock* and those officially associated with it; 2) social media; 3) single-owner or small group-operated fan websites; and 4) fan fiction and associated comments. This interdisciplinary project draws on the work of fandom/digital culture scholarship (e.g., Henry Jenkins, Matthew Hills, Paul Booth) within a broader framework informed by scholars of digital culture and queer and feminist ideologies (e.g., Donna Haraway, Lee Edelman, Lauren Berlant), as well as emerging scholarship on asexuality, which is informed by queer and feminist perspectives (e.g., Brenda Chu, Julia Decker, Jacinthe Flore).

Dedicated, in loving memory, to my father, the feminist.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To all those who took the time to mentor and teach me: I hope I've made you proud, and I will continue to pay it forward. Dr. Horner, you set a fire in me all those years ago. Dr. Bowdon, you have nurtured that flame.

To my past, present, and future students: I am honored to be your teacher. I am humbled by all I have to learn from you.

My deepest gratitude to my family and friends, without whom none of this would be possible.

Mom: You continue to be a light for me to follow and to come home to. Thank you for ALWAYS being there for me and the kids. Joy: My beloved monster, my baby sister, I hope I can be like you when I grow up. Thanks for taking care of our family in all kinds of weather.

Chris: Your patient understanding and support in all things has always made me feel like I can accomplish anything, like even superhero stuff. I love you; I am so grateful to have built a life with you. Lynnette and Libbie: You both held me up when I didn't think I could stand on my own during different parts of this process. Our sisterhood is everything. Leandra: Your example and encouragement helped make this experience a little less daunting. I appreciate your generosity of spirit.

To Layla and Thomas: You two can do anything. Work hard. Be kind to yourself and others. I love you, always. I am inspired by you both every day. Being your mother is my greatest joy.

To the ERAU Community: Without your financial and moral support, I would never have begun this journey. Special thanks to Donna, who always made sure that I could survive work and school and motherhood without having to compromise who am I or what I do. Your mentoring has helped me develop professionally, but what I've gained personally has been even greater.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

“Someone who is FIAWOL [Fandom Is A Way Of Life] invests the majority of their time and energy on fandom and fannish pursuits, often making long-term commitments (e.g., running a convention, being a usenet/ mailing list/ community/ forum moderator for years, etc.), and forming their strongest social bonds through fandom.” Fanlore.com

Prior to investing my time and energy into researching online fan culture, as represented by the fan communities organized around the BBC’s television series *Sherlock* (2010-present), a modernized adaptation of Arthur Conan Doyle’s stories created by showrunners and frequent scriptwriters Steven Moffat and Mark Gatiss, I would have, without compunction, claimed to be a fan of Sherlock Holmes. I have read many novels and short stories by Conan Doyle, and I am always interested in the many adaptations of his characters. I have realized, however, that it is unlikely that those invested in fan culture would consider me much of a fan. As a casual fan, I am interested in Sherlock-related primary texts, but I have never interacted with or contributed to fandom (digital or face to face) in any significant way. I relay this information guiltily because, during my dissertation research, I have gained so much insight by examining the myriad ways in which fans constitute and contribute to a robust, insightful, and thriving community online. When I began my research, I wondered if I would become more heavily invested in fandom on a personal rather than only on an academic level: someone for whom fandom is a way of life (FIAWOL), to use common fan parlance, or if I would remain someone for whom fandom is just a goddamned hobby (FIJAGH). Because I identify as FIJAGH, what bearing would my lack of

fannish experience have on my research? Could I possibly evolve into someone for whom FIAWOL? Would I want to? Essentially, how might my subject position affect my research?

The terms *FIAWOL* and *FIJAGH* are indicative of fan identities more than of fan practices. They are used most often to indicate the level of investment one has in fandom, as a generally snarky way to separate identity groups that are unlikely to be able to find common ground. Fanlore.org provides a humorous but enlightening example: "We tried living together, but I'm FIAWOL, and she's FIJAGH--it just didn't work out." At first I worried that my FIJAGH status might mean that researching fan culture online just would not work out. Fortunately, that has not been the case.

As an academic, I can easily recognize my fannish tendencies and practices, although they have been cultivated by academia rather than by media and/or fan communities. Both academia and media fandoms continue to shape and be shaped by the digital spaces that they inhabit. My interest remains rooted in fan culture as it is mobilized in digital culture. I am a fan of scholars and scholarship about digital culture and fandom, rather than a member of any particular media fandom. I have contributed to and consumed academic blogs, attended conferences, and geeked out upon meeting or interacting with authors whom I admire online. I distinctly remember during a graduate class that one author we had read and posted about on our class-generated public blog actually responded to some of our posts. We were giddy. I felt particularly proud to have received a long, thoughtful response to my post from the author of the work we were studying, and I felt a profound pressure and responsibility to respond in kind, although I also felt "out of my league" as a student. As an English major in the 1990s, I did not have that kind of access to authors because digital technology/culture had not evolved enough to

make such easy access possible, and investment in conversation between students and professional authors was not perceived as equally valuable anywhere outside the classroom. Currently, my life's work and my identity as a teacher, scholar, and student are vested in those practices that help me to engage with other thinkers/creators and that help me to interact with their works. That is not so different from media fans, and because digital technology affords participants unique ways of interacting with both texts and those who produce those texts, there is much common ground.

In addition, this dissertation focuses on the potential for fan culture to support advocacy work, combining two subjects about which I am passionate: advocacy and digital culture. In addition to my identity and work as a scholar, I am an advocate for the LGBTQ community, and although this dissertation is focused on cultural advocacy for asexual identity, I use my knowledge and experience with queer culture and scholarship to inform my assertions throughout. Asexual identity, in the simplest of terms, is a sexual identity defined by varying degrees of a lack of interest in sex with either the same or opposite gender. Beyond the lack of interest in sex, asexual identity is quite variable, ranging from those who might be interested in a range of intimate activities with a partner to those who do not engage in any intimate activities. Relationships among and with asexual people can be romantic or aromantic. Asexuals are only beginning to be recognized as an identity group with unique characteristics that may challenge or be challenged by the current status quo, in which sexual activity is the basis for some of the ways in which people are defined and understood and by which we structure our lives. The kind of cultural advocacy on which I focus is most prominently enacted in both critical and practical ways online: The representation of an asexual character on television and the fan communities'

championing of that character are critical because there is so little representation of asexuality as an identity in popular culture. Creative works like fan fiction, blogs, and social media posts lend themselves to a practical approach to cultural advocacy because they may help asexuals and their allies imagine social situations or societal expectations that are complicated by or for asexual-identified people.

As I read scholarly work on fan culture, it is apparent that identifying one's subject position as a fan and/or a scholarly researcher is a crucial part of most authors' works. Fan/media studies scholars Paul Boothe, Karen Hellekson, Kristina Busse, Matthew Hills, and Henry Jenkins, to name just a few, disclose their personal investment in fan culture and attempt to make clear to readers of their academic works how the way that they perceive their subject position contributes to their methodology and scholarship as a whole. Whereas some (e.g., Hills) are fan-scholars, indicating that they are invested in a fan identity, others make clear that although they may mimic fan behavior in their research, fandom is not their way of life. As opposed to the self-identified "fan-scholars" who acknowledge that fandom is a way of life for them or the scholars who make note of the extent to which they are removed from fandom and, consequently, fan practices in their methods, I represent a new category. Because of my position as a student of fandom and an academic scholar, my methodology and perspective are different from what is currently available in fandom scholarship.

In addition, differentiating between "fan" as an identity and "fan" as a practice, according to Boothe, is important if academic scholars want to "see what is particularly 'fannish' about a range of practices" (3). Fan, as an identity category, as Hills explains in several works, is linked to fan "affect," to the indelible feelings of attachment that fans have to the object(s) of their

affection, while fandom, according to Boothe, relies on the practices “around which fans can structure particular meanings in their lives” (3). Busse categorizes these two definitions as “fannish identity and fannish behaviour” (388). Because my research interests and expertise are in digital culture, rather than uniquely in fan culture, I focus on fannish behavior and comment on fan identity only to differentiate it from common practices of digital culture, at large, or to note how fannish identity may influence praxis in digital spaces.

One challenge for scholars is that we are living with and, according to Katherine Hayles in *How We Think (and E-Lit)*, co-evolving with technology, so it is both imperative and difficult to consider technology both as a tool but also as a platform in which we live and perform identity. Walter Ong describes the first paradigmatic shift from oral to print culture in *Orality to Literacy* and made predictions that the shift to digital culture will open us to some qualities more akin to orality than those circumscribed by print culture because of the new way in which the “self” engages with new media. The truth of this prediction is exemplified by real-time, online discussions within fan communities as new information, ranging from a news article or review to a new film or television episode, becomes available on the Internet. Clashes between discourse communities, such as television critics and fans, may occur almost immediately as forums and comments sections are filled with texts that very much resemble oral discourse and may take the place of spoken conversation. The shift from primary to secondary orality (which we would consider a part of digital culture, now) is fraught with the same difficulties as the shift from orality to literacy.

To make this point, Ong points out that Plato criticized the “new technology” of writing and distrusted it, much in the same way computers were distrusted when they began to become

mainstream. “They will destroy our memory” and “they will alienate us from the ‘real world’” are criticisms leveled against both print and digital culture. Ong further notes the irony of Plato’s criticism because his analytical, self-reflexive criticism was “possible only because of the effects that writing was beginning to have on mental processes” (79). Plato could not recognize the flaws in his criticism because he was steeped in the culture of his time, and, as Terry Winograd and Fernando Flores would say, neither can we. They claim that computers, like every other technology, are a “vehicle for the transformation of tradition” (561). They explain that people are caught up in this transformation and transformative tradition regardless of their will because “we are already always engaged in that transformation” (561). This acknowledgment of the concomitant construction of ourselves and technology is a hallmark of the emerging inter-disciplines of digital culture studies and fandom studies and is reflected in the Texts and Technology program, as well. My research in popular culture, especially film and television studies, works toward revealing the complex relationship between humans and technology, where technology becomes an extension of the self. As Ann Frances Wysocki explains in “Drawn Together: Possibilities for Bodies in Words and Pictures,” identity is constantly being constructed in and through the texts we create. As Wysocki explains a concept introduced by Stuart Hall, she notes the following:

It is not that we find our selves in our work because there was a unified self that preceded the work and that only needed being made present somehow in the work; it is rather what the work is—its status as a shaped object in front of us—makes visible to us ‘what we are’ the [subject] position has had to be constructed—produced—before it can be judged. (26)

This “judgment” to which Wysocki refers explains the way in which we “see ourselves in what we produce,” and this judgment also provides us the opportunity to ask “Is that who I (at least in part) am? Is that who I want to be? Is that the position through which I want to be seen?” (26).

The ways in which our identities are embedded in the texts that we produce have profound implications for advocacy work online. Being able to judge who we are and who we might want to become by navigating and negotiating the texts we produce and the texts of others, we are able to make those “judgements” and that opens up a space for change. There is nothing more important to advocacy work than that.

Purpose

Popular culture is often criticized as temporal/ephemeral, but that aspect of its nature can enhance rather than limit its value when we approach texts (i.e., objects of study in any medium, including television or film) from a cultural studies perspective. Popular culture texts are critical to understanding how people navigate their perceptions of self and other in specific spaces and times. In “The Evidence of Experience,” Joan W. Scott argues that, in order to more realistically represent the “Other” in history, we must first acknowledge those marginalized groups and then properly situate them within a framework that does not serve to further position them as abject. Scott begins by explaining the importance of literal visibility for marginalized groups:

“knowledge is gained through vision; vision is a direct apprehension of a world of transparent objects. . . . Seeing is the origin of knowing” (398). Only by witnessing, or having a credible

witness to, the real-life experience of marginalized identity groups can we begin productive discourse about them.

When audience members encounter Sherlock, it seems impossible not to notice his lack of a romantic partner because of the extent to which coupling is the default expectation in our culture and because the “love interest” story line is certainly prime fodder for television series to explore. For providing the opportunity for a non-heteronormative character to figure as the male lead in a series, the creators/casting directors of *Sherlock* deserve praise, although, to be fair, Sherlock’s lack of interest in sex and romance does align with the canonical version of Sherlock Holmes. “Visibility” results from this perceived lack as Sherlock’s sexuality and relationship status often comes under scrutiny from characters in the series and fans of the show. However, this visibility resulting from Sherlock’s refusal to identify his sexuality in a way that satisfies the other characters and, by extension, fans, does not automatically generate interest in alternative epistemologies. It is only made visible because of its fringe position rather than because it creates the potential for examining “experience” as a way to refigure marginalized identities as part of, rather than in deference to, dominant discourse, ideologies, and epistemologies. Furthermore, the other characters’ constant battering of Sherlock to disclose his sexual identity and to find a suitable partner makes their understanding of a lived experience that countermands heteronormative instantiations of culture impossible, which marginalizes Sherlock even further.

The pressure of “the open secret” that Eve Sedgwick invokes in *Epistemology of the Closet* poses unique challenges for asexual individuals, who may not be interested in or informed enough to disclose their sexual identity in a meaningful way. The pressure to disclose exists

because sexual/gender identity is, as Sedgwick argues, “considered a matter of public concern” (70). As we see in our lived experience, queer-identified people who respond to this pressure and immediately identify themselves often face either rejection or reduction to tokens and spokespeople, losing the chance to simply exist as authentic human beings who are not just or only their non-heteronormative identities. At the same time, if queer-identified people choose not to disclose their “secret,” they risk offending those people with whom they are trying to form relationships. The expectation that people of unconventional gender and sexual identities “confess” stems from and facilitates the pathologization of those identities as abject. Also, the unique importance ascribed to “coming out” creates a tension between the “secret keepers” and everyone with whom they come into contact. Most often and certainly in the context of television narratives, the pressure of the open secret is too much to bear, and characters confess their secrets. Sherlock is different. This character’s refusal to self-identify, even in the face of pressure from other characters, allows that tension to be perpetuated, bringing attention to the essential role that disclosure plays in queer politics, rather than only representing and making visible a queer character. This is a unique portrayal of a leading man and as such positions writers and viewers of the show to generate or inspire unique insight.

Although popular culture artifacts, like television shows, are certainly ephemeral, they are also pervasive and can have a lasting impact on the general public’s perception. Especially when a television show breaks from the norm and includes characters who challenge typical heteronormative views/values, there is an opportunity for the show to become more than mere entertainment. In addition, because of the prevalence of digital texts—including news articles, interviews, clips, promotional photos, stories, etc.—being archived, the characters, plots, and

information about a television series, for example, long outlive the actual number of years the series is broadcast. Television series that have an impact on popular culture transcend their initial broadcast dates and become touchstones of our culture.

My research for this dissertation has allowed me to explore *Sherlock*, and the Internet-savvy fandom's related texts created on and disseminated through social media, fan fiction archives, and websites. These texts, involving several print and visual technologies, are particularly useful and timely for studying digital communities and digital culture and constructing an understanding of the ways in which alterity is represented, consumed, transformed, challenged/championed, and disseminated by the viewing public.

This show and corresponding digital artifacts can inspire the public to think more critically about representations of sexuality and gender. Most important to my work in this dissertation, the show and artifacts also inspire prolific web-based responses from fans that range from deeply personal self-reflections (e.g., blogs, YouTube videos) and critical dialogues from fans and non-fans (e.g., discussion board posts, comments responding to online newspaper articles) to creative works (e.g., Tumblr sites devoted to a theme, such as asexuality and *Sherlock*; the creation of fan fiction archives or the stories, drawings, or videos stored within them); and even to activist work (e.g., educational or institutional websites' articles or interviews regarding a *Sherlock*-related news topic). These interactions are shaped by the affordances of the digital spaces; since *Sherlock* began in 2010, for example, fans have worked with a wide variety of social media. The ability for fans to communicate instantaneously (at least within Western cultures that encourage Internet access) and to archive creative or critical works seems to have stimulated growth in the number of *Sherlock* fan communities. Although digital culture has been

mired in criticism regarding the extent to which users have become passive consumers of filtered knowledge, as per writers like Nicholas Carr, or anti-social, as per writers like Sherry Turkle, these fan works illustrate the extent to which the affordances of digital media and certain contexts make possible empowering opportunities to deepen self-knowledge and to build community. Fan communities have the ability to shape the perceptions of those who passively observe or actively participate in a forum, but they can also shape the popular culture texts to which they are responding, making fans both producers and consumers. Such has been the case with *Sherlock*; the series' content has been influenced by fans who take to the Internet in a variety of ways to creatively and/or critically express their varied views of the show and its characters.

By exploring why/how *Sherlock* inspires fans (and sometimes advocates working toward greater mainstream recognition of minority sexual identities) to produce creative or critical works/content, my research contributes to a larger discussion regarding the need for popular culture representations of non-heteronormative characters. The focus of my dissertation is reflected in the following questions and what they imply about the unique power and limitations of critical and creative praxis online: 1) What is the significance of *Sherlock* fan-produced content, especially as it relates to the show's representation of non-heteronormative sexual identities/desires? 2) What is the extent to which the creation and dissemination of these digital artifacts may be empowering or disempowering both to the creators and consumers of those texts? More specifically, how do these online interactions work to establish a cultural advocacy toward recognition and understanding of asexual identity and fan identity? 3) How are participants in *Sherlock* fan culture affected by the opportunities for community building and

free self-expression that exist in unique ways in online environments? 4) How do these online texts inspire and influence the material world (advocacy) and the source text (the television show)? 5) By influencing the material world and the source text, to what extent might these participants in digital culture have the potential to influence mainstream culture's perceptions of the show and of the non-heteronormative sexual identities that the characters portray?

Specific Framework

To address these questions, I have chosen artifacts that exemplify the participants' consumption or production of critical and/or creative texts inspired by *Sherlock*. Texts have been chosen based on how the content producers and consumers interact with the environment, each other, and others outside of the fan-based communities online. For example, some criteria for choosing artifacts include the following: 1) All artifacts clearly reference *Sherlock*. 2) In some cases, artifacts have been organized according to whether they are creative works or critical responses to the show or fan-created created works—examples include creative works such as fan fiction, videos, and photographs and critical responses via blogs, forums, or websites. 3) In some cases, artifacts have been chosen because of the type and scope of influence the texts have on their audiences. For example, I chose some texts because of their “viral” nature or because of their recognition by mainstream media or showrunners/celebrities. This approach allowed me to select a varied sample of digital texts and sites appropriate to the purpose of this research.

The international *Sherlock* fan community frequently uses digital media to communicate with each other and outside-fandom sources ranging from series showrunners and cast to advocacy groups like Asexuality Visibility and Education Network (AVEN) to professional

journalists writing for mainstream entertainment or news media. The wealth of texts provided by this fandom makes it worth studying in light of the ways that fans communicate online and the rhetorical impetus for that communication, such as the need to educate oneself or others, work with advocacy groups, or share creative works, as well as news or rumors, with those who are equally invested in *Sherlock* and, most often, its actors, particularly Benedict Cumberbatch, who plays Sherlock Holmes, and Martin Freeman, who plays John Watson. My methodology takes into account the need to be well versed in the primary source in order to understand and appreciate the texts that fans produce.

I had to view the *Sherlock* television canon to evaluate how the writers, directors, and actors presented queer characters whose interpretation forms the basis of diverse fan readings and the creative works resulting from those readings. The episodes' broadcast schedule, especially the filming and broadcast premiere of "The Abominable Bride" (2016), often determined when more texts, such as #Setlock tweets, were more prevalent. Thus, keeping up with filming for new episodes, as well as watching the television canon, became cyclic focal points of my research.

Next, to make the number of fan-generated texts manageable to study, I chose to analyze #Setlock tweets, three blogs, fan fiction posted to Archive of Our Own (AO3), posts to advocacy site AVEN, the semi-official series website Sherlockology, and mainstream online entertainment news articles referring to *Sherlock* and its showrunners and cast. Asexuality advocates only became active on forums like AVEN after Steven Moffat and Benedict Cumberbatch began discussing Sherlock's sexuality in media interviews. Especially when the cast or showrunners commented on fans' reading of Sherlock's sexuality (especially asexuality) that differs from the

official interpretation of a character, fans posted comments about the interviews on forums. They often disagreed with the interpretation of the character or of Moffat's or Cumberbatch's comments about asexuality. These responses in advocacy forums did not occur until Moffat or Cumberbatch responded in media interviews to fans' reading of Sherlock as asexual, which took place beginning in 2014.

Consequently, I further limited my research to English-language texts sent, posted, or published between 2014-May 2016, with the exception of fan fiction stories archived within AO3; I searched the archive going back to August 2010, shortly after the first season's *Sherlock* episodes had been broadcast in the U.K. and fans began writing stories specifically about this adaptation of Sherlock Holmes. Sherlock was a hot new television series in 2010, after episodes were broadcast in the U.K and, within months, around the world. Fan fiction began appearing on AO3 in 2010 as British fans embraced the series and began to interact creatively with this source text. Typically, one way that a new, burgeoning fandom expresses itself creatively is by writing fan fiction. The modernized, sexually ambiguous Sherlock Holmes encouraged fans to "ship" (write stories about two characters in a potentially sexual relationship) Sherlock and his flat mate, John Watson in order to fill in the gaps within the episodes. Fans reading Sherlock's lack of self-identification as asexual or homosexual, for example, created stories based on episodes but that explored what potentially could happen between scenes shown on television. As soon as episodes were broadcast, fan fiction speculating about Sherlock's sexual orientation began to be published. I had to establish a cutoff date for my research into fan fiction as I began to write this dissertation, and I waited until fan fiction about the most recent episode, "The Abominable

Bride," had been published. I needed time to read and evaluate the stories, hence the pragmatic cutoff date in early 2016.

During January 2014 and February 2015, I studied tweets with the hashtag #Setlock during the filming of special episode "The Abominable Bride," when the #Setlock community was most active, and again monitored tweets with the #Setlock hashtag when filming began for the fourth season's episodes in April 2016. This sampling of texts provided me with almost daily updates about aspects of *Sherlock* fandom and the ways it uses digital media. #Setlock only became a phenomenon during promotion of Season Three episodes. Because of long hiatuses between seasons, the only period in which I could study #Setlock tweets in real time, without their later deletion or editing from Twitter histories, was during the early 2015 filming of "The Abominable Bride." After the filming of that episode, the showrunners and producers attempted to shut down #Setlock by limiting fan access to filming locations. Although Chapter 2 includes discussion of some #Setlock posts during the filming of the first and second episodes of Season Four in April and May 2016, a more thorough study of all #Setlock tweets was not possible because the tweets were taking place as I was analyzing results and finishing chapters. The prime time for #Setlock as a source text was in January-February 2015.

Using a top-down approach, from general to increasingly more specific texts, as well as largest potential number of sources providing those texts to specific producers (e.g., a website manager, blogger, or story writer), I developed a four-category approach that included both qualitative and quantitative methods to analyze the number and types of communication considered for this project. These categories are

Category One: General Knowledge—mainstream media articles related to Sherlock and those officially associated with it.

Category Two: Fan Generated Knowledge (Temporal)—social media (#Setlock community’s tweets).

Category Three: Fan/Official Source Generated Knowledge (archival)—single-owner or small group-operated websites. Sometimes these sites integrate social media messages but not as a function of the website.

Category Four: Fan-Generated Creative Texts and Responses (archival)—creative responses, like fan fiction, to *Sherlock* and comments about those texts.

Category One

The first category involved a daily Google search of published online articles about Sherlock and those people officially associated with it. These searches resulted in news articles about series-related events (e.g., the start of filming new episodes, episode broadcast dates, appearances by cast members at awards or other public events, such as episode screenings), which often were helpful in determining when, for example, the #Setlock community would become more active. Because fandom in digital media is both temporal and ephemeral, timeliness is crucial. Category One research constitutes what the general public is made aware of

via official channels. This type of research contributes to scaffolding the research plan, helping to organize the time and resources necessary to capture fan-related texts in real time. Digital fan culture research requires anticipating when fan activity will take place in real time in order to capture the fan texts generated in response to some aspect of the show. Additionally, interviews with cast and showrunners and reviews of newly broadcast episodes published in mainstream entertainment news acted as a barometer of public interest or opinion about the series and its fandom. Because fans may not only react to a broadcast episode but to a comment made by an actor, showrunner, or even mainstream media commentator, it is necessary to monitor Category One mainstream texts in order to understand the original context. This original context helps reduce possible bias by referring only to fan representations and perceptions.

Category One research requires that keywords be chosen carefully to result in the most productive online search and that they are used consistently. The following terms were used in Google searches in order to gather articles from online newspapers, tabloids, and magazines: *Sherlock*, Benedict Cumberbatch, Steven Moffat, and Sherlock Holmes. Although other terms, such as Mark Gatiss, Martin Freeman, or episode titles, might have been included, the title of the series, titular character, actor playing that character, and primary showrunner/writer consistently generated a list of articles about the series, many of which also directly refer to fandom. Other actors' names, for example, often would turn up in articles about Cumberbatch, Moffat, or their series, and the four daily search terms made the searches easy to complete and effective for suggesting articles to evaluate. These articles provide a mixture of praise and criticism about the series or its fandom and invite public comment through posts about the published articles or quotations from representatives of the public regarding the article's subject matter. These articles

were read and noted for any significant information regarding fandom and the ways the public reacts to fans or fans respond to *Sherlock*. This helps to establish the relative subject position of fans within media culture.

Category Two

The hashtag #Setlock brings together *Sherlock* fans at peak times during the filming of new episodes. Two such times occurred during the research for this thesis: January-February 2015, when frequent on-location filming took place for “The Abominable Bride,” and April-May 2016, when limited on-location filming took place for the first two episodes of the fourth season. Although several hundred tweets with the hashtag #Setlock were reported at peak times as new information about what fans had seen being filmed or what had been tweeted by someone officially working with *Sherlock*, this mass of individual texts was made more manageable by limiting the tweets to be analyzed to those in English. I copied and pasted the results of a search for the #Setlock hashtag at least once a day during the most active filming periods, depending on how much communication was taking place among fans. Then I reviewed and grouped tweets to look for trends or links to off-Twitter sites that might provide additional information about *Sherlock* fans (e.g., one #Setlock fan’s collection of photographs or videos taken from that day’s on-location filming, a Tumblr site where a #Setlock fan posted original art based on interpretations of what the characters were doing during the on-location filming of a scene). I also noted the number of retweets of the most popular news or images distributed among the #Setlock community, so that I would be able to make claims about the popularity of the tweet. In April 2016, my search results included a conversation between actor Amanda Abbington and

#Setlock or *Sherlock* fans. By following threads of tweeted conversations (often involving Gatiss or Abbington), looking for trends in or ways to categorize tweets, and selecting tweets that represent specific ways to interpret scenes filmed on location or indicate a particular aspect of fan behavior, I could incorporate information about *Sherlock* fandom in a number of chapters.

Capturing (i.e., copying and pasting messages into Word) tweets is imperative for research into fandom because, even more than with other online texts, tweets are easily and frequently deleted. A controversial tweet that the author may wish to remove from public view (e.g., deleting “evidence” that it was written) can be deleted at any time. Celebrities, such as showrunners or actors, may decide to remove tweets that have been misinterpreted or reflect badly on them—such as an angry comment posted during an online argument that does not support a fan-friendly or career-enhancing image of the famous person. Fans, however, understand the highly ephemeral nature of Twitter and often use screen capture to prove the existence of a controversial tweet; such screen caps often are posted to fans’ Tumblr or other websites, where they can be further discussed. I emulated the fan practice of screen capture in order to gather primary sources before they were circumscribed in other formats, like fan websites. This strategy helped me to remain up to date and unbiased, because I kept up with developments as they occurred, rather than investigating something after it had already been posted on a website in service of that author’s interpretations and ideas.

This approach of capturing and grouping tweets can be useful to researchers who want to use quantitative methods to determine numbers of tweets posted by celebrities or fans, group tweets, and enumerate items within categories. However, I preferred a qualitative assessment of tweets; I read and selected tweets whose prose or visual content provide insights into fan

behavior, such as interpretations of characters or plot points based on what was observed and shared through the #Setlock hashtag. I also learned to easily identify tweets and look at the number and types of responses to specific “players” within the #Setlock community: showrunner/actor Gatiss, actor Abbington, producer Sue Vertue, and “superfans” who are highly invested in *Sherlock* and its cast, such as @AnythingBatch. Analysis of the frequency and content of tweets made by or between people with official status and highly invested fans often illustrated the different ways that fans and celebrities use Twitter as a means of communication within the #Setlock community.

Because the #Setlock phenomenon, as discussed in Chapter 2, has also been reported by mainstream media and has had an effect on the way that the television series has been filmed during Season Four, direct observation of the #Setlock community’s tweets is an important part of my research and may be a model for other researchers to use to track fan behavior through the content and frequency of tweets. It also helps to be able to track how these different communities and discourses intersect and overlap, which can be crucial to making claims about the practices and products of digital fan communities.

Category Three

Following a small number of representative websites, operated by a small group or individuals, can provide longer blocks of text for analysis. Tweets are notoriously short and spontaneously written, but blogs published to websites are more likely to be longer and edited. In addition, readers’ responses to website information can be grouped and evaluated; most blogs or menu sections of information, whether on sites maintained by an advocacy group, fan group, or

individual fans, include a discussion forum or comments section where readers can ask questions, share experiences, or publish opinions. Websites should be chosen based on what a researcher wants to investigate. Because maintaining a popular website is quite an investment of time and energy, websites tend to be sites for looking at dedicated fans or advocates.

Because a portion of my dissertation is focused on advocacy inspired by *Sherlock* fan communities, I chose AVEN as the advocacy site most relevant to *Sherlock* fans because it provides information about asexuality—which is one way that fans read Sherlock Holmes’ sexual orientation. *Sherlock* fans join discussions on this site when, for example, showrunner Moffat or actor Cumberbatch has made a comment about asexuality in an interview. Some *Sherlock* fans posting stories to AO3 also have directed readers to asexuality-education/information websites, including AVEN. This is where heavily invested asexuality advocates and fans collide in interesting ways. To learn how fan culture intersects with other discourse communities, I looked at fan websites to determine which outside sources are linked most closely to fan production in order to choose websites on which to focus.

To illustrate the connection between fans and the people who make *Sherlock*, I chose Sherlockology, the semi-official series website. Designed and operated by four fans, Sherlockology has gained the stamp of approval of the BBC and Hartswood Films, producers of the series. This website’s content provides insights into the ways that fans can influence television production and be influenced by content provided by official producers of *Sherlock* content.

Far less than official are three websites chosen for their daily blogs. Benedict’s Third Testicle, Sophie Hunter Gossip Blog, and The Fellowship of Erdemhart produce daily text blogs

and photographs or videos referencing *Sherlock* and its lead actor, Cumberbatch. These sites, produced by individual fans, are well known among *Sherlock* and Cumberbatch fans for their critical evaluation of the actor's work and rumors or news about the television series. One site (The Fellowship of Erdemhart) is operated by a teenaged fan, whereas the other two sites are produced by fans over 30 (one in her 50s). In Chapter 3, these sites provide extensive comments about the series and its fandom and have provided information about the negative side of fandom (flaming, trolling, doxing), which is not evident through the content provided by Sherlockology. These blogs are especially interesting as a source of information because the site owners pride themselves on being "Sherlocks" or detectives who seek out the truth behind public relations hyperbole or only pro-*Sherlock* content provided by official sites; they look for the less-than-perfect information about the stars or the series in order to understand the truth of what goes on behind the scenes. Such websites are especially useful as case studies of fans who publish a blog directed to other fans and have first-hand knowledge of the benefits and perils of participating in fandom.

Category Four

Although Category Three texts also may be produced by individuals (i.e., the blogs), Category Four's individually produced texts differ in the content of the material shared with other fans. Category Four texts are creative works generated by fans and most often consumed by them. In Chapter 4, I focused on fan fiction, although there is a wealth of texts available from digital art to video and everything in between. AO3 is the largest online collection of creative works for any fandom, and its collection of *Sherlock*-themed stories is rapidly approaching

100,000, adding dozens of new entries every day. I analyzed only one segment of these stories—those that pertain to Sherlock’s asexuality and are written in English. I also chose comments that readers posted about asexuality and their responses to the story to help gauge how stories describing Sherlock as asexual have been received by fan readers and whether these stories may encourage readers to learn more about asexuality or share their own experiences with other readers.

Through analysis in these four categories, I attempted to gain a deeper understanding of the way the *Sherlock* fandom operates daily and throughout the series’ episodes produced or broadcast since 2010. By integrating smaller studies of social media tweets, websites, fan fiction, and mainstream media reports, I began to see the big picture of fandom and the many types of digital texts and communication methods that highlight aspects of the complex relationship among fans, the series (*Sherlock*) that precipitated their fandom, and the creators/producers of the series. My research also illustrates the changing nature of digital fandom, in which fans are consumers, but increasingly are producers, of content and, through the use of digital technologies, may have a greater influence on the official producers of a television series.

Chapter Summaries

Chapter 2: Social Media and the Social Tensions Surrounding “Unofficial” Fan Sites and BBC-Sanctioned Media Presence: Reaching the “Real” World

Shay David asserts that “Online knowledge communities are not microcosms of . . . larger social systems but new formations within and in continuity with them” (page). She remarks that the “negotiation” between “established knowledge systems” and new online

knowledge communities results in those online communities being “social laboratories where community values, goals, and modes of interaction must be designed rather than received” (193). This chapter analyzes the kind of “negotiations” necessary to be a part of a sanctioned online media presence (i.e., Sherlockology) or part of an unsanctioned online media presence (i.e., #Setlock) and how/why these fan-based knowledge communities “design” their digital spaces and interactions in ways that reflect their affiliations and, more broadly, their goals.

In this chapter, a study of the online media presence of prominent unsanctioned fan sites like #Setlock on Twitter is used to illustrate the value of digital media to support unfettered content free from the constraints placed upon BBC-sanctioned media like the website Sherlockology. #Setlock fan sites and Sherlockology are mediated in different ways that illustrate the “unwritten rules” of communication within digital communities and the consequences of publishing information for and about this television series and its fandom. Much of this chapter makes claims about the dwindling divide between those who have been traditionally considered “producers” and those who have been traditionally considered “consumers” in order to suggest how and why these fan communities are likely to be influential platforms for advocacy work.

Chapter 3: The Evolution of Sherlock Fan Culture Toward an Ethic of Advocacy: Representing Asexuality

Exploring the power of fandom (as established by the previous chapter) toward an ethic of advocacy, this chapter shows how the principles of online community building explored in the previous chapter can be capitalized on when the community shares a “collective identity” and

functions as a site for online advocacy. The chapter begins by positioning asexuality as a burgeoning identity group with almost no popular culture representation. Asexuality is not yet recognized very widely as an identity group, and Sherlock, the television series' title character, is being co-opted by advocates to represent asexual identity in the critical works of *Sherlock* fans and asexuality advocates online, even though showrunners and the actor portraying Sherlock deny that he is asexual and the character never explicitly self-identifies. The chapter begins by establishing the current state of the asexuality movement by showing parallels with the LGBT movement, while acknowledging the tension/critical differences between LGBT and asexual advocacies in order to argue that online communities are ideal venues for the kind of advocacy likely to be most productive to advance the current stage of the asexuality movement. This chapter then provides evidence that the depiction of non-heteronormative characters in the show creates an opportunity to question heteronormative notions of love and intimacy, which lends itself to a queer/asexual reading by fans. Looking at the critical contributions of fans to sites that engage in different types of advocacy work online is a focal point in this chapter and leads to a discussion of the ways in which identities are created and maintained discursively in online spaces.

Finally, this chapter provides evidence that *Sherlock* is a springboard for significant recognition of and advocacy for asexual identity enacted by fans online. Fans' texts, ranging from individuals' deeply personal responses to fan communities to sites for activism, illustrate how *Sherlock* has empowered fans to explore and sometimes question notions of heterosexism, their own sexual identities, and cultural perspectives on alterity. This chapter argues that these

often discounted online texts are a significant tool for advocacy online because rather than in spite of their temporality, and because they most often function dialectically.

Chapter 4: Understanding Representations of Asexuality in Sherlock Fan Fiction as Advocacy Work

Whereas the previous chapter explores the *Sherlock* series source text and Internet communities that are organized around the asexuality advocacy movement and connected to *Sherlock* overtly, this chapter examines the creative works of *Sherlock* fans who focus on asexuality, particularly fan fiction. This chapter examines the ways in which the affordances of digital media inspire an opportunity for “play.” This “play” can lead to important inquiries/insights into gender, sexuality, and desire, both by the slash fiction writers and slash fiction fans who rank and comment on their favorite selections. The largest collection of *Sherlock* fan fiction, the AO3: Sherlock TV archive, encourages writers to share, explore, or promote the characters’ sexuality, which may also reflect their own sexual orientation or views about the validity of non-heteronormative relationships.

In this chapter, I first examine the ways in which the digital environment can create a space that can be perceived as “safe” by those who are producing creative works that subvert mainstream culture’s expectations regarding acceptable expressions of desire. I then explore the consequences when mainstream culture intercedes, as has happened in several contexts involving *Sherlock* fandom, and finally how the “head canon” (i.e., the way that fans think of *Sherlock* characters and plot, which usually differs significantly from the broadcast version) created and maintained by fan fiction communities is evidence of the ability of these groups to upend

traditional authority (i.e., showrunners) in favor of culminating alternatives to the dominant discourse, not just about *Sherlock*, but about asexuality.

Conclusion

This dissertation is the culmination of my understanding of both fan and advocate as practice and, in a more limited sense, as identity in digital spaces. The combination of fandom and advocacy, though, at times, invested in cross purposes, is a pairing that works to inspire activism, especially for these early stages of cultural advocacy for asexuals. Because the asexuality advocacy movement is only just beginning to gain momentum, the necessity for praxis that reflects the larger goal of reaching out to others who have similar interests either because they are invested in a certain reading of their favorite character, because they are asexuals who are exploring what it might mean to be asexual and/or how to explain their identity to others, or because they are allies. These categories are not mutually exclusive and especially in Chapter 4, we see some recognition of overlap as many asexuality fan fiction authors also identify as asexual and as advocates. The goals of people who are invested emotionally and pragmatically in the goals of visibility and understanding, either for themselves or for a beloved character are the backbone of this study and the extent to which they are finding community and understanding and increasing awareness of asexuality as a legitimate identity category leaves me optimistic for the future of the asexuality movement.

Chapter 2 begins by establishing a framework for understanding two types of fan practice online: practices that are officially sanctioned and practices that are actively discouraged by

official sources. Unsanctioned practices are necessary when engaging, whether directly or indirectly, with advocacy work. The counter-cultural ethos of fandom lends itself well to this end.

CHAPTER 2: SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE SOCIAL TENSION SURROUNDING “UNOFFICIAL” FAN SITES AND BBC-SANCTIONED MEDIA PRESENCE: REACHING THE “REAL” WORLD

“Fandom and the media industry must exist together; one necessitates the other. Media play is finding those nuanced moments when fandom and the industry are discursively interactive.

*Those moments reveal sites of power struggle, where sometimes fandom asserts itself and other times the industry claims ownership. . . .Media play happens because of the emotional connection to a media or text. . . .Fans become part of the industry just as the industry relies on fans.” -Paul Booth, *Playing Fans: Negotiating Fandom and Media in the Digital Age**

David asserts that “Online knowledge communities are not microcosms of . . . larger social systems but new formations within and in continuity with them.” She remarks that the “negotiation” between “established knowledge systems” and new online knowledge communities results in those online communities being “social laboratories where community values, goals, and modes of interaction must be designed rather than received” (193). My research in this chapter explores the kind of “negotiations” that, as noted in the previous chapter, David asserts are necessary to be a part of a sanctioned online media presence (i.e., Sherlockology) or part of an unsanctioned online media presence (i.e., #Setlock). This chapter also illustrates how/why these fan-based knowledge communities “design” their digital spaces and interactions in ways that reflect their affiliations and, more broadly, their goals. The dwindling divide between those who have been traditionally considered “producers” (e.g., actors, showrunners) and those who have been traditionally considered “consumers” (e.g., fans) has led

to particular ways for fans to assert their identity as fans and to contribute to a broader understanding of fan culture and community, especially as interactions transpire in digital spaces.

Noted interactions between *Sherlock* fans and the producers of *Sherlock* (i.e., showrunners and celebrities) demonstrate what Joe Karaganis asserts about the current state of digital culture:

Relationships between cultural producers and consumers give rise to new cultural roles that blur the distinctions between the two. . . .The contribution of digital technologies to this process is felt primarily along two axes: growth in the scope of “authorship,” meaning the ability to create and transform cultural goods; and growth in the size of the publics within which individuals can efficiently operate, reflecting improved capacities to search for, collaborate on, and distribute expressive material across large networks. (223)

The digital space reframes the kind of relationship that fans can have with the creators of the texts that they love and with the text itself. For example, *Sherlock*'s showrunners, especially Moffat, are very much aware of the fan community's presence on social media (e.g., Tumblr, Twitter). Moffat makes use of this knowledge in unexpected ways that have resulted in fans having a direct influence on the show and, consequently, on the mainstream culture that consumes it. He knew, for example, that fans spent much of the two-year hiatus between the broadcast of Season Two and Season Three episodes theorizing about how Sherlock survived a fall from a hospital roof. Moffat also had become aware of fan fiction pairings not previously shown in the series. When Moffat wrote the “return” episode (“The Empty Hearse”) to begin

Season Three, he incorporated scenes that specifically referenced fans or responded to fan expectations regarding Sherlock's potential romantic relationships.

A fan theory about Sherlock's survival became the basis of a "theory" scene in the episode. According to this fan theory shown on screen, Sherlock and his nemesis Jim Moriarty (Andrew Scott) are working together to fake Sherlock's death by setting up a dummy to fall from the roof. While Sherlock mimics sorrow during his phone conversation with John Watson right before "he" falls, Moriarty, clearly not Sherlock's foe in this theory, nearly spoils the ruse by giggling. Sherlock shushes him, the pair lock eyes, and they move toward a kiss. Although the scene is abruptly cut before the kiss takes place, this "theory" scene illustrates Sherlock in a homosexual relationship—something that many fans portray in fan fiction, discuss on fan forums, and would like to see become televised scenes.

"The Empty Hearse" also depicts fans of Sherlock, who are included as part of the show, mimicking the community of real-world *Sherlock* fans who obsessively follow the series. During the previous episode/cliffhanger, "The Reichenbach Fall," Sherlock is glorified in London's media for the high-profile cases he solves; by the end of the episode, however, Moriarty has manipulated the media into turning against Sherlock. Nevertheless, Sherlock's media popularity has garnered him many fans, who fail to believe that he is anything less than a hero. In "The Empty Hearse," a group of fans meets in person to discuss what happened to Sherlock and postulate whether he is still alive and, if so, how he survived the fall. The meeting only breaks up when every fan's phone starts buzzing at once with the news—spreading quickly via social media—that Sherlock has returned from the "dead." Such a "meta" (i.e., referring to conventions of a genre) scene that illustrates how real-world fans of the series become highly invested in the

characters indicates that Moffat, who wrote this episode, recognizes fan devotion to the series (or Sherlock) and the immediate connection among fans through social media.

Within one episode, Moffat acknowledges fans' intense investment in Sherlock Holmes (or, in the real world, *Sherlock*) fandom. The series' fans influenced the direction of this episode in particular by making their expectations for character development known within fan communities, and Moffat, aware of these communities, acknowledged them. This acknowledgment is evidence that the showrunners pay attention to fan activity in a critical way and that fans directly influence the content of the show, which suggests a concomitant relationship between showrunners and fans that even extends to content.

#Setlock and Sherlockology are mediated in different ways that illustrate the “unwritten rules” of communication within digital communities and the consequences of publishing information for and about this television series. According to Boothe in *Playing Fans: Negotiating Fandom and Media in the Digital Age*,

We [fans] play with the borders and frames of narratives through our own imaginative engagement. As consumers of media, we play with the texts, meanings, and values created by media industries. But playing fandom isn't just what we do with our everyday media; it's also what our media do with us. As media producers ourselves, we are played by those same industries. Our creative work is used to sell products and services. Our clicks become capital. We are commoditized from and marketed to. (1)

This tension between fans and those who produce the media that they consume and, at times, transform is what shapes fan interactions in different venues; this chapter presents primary research gathered from both web/social media sites and news sources and an analysis of the ways in which content from both #Setlock and Sherlockology is created and perceived by fans and a general audience, in order to examine the different rhetorical and creative strategies used to generate and disseminate content in these different cases. The information gathered is the basis for arguments regarding the extent to which the affordances of digital media not sanctioned by the producers of a traditional institution, like the BBC, may empower dedicated and creative fans (and their fans). These unsanctioned fan sites may influence or undermine mainstream media's attempts to control digital content regarding a television series. As well, such fan sites may affect the showrunners' ability to control perceptions regarding the series. This lack of control can be perceived as problematic when, for showrunners, controlling perceptions about their creation is an integral part of staying relevant and staying on the air, which is what allows them to continue profiting from their work.

Sherlockology and the Shift from Fan Site to Semi-official Website

Shortly after *Sherlock* debuted in the U.K. in summer 2010, a small group of British Sherlock Holmes and *Sherlock* fans launched the website Sherlockology. It provided information about the television series, as well as Sherlock Holmes, and the “staff” of four were Sherlockians, Sherlock Holmes fans knowledgeable about both canon and adaptations. The well-designed site, with a variety of content appropriate for fans of both Holmes and *Sherlock*, attracted not only the appreciation and attention of an increasingly large fan base but also of the

producers of *Sherlock*. The cast (especially Cumberbatch) and showrunners became aware of Sherlockology because of its knowledgeable, professionally designed content and respectful attitude toward the series. When Sherlockology staff attended, for example, an advance screening of an episode, Cumberbatch immediately recognized the name “Sherlockology” and expressed his pleasure with the site (Porter). By 2013, when *Sherlock* began filming its third season’s episodes, fan volunteers from Sherlockology met with BBC representatives to discuss the website. The meeting led to this website being granted a semi-official status not offered to any other fan site.

In recognition of Sherlockology’s special status as a fan-operated website with “insider” access to the showrunners, producer Vertue wrote a promotional blurb for the website, which is prominently featured on its home page: “Thanks Team Sherlockology for all your dedication, hard work and sleepless nights in getting your website to this level of class, accuracy and information. Certainly takes a lot of heat off ME having to do it!” (Sherlockology, “Sue Vertue, Hartswood Films”). By listing her name and the production company on this fan site, Vertue alerted anyone visiting the site that this group of fans had achieved a new level of connection with the showrunners and cast. This statement increases the website’s status (and that of its volunteer staff) and indicates that the information presented on this site has the blessing of the showrunners.

It also makes observers question the extent to which fan labor is being exploited by corporate entities. Sherlockology doesn't make a profit. It generates money to keep the domain name and operate the site; it sells Sherlockology t-shirts and has a place for the site's fans to donate money for site upkeep. The designers, webmasters, writers, and so on are four unpaid

volunteers. However, groups whose products are promoted on the site (e.g., the BBC, MX Publishing) may make money through product sales because their wares are advertised on Sherlockology. The website, however, does not get any of this money. According to Bertha Chin in "Sherlockology and Galactica.tv: Fan Sites as Gifts or Exploited Labor?" using this kind of fan labor for the purpose of promoting the show is not as simple as the pure exploitation that is suggested by Vertue's comment, which acknowledges that the services that Sherlockology provides are the domain of her job as producer. However, fans who contribute to their fandom, according to Chin, participate in a "gift economy" in which the exchange for their labor is often pleasure and recognition. In the case of Sherlockology, the endorsement by Vertue is major recognition. In an attempt to re-frame how fan contributions are traditionally perceived as tertiary, Chin looks to the fans who create the content for their perception of the value of their fan-driven works. In an interview with Sherlockology founders/operators, Chin reports that they feel they are contributing to fan culture in a significant way and that is what is rewarding, not that they are serving the publicity machine for *Sherlock*. This is significant because fans who operate in online communities are often vested in more than just the object of their affection; they are focused on community building.

The shift to a sanctioned website also indicated an important change in the content provided to fans via Sherlockology. Although the Sherlockology staff of fan volunteers could still technically create any type of content for their site, they began to be provided information that no other fan site (or fans in general) could learn elsewhere. Sherlockology became a conduit through which individual fans could theoretically submit questions or comments to the producers of *Sherlock* as well as receive important updates about the series. Thus, Sherlockology has

become a means for showrunners, to a certain extent, to control the type of information presented to fans through a frequently visited website, as well as Sherlockology's social media presence on Twitter, Facebook, Tumblr, YouTube, and Instagram. If Sherlockology would violate the trust in which the BBC and Hartswood Films has placed in it not to divulge spoilers (i.e., information about upcoming episodes not officially released to the public), for example, the team likely would find its access to actors and producers abruptly curtailed. However, in theory, Sherlockology can publish whatever it likes on its website, and the variety of content illustrates the mediation between an international fan community desiring the latest in-depth information about Sherlock Holmes, *Sherlock*, or actor-related projects and the showrunners who wish to court fans but present only the amount and type of information they feel is beneficial to promoting the series.

In addition, the site continued to build a fan community beyond the explicit control of showrunners or the BBC because fans can contact Sherlockology directly and develop a personal connection to the website team through online communication channels. For example, fans tweet Sherlockology with their comments about an episode or news about the series and, within a few minutes at the latest, view their tweets published on the Sherlockology site as the result of a direct feed from Sherlockology's Twitter account to the website. An autofeed supplies tweets to the Sherlockology website, but the staff monitors the tweeted content and manually removes any tweets they find offensive. Fans send email to the team and receive a personalized response. As well, not all Sherlockology content refers to *Sherlock*. When Cumberbatch starred on stage in *Hamlet* in 2015 or promoted his role as Dr. Strange in a forthcoming Marvel movie slated for release in late 2016, Sherlockology wrote or linked articles about the actor's non-*Sherlock*

projects in which Cumberbatch and *Sherlock* fans likely are interested. These types of articles attract more hits for the website and may draw visitors' attention to other recently posted content specifically about *Sherlock*. Fans turn to Sherlockology because of the accessibility and professionalism in the site's design and the accuracy and variety of content. The site and its links always serve to draw attention to the latest info about *Sherlock*, whether during hiatuses (lower traffic times) or seasonal broadcasts (higher traffic times). There's really not a difference in the function, although obviously more people may be interested in *Sherlock* and seeking information about the series when its episodes are in the news or being broadcast.

Companies who would like to promote their merchandise to *Sherlock* fans have a way to market their wares if Sherlockology staff members deem them appropriate. Not surprisingly, BBC-produced merchandise, such as official *Sherlock* scarves, coffee mugs, or posters, are promoted through articles and links to places to buy the merchandise. The BBC or Hartswood Films also periodically supplies prizes for contests generated to get more fans involved with the site and aware of upcoming *Sherlock* episodes. However, creative fans who have developed products related to Sherlock Holmes (and therefore not in violation of any BBC copyright to the characters or series) and book authors writing about Sherlock Holmes or *Sherlock* in academic books or novels allowed through open domain also have publicized their works via Sherlockology. The website even markets itself through a line of Sherlockology t-shirts and scarves (Sherlockology, "Sherlockabilia"), a move which aims to grant fans not working on the website implied "status" by wearing Sherlockology apparel and forging a link with the semi-official *Sherlock* site. Although Sherlockology is not a for-profit site, it has become associated with fan-related and official merchandise and has expanded its purpose from the place to go for

information to the place to be recognized as a *Sherlock* fan. The nature of Sherlockology is to be the repository of *Sherlock* information and, in a limited sense, products. Fans who visit the site are consumers of information (and possibly merchandise), and the tone of all information is positive toward the cast, crew, and content of *Sherlock*. Although fans may feel that Sherlockology provides them direct access to the showrunners, this “access” is carefully managed by the Sherlockology staff and always under the scrutiny of the BBC and Hartswood Films.

Content Made Possible by Hartswood Films

Since its status change, Sherlockology has become, as its home page notes, “The Ultimate Guide for any BBC *Sherlock* Fan.” Articles located under the News & Events menu illustrate the special relationship that the website has with the BBC and Hartswood Films and directs fans to unique content related to the series. The article “Sherlock: The Abominable Bride—Set Visit” was published on January 2, 2016, the day after the television special “The Abominable Bride” had been broadcast in the U.K. and U.S. and had begun to be distributed internationally to cinemas to reach an even wider audience. The date of the set visit, however, was February 3, 2015, nearly a year earlier. Although Sherlockology staff were invited to the *Sherlock* set for an exclusive behind-the-scenes visit, they were not allowed to publish the set report until after the episode had been broadcast. (Similarly, Sherlockology carefully times its episode reviews and avoids releasing any information that may inform fans of narrative content before an episode’s release date.)

The set report offers tidbits that fans cannot read anywhere else. Along with journalists also invited to the set, the Sherlockology team explained that, upon arriving in Bristol, where filming was taking place, they and the journalists were “all herded into a relatively small holding room, where representatives from the BBC hand[ed] us various sheets of paper that we [had] to sign to prevent us saying anything about this trip until we’re told that we can do so months later” (Sherlockology, “Sherlock: The Abominable Bride—Set Visit”). This comment underscores to readers two important facts about Sherlockology: it is granted the same status as professional journalists’ publications, and the site is restricted in the same way as other mainstream news media and is not unregulated like most fan sites. The Sherlockology team interviewed cast members and showrunners and, eventually, presented their interviews online as part of the set report. Just like other journalists, they were not restricted as to the types of questions they could ask, so, on behalf of fans, they could pose questions that their readers would like to have answered. The only restriction in this case was the embargo on publication until the episode had been broadcast so that no spoilers would be published in advance. In addition to cast and crew interviews, the report features photographs taken on set that day, providing a unique “fan” perspective on the set visit and providing information that journalists did not publish in their publications. Sherlockology also maintains a more awestruck tone in the narration and a minute-by-minute account of the day’s activities, a voice and organizational structure unlike the reports that typically appear in newspapers or magazines for a mainstream audience of casual *Sherlock* viewers. In contrast with the #Setlock fan community that will be discussed next, Sherlockology is far more like a mainstream news publication; however, unlike a mainstream media outlet, Sherlockology represents *Sherlock* fans and gears its graphical and textual elements to fans, with

puzzles, calendars, and wallpapers, as well as extensive prose details about set visits and special events—all types of information found on typical fan sites rather than in journalistic articles.

Sherlockology tows the line between being a site produced by ardent fans who provide inside information to other fans who lack the staff's access to *Sherlock* and serving as a quasi-official site supporting the BBC and *Sherlock*'s producers by being deferential to showrunners, cast, and crew. The published description of the Sherlockology team's visit to the Cardiff set during filming of "The Empty Hearse" serves as an example of how these tensions play out. The Sherlockology team was left alone in a waiting room (green room) with a script on the table. The report of their temptation allows fans reading about the set visit to put themselves in the staffers' place:

We resist the urge to look.

Yes, we want to know, but with all the cast and crew working so hard, our conscience makes it clear that the solution [to Sherlock's return from the "dead"] deserves to be discovered while watching it on screen in the final cut. (Sherlockology, "Sherlockology on Set")

This paragraph echoes Moffat's and Gatiss' attitude toward spoilers—that fans should not reveal anything about an episode before its broadcast. It also reassures the BBC and producers that the Sherlockology staff can be trusted.

Other details in the Sherlockology set report are likely to interest fans heavily invested in the series: “We do not miss the opportunity to get some advanced information on Sherlock’s costume and particularly his new scarf. Benedict was given three to choose from, we’re told.” This type of detail is unimportant to casual viewers, and mainstream media seldom use a first-person narrative in their set reports.

In a *Telegraph* article about a set visit during filming of “The Abominable Bride,” for example, journalist Tim Martin includes interviews with the series stars, referring to Benedict Cumberbatch as “Cumberbatch” rather than the familiar, fannish use of “Benedict” favored by Sherlockology. The article’s emphasis is on quotations and descriptions of what took place on set are used as transitions between interviews with cast members. The following description of the lead actors preparing for a scene illustrates a third-person, objective style typical of newspaper articles and different from Sherlockology’s fan narrative:

As Cumberbatch and Freeman prepare to return to set, they mutter about the show’s excursion into period drama. Freeman laments the fact that he can’t get dressed by himself, while Cumberbatch has period arcana to deal with, including a fancy meerschaum pipe that is, he notes darkly, “a pyrotechnic pipe” [that might explode if he smokes it]. (Martin)

The *Telegraph* article, like Sherlockology’s report, provides details to interest highly invested fans, but the journalist does not include references to himself and merely reports what took place.

Martin may or may not be a fan of the series or its actors, but readers cannot tell his bias from the style or content of his report.

Just as Sherlockology's behind-the-scene reports differ in tone and style from the majority of newspaper reports, so does the Sherlockology team's style differ from highly invested fans' reviews, either pro or con. The Sherlockology spoiler-free review of "The Empty Hearse" covers the plot's main points and assures fans that they will be satisfied with the episode. Unlike other fan reviews, Sherlockology's was posted before the episode was broadcast (indicating their special fan status) but did not reveal any surprises about the story or characters. The team's review is positive, interspersing supportive but unrevealing phrases like "making a triumphant return," "infused with uproarious comedy, wicked and knowing writing," and "brilliant" performances throughout the review (Sherlockology, "Sherlock S3E1").

In contrast, fan sites known for being pro-Cumberbatch or *-Sherlock*, such as Cumberbatchweb, offer gushing reviews presented in first person. Within one sentence, Cumberbatchweb describes "The Empty Hearse" as "emotional, exhilarating, audacious, and thrillingly clever." She also bases the review on the way she would have written the episode:

It's just chock full of so many lovely moments it's really hard to know where to start. If I had sat down before the episode aired & written myself a little checklist of things I'd like included in the episode . . . the resulting list would have looked a lot like The Empty Hearse.

In short, Cumberbatchweb gives a positive review because “The Empty Hearse” meets her expectations as a fan; she does not provide an objective assessment of the episode.

Cumberbatchweb’s review also describes “Benedict’s parents [who guest star in this episode] . . . exuding warmth from every pore.” Cumberbatch is “beyond brilliant,” and Freeman is described within one sentence as “fearless, brave, funny and very touching.” This review with its superlative adjectives, use of first names, and comments about the lead actor’s parents, not their characters, is typical of positive reviews posted on personal websites celebrating a series or an actor. Cumberbatchweb may hope that Cumberbatch or *Sherlock*’s showrunners read the review and, even if they do not acknowledge it, think kindly of her or perhaps offer her similar perks provided to Sherlockology if her site positively promotes the series or its lead actor. The length of Cumberbatchweb’s review is twice that of Sherlockology’s and considerably longer than journalistic reviews, primarily because of effusive word choice and strings of superlatives. Although Sherlockology’s review is also positive, it does not go to the extreme level of Cumberbatchweb’s everything-is-brilliant review.

Fans posting far less positive reviews also may indicate a high level of personal investment in a series, if only to pick it apart. A fan review of “The Empty Hearse” posted to A.V. Club terms Cumberbatch only “a capable actor” instead of deeming him “brilliant,” as Sherlockology and Cumberbatchweb do. Moffat fares much worse; he is “his show’s biggest problem” by trying to provide too much clever meta content. Nevertheless, *Sherlock* may be worth watching “when the show can get off its hamster wheel” and when “Moffat’s Sherlock” is not being “a total dick” (Valentine).

Another fan review, entitled “A Negative Review: Sherlock Series 3 Sucks,” offers a highly critical but logical assessment of “The Empty Hearse,” as well as the other two episodes in Season Three. The reviewer explains that “Steven Moffat’s most consistent failure . . . is his total inability to let characters face the consequences of their actions Characters forget all the nasty things they’ve done to each other at a moment’s notice” (The Diurnal Rambler). The reviewer then points out evidence from Season Three episodes to support his argument; this is not simply a negative review because the fan does not agree with the direction the series is taking. He concludes that *Sherlock*’s villain in Season Three, Charles Augustus Magnussen, is a “saint” compared to Sherlock, who “lies to everyone he meets, forces an apology out of someone at bomb-point (then laughs about it), sees other characters as tools, and constantly talks about not caring for anyone else in the world.” According to this fan-reviewer, throughout Season Three, showrunner/writer Moffat “urinates all over . . . the show” (The Diurnal Rambler). It is unlikely that reviewers, especially like The Diurnal Rambler, would not have taken the time to write an evidence-based review that indicates in-depth knowledge of episodes if they were not invested in the show. After all, unlike newspaper reviewers, they are not paid to write a review. They are not likely to gain any approval from the series’ cast, crew, or showrunners (who may never even read the review). These fans are not gaining benefits even from other fans when they provide negative reviews that may challenge hardcore fans’ unwavering acceptance of everything *Sherlock*, even if criticism is supported by the reviewers’ interpretations of scenes and does not simply bash the series or actors because the reviewers do not personally like them.

As these few examples illustrate, Sherlockology provides a midpoint among fan reviews or published behind-the-scenes reports. Its writers employ a fan-directed style with a positive,

first-person narrative; the site emphasizes its spoiler-free reviews and points out the staff's respect for the showrunners and producers who provide them access to the cast and crew. Other reviewers, who do not face any regulation by *Sherlock* producers or the BBC, can post what they want, ranging from over-the-top descriptions of the show's quality to a critical deconstruction of episodes. Although all these reviews or reports support their authors' positive or negative points with examples from episodes, the authors' viewpoints represent widely divergent perspectives that may reflect the level of their personal investment in or affiliation with the series.

Unmediated Content in Sherlockology

Without the unique content offered by Hartswood Films or the BBC, Sherlockology would simply be a thorough, professionally designed, well-written fan site with content similar to that of other fan sites. The unmediated content created only by Sherlockology staff includes episode reviews, descriptions of characters, and lists of filming locations (likely checked by the BBC or Hartswood Films for authenticity, although this information can also be gleaned from field work and online sources). Despite this type of information being typically generic "fan content" available elsewhere (e.g., actors' biographical information, episodic plot summaries), the presence of the BBC and showrunners can be felt in the way that reviews in particular are structured. Although not every review is glowing, the tone is overwhelmingly positive. Whether that stems from fan appreciation of the series or the development of a more personal connection with showrunners, cast, and crew is unknown, but Sherlockology maintains an upbeat attitude toward the series and does not publish negative reviews or information about it. In that sense it may differ from other fan sites, as can be seen from the previous examples which run the

extremes of gushing love without any critical framework for discussion to series bashing or criticism directed specifically toward the showrunners or actors. Although Sherlockology may have freedom to publish its own content, consumers who visit this site soon realize that all information portrays the series positively. As David asserts, “Looking forward, the test of community-based, knowledge communities in the broader public domain is not whether they generate relevant information, but how they negotiate the border with established systems of knowledge production, expertise, and credentialization” (194). Sherlockology negotiates this border with a fanatic devotion to *Sherlock* and within the auspices of a “gift economy,” as Chin notes. This results in information that is crafted in deference to the commercial interests related to *Sherlock*, as noted in the previous examples. The Sherlockology team do this in order to reap the benefits that they perceive have the greatest value, and these benefits can only be granted via a trusted affiliation with showrunners/producers. Because the showrunners’/producers’ interests must be primarily commercial, Sherlockology contributes to the commercial success of the show, while also contributing, in their uniquely fan-centric way, to the online fan community. This liminal space in which fans are both consumers and producers informs how/why and in what way they create both texts and community.

#Setlock for Season Four and Attempts to Control the Fan Community

In contrast with Sherlockology, which is very cognizant of publishing information in such a way that it does not reveal information before it is officially released, another popular web community, primarily organized via Twitter, is mostly concerned with spoilers: #Setlock. Spoilers are bits of information that have either been shared by a commercial entity or gathered

by astute fans. Spoilers occur before the official media is released, potentially spoiling the experience of discovering narrative details while engaging with the official media, rather than while browsing online before the release date.

In *Sherlock* fandom, the use of the Twitter hashtag #Setlock best illustrates fans' participatory behavior within the Setlock community. In addition to writing fan fiction and sharing ideas and information about the series or characters, an increasing number of fans show up to watch on-location filming, an activity that has a bearing on the way the series is filmed. Instead of incorporating many on-location scenes in each episode, which was typical of the first three seasons, the writers now have begun scripting episodes better suited for in-studio filming, simply because of the number of fans who, by sharing information via #Setlock, discover and share daily filming information, and many fans arrive on location to watch the day's filming. When these fans take photos or video of a scene filmed in a public location and share it immediately on Twitter via #Setlock, an episode's plot or casting choices may be spoiled for audiences who cannot see the finished episode until months later. A large group of fans cheering when they see a favorite actor can also be a distraction to cast and crew, and fans eager to watch filming may inadvertently interfere with a shot.

#Setlock fans understand the power of immediacy in communication—and its potential pitfalls. The whole purpose of #Setlock is to share the latest information about filming and, if possible, to help gather people at a filming location. Whereas other fan communities may have more formal membership (e.g., signing up for an account on AO3, following a blog in order to contribute to a discussion) and means of monitoring the site for trolls (i.e., people who post only negative comments or, more often, vile personal attacks), the #Setlock “community” does not.

Because it is situated on Twitter, anyone can search for the #Setlock hashtag to find information about *Sherlock* filming or rumors; similarly, anyone can tweet and send information under the #Setlock hashtag. The #Setlock community has fluid membership because this hashtag is often the only way to unite fans who want to communicate about *Sherlock* filming as it happens.

#Setlock has become so popular that even U.K. newspapers follow the tweets and debate the propriety of fan behavior regarding *Sherlock* filming. In 2015 in particular, #Setlock, like the object of its affection *Sherlock*, gained media attention. *The Daily Dot* defined #Setlock participation by stage:

The first stage of [#Setlock] addiction is following *Sherlock*'s actors, writers, and behind-the-scenes crew members on social media. But let's be honest here, that's amateur hour. A more dedicated setlocker also keeps track of public casting calls and potential location rumors, just in case someone connected with the episode accidentally shares something—*anything*—that might contain some clues about the next episode. The top tier is for those who actually visit the set in person. (Baker-Whitelaw)

This acknowledgment by the mainstream media is significant as it lends credibility to fan-created knowledge systems, which have been historically ostracized and portrayed as less critical and less worthy of attention. According to Hills, in “Psychoanalysis and Digital Fandom: Theorizing Spoilers and Fans,” fan behavior has been pathologized in ways that are damaging to our understanding of fan generated texts as more than just “equated with strong emotion” (106). Traditionally, fan-based texts have been seen as the creation of pathologically fixated authors and dismissed as the result of “unhealthy” fixation and attachment. Hills points out that whether

notions about fan fanaticism are true is irrelevant. What matters is the extent to which researchers/scholars consider fan texts on their own terms to “help us unpack, challenge and contest cultural notions of fan abnormality” (107).

Mainstream Media’s Use of #Setlock Information

Unlike Sherlockology, which may be treated like mainstream media, #Setlock is where mainstream media go to get unmediated content posted by fans of the show. Publications such as the *Radio Times*, *Daily Dot*, *Den of Geek*, and *Wales Online* follow #Setlock and use information gathered by fans as the basis of their own highly clickable articles. Because *Sherlock* is often a hot topic in entertainment news, the media becomes influenced by #Setlock when writers rely on second-hand information from fans visiting *Sherlock* filming locations. Instead of doing their own reporting, they scan Twitter and other social media sites for the latest #Setlock news. In 2015, more than fifty articles, many repeating information from #Setlock tweets or actor interviews, alerted the general public to #Setlock and earned money for their publications from each click to an online article about it. From *The Guardian* to *The Hollywood Reporter*, with tabloid coverage in between, #Setlock was addressed/utilized by mainstream media.

Additionally, fans who were quoted within articles or had their tweets republished or followed by mainstream media writers thus could gain status (or notoriety) within the #Setlock community specifically or more generally within *Sherlock* fandom. Their interest in this series had been publicized to a mass online audience, giving them “authority” status when it comes to *Sherlock*. This legitimizing of an Internet community as a source for critical information about the show demonstrates the extent to which a web-born community can gain both recognition and

status, re-positioning fan culture and its spoils from the fringes to the mainstream but also continues to commodify/monetize fan-generated texts/knowledge in a way that benefits a commercial entity rather than the fans who are creating the content, except in raising their status among their peers. However, the mainstream media is more focused on serving the public than only serving themselves, as *Sherlock* producers must be.

Perhaps not surprisingly, *Sherlock* fandom through #Setlock has been dubbed a modern version of Beatlemania. Freeman explains in an interview with *Empire Magazine*, “I’ve got some great reactions to things I’m very proud of, but I don’t think any surpass *Sherlock* in terms of critical acclaim and number of people watching--and just a general feeling that you’re in a mini Beatlemania.” However, perceiving #Setlock as only like Beatlemania is to miss an important difference and to fall into the pathologization of fan behavior rather than to focus on fan-created texts. #Setlock features creative works such as real photos, creative manipulation of photos, all sorts of visual art, and video production. #Setlock has inspired fan fiction which will often be demarcated with a #Setlock tag and which references particular posts. As Francesca Coppa points out in *A Brief History of Media Fandom*, this phenomenon is not limited to *Sherlock* fandom:

Media fans are making more kinds of art than ever before. Not only are they still writing fan fiction, but image manipulation software has also allowed for a more sophisticated visual art. Digital editing software has taken the fannish art of creating video. . .to a whole other level. . . . And fans are continuing to create a rich critical literature about themselves, and a tradition of fan meta-discourse continues to flourish online. (58)

However, these fan endeavors are not always received well because of the kind of impact they may have on many aspects of the media that they venerate. *Sherlock* co-creator Gatiss mentioned to the *Radio Times* in late 2014 that #Setlock, which often results in hundreds of fans watching on-location filming, has changed the nature of the series. This statement supports the idea that fan activity, for better or worse, contributes not only to how the show/characters may be perceived but even how the show is actually produced. Gatiss explains, “When we were filming Baker Street exteriors last time, the fact you’ve got about 300 people behind crash barriers is . . . interesting, [so] we have factored in trying to minimise large scenes outside If you’re just drawing up in a taxi and running through a door, it’s easier but large dialogue scenes outside are quite tough.” Gatiss, who also plays Mycroft Holmes, added that “in terms of concentration it’s hard when you feel like you’re being observed by more than just the crew” (Jones, “Sherlock Fans”).

Series’ co-lead Freeman was more outspoken in his opinion of #Setlock a few months later, during the filming of the *Sherlock* special: “It’s like trying to act at a premiere When we’re [filming at] our stand-in for Baker Street, it is hard to do your job. And I don’t love it” (Gill). Although entertainment media might be expected to emphasize the #Setlock story, it also was covered by mainstream newspaper *The Guardian*, which reported additional comments by Freeman. The actor’s comments instigated an online public debate among fans and critics whether #Setlock should be discouraged or more drastic measures taken on location to end it. This clash over how fans and fan activities are perceived and what measures should be taken to

control these behaviors is indicative of the kind of power fans have to affect many aspects of the show, even in the face of discouragement from the actors and showrunners.

The *Radio Times* polled fans online, asking Is it acceptable for fans to attend #Setlock? More than three-quarters of the 5,000 fans responding to the poll (76.87%) answered No; only 23.13% voted Yes (Jones, “Should #Setlock Continue?”). A follow-up article included criticism of #Setlock by two *Sherlock* fans:

Actors and crew should have the freedom to work without people spying on them and spreading spoilers about what and how and when and where they do it You don't spy on people working on the streets, do you? Nor tweet about how their job is done, right? If you did, they would also ask you to step back in order to get some privacy.

I don't know why people can't let the actors and crew get on with filming They're distracting the actors from their job just by being there. They're spoiling upcoming episodes of *Sherlock* not just for themselves, but for everyone else as well. (Jones, “Sherlock Fans Say No to #Setlock”)

The article also includes an anecdote from Gatiss that #Setlock fans once “broke into wild cheering when Martin Freeman opened a package of crisps on set,” yet another piece of evidence to the public that not only does #Setlock influence the ways that *Sherlock* can best be filmed but indicates the nature of #Setlock fandom. Overly enthusiastic fans—also perceived as self-

centered or selfish fans—are portrayed as giving a bad reputation in the media to *Sherlock* fans in general.

At last, co-creator and showrunner Moffat concluded the 2015 debate by spinning Freeman’s comment more positively and “making nice” with the series’ fans. “Martin just made a very innocuous remark. . . . He doesn’t mind [#Setlock]. . . . We’re all genuinely—including Martin, including grumpy old me—very appreciative that people love our show so much, we’re thrilled by it in fact” (Holmes). Moffat emphasized that his comments, which included calling fans “incredibly well behaved and polite and sweet and nice,” was not spin but only the truth. Nevertheless, his comments seemed like official damage control of public criticism of fans, coupled with the understanding that likely the most vociferous *Sherlock* fans participate in some way with #Setlock. Those who cannot or do not choose to visit filming locations nonetheless may follow the tweets and share information with other fans. Moffat does not want to alienate a large percentage of *Sherlock* fans, especially when the series takes months- or years-long hiatuses between seasons. This flies in stark contrast to the kind of relationship that Sherlockology has with the show. While Sherlockology exists to serve at the behest of the show, #Setlock persists despite being actively discouraged. In evoking an apology from Moffat they have affected yet another aspect of the show, the show’s relationship with fans and the public perception of these kinds of fan activities.

In-person positive interactions with #Setlock fans during on-location filming (e.g., the actors chatting with or signing autographs for fans between scenes or as they leave the location) can help promote the series within fandom and make fans feel that they have a larger personal stake in the production. As well, shared photos or news tweeted via #Setlock generates interest in

new episodes long before they are broadcast and keeps *Sherlock* in the news throughout the year. This is important for the show's continued success.

However, according to an increasing number of media and fan reports—many of them tweeted via #Setlock—not everyone among cast, crew, or fandom is happy (no matter what Moffat says) about the amount of influence #Setlock increasingly has on the way the series is filmed. If more scenes are filmed on closed interior sets, the series' "look" will change, as will the types of action scenes that can be filmed. The "flavor" of real locations throughout the U.K. has been one reason for *Sherlock*'s success; international fans in particular enjoy vicariously visiting U.K. locations lovingly filmed for episodes. If filming delays or increased security results in a higher budget for on-location filming, the budget-conscious BBC, as well as production company Hartswood Films, may decide that #Setlock warrants fundamental changes in where and how the series has traditionally been scripted and filmed. During filming for the fourth season's episodes, for example, location filming was curtailed or completed out of sight of fans by, for example, filming on closed interior locations such as a church or a university. #Setlock fans could not get nearly as close during many on-location scenes. Nevertheless, when filming took place in the very public Borough Market in London, #Setlock fans quickly tweeted the location, and dozens of fans arrived—and stood hours in the cold until filming was concluded. In April-May 2016, #Setlock activities still took place, but fewer scenes are publicly accessible.

Furthermore, Gatiss notes that the "insider information" tweeted by fans watching a scene being filmed also "gives a lot away, which is a shame" (Jones, "Sherlock Fans"). Fans often share information about who is on set each day, indicating which characters are in a scene,

what they are wearing, and what they are doing during a filmed scene. However, fans' interpretations of what is revealed during location filming may be misleading, and, at best, #Setlock provides only part of the larger picture of the entire episode. Nevertheless, astute fans may be "spoiled" about aspects of plot or character development because of information shared via #Setlock. The surprise elements of a new episode may not be quite so surprising if they are revealed months before an episode is broadcast, and the potential exists for audiences not being as excited about new episodes as they would have been if they had not been spoiled by #Setlock news or images.

Not only may fans accidentally or intentionally publish spoilers about upcoming episodes, but the mere presence of so many fans showing up in a public place to watch filming can pose logistical problems as well. During outdoor filming of "The Empty Hearse," the camera could not avoid every fan standing in the background of the shot. As one entertainment news writer explains, "The crowds of onlookers were so difficult to avoid that the first episode of season three includes some accidental cameos from fans who were caught in the shot" (Baker-Whitelaw). Although being captured for posterity within a *Sherlock* episode may make some fans feel special or make others jealous, the presence of people who are not characters, or not even extras providing background actions appropriate for the scene, can destroy the illusion being created by the *Sherlock* cast and crew. Fans who are not dressed appropriately for the scene or who are obviously watching the lead actors instead of reacting to the fictitious drama taking place can break the fourth wall just as surely as an actor turning to the camera and addressing the audience directly. While fan musings have always been a part of affecting how a show is perceived, for better or worse, #Setlock is changing the way that *Sherlock* is made.

#Setlock and Celebrity Relationships: Attempts to Mediate Fan Behavior

When the filming began for Season Four in April 2016, fans became concerned with Moffat's statement, widely carried in mainstream media, that this season's three episodes form "the story we've been telling from the beginning and it's about to reach its climax" (Ausiello). Many fans, as well as television critics, interpreted that statement to mean that the series would conclude in 2017 at the end of Season Four. Television critic Michael Ausiello added that "it's worth noting that [Moffat] has previously said that he sees the franchise carrying on 'for a long while.' When reached for comment, a Masterpiece rep argues that the word climax can 'mean many things' and notes that Moffat 'likes to tease'" (Ausiello). (In the U.S., *Sherlock* is broadcast as part of the PBS *Masterpiece* series.) Nevertheless, die-hard *Sherlock* fans began worrying and speculating online whether Season Four might be the finale of the much-loved series, especially in light of stars Cumberbatch and Freeman having much higher international profiles and plenty of film roles to take up more of their time. Thus, when filming began for Season Four, the #Setlock community looked forward to finding out juicy tidbits about the series that either would alert them to plotlines indicating the end is near or assuage their fears that this might not only be the beginning of the end of *Sherlock*, but of the vibrant #Setlock community.

Sherlock's production team, however, had different ideas than #Setlock fans about the amount and type of information that could be accessed by even as dedicated a group of fans as the #Setlock community. The first weeks of filming were completed on a closed interior set, and the only information tagged #Setlock came from the series' insiders, such as showrunner/actor Gatiss and actor Abbington. In April, Gatiss tweeted a photograph of the back of Cumberbatch's head with the caption "Back!". He did the same with Freeman and Abbington. On April 14,

Abbington tweeted “Lonnng day.” Although fans frequently tweet Abbington as if she is a friend instead of a *Sherlock* actor, members of the #Setlock community have also tried to get her to spill secrets about filming. Such a #Setlock-tagged tweet posted on April 18 referred to a locked-down on-location filming site in Margram. (The #Setlock community had been alerted by photos posted by crew after filming took place, as well as fans living near the site, that trucks for *Sherlock* filming had been seen at that location, but the information came too late for fans to congregate, and the filming was confined to a closed indoor location.) Josie (also known as ClaraOswald_12, a tag referring to Moffat’s other television series, *Doctor Who*) wrote “The *Sherlock* filming that took place in Margram was a christening. That’s all I’m saying.” The tweet, sent to Abbington, earned the immediate reply “Or was it?” Similarly, on April 13, Abbington sent a friendly “Night night you lovelies,” which could be interpreted as being directed to castmates or fans, before teasing “Tomorrow is a busy day.” Both the #Sherlock and #Setlock tags were added to her tweet, ensuring that it would be seen by the community. This use of #Setlock by one of the show’s celebrities is indicative of the extent to which #Setlock has gained recognizable status. This co-opting of #Setlock by official sources as well as measures taken to curtail unwanted fan behavior is evidence of officials attempting to manage #Setlock in a way similar to the handling of Sherlockology to make it a more palatable, less unruly fandom.

Unlike the #Setlock community’s rapid sharing of information and plenty of first-hand opportunities to watch filming of episodes during Season Three in 2013 or for “The Abominable Bride” special in 2015, this time the number of sightings was greatly reduced by the showrunners and production company, leaving #Setlock members to pose questions to actors based on rumors rather than personal sightings of the actors at work and forcing many fans to rely only on what

Gatiss or Abbington tweeted under the co-opted #Setlock tag. By technically becoming a part of the #Setlock community and providing (non)information about filming, Gatiss' and Abbington's tweets seemed to be an attempt to redirect attention away from the fans and toward the series' cast and producers as the "real" source of content for this community. It also indicated that #Setlock content, which in previous years had resulted from information from fans who had observed on-location filming and deduced plot details from what they had seen, would more often be limited to teases from official sources because fewer fans would have opportunities to watch the *Sherlock* cast or crew at work. These changes alter the ethos of #Setlock, making it seem more a part of the official media. This change in status, which was clearly desirable for Sherlockology is not as easily mitigated in #Setlock.

For example, early in the Season Four filming, a group of students from Into Film (a UK based not for profit, educational organization supported by film agencies that helps young people—5-19—learn more about film) were permitted to visit the *Sherlock* set and have a group photo taken with cast members Cumberbatch, Freeman, and Rupert Graves (who plays Detective Inspector Greg Lestrade). However, the photo, which was reportedly taken with the production company's permission (and the cooperation of the cast) had to be approved "by the studio," according to one student who visited the set. The group did not watch filming, but their presence on the set was embargoed, much like Sherlockology's set visit had been the previous year. Students were not allowed to tweet the photo, only to retweet it from their institution after permission was given to make the photo available to students. They also were not allowed to use hashtags to alert *Sherlock* fans to their visit. The tweets from one student (@silvershuzuo) indicated the plight of many in the class who found themselves inundated with new followers

once the photo had been retweeted by students. On April 20, the student (ffion) posted this notice regarding the photo that would soon be released: “Just a warning when I post the pictures with Benedict and the others please don't quote it with any hashtags thanks!!” A follow-up tweet the same day reported “I've just been told I'm not allowed to tweet the picture myself but I retweeted it!” Another student, Jean, tweeted similar information. At first she gushed “It was amazing visiting the set of *Sherlock* today, I talked to Martin Freeman and Steven Moffat. And got pictures with Martin and Benedict!” When a Twitter friend asked if she could post the photos, Jean replied “not at the moment sorry, they have to be okayed by the studio before we can post them.” The group photo was later released through a faculty member’s Twitter account. Next to the twitpic was the note “Thanks @hartswoodfilms & Sherlock crew for inspiring our young filmmakers & supporting the work of @intofilm_edu” (Stevens). No hashtags for #Sherlock or #Setlock were included; the message was directed only to Into Film and Hartswood Films.

However, the Twitter-savvy fans of Cumberbatch or *Sherlock* were not under such strictures and gleefully retweeted the photo and students’ tweets, adding the hashtag #Setlock to ensure that as many fans as possible found the image and reports of the set visit. In particular, Anything Cumberbatch (@AnythingBatch), reputed to be a Cumberbatch super fan, retweeted the image several times, each time adding the #Setlock tag. As might be expected, some fans scrutinized the photo, enlarging and cropping sections for discussion. During fan “analysis” of the photo of Freeman, one fan questioned (and had the message retweeted dozens of times) “Why is Martin’s hair so . . . Martin? He is in costume, yes?” (Michelle). Another fan tweeted and demanded discussion of the fact that Freeman, apparently on the set as John Watson and not as himself, was not wearing a wedding ring in the photo. Sophie tweeted in all caps (i.e.,

shouted) to gain other community members' attention "WHY IS NO ONE TALKING ABOUT THE FACT THAT MARTIN IS WEARING JOHN'S CLOTHING BUT 'NO' WEDDING BAND." Because fan speculation was that during Season Four Abbington's character, Mary Watson, would be killed off (in part because the canonical Conan Doyle character dies), Freeman and John received a great deal of scrutiny as fans tried to determine if Mary lives or dies, John stays married, or the Watson baby is born and survives. Such discussion could not be controlled by Hartwood Films or the BBC.

The attempts to strictly determine the amount or type of information made available online via Twitter could not completely close down #Setlock information. Thus, even during a time when *Sherlock* filming became so tightly regulated that on-location information was severely limited and the filming kept as private as possible, #Setlock continued and followed its own rules, designed to circumvent what the showrunners wanted to happen. Fans eagerly shared whatever photographs they could find, attempted to clarify rumors, and analyzed every bit of information available, no matter how limited.

Even more creatively investigative #Setlock community members talked with sources who likely would not be "punished" for casually leaking information. The owner of Speedy's, a diner located next door to "221B Baker Street"—the North Gower Street location standing in for the real Baker Street—let slip that filming would be taking place in late June at their location. It is doubtful that Hartwood Films would seek out another location for the exterior shots of Sherlock's home, which have become a staple in the series. It would also seem odd if, only in Season Four episodes, the familiar Speedy's sign and restaurant were missing from "Baker Street" if the producers sought another location in retribution for the owner leaking information

to #Setlock. Lauren announced that she “just asked the owner of Speedy’s” and found out on April 21 that on-location filming was scheduled at Speedy’s on June 21 or 22. Within two hours, the message had been retweeted more than a hundred times through Lauren’s and Anything Cumberbatch’s Twitter accounts. Members of the #Setlock community immediately began to mobilize and plan for their location visit two months later. This single announcement during the early weeks of filming illustrates that, despite the dearth of location-specific tweets from official sources using the #Setlock tag, the fan members of the #Setlock community still found ways to circumvent the showrunners and track down at least some location filming. Even with control measures implemented by the production team, #Setlock continued as a viable community that could not completely be held to the “rules” set forth by official sources as to who would have access about *Sherlock* filming.

#Setlock and the Power Differential Between Fans and Official *Sherlock* Sources

The extent to which fans have become concomitant producers of texts and knowledge regarding the objects of their affection has ramifications for how fans and celebrities manage to negotiate a relationship that has distinct tensions and advantages. The fan/celebrity (unofficial/official) relationship is tenuous because while celebrities (actors and showrunners), presumably, have insider information that the fans want, those celebrities must mitigate their responses to avoid alienating their consumer base. Because celebrities are communicating via social media directly with fans and that communication is at the discretion of the celebrity rather than the official show’s representative, there is room for negotiation between fans and celebrities. These negotiations imply that fans, as a subcultural community, have more to offer to

the celebrities that they follow than might be perceived initially. These negotiations have the potential to lead fans who are adept at navigating the digital landscape to educate celebrities about the ramifications of their contributions to fan communities. Dedicated fans in digital spaces have the potential to moderate interactions in some surprising ways, which ultimately end up a testament to the power of online fandom to affect both the object of their affection and the digital culture that has evolved around it.

Many *Sherlock* fans, who also follow #Setlock, follow actor Abbington and Gatiss, who is both a showrunner and actor on the series. Although crew members such as set designer Arwel Jones also tweet updates about the production preparation for new episodes, Abbington in particular directs official information to *Sherlock* and #Setlock fans. Even when she does not specifically add the #Setlock hashtag to a tweet, her message is instantly shared not only among her followers but to a much wider audience of *Sherlock* or #Setlock fans who read Abbington's messages that have been retweeted by her followers/fans.

In the case of *Sherlock*, the insiders who share official information via Twitter may not yet realize the power or responsibility they have when they target fans interested in specific information about a topic (such as a beloved television series) in which they are heavily invested. These sources of official information also may not be as technologically sophisticated as fan users of the technology. Although the official sources of information about *Sherlock* control the amount and type of information they send, they seem to believe that fans will passively take that information and be grateful for it. However, fans in general, and *Sherlock* fans in particular, certainly are not passive. After all, the #Setlock community is geared toward sharing spoilers.

In previous seasons, the showrunners and producers have relied on fans to generate interest in the series and spread information about filming via Twitter. In November 2013, for example, BBC promotion of the first episode of the third season of *Sherlock* began with a hearse driving around London; in the window was the U.K. broadcast date of the episode entitled “The Empty Hearse” and the hashtag #sherlocklives (Kemp). Fans who saw the hearse in various parts of London tweeted photos and news about the sighting, using both the #Setlock and #sherlocklives tags. The immediate fan response to the information helped promote the seasonal premiere and generated excitement among *Sherlock* and #Setlock fans.

Based on experiences such as this example, the BBC, showrunners, and producers may expect that #Setlock or *Sherlock* fans will respond in the ways they prefer—but fan communities use information in the way that suits them best and are not easily controlled. Fans may see Twitter as a means to share any type of information and expect to generate an immediate response—for good or bad. Showrunners and other official sources of information may try to manipulate fans by providing them only tidbits to keep them interested in a series between episodes but then expecting them to play by the rules. #Setlock fans understand and most often enjoy the fact that there are no rules governing tweets.

A case in point is the May 11, 2016, Twitter conflagration when Abbington tweeted a photograph of the first page of her shooting script for the fourth season’s second episode. The cast had met to read through the script before filming began the following week. She captioned the photo “This just happened.” The seemingly innocuous twitpic to alert fans to the start of the next episode’s production generated the expected interest among Abbington’s followers, many who are #Setlock and *Sherlock* fans who immediately retweeted the photo. This tweet did not

have the #Setlock hashtag but was nonetheless circulated among members of the #Setlock community who follow Abbington's or Gatiss' every tweet related to the series.

Because *Sherlock* is a series about a genius consulting detective, many #Setlock fans in particular enjoy tracking clues about upcoming episodes, including but not limited to the filming locations. For example, #Setlock tweets generated from fans watching on-location filming typically include reports of the scene's apparent plot, characters included in the scene, wardrobe, and props. From these clues shared through #Setlock, fans try to emulate Sherlock Holmes by deducing what the episode is about and how the plot affects the Sherlock-John relationship. When Abbington tweeted a photo of the front of her readthrough script, #Setlock fans immediately reacted as if the image were a clue about the second episode. One fan applied a filter to the image to enhance the text (Reetu Kabra, reprinted in Benedict's *Third Testicle*); in so doing, a few words from several lines on the script's second page were revealed: eyes, up, Collects himself. Looks to the, stay close to his face, cut to. Even the most dedicated Sherlockian likely would not be able to deduce the plot of the episode based on these few words. Abbington, however, snapped upon seeing what had been done to the photo she had tweeted. According to fan culture theorist Hills in "Psychoanalysis and Digital Fandom: Theorizing Spoilers and Fans," fan-created spoilers represent a paradox for producers: Producers do not like spoilers because they see them as "a form of damage to the commercial value of a property." However, producers often view official spoilers (released by the producers themselves) as "enhancing brand value" (108). What this "info-war" reveals about spoilers, according to Hill, is that "it isn't the spoiler per se that is industrially opposed. . . but rather its unofficial informational scope, scale, and lack of professional propriety. Unofficial spoilers threaten producers with a lack of mastery and

control over the presentation of what they consider *their* narratives” (108). This info-war is less about spoiling a consumer’s enjoyment of a show and more about control of a commodity. This is made very clear by Abbington’s disproportionate reaction to a fan’s enhancement of her twitpic, because that enhancement reveals nothing about the show.

Her initial tweeted responses were to castigate the fan who posted the enhanced photo (e.g., “Stupid fucking cretins put a filter on my photograph. What? You can’t wait. You have to fucking spoil it for everyone else? Arse holes.”) and then to stop posting information about *Sherlock* (e.g., “Won’t be posting anything else about Sherlock then. Ruined that shit”). In this way she placed blame on fans who took her photo and used it in a way she had not expected (thus potentially freeing her from any backlash from her employers) and tried to control (at least in the future) what fans can know about filming by not providing any information at all.

However, Abbington also understands the power of Twitter to generate interest in the series and her role in it; in 2016, *Sherlock* was entering its fourth season and a fourth years’-long hiatus between new episodes. Keeping fans engaged with the series and encouraging their interest in episodes scheduled for broadcast in 2017 is likely another reason why Abbington and other *Sherlock* insiders continue to use Twitter as a means of disseminating information about the series. Recognizing Twitter’s value in promoting the series likely helped influence Abbington’s further tweets in response to the “leaking” of words from the script.

After several angry tweets on May 11, Abbington eventually admitted she “may have overreacted” and backed off from swearing at fans. She likely anticipated that her “hug” added to an apology (“Sorry about that, folks. Really”) would restore the status quo and end any animosity between groups of fans or between official *Sherlock* source(s) and extremely invested

fans. Because Abbington is a celebrity with thousands of followers, her tweets carry more weight with fans. When she attacks fans, she may inadvertently be activating a troll network eager to go after the offending fans. Of course, these “uber fans” do not consider themselves trolls in the traditional sense. They may feel it is their responsibility, as devoted fans who “take direction” from the content of celebrity tweets, to police the fandom and destroy those fans who have annoyed or threatened the celebrity. As part of this policing, uber fans’ tactics may include anything from bullying to death threats. Uber fans following Abbington’s tweets on May 11, for example, not only wanted to defend her through their righteous anger on her behalf, but they likely sought her approval for their actions. In fan parlance, they wanted a “cookie” as a reward for protecting the celebrity.

Through a series of tweets, Abbington engaged primarily with one fan, Andressa, about the results of the actor’s angry tweets among #Setlock and *Sherlock* fans. When Andressa and a few #Setlock fans attempted to explain to Abbington that her tweets could incite real violence against the people who enhanced the photo, the actor did not seem to understand the power of her tweets. She merely stated that what others do is not her fault. Although Abbington is right in thinking that she cannot control all fans’ actions—especially those of uber fans—she nonetheless should understand that by calling fans “cretins” and swearing at them, she potentially has the power to emotionally wound fans who are trying to do what the #Setlock community encourages: uncover and disseminate information about *Sherlock* episodes in production. By baiting fans, Abbington might anticipate that at least a few among the thousands of her followers might take the bait and use her photo to gather more information than she anticipated. As well, nothing in the plot was revealed by the photo’s enhancement. Abbington seemed more upset that

fans would attempt to spoil the plot rather than reacting to actual spoiled information. She also seems unaware that uber fans may turn on other fans within the #Setlock community to ostracize them or even emotionally or psychologically destroy them for participating in the fan community in a way that an official source did not anticipate or approve of. Because Abbington has previously used the #Setlock tag to target followers who track down information about episodes in progress, she should know how #Setlock fans in particular, and *Sherlock* fans more generally, respond to her tweeted texts and images. Losing control of the official message she wanted to send to followers seems to be the real issue at the heart of Abbington's Twitter meltdown.

The Dark Side of Fan Communities Online: Trolling and Doxxing

As discussed throughout this dissertation, digital communities can be welcoming places that may educate, entertain, or encourage advocacy among their members. Websites run by a group (such as Sherlockology or AVEN) or a fan fiction archive (such as AO3) are monitored by more than one person who operates the site, and the website may publish rules of conduct to determine who may upload or post information on the site—and the consequences if the rules are broken, as well as encourage the community using the site to help regulate behavior. Only registered users may post content to the Sherlockology site, and they must abide by the legal disclaimer provided on the website (“Terms and Conditions”). Anyone whose tweet to Sherlockology contains abusive language will not see their tweet republished on the website. Similarly, AO3 members may be blocked from using the site and their posts removed if they verbally attack other members; a key line in the Abuse explanation in the Terms of Service is “We are most concerned with people who are actively and deliberately hostile to the community”

(Archive of Our Own, “Terms of Service FAQ”). The structure of these types of websites helps ensure that, in *Sherlock* fandom, Sherlockology and AO3 are places where members can feel comfortable as part of the community and are secure from attack by trolls, for example. Keeping the community a safe space for visitors and members has been an important aspect of these and similar fan sites.

However, social media sites like Twitter or Tumblr are structured differently. They encourage single-user accounts, and individuals are much more likely to be easily targeted for abuse. Although Twitter as a social media service allows individuals to report abuse, it has not been effective in protecting individuals from trolls. Blocking followers may seem like an effective way for an individual to stop abusive tweets being sent to his or her account, but trolls have been known simply to open a new account and start the abuse again. Mainstream media articles have frequently documented Twitter abuse, especially toward women (e.g., Bahadur), and the majority of *Sherlock* fans who post fiction, tweet about *Sherlock*, or participate in #Setlock seem, by their account names or profiles, to be women.

Tumblr permits individuals to post textual blogs or photographs, the two most popular types of information on these sites. Although site owners can turn off the anonymous posting feature or remove posts that are offensive, trolls seeking personal information about site owners often find it easy to track down the owner’s linked Facebook or Twitter account, which is more easily “hacked” for information. Within *Sherlock* fandom, one of the sites I chose to study because of the amount of daily discussion about *Sherlock* and actor Cumberbatch was shut down by its owner as a result of doxxing, the practice of maliciously searching for and publishing on

the Internet private information. The following example illustrates the extent to which fans who oppose the industrial party line may be disciplined.

The Fellowship of Erdemhart (TFOE) website, which is a fan operated fan site, published the owner's opinions about Cumberbatch and his personal life, primarily his marriage, as part of the ongoing daily site discussion of how his private life and professional roles affect his performance in and availability for *Sherlock*. When some fans devoted not only to Cumberbatch but to policing the Internet to stop any negative discussion about him read some of TFOE's blog posts, they decided to threaten TFOE with doxxing if she did not stop publishing her opinions. TFOE described in her blog what so-called fans had done to her as part of the doxxing:

I've received death threats

After they found out my name, address, and phone number, I received a few calls to my cell, threats about contacting my local police department to warn them about my blog (like wtf why would they care)

They threat end [sic] to call CPS [Child Protective Services] on my parents for allowing me to have this blog. [TFOE was 15 years old when this post was published.]

They've kept pictures of me as 'blackmail' although the last pictures they have of me unless they followed me before I blocked my Instagram account was 46 weeks ago right before Christmas.

They've contacted some of the administrators from the board of education.

They threatened me by telling me they have sent the info of my blog to BC's [Cumberbatch's] management. (9 Nov. 2015)

The resulting discussion among fans with similar blogs indicates the severity of doxxing. The following two comments are representative of many more that were blogged and reblogged among *Sherlock* or Cumberbatch fans:

Anonymous: People can't really have any radical opinions, even on anonymous online blogs (especially on online blogs) anymore [be]cause it always seem[s] to come out and bite them in the back.

Annashipper: I have not revealed much about myself here, apart from the fact that my real name is Anna, I share a year of birth with Ben and I live in Greece. Can you explain to me how that warranted arseholes . . . partially doxxing information and pictures from my Facebook page? While you're at it, could you also explain why all [of the Tumblr fans posting blogs about Cumberbatch/*Sherlock*] that were doxxed had it coming? It's a long list: wikianonbc, sophiehuntergossipblog, the-fellowship-of-erdemhart, cumberbees, gatorfisch, carmen1969stuff, mimichanelle, ummzaksbest. (Sophie Hunter Gossip Blog, 18 Sep. 2015)

As a result of being doxxed more than once (including multiple death threats), TFOE posted the following message before changing the content of her website to photos of Cumberbatch and *Sherlock* with no commentary:

I'm getting tired of having 80% of the BC fandom devalue me for a blog I do as a pastime And after the stress of real life and other stuff, it gets frustrating that not even in what was supposed to be a safe haven do I get any respite. (24 Apr. 2016)

The owners of the two Tumblr blogs followed and analyzed as part of my research (Sophie Hunter Gossip Blog and Benedict's Third Testicle) also were doxxed, but they have continued publishing blogs and attempting to educate fans who have been doxxed. The Sophie Hunter Gossip Blog, for example, includes a menu item entitled "On Doxxing and Trolls," which provides links to online information about ways to combat trolls and legally protect oneself against online harassment.

In light of doxxing, trolling, and other online abuse directed toward fans, those *Sherlock* and #Setlock fans who contacted Abbington or Gatiss about their tweets potentially inciting troll-like fans to attack others are not only incredibly brave but necessary to make celebrities aware of the ramifications of social media. Actors, such as Abbington or Gatiss, may use Twitter to promote themselves or their projects (i.e., *Sherlock*), but they may not consider how their messages may affect individuals within fandom. Twitter-savvy fans have taken the responsibility to educate these actors about the ways that social media works and why celebrities in particular

should think about the ramifications of their words before they tweet. In this way, fans are helping to create a safer space within social media for open discussion and sharing of information about *Sherlock*, even in those types of sites with structures more likely to permit individual users to be targeted and attacked by those who disagree with them.

Andressa used her tweets to educate Abbington about the nature of Twitter and fan communities. Through her tweets, she may be perceived as advocating for a kinder, gentler Twitter, but she also attempted to educate an official *Sherlock* source about the potential ramifications of Twitter communication sent from that source. Through a series of tweets, Andressa first wrote that “When you snap like that, people go after the fan who started it. That’s why it’s so bad.” Abbington replied directly to Andressa (but the message was retweeted thousands of times) to ask how that was her fault. Andressa next explained that “All I said is: it happens. It sucks. Please try to take a deep breath before tweeting, because it can get really awful” and added in another tweet that she had also tweeted to Gatiss that “Sometimes what [fans] do with your words isn’t your fault, but if you can prevent the consequences, PLEASE do.” Abbington further commented that she is a supporter of free speech, and the conversation ended, from her perspective at least.

“Educating” Abbington seemed a more positive approach and one that generated a more emotionally moderate response from the actor. A tweet earlier in the day by Natalie K complained directly to Abbington “Not a fan of actors who refer to their fans this way” and reposted the “cretins” comment. Abbington replied “Stop following me then.” The actor, however, did respond to Andressa’s thoughtful comments and participated in a brief conversation via a series of tweets. Although Twitter is often not conducive to thoughtful

discourse and is limited to short responses instead of lengthy messages, it at times may be useful as even a limited forum for some type of “advocacy” (e.g., be polite, think before you tweet) against bullying or trolling and for education about the nature of Twitter and the ramifications of celebrity messages directed to their fan base.

The discussion did not die on Twitter or Tumblr; thousands of notes, retweets, and posts reflected on what Abbington had tweeted and how fans responded. One fan blog, Benedict’s Third Testicle, reprinted not only Abbington’s and Andressa’s tweeted conversation but the running commentary by other fans who posted their responses to a blogged discussion. Choppedcreationcheesecake, for example, posted this lengthy commentary about Abbington’s lack of understanding of fandom and Twitter:

A highly interesting debate and lots of interesting issues here I think. There has been much said about the AmA’s [Amanda Abbington’s] unnecessary insults, her mistakes and her apologies. What I just want to point out are two things: When AmA used her insults against the fans who went all Sherlock with the script page she unintentionally leaked, some of the Uebers [sic] on Twitter immediately whole-heartedly repeated her insults and celebrated them. Then AmA comes to the realization that insulting some fans was wrong and she made a mistake in the first place, and the Uebers? [sic] Well their goal is to always, always uncritically [sic] agree with anything their star does and says. And since AmA apologizes they celebrate her some more for having the guts to do that. Hm.

Oh and the second point I want to point out is about the reply AmA tweeted to Andressa. AmA really doesn't get fan mechanisms, does she? Yeah, AmA you as the celeb have that much power. When you call a fan out and call them names, the other fans will go after the person you called out. If you don't get that then you really, really don't understand your own status and how a fandom works.

Site owner/moderator Ballsy further discussed the ramifications of this series of tweets making the rounds of the #Setlock and *Sherlock* fandom:

[Abbington] seems completely unaware of her power within this fandom. There are ubers out there who consider themselves the self-appointed fandom police. . . .They are not pleasant, and they feel fully justified in ruining the lives of those who they feel don't comply with their fandom policies. These ubers also VERY much want their cookie from BC and the Sherlock team. . . . So, when Amanda calls out a specific fan for doing something she doesn't like? She might as well have issued direct orders to the Ubers to attack this fan. And that is exactly what just happened.

Amanda? You didn't like getting death threats did you? [This comment references death threats made via Twitter toward Abbington in 2013 and 2015 in light of her character's introduction and development on *Sherlock*.] Well we don't much like it either. . . . There are too many amongst this fandom (it happens in others too, it's a thing) that are way too

willing to attack others, for a cookie or to police the gospel according to BC [Benedict Cumberbatch]/*Sherlock*. . . .The *Sherlock* team need to be more cautious. . . .

Cyberbullying has claimed victims.

Although the conversation about the way that official sources and fans interact, and the ramifications of these interactions, began and quickly ended (within one day) on Twitter, the discussions within fandom continued for several days afterward and included the much longer, more thoughtfully written, and likely edited, responses. Forums such as fan blogs are far more conducive to further discussion. Whereas Abbington, for example, may have considered only the immediacy of Twitter in sharing her emotional responses to what she perceived as accidentally leaked information, #Setlock or *Sherlock* fans continue to discuss, share, and archive information so that it becomes a close-to-permanent record of fan activity.

Abbington, like other official personnel working on *Sherlock*, seems to have difficulty discerning between “baiting” fans and sharing information with them. Especially because few #Setlock photos or clues to filming locations have been provided during the fourth season’s filming—most likely so that #Setlock fans do not interrupt filming and showrunners can maintain greater control not only of the set but information leaked from it—frustrated #Setlock fans spend even more time analyzing the images they do receive from insiders like Abbington. They also post messages on blogs like Sophie Hunter Gossip Blog and Benedict’s Third Testicle, among other fan sites, to complain about baiting and the increased lockdown of information from the *Sherlock* set. Abbington may not have understood that her message seemed “baity” and that fans would take the bait and analyze the photo in great detail.

Like many representatives of official, sanctioned information networks that try to control the amount and type of information disseminated to the public about their product or business (in this case, *Sherlock*), Abbington may assume that consumers (in this case, fans) will be pleased with whatever information is provided to them. In fan culture, however, tracking down information and being the first to share it with other fans builds credibility. Thus, the fans who applied the filter and shared what amounted to only a few indecipherable words from an official script likely did so for three reasons: 1) they want to know first what is happening on the *Sherlock* set and within the plot, 2) they want to be recognized as “Sherlock Holmes”-type fans who are technologically savvy enough to decode information others cannot, and 3) they want to be enhance their credibility within fandom by becoming (or maintaining their status as) a go-to source of information.

The thousands of notes, retweets, and reblogs of Abbington’s original tweets remain on the Internet as screen captures taken and shared among #Setlock and *Sherlock* fans via social media. Even if Abbington deletes her tweets from her account, they live on in cyberspace indefinitely on numerous fan sites on Tumblr, for example. Whereas a fanfiction archive like AO3 is more carefully moderated by an entire community, or fan blogs like Sophie Hunter Gossip Blog and Benedict’s Third Testicle are moderated by the site owner/fan choosing to present information to support his/her own point of view, Twitter is the Wild West of fan information. Trolls are far more likely to gather to attack those they believe are in the wrong, and Twitter historically, as a commercial entity, does not do a good job of protecting individual users from attack. Although insular fan communities associated with a blog or a fan fiction archive, for example, encourage discussion, education, and positive activism, #Setlock community members

may, in isolated cases such as the previous example, use Twitter as a limited forum for more generalized advocacy or education of one user, not a wider audience.

Conclusion

There is no denying that the kind of fan practices that those invested in #Setlock exhibit have affected the content and even the practices of filming *Sherlock*, which is significant in and of itself. More importantly, a shift in the perception and recognition of fan-produced knowledge systems, as evidenced by my research, demonstrates the extent to which empowered fans in digital spaces are creating new ontologies, negotiating many aspects of media culture—from “spoiling” to helping celebrities to recognize the kind of impact they have in a digital environment. Simply put, fans have a significant impact on media culture, while creating and maintaining creative and knowledgeable online communities that also influence cultural practices beyond those traditionally associated with fan culture. Most important for my purposes has been to discern which fan practices and productions negotiate those cultural boundaries in ways that allow fan contributions to effectively exist in that liminal space.

Boothe and others rightfully claim that fan practices are being emulated by the media industry in order to capitalize on fan-based knowledge systems and practices. Boothe also asserts that “by retaining ideological and textual concomitance, contemporary fan work negotiates the boundaries between producer and audience while still maintaining a reverence for those boundaries. . . . Fannish work, in subverting the system, may support it” (15). Although I have presented evidence to corroborate the claim that fan practices are being emulated by corporate entities, there is still space for resistance to those industrialized responses/representations and for

fan empowerment and creativity, despite their occupying a paradoxical position in which some fan activities simultaneously oppose and become complicit in corporate goals.

My research reveals that emulations of fan activity may be poorly executed, as seen in Abbington's #Setlock/Twitter conflagration, in which Abbington not only ends up alienating some of her most devoted fans, but her ability to discern what it means to contribute to a community online comes into question. She is schooled in the ways of online community interactions and made aware of her privileged yet naïve position as a celebrity operating in a fan space. In addition, the use of #Setlock information by mainstream media runs contrary to the goals of the producers of the show, but, of course, it still serves the purposes of mainstream media. There is no practical way in a participatory, online fan culture to escape the hegemony of the industry that has produced the very texts that fans venerate if we buy into the gift economy paradigm of fan culture. Recognition either by other fans, mainstream media, or producers is an integral component to understanding why fans labor to produce texts for which they are not compensated. While fans are often portrayed as selfish and self-serving (as in Beatlemania), the gift economy model positions fans in different circumstances as simultaneously self-serving (e.g., building credibility and social capital for themselves and their community via recognition by the corporate producers—as in Sherlockology) and also as undermining the producers and gaining recognition and status with other fans and mainstream media despite corporate disapproval (e.g., #Setlock). Regardless of whether fan communities exist and flourish at the behest of corporate entities, my research reveals that fan communities are most interested in serving the distinct and different goals of their respective members. Neither Sherlockology nor #Setlock is overtly concerned with whether their contributions are valued commercially, rather

that they are valued by their chosen fan communities, whose goals may at times align with or oppose the goals of corporate entities.

In the case of *Sherlock* fandom, the ethos of a fan gift economy toward practices that encourage the shaping of online communities that produce their own unique ways of knowing and co-existing with the objects of their affection positions these communities as ripe for advocacy work, particularly for marginalized communities. Marginalized identity groups must reconcile their liminal position on the outskirts of society, with their desire for recognition by the mainstream. In the *Sherlock* fan community, the combination of fan community and advocacy has resulted in unique and creative online knowledge work and efficacious advocacy practices. Practices that are informed both by the digital space in which they are enacted and the subject position (fan/advocate) of participants. A study of how and why fans enacting advocacy in digital spaces is ideal particularly for the asexuality movement follows.

CHAPTER 3: THE EVOLUTION OF *SHERLOCK* FAN CULTURE TOWARD AN ETHIC OF ADVOCACY: REPRESENTING ASEXUALITY

“Social change movements frequently tell the tale of their inception in such a way as to claim that they burst forth as a natural response to the evils of oppression. While such a strategy may enhance group solidarity, it is, without exception, a simplification of the actual social context in which movements exist.”

~ Amanda Udis-Kessler

The BBC television series *Sherlock* is a springboard for significant recognition of and advocacy for asexual identity enacted by fans online. Fans’ texts, ranging from individuals’ deeply personal blogs to fan communities to sites for activism, illustrate how the series’ portrayal of non-heteronormative characters has empowered fans to explore and sometimes question notions of heterosexism, their own sexual identities, and cultural perspectives on alterity. In this chapter, I argue that these often discounted online texts are a significant tool for advocacy online 1) because of, rather than in spite of their temporality; 2) because they function, most often, dialectically; and 3) because they are generated by fans whose unique “strategies, tactics, and affective spaces,” to use Hills’ terms, are well suited to the exigencies of advocacy work and to the advantages of the affordances of online media and communication (147).

Asexuality Social Justice Movement and the LGBTQ Movement

Whether asexuals are largely recognized and considered part of queer/LGBTQ culture/movement is debatable. According to Erica Chu in “Asexualities: Feminist and Queer Perspectives,”

asexuality is often perceived as “less worthy” of critical attention than gay/lesbian/queer identities for two reasons: 1) Asexuality is perceived by LGB activists as “not radical enough in its transgression of the cultural limitations placed on eroticism” (80). This view is based on the fact that LGB activists have had to fight against sexually repressive attitudes and “shaming” to gain recognition of and acceptance for erotic acts that are non-heteronormative, leaving them to sometimes misrecognize asexuality as “keeping with the normative fear of sex,” which accounts for the pervasiveness of reductive, repressive attitudes about sex of any kind (80). 2) LGBQ activists have been invested in challenging “compulsory heterosexuality” but have not included in their understanding of compulsory heterosexuality an implicit “compulsory eroticism,” *which is the basis of* the oppression of asexual people. Chu advocates an understanding of asexuality that places it firmly within the auspices of queer identity politics precisely because asexual identity can be understood as “anti-assimilist,” which is a more radical view on sexuality. Chu explains that anti-assimilist views discourage “positivist models of identity that assume monolithic identity categories [for example, those that only understand gay identity in terms of having been ‘born this way,’ which aligns it with heterosexual identity, thus assimilating in order to prove equality] and instead encourages asserting identity on the basis of each individual’s sense of their preferences and desires,” which would be perceived as more “radical,” “more queer” (84). This understanding may allow asexuality advocates to have a distinct voice and to make clear what they can contribute to the queer community and corresponding politics, but this understanding is not yet the norm.

Asexuals face a lack of understanding and a general invisibility that makes advocacy and inclusion challenging. Julie Decker, in *The Invisible Orientation: An Introduction to Asexuality*,

explains that “some will say that enduring invisibility is not the same as oppression—and they’re right, though what happens as a result of systematic erasure, verbal abuse, and misunderstanding can be oppressive” (48). There is no value in comparing suffering, as can be the case between LGBTQ advocates and asexuality advocates. Common reactions to asexual claims regarding discrimination include a general dismissal because asexuals can “pass” as straight and, therefore, access heteronormative privileges in ways that LGBT people may not. According to Decker, the most common problem affecting people’s perceptions regarding the struggles that asexuals face occurs because “prejudice and discrimination cannot be molded to detect LGBTQ oppression and then get applied unchanged to detect it in asexual populations” (57). Decker supplies a list of those “laws, situations, and attitudes” that do have an impact on asexual people along with documentation regarding these issues/claims:

- Consummation laws
- Adoption denial
- Employment discrimination and housing denial
- Discrimination by mental health professionals
- Lack of marriage equivalent for non-romantic relationships
- Religious pressure/discrimination
- “Corrective” rape
- Lack of representation in media and sex education
- Internalized oppression/self-hate

Despite the lack of recognition for asexuality within the moniker and movement of the LGBTQ community, the current asexuality movement, deemed in 2012 “an emerging sexual orientation” by S. B. Gazzola and M. A. Morrison in “Sexual Minority Research in the New Millennium,” can be defined by hallmarks similar to those experienced by LGBTQ people, positioning asexuality for a similar trajectory toward visibility and acceptance. Asexuality has been pathologized and miscategorized in the recent past, which is similar to the way homosexuality was first classified by the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. Homosexuality was first deemed a disorder by clinicians in 1974, but, because of increasing pressure from the lesbian and gay movements in the 1980s and an increased understanding from the clinical side, this classification was eliminated in 1987. Similarly, asexuality is most commonly diagnosed as hypoactive sexual desire disorder (HSDD) or inhibited sexual desire (ISD), both of which are marked by a lack of interest in sexual activity and the distress that such affliction induces. Unlike homosexuality, asexuality has yet to be accepted as an expression of a healthy sexual identity (Flore). The asexual movement distinguishes between HSDD and asexuality as an identity by eliminating the “distress” part of the diagnosis. Asexuality as an expression of sexual identity is becoming more popular as more people report being naturally predisposed from childhood to a lack of interest in sexual activity.

Getting recognition for asexual identity is more complicated than it has been for homosexuality because of the challenge of asexuality being defined by the absence of desire, rather than by desire deemed oppositional to heterosexual behavior, as in the case of homosexuality. According to Jacinthe Flore in *Psychology and Sexuality*, “The American Psychiatric Association's (APA) Diagnostic and Statistical Manuals (DSMs) provide no

measures, no scales, and no defined norms [regarding asexuality], yet, simultaneously, assume a normative sexuality against which all others can be measured and classified” (152). In this way, asexuality is also aligned with homosexuality while remaining markedly different. Both have typically been defined in deference to heteronormative instantiations of discourse and culture. For homosexuality there is a clear relationship to heterosexuality—homosexuality has been perceived as less than, as abject. Asexuality is not only defined in relation to heteronormative expectations, but it faces a problem that homosexuality has not. Nobody seems to consider asexuality at all because it is defined in the most basic of terms as the absence of interest in sexual activity with a partner. Homosexuality is defined by what homosexuals “do,” while asexuality must be defined by an absence of something, or what people “do not.” Asexuality thus proves much more difficult to comprehend when so much of how people understand the world is built on dichotomies (male/female, hetero/homo).

While sexuality theorists and researchers largely acknowledge the fluidity of gender and sexuality, there is little recognition for the lack of desire as part of the human condition rather than as a pathology. As Michael D. Storms explores in his 1980 article, “Theories of Sexual Orientation,” because the Kinsey scale, which is demarcated with 1-6 as indicators of hetero and homo sexualities, does not initially account for asexuality, though some people in his study reported no or very low interest in sex with a same-sex or opposite-sex partner, Alfred Kinsey added an “x” to represent asexuality as a later addendum to what is now commonly referred to as the Kinsey Scale. Asexuality was recognized but placed outside of the scale meant to represent the fluidity of sexual orientation. This outside position is evidence of the inability for even sex researchers (let alone the general population) to conceive of asexuality as a marker of sexual

identity. Storms refigures a less limiting scale in which “these data are better described by a . . . model in which homoeroticism and heteroeroticism are viewed as separate variables and in which bisexuality is defined as scoring high on both dimensions,” so that bisexuality could be recognized as a category in which a person may have a greater or lesser sexual attraction to the same or opposite sex, rather than as essentially half hetero and half homosexual, which is a misperception regarding bisexual attraction. Although this shift allowed asexuality to become part of the scale, it did not move asexuality any closer to being perceived as an identity, rather than a conditional descriptor.

Derridian post-structuralism offers the idea that semiotic systems are most often understood in binary terms in which a hierarchy exists, privileging one half of the binary over another (e.g., male/female, straight/gay, white/black). This idea is often invoked to help account for the myriad ways in which the dominant discourse controls perceptions regarding privilege, power, and normativity. E. F. Emens explains how asexuality faces similar challenges as bisexuality because of the extent to which they disrupt not only the hierarchy, like the gay civil rights movement would, but the binary itself. Emens points out that the assumption of and preference for “monosexuality” in our culture is what often excludes both bisexuality and asexuality from both the lesbian and gay community and heteronormative culture. This exclusion is often what perpetuates the lack of recognition and understanding for both identity groups. As many scholars have noted, bisexuals are often faced with misperceptions that limit others from recognizing the authenticity of bisexual identity. Udis Kessler adds that bisexual people seem to throw a wrench in the primary mantra used by the gay community: sexuality is not a choice. Because bisexuality is so often linked to choice-making, it, at first glance, seems to threaten that

mantra. Udis-Kessler writes, “Community-oriented individuals [both heterosexual and homosexual], protective of the essentialist view of sexuality that seems to give rhyme and reason to their communities, equate the fluidity and apparent choice-making of bisexuality with that of constructionism, and see only a threat to that which they hold dear” (81). However, this reductive view does not account for the fact that the fluidity of desire that equates to bisexuality is no more of a choice than is a desire (gay or straight) that reflects the traditional binary. Further complicating this issue is that, for bisexuals, the fluidity of their desire means that outward signifiers—the gender of a bisexual person’s current partner(s) or lover(s)—also will likely differ at different points in his or her life. A bisexual woman who is currently in a relationship with a man is read as straight despite the fact that she remains queer. If that woman were to become involved with a woman, then she suddenly is read as gay, which is also a misrepresentation of her true identity.

Similarly, asexual identity exists under erasure. Because the definition of asexuality is the absence of sexual attraction, and, according to the AVEN, there is not one singular experience for all asexual people. AVEN provides the following definitions:

Demisexual: Someone who can only experience sexual attraction after an emotional bond has been formed. This bond does not have to be romantic.

Gray-asexual (gray-a) or gray-sexual: Someone who identifies with the area between asexuality and sexuality, for example, because they experience sexual attraction very rarely, only under specific circumstances, or of an intensity so low that it’s ignorable.

Aesthetic attraction: Attraction to someone's appearance, without it being romantic or sexual.

Romantic attraction: Desire of being romantically involved with another person.

Sensual attraction: Desire to have physical, non-sexual contact with someone else, like affectionate touching.

Because there is no singular type of expression for asexual identity and because asexuals are not always read as "other," asexuals may "pass" as heteronormative in the same way that bisexuals may be perceived, at times, as straight. This misperception has the potential to disempower both bisexuals and asexuals because it leads others to question why they need representation and advocacy.

While discourse regarding LGBT people has largely evolved in subtle but important ways, discourse regarding asexuality has not. For example, in many personal accounts of asexuals coming to terms with and attempting to understand their sexual identity, as is the case with homosexual "coming out stories" of the 1970s, they most often lack a cultural referent and the language to describe their sexual identity because there is no popular culture referent or common language to express that identity. For example, Cathy, a 20-year-old asexual woman who participated in a The Asexuality Story Project, a website in which asexuals post about their experiences, describes hearing the word *asexual* for the first time in college:

Then I heard the word asexual for the first time my first day of college. At first I thought it sounded stupid because I know humans can't reproduce asexually, but when she explained it, it sounded a bit like me. So one day I researched it because I had nothing else to do and I couldn't believe [sic] how much it sounded like me. My life suddenly made sense. I never knew there were other people like me [sic] I thought I was all alone.

This sentiment of lacking the language and understanding to identify one's sexuality is repeated continuously in the narratives of asexuals.

While this sentiment likely rings true for gay men and women coping with the discovery of their sexuality forty or fifty years ago, the attention being paid to LGBTQ issues and identities in our current culture has profoundly affected young people now identifying as gay, lesbian, trans, or queer. They are likely to be aware of both discourse and representations to which they may relate when they attempt to navigate a burgeoning sexual identity outside the heteronormative ideals. Asexuals are still lacking the language necessary for describing who they are, and this lack of language is supported by everyday examples of digital technology. As of the writing of this text, Microsoft Word's autocorrect continuously corrects the spelling of "asexuals" (a plural noun akin to homosexuals) to "asexual" (an adjective) or, without autocorrect, highlights "asexual" as a word not matching any recognized term. This lack of representation in our popular discourse reduces asexuals to a description of their lack of sexual behavior, at best, and to a type of single-celled organism and plant reproduction, at worst, rather

than validating asexuality as an identity, as who people are, rather than what they do or, in the case of asexuality, what they do not do.

Finally, as representations and acceptance of representations of LGBT people increase, both in our culture and in our popular culture media, acceptance/understanding and representations of asexual people are sorely lacking, as were representations of homosexuals as recently as a decade ago. According to Joseph Rouse in his essay, “Feminism and the Social Construction of Scientific Knowledge,” reflexivity “exposes the illusion that representation is autonomous and self-projecting; feminists respond that we can never encounter or understand ourselves (and especially not ‘the Self’) except through our interactions with others in particularly shared surroundings” (370). Popular culture artifacts like television shows (e.g., *Sherlock*) can become our “shared surroundings,” and characters in these texts can “expose the illusion” that non-heteronormative people are disembodied by challenging heteronormative constructions of sex and gender. In this way, a television show (its characters in our living rooms sometimes for years) can provide this mediated understanding; conversely, of course, any artifact can also (intentionally or not) encourage the same old stereotypes and stigmas.

How characters are perceived does depend, in part, on the viewers. Those viewers, especially in Western countries, often have access to digital media and engage in critical and creative ways with them. These texts demonstrate how a television series has empowered legions of fans to explore and sometimes question notions of heterosexism, their own sexual identities, and cultural perspectives on alterity. These digital artifacts illustrate both the unique affordances of digital media and the ways that certain types of participation have the potential to enlighten or empower those who participate in creative expression and community-building activities. In this

case, those activities reflect a current movement toward visibility, recognition, and acceptance of asexual as a sexual identity that can help us to understand both the great potential and limitations of online advocacy.

Sherlock: Fertile Ground for Activist Roots

Sherlock modernizes the canonical characters from Conan Doyle's novels and short stories from Britain's Victorian and Edwardian eras. It has garnered much attention because of its portrayal of non-heteronormative characters and its robust fandom. These qualities make it a perfect text for this study.

Additionally, the world created by the show espouses heteronormative ideals regarding sexual partnerships and marriage, which are constantly called into question by the inclusion of an asexual character. For example, Sherlock Holmes and John Watson are often perceived, in the most favorable of ways, as a couple by other characters in the show who seem either delighted or incredulous that Sherlock has finally paired up with someone. Not coincidentally, the constant recognition of the possibility that Sherlock and John are intimately involved also stokes the flames of some very popular fan theories and fan fiction in which Sherlock and John are lovers.

Modern Sherlock still lives in London at 221 Baker Street, in the upstairs flat (B) rented from Mrs. Hudson (Una Stubbs). During most of the first three seasons' episodes, he shares 221B with John, a soldier-doctor who is home after being wounded in Afghanistan (just as the original Watson was wounded in a much earlier Afghan War). Within 24 hours of their introduction by mutual friend Mike Stamford (David Nellist), Sherlock invites John to look at the flat on Baker Street with him, and they agree to move in together.

The instant friendship between Sherlock and John is necessary to have the pair immediately involved in stopping a serial killer, thus hooking the audience into the first episode's plot. Dialogue and the usage of first names, however, insinuate that their close friendship may be more than "like" at first sight. Unlike customary references to the main characters as Holmes and Watson, *Sherlock* showrunners and frequent scriptwriters Moffat and Gatiss insist on modern informality by referring to the characters as Sherlock and John. In addition to indicating that Sherlock and John are immediately comfortable with each other, this first-name basis makes the characters more accessible to audiences, who more easily view them as contemporaries or even "friends."

Becoming "friends" with Sherlock and John also helps establish the foundations for the series' little "family" of characters its audiences soon come to know. Modernized canon characters include Mycroft Holmes (portrayed as "the British Government"), (New) Scotland Yard Inspector Lestrade, and Mrs. Hudson, but the series also introduces new characters created for this series: St. Bartholomew Hospital pathologist Molly Hooper (Louise Brealey) and New Scotland Yard detectives Phillip Anderson (Jonathan Aris) and Sally Donovan (Vinette Robinson). Modern Sherlock has developed relationships with these people through his work as a consulting detective who accepts private clients but also works with New Scotland Yard, at their request, on their most difficult cases.

Two key aspects of the modern television series—the close friendship between Sherlock and John and Sherlock's occupation as a consulting detective, complete with the required familiarity with current technology and forensics procedures to allow him to deduce crime scenes more expertly than anyone else—are consistent with Conan Doyle's original stories. In

particular, the Sherlock-John relationship has encouraged literary scholars to study the correlation between the original texts and the current television series. For example, Rebecca L. McLaughlin's thesis research into the BBC television series and its characterizations of Sherlock Holmes and John Watson early on asserts that

Sherlock writers Steven Moffat and Mark Gatiss fully understand the relationship between Holmes and Watson in the original texts, and place emphasis on the characterization and development of this homosocial relationship within the show. Although it is set in contemporary British society, the show draws from and relies on the original representation of the relationship between these two men. Throughout *Sherlock*, Moffat and Gatiss explore the reasons for this male friendship, often incorporating, within the diegesis, elements of literary criticism about the original texts. (2)

The Victorian-era male friendship described in Conan Doyle's stories reflects the social expectations of the author's time. Unmarried men who shared lodgings for financial and collegial reasons were not perceived as "gay." In fact, because homosexuality was criminalized in Britain until the mid-twentieth century, the original Holmes and Watson would have been in legal peril if anyone suspected that their friendship had become sexual. Close male friendships, however, were encouraged by a society in which men's sphere of influence was very different from women's. Men of the upper middle classes often attended university together and developed close friendships with their classmates. Watson not only had been educated as a physician but served with the Fifth Northumberland Fusiliers, where he lived and worked closely with his

brothers in arms. That two young men, Holmes and Watson, would share a home as well as adventures until the time that Watson is married was not considered strange or sexually suggestive in the original stories' setting. Moffat and Gatiss are true to the characters' original portrayal when they immediately set up the situation by which Sherlock and John become flatmates and close friends. However, the close male friendship depicted in canon takes on a different meaning for viewers, especially when Moffat and Gatiss use audience expectations regarding a homosocial relationship to create sexual tension throughout the series. This "teasing" of Sherlock's or John's sexual orientation and the "true" nature of their relationship beyond the eye of the camera has become a hallmark of the series, beginning with the first episode.

When read in a cultural context, even the most seemingly benign constructs can reveal an agenda. This agenda can be a consciously persuasive objective or can be an assumed, or even unintentional, conscription of popular values. This conscription of popular values is often invisible or made to seem "natural" if it reflects the views of the dominant discourse and/or ideology of the time. The most powerful constructs in heteronormative ideology—expectations to commit to one person, marry, consummate the marriage, and raise children—are so ubiquitous that their position as the default expectations for adult heterosexual people pervades our culture. Although the dominant culture has always valued the heteronormative constructs of marriage and family, its cultural packaging as a product everyone should buy has shifted over time; essentially, only the sales pitch has changed. As John D'Emilio discusses in "Capitalism and Gay Identity," the family existed, first and foremost, as an economic entity in which members counted on each other's interfamilial labor to survive. Capitalism and the free labor system led to the disenfranchisement of the nuclear family as the only possibility for sustainable living. As a

result, according to D’Emilio, the nuclear family, once valued for the economic stability it offered, became distinctly “social” and emotional and was venerated as the sole “source of love, affection, and emotional security,” which kept in place heteronormative constructs as the only sanctioned structure for adult human relationships (473). Although economic autonomy could now exist, the sheer pervasiveness of the ideological value of the nuclear family would compromise everyone’s ideological autonomy in that few people, gay or straight, question whether they really need or want this “product.”

Everyone, gay and straight alike, is subject to the shaping force of heteronormative instantiations of social and cultural practices. Ultimately, *Sherlock*’s depiction of a character who can be read as asexual, Sherlock, who has no interest in such social/cultural precepts, enables the audience to acknowledge the power that heteronormative constructs have to shape perceptions of how intimate relationships can and/or should be structured, especially when it comes to the expectation that one should seek intimate partnerships that lead to sex and marriage. Currently that pressure might extend to marriages between same-sex partners, as well, and the characters in *Sherlock* certainly seem to be progressive in their perception of lesbian and gay characters, though less progressive when it comes to perceptions regarding alternatives to traditional notions about partnerships and intimacy. While Sherlock eschews marriage and kinship in favor of “work,” we can sense how heteronormative expectations function like a gravitational pull for most people who, unlike Sherlock, cannot easily dismiss them in favor of “work.”

A telling example of this trend occurs when Mrs. Hudson shows the flat to Sherlock and John. She mentions the availability of a second bedroom upstairs, “if you’ll be needing one.” Perplexed, John replies that they need two bedrooms, one for each flatmate. Apparently Mrs.

Hudson, like many people who grew up in Western culture during the 1940s and 1950s, has a heteronormative view of romantic relationships, although she is also aware of changing social attitudes toward homosexual relationships. For Mrs. Hudson, everyone should be paired with an intimate partner. She has known Sherlock for several years, ever since he ensured her troublesome husband's execution in Florida, and she is surprised when he brings a potential roommate to see the flat she is going to rent to him. Throughout the first episode, viewers are presented with plenty of evidence that Sherlock Holmes is a loner. Mycroft, for example, tells John that Sherlock has no friends; the closest relationship he has is with his "enemy," Mycroft (who, John later learns, is Sherlock's brother). New Scotland Yard's Sergeant Donovan is surprised that Sherlock brings a "colleague" to a crime scene, an unheard of occasion; Detective Inspector Lestrade, who has known Sherlock for five years, also questions Sherlock about John's presence at the crime scene. No one, it seems, is accustomed to Sherlock having a friend. Thus, when Mrs. Hudson sees Sherlock bring "home" John as a potential roommate, she is pleased that he seems to be following an expected social construct: "pairing up." This "pairing up" is antithetical to Sherlock, who, according to evidence throughout the series, would be best classified as aromantic asexual.

Although John repeatedly indicates that he is only a roommate, Mrs. Hudson is undeterred in assuming Sherlock is in a (likely sexual) relationship with John. She whispers that the next door landlady, Mrs. Turner, "has married ones" and indicates that she is not averse to renting rooms to a homosexual couple ("A Study in Pink"). In this way, Mrs. Hudson seems more open-minded than many of her generation. In fact, she takes on a competitive glee in assuming that she will have her very own "married" ones living together. Now that marriage

equality is gaining traction, it is no wonder that Mrs. Hudson can make the leap to accepting a potential homosexual relationship, but she (and many others in the series) cannot seem to let go of the idea that Sherlock must be paired up romantically with someone, rather than considering that he may be asexual and uninterested in the traditional trappings of intimate partnerships. This lack of consideration of an asexual identity reveals the inherent heteronormative bias. The series' recognition of this bias continues throughout the seasons and in many different contexts, allowing viewers to pick up on this perspective. After John has moved into 221B and gone to his first crime scene with Sherlock, a mysterious man "encourages" John to enter a dark car and be driven to an interrogation in an empty garage, where John is asked about his relationship with Sherlock. Because Sherlock apparently has no friends and John, according to his therapist, does not easily trust people, the mysterious man, who turns out to be Mycroft, wonders why John has so quickly become involved with Sherlock. "Might we expect a happy announcement by the end of the week?" he asks, implying that the only reason the pair would move in together so quickly is if they have an intimate relationship.

The expectation for intimate relationships to be sexual and implications regarding the expected "pairings" continues to mount as the season progresses, even Sherlock (the show's genius, "out of the box" thinker) is constrained by underlying heteronormative expectations that limit one's perspective regarding the possible range of relationships for humans. Dialogue, such as that in the restaurant scene in "A Study in Pink," implies that Sherlock, who can correctly deduce most facts about anyone he meets, thinks that John is at least bisexual and interested in him, despite John's constant protestations that he is heterosexual. During a stakeout, Sherlock takes John to an Italian restaurant operated by Angelo, a man Sherlock once proved was not

responsible for a serious crime. From the restaurant's window, Sherlock can watch for the suspected serial killer (the plot or case element of this episode). Not realizing that Sherlock is working, Angelo is thrilled that Sherlock has brought a date to his restaurant. Despite John's protest that he is not Sherlock's date, Angelo insists on placing a candle on their table because it is more romantic. During dinner, John asks Sherlock if he is romantically involved with anyone. Sherlock explains that women are "really not my area." John assumes that Sherlock has a boyfriend, "which is all right, by the way," but Sherlock replies that he does not have a boyfriend, either. Instead, Sherlock tells John that he is flattered by his attention but is "married" to his work. Flustered, John explains that he is not coming on to Sherlock. He reaffirms that Sherlock is single, just like he is. John's inability to even consider that Sherlock may be asexual is indicative of the lack of recognition in popular culture for this identity, despite such clear reference to asexual identity markers, which continue to build as the show progresses.

Sherlock, as one of very few television characters that fans identify as asexual, does not self-identify as any orientation, nor do the actors or showrunners corroborate the interpretation that way. For Sherlock, that interest is theoretical—how passion may lead to violent crime, for example. Like other characters that viewers perceive as asexual, such as *The Big Bang Theory*'s Sheldon Cooper (Jim Parson), Sherlock does not verbally self-identify as anything. His actions, like Sheldon's, indicate a very limited interest in sex. For Sheldon, even a brief experimentation with sex is not enough to deter fans from believing he is asexual, nor should it be, because there is a range of responses to sexual interest among asexuals, as evidenced by the diversity in asexual identity descriptions, which indicate a range from no interest in sexual conduct to a very limited interest in some sexual activity. In Season Nine, Sheldon gives his virginity to long-time

girlfriend Amy (Mayim Bialik) and, after admitting that he enjoyed sex more than he expected, suggests that they do it again next year on Amy's birthday ("The Opening Night Excitation"). These characters contrast with the rare character who openly identifies as asexual, such as Voodoo Dunacci (Kelly O'Sullivan) on short-lived USA Network series *Sirens* (2014-2015). Whereas a self-identified asexual may be more common on a cable network television series with limited distribution, the more ambiguously identified asexuals like Sherlock or Sheldon are more common on mainstream television series. *The Big Bang Theory* (2007-present) is CBS's top-rated comedy and has been for several years. *Sherlock* is one of BBC Worldwide's most popular global exports. That these series reaching mainstream audiences who may not be familiar with asexuality do not specifically label their lead characters as asexual is not all that surprising.

Instead, Sherlock, like Sheldon, couches his self-identity in ambiguous terms that allow viewers to interpret the dialogue to support the reading they prefer. Such comments bookend the episodes discussed in this dissertation [e.g., the first episode, "A Study in Pink" (2010) through the special holiday episode, "The Abominable Bride" (2016)]. In the former, Sherlock resists John's questions about personal relationships and explains that he is married to his work. The dialogue in this scene could be interpreted as Sherlock being asexual (in his case, not interested in intimate, non-sexual relationships with anyone) or celibate (choosing not to have sexual relationships). Throughout the series, Sherlock is hinted as being a virgin and possibly "alarmed" by sex ("A Scandal in Belgravia") and uninterested in finding a sexual partner. At John's wedding, maid of honor Janine (Yasmine Akram) attempts to hook up with Sherlock, but he dodges her advances and deduces possible partners for her. Janine's comment, "I wish you

weren't . . . whatever you are" can be read as Sherlock's ambiguous (to her) orientation or her lack of understanding his asexuality ("The Sign of Three"). The special episode "The Abominable Bride" is perhaps the most revealing, because it takes place within Sherlock's mind—he subconsciously determines what the "Sherlock" and "John" solving a crime in his mind palace will say or do. Once again, John expresses concern that Sherlock is alone and alludes to "experiences" that he assumes Sherlock has had. Visibly uncomfortable, Sherlock tries to steer the conversation in other directions. Finally, John asks "What made you like this?" The implication, from the married man's worldview that everyone must pair up, is that Sherlock must have had a previous relationship that scarred him emotionally and left him unwilling to risk becoming involved again. Sherlock, however, proudly proclaims, "Nothing made me. *I* [actor's emphasis] made me." Viewers may read this dialogue as indicating that no one or prior experience has made Sherlock, the lone consulting detective, more content with his work than with a sexual partner. However, it also may indicate that, without a vocabulary to express his sexual orientation—or, indeed, a definition that the public can understand or accept as valid—Sherlock "made" himself and feels unique among his circle of family, friend John, and work acquaintances. As with many areas of his life, Sherlock prides himself on being unique, from his choice of profession to the way he thinks to the independent way he lives. Being asexual may be read as part of Sherlock's uniqueness or "other"ness.

Fans gather "evidence" such as the previous examples from the show that Sherlock could be perceived as asexual so that they may co-opt this character as a possible representation of asexual identity in popular culture. This group is so in need of representation that they act as detectives themselves, building a case for the possibility that they may be on the cusp of

representation. While this is certainly a worthwhile endeavor, as it draws attention to the plight of asexuals, Sherlock, as representative of asexual identity, is not as compelling a representation as it would be if the character were to self-identify, validating asexual as an identity, rather than marking the presence of asexual behavior.

Furthermore, Sherlock's asexual behavior may be used to pathologize his asexuality in such a way that it adds to the misperception that asexual behavior is always a sign of dysfunction, rather than entertaining the possibility that it may be part of one's identity. In the first episode, Sherlock proclaims himself to be a "high-functioning sociopath," a claim reiterated after he kills Charles Augustus Magnussen (Lars Mikkelsen) many episodes later ("His Last Vow"). Nevertheless, as many scholars (e.g., Dondero and Pippin) have noted, Sherlock is not, by medical definition or character development during more than three seasons' episodes, truly a sociopath. He may claim sociopathy so that he does not need to be socially acceptable to those he deems his intellectual inferiors or to mask his emotions, but Sherlock increasingly shows that he is capable of love, particularly when it comes to John Watson. Sherlock is "other" from the social norm, but his potential asexuality is not the only reason why he is so different from the rest of the characters in *Sherlock* or on U.S. or U.K. television. His behavior regarding sex or sexuality is merely another factor—like (incorrectly) self-identifying as a sociopath, being able to deduce facts from observation, choosing not to eat or sleep during a case—that is outside the norm and may initially seem to pathologize asexuality and has been troubling to fans who are also asexuality advocates. Because viewers learn nothing specific about Sherlock's relationship history other than that he has not really had any, they receive no trite or convenient explanation for his remaining unattached; they have no reason to believe that his ideology stems from pain or

dysfunction, which allows savvy viewers to perceive his “lifestyle” as not a reaction to something but as a queer identity.

Just because Sherlock may be perceived as asexual does not mean that he is incapable of feeling or demonstrating great love. This aspect of his identity has been championed by advocates who remind us that sex does not have to equal love, or that love does not require sexual attraction. Throughout the series, he increasingly sacrifices himself to save John—most notably, faking his death in order to save John from Moriarty’s hired assassin and leaving behind his friends and livelihood in order to finish the job of dismantling Moriarty’s criminal network (“The Reichenbach Fall”) and, a few episodes later, murdering a publishing magnate who blackmails John’s wife and threatens John physically (“His Last Vow”). However, Sherlock does more than physically save John’s life on several occasions. He gives John purpose and becomes, according to John, his best friend (“The Sign of Three”). Sherlock considers John his only friend (“The Hounds of Baskerville”) and, during the best man’s speech at John’s wedding, proclaims that he and Mary are the two people who love John most (“The Sign of Three”). In fact, Sherlock’s obvious emotional reliance on John’s well-being has become the focal point of many types of fan readings of the Sherlock-John relationship.

The amount of sexually suggestive dialogue, especially within the pilot episode, establishes what Carlen Lavigne describes as Sherlock’s amorphous sexuality: “he is assuredly queer, in the most generic, non-heteronormative sense of the word, and he *could be* [original emphasis] gay, straight, bisexual, asexual, or pansexual. He does not commit himself in any way” (18). In subsequent episodes, Sherlock only seems interested in keeping John’s attention, ensuring that John remains his flatmate, or protecting John. Even when tempted by Irene Adler

(Lara Pulver, “A Scandal in Belgravia”), Sherlock resists her less-than-subtle seduction attempts; Adler eventually tells John that she is attracted to Sherlock, but that John and Sherlock are the ones in a relationship. Sherlock’s sexual experience, however, is also questioned in this episode, indicating that he may feel emotionally close to John but has not entered a sexual relationship.

Early in “A Scandal in Belgravia,” Sherlock and John are summoned to Buckingham Palace, where Mycroft introduces Sherlock to a representative of his royal client. The men explain that Adler is blackmailing a member of the royal family and show Sherlock a series of sexually suggestive photographs that Adler is using to prove she can ruin the royal’s reputation. Mycroft warns Sherlock not be alarmed, even though the case “has to do with sex.” Sherlock quickly assures his brother, “Sex doesn’t alarm me,” to which Mycroft replies, “How would you know?” Although the banter may merely reflect sibling rivalry, more specific dialogue near the episode’s end reinforces the visual evidence (i.e., Sherlock avoiding Adler’s advances at two points in this episode). Adler tells Mycroft that criminal mastermind Moriarty refers to Mycroft as the “Iceman,” but Sherlock is called the “Virgin.” With the number of insinuations about Sherlock’s lack of sexual experience given throughout this episode, the character’s sexual identity seems especially fluid and leads many viewers to think of Sherlock as asexual rather than gay or bisexual. The view of asexuals as virgins is a common misperception, as asexual people may have varying degrees of interest in certain types of sexual situations.

During the third season, Sherlock (who has returned to London after faking his death and working to dismantle Moriarty’s criminal network) strives to repair his friendship with John, who has mourned Sherlock and is horrified that Sherlock cruelly deceived him by faking his death. However, Sherlock also becomes friends with Mary Morstan. He seems comfortable with

his asexual role in this three-way friendship. When Sherlock seems jealous of John's fondness of his former (male) military commander, Mary reminds him that "neither of us was his first" ("The Sign of Three"). Whereas John tries to compartmentalize his post-marriage relationships (Mary = spouse, Sherlock = best friend), he nonetheless keeps returning to Sherlock, and the John-Sherlock relationship remains the foundation on which the series continues to be built.

In addition to Sherlock's continuing emotional investment in his relationship with John, he continues to provide evidence that he may be asexual. When he shams an engagement to a woman to gather information for a case, his fiancée Janine is affectionate and continually tries to place him in provocative situations. She moves into 221B and makes herself at home, rearranging furniture and wearing Sherlock's shirt. However, later in the episode, when she realizes that she has been used, she tells Sherlock that she wishes they had consummated the relationship: "Just once would've been nice." Sherlock drolly explains that he is saving himself for marriage. Despite Janine saving face by reporting to London's tabloids that Sherlock is an insatiable lover, viewers understand that, according to Sherlock, he is still not interested in sex with a woman, whether it be professional seductress Irene Adler or wholesome fiancée Janine ("His Last Vow").

Digital Affordances: Toward an Ethos of Advocacy

Through these and many other examples across the series' ten 90-minute episodes to date, 21st century Sherlock has become caught in the crossfire of a heated online debate about his sexuality. The lead character's asexual behavior has shed some light on and given a voice to those fans or audience members who identify as asexual. The series also actively promotes

online discussion regarding a multiplicity of sexual orientations and societal interest in or response to *Sherlock*'s character revelations and development. Fan engagement with these issues leads to many thoughtful online discussions, not only about the series but also about concepts of sexuality in a broader scope. We end up with some evidence of very timely, meaningful community advocacy and support through online fan communities, as well as asexual community/advocacy sites like Asexuality Visibility and Education Network, Asexual News and Asexuality.org.

The series' character development and evolving plot lines allow viewers, and more specifically fans, to create safe spaces online for communities in which they can discuss both their and the characters' sexuality and perceptions regarding both traditional and non-traditional relationships. The value of a show that pushes the typical heteronormative boundaries and represents alternative sex/love relationships cannot be overstated. These main characters heavily imply a world in which characters of any sexual orientation are normal, and the "atypical" relationship between Sherlock Holmes and John Watson cannot easily fit preconceived definitions of "family," "couple," or even the concept of "love."

Exploring the content of these communities and the ways in which they and the technology that makes them possible function and contribute to a modern understanding of identity, community, and even advocacy online are tantamount to understanding what it means to be a contemporary citizen in the digital age. Thus, in a digital age, authentic representation of non-normative expressions of both sexuality and gender becomes increasingly important. In order for authenticity to be established, there needs to be a "witness" to these subjectivities, first

to instantiate their existence and then to think about how these queer subjectivities affect and are affected by the dominant discourse.

Donna Haraway, in her book, *Modest_Witness@Second_Millennium.FemaleMan Meets Oncomouse*, explores the concept of the traditional “modest witness.” This classic modest witness claims to be “the legitimate and authorized ventriloquist for the object world, adding nothing from his mere opinions, from his biasing embodiment” (24). The classic modest witness is always a male of some social standing, which reveals the way in which heteronormativity shapes our social and political consciousness in that it is the default “culture of no culture” that Susan Traweek first describes and Haraway inscribes as part of her rhetoric. This “culture of no culture” presupposes that the classic and outmoded modest witness’ identity and, consequently, his or her documentation of the witnessed events magically transcend any subjectivity that might otherwise be present. In this way, those whose voices are a privileged part of that “culture of no culture,” which presupposes heteronormative-embodied maleness, are also those who exercise socio-political power over marginalized identities.

Sites for advocacy online can be said to host a new generation of “witnesses” who contribute narratives about their personal experiences and advice based on their opinions and personal experiences, and their “biasing embodiment” is at the forefront of their claims. By allowing people who contribute/create texts to speak their personal truths in their own words, advocacy websites like the Asexual Story Project provide an authentic representation of the asexual community and reliable information about the community’s needs. This site accomplishes two things: first, it instantiates their existence, and second, it provides an opportunity for those both in and out of the asexual community to think about how the very

existence of these queer subjectivities affects and are affected by the dominant discourses. The sites examined in this dissertation do a good job of putting contributors in the position to make claims of situated knowledge, especially because they offer diverse claims from diverse people about asexual experience.

Haraway asserts that, in order “to enable compelling belief and collective action” (which is the mission of any social action movement), we must find a new modest witness who, “while eschewing the additive narcotic of transcendental foundations” (22) like those that guarantee objective representation of a universal truth, must be “in the action, be finite and dirty, not transcendent and clean” (36). In other words, we need to see and hear the voices of those who lack recognition within the framework of traditional society if we want to have a better understanding of the way that the “real world” produces knowledge, because “nothing comes without its world, so trying to know those worlds is crucial” (37).

Acknowledging subjectivity is crucial when considering objectivity. The most objective and, consequently, useful “witness” is one who documents his or her observations about the world through the lens of his or her own situated knowledge and who practices “critical reflexivity”—a witness who is aware of and attempts to make others aware of a distinctive subject position. This “critical reflexivity,” especially when espoused by a witness who identifies with a marginalized (sub)culture, makes room for new ways of producing and reconfiguring knowledge, which is necessary if we are to understand and account for the representation and rights of those groups that fall outside of the traditional “norms” that dictate the limits of a community’s and/or society’s perceptions. The value inherent in working in a social media environment is that accomplishing this production and reconfiguration of knowledge requires a

minimum of time and effort and allows participation from contributors all over the world from different social standings and cultural backgrounds.

Those fans and advocates who share their stories and perceptions online are the new modest witnesses, and their ability to impact our culture is directly related to the post-human condition and online environment that enables their texts to be consumed and even to be understood in a way that would not be possible without the affordances of digital technology, digital culture, and digital literacy. While this platform has much promise for advocacy, as discussed in the next section, it is also limited in some profound ways. For example, in the opening to her talk at the University of Central Florida on October 19, 2012, seasoned activist and feminist icon Gloria Steinem began her talk by addressing the audience directly:

I especially appreciate your coming together in one room in the age of twitter and pressing send and so on. I just want to remind us that, as miraculous as the electronic age is, something can happen in a room like this that can't happen anywhere else. We have to be together in order to truly understand each other. If we don't have all five of our senses connecting, the chemicals in our brain that allow us to empathize with each other don't get triggered. You can't raise a baby on the Internet. So, I hope that this feels as special to you as it does to me.

Steinem's take on the issue of embodied face-to-face communication and computer-mediated digital communication has profound implications for how some people may perceive activism in an online environment. Her comments speak to the tension between digital and face-to-face

interactions. When I was an audience member at Steinem's talk, I was taken by how important it felt and how good it was to be in the company of other people who wanted to make a difference. While it may seem like an obvious point, I was not taken by the same emotion when reviewing the transcription, which would have been the case even if I had been viewing it online without having already seen it in person. Cultural critic Walter Benjamin makes sense of this phenomenon when he claims that with even "the most perfect reproduction" (filmic reproduction being as "perfect" as it gets), a mechanically reproduced text "is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be." This removal from its original, temporal moment changes something about the text and how a viewer perceives it. Benjamin identifies that which is changed through mechanical reproduction as "the aura" of the text:

The concept of aura . . . may usefully be illustrated with reference to the aura of natural ones. We define the aura of the latter as the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be. If, while resting on a summer afternoon, you follow with your eyes a mountain range on the horizon or a branch which casts its shadow over you, you experience the aura of those mountains, of that branch. This image makes it easy to comprehend the social bases of the contemporary decay of the aura. It rests on two circumstances, both of which are related to the increasing significance of the masses in contemporary life. Namely, the desire of contemporary masses to bring things "closer" spatially and humanly, which is just as ardent as their bent toward overcoming the uniqueness of every reality by accepting its reproduction.

Benjamin's observations help to interpret our current media culture that strives to, as Marshall McLuhan notes, expand "our central nervous system in a global embrace, abolishing both space and time as far as our planet is concerned" (3). As we attempt to "bring things 'closer,'" we may be diminishing "the aura" of a text, rendering it less authentic and thereby alienating it from the possibility for the authentic "closeness" that actual temporal and physical presence renders. Steinem's comments lead me to these questions: How important is "authenticity" to productive activist work in digital spaces? How "close" can we get to the persuasive power of the traditional activist model that Steinem has so successfully utilized for so long? Is there the potential for a *digital aura*?

Benjamin asserts that "to pry an object from its shell, to destroy its aura, is the mark of a perception whose 'sense of the universal equality of things' has increased to such a degree that it extracts it even from a unique object by means of reproduction." This contemporary misperception by audiences about the authenticity and quality of digital texts, those texts removed from the "human life world," marks the tension created when activism and advocacy are performed through new media. However, considering a new understanding of the potential for digital media to invoke a subjective and affective experience, as well as Benjamin's argument, opens up opportunities to create new ways to navigate and facilitate our understanding of ourselves and others. In Steinem's talk, she does not diminish the value of digital media; she cautions listeners to be aware of the difference. Looking at those differences and analyzing existing participation in activist media online, such as through this analysis of television texts

and fan works, helps to facilitate an understanding of the current circumstances of advocacy through new media and the potential for new kinds of advocacy experiences to emerge.

These platforms (face-to-face and computer-mediated) have implications for how activism works for different audiences and in different circumstances. Previously, one would have to attend a rally or other social forum in order to be impacted by these messages; now, people can be influenced in increasingly profound and engaging ways through new media that have the potential to make the mechanisms for social activism more efficient rather than diminish the activity itself. We must consider that, while more than two hundred people attended Steinem's talk and shared with me that unique experience, many more than that could share and discuss the video of her talk via modern technology. The importance of proliferation of a message to the success of a social action campaign is imperative, and the digital and face-to-face "talk" that this video has inspired has an "aura" of its own, one that is unique and participatory. It is this model of online advocacy that is enacted by *Sherlock* fans in service of the asexual community.

Fan-generated texts and fan-maintained communities, as Hills explains in "Virtually Out There," "support and sustain a community of the imagination," rather than the often referred to "imagined community," in which theorists tend to focus on the "pleasure" derived from fan activities rather than the affective attachments (147). *Affect* refers to emotion, and fans' highly affective attachment to the objects of their affection and their devotion to them are key elements in understanding why/how fans and fan communities are particularly well suited for advocacy work. These affective attachments, when cultivated in online affective spaces, lead to fans/advocates who are passionate and well versed. Hills explains that virtual communities are

“unlike fan conventions, which are restricted to specific times and places, and which therefore function as ritually bounded spaces separated off from fans’ everyday lives” (148). While this embodied contact remains significant and important to many fans (and advocates like Steinem), it is not central to their lived experiences in the same way virtual communities are. While this may seem, at first, challenging to apprehend because what is being asserted is that the embodied experience is more separated from everyday life than the disembodied-virtual experience, Hills adds that virtual communities break down the barriers that fans face as they go through their everyday lives with others who are not likely to share their values or acknowledge/understand their fan identity/culture. Virtual communities allow “fan expression and identity to leak out into, and potentially permeate, the fan’s everyday life” because their community is accessible through digital technology all the time, unlike those embodied fan experiences like conventions (149). The access and the distribution power of online media prove important for both the affective fan experiences and cultural identity and advocacy. Unlike the very limited distribution of print texts, like fanzines, the texts distributed online are accessible by anyone with an Internet connection and interest in either a particular fandom or a particular cause.

Sherlock and the Fan Community: Enacting Asexual Advocacy Online

Just as the “official” word about Sherlock’s sexuality, espoused by Moffat and Cumberbatch in media interviews, often contradicts fans’ definition of *asexual*, so do their comments reflect a very different understanding of asexuality as a sexual orientation rather than a lifestyle choice. In an interview with *Indie Wire* in 2012, during the television season when dominatrix Irene Adler attempts to sexually tempt Sherlock and reveals that Moriarty’s code

name for the consulting detective is “The Virgin” (“A Scandal in Belgravia”), Cumberbatch describes his character’s sex drive in terms that led to dissenting discussions in asexuality forums. The actor replies to a question about Adler influencing Sherlock’s sexuality and his apparent “non-existent sex drive” during the first (pre-Adler) season:

Well, I see no reason at all why he shouldn't be sexual. Everyone recruited him to their perspective, their interpretation. I've had asexuals come up to me and thank me for representing asexuals. I don't know how that came about. I mean, the man's too busy to have sex. That's really what is it. Not every man has a sex drive that needs to be attended to. Like a lot of things in his life where he's purposely dehumanized himself, it's to do with not wanting the stuff that is time wasting, that's messy. That goes for certain relationships, as well as sexual intimacy. (N. Smith)

This quotation indicates that Cumberbatch does not seem offended or distressed when asexuals thank him for his character giving visibility on television to asexuality, but he consistently chooses to describe Sherlock as preferring celibacy as a lifestyle. His understanding of asexuality, at least as expressed during interviews, is that asexuals have no sex drive. What is more troubling to the asexual community is that the actor who, through Sherlock, may represent them on television also describes Sherlock’s decision to avoid sex as “dehumanizing,” as if an integral part of the definition of *human* is someone who is sexually active or at least does something about his or her sex drive beyond suppressing it.

During an *Elle* interview more than two years later (in October 2014), in response to a question about Sherlock's sexual prowess, Cumberbatch again mentions asexuality: "He's asexual for a purpose. Not because he doesn't have a sex drive, but because it's suppressed to do his work. Cold showers, looking at a lot of dead bodies . . . that'll do it for you" (Brog). Cumberbatch further speculates that Sherlock has hot sex off camera with Adler after he saves her from a beheading. To many fans, these types of comments seem designed to make Sherlock more of a heterosexual sex symbol and less of a poster man for asexuality. Perhaps not so coincidentally, during fall 2014 Cumberbatch was in the middle of an Oscar campaign for his role as Alan Turing (*The Imitation Game*), whose homosexuality became as much of a discussion topic as his brilliance as a World War II code breaker and the father of the computer. During the film's promotion, the actor was often perceived as trying to establish himself as a Hollywood leading man. Making his best-known character Sherlock seem determinedly heterosexual may have been part of Cumberbatch's campaign to steer clear of being primarily identified with homosexual or asexual characters, as they are not typically Hollywood leading-man roles. Nonetheless, as Cumberbatch notes in the 2012 *Indie Wire* interview, he realizes that fans often perceive the character differently than he does and co-opt Sherlock for different purposes.

What showrunner Moffat says about Sherlock's sexuality is frequently quoted within asexuality forums as the starting point for a (sometimes angry) discussion about Sherlock's sexuality and the ways that Moffat's comments seem contradictory to the aims of the asexual community. Not only does Moffat rely on canon as his proof that Sherlock Holmes, in the Victorian or modern eras, is celibate, not asexual, but he notes that asexuality is an atypical

choice for a television character. Within a *Guardian* article published in January 2012, shortly after the Adler episode “A Scandal in Belgravia” was broadcast, Moffat is quoted as saying that “If he was asexual, there would be no tension in that, no fun in that—it’s someone who abstains who’s interesting” (Jeffries). To some asexuals posting on Tumblr blogs or asexuality forums, Moffat’s use of “no fun” is translated as “boring,” as in the title of an Asexual Education Tumblr site: “A Lovely Interview About Sherlock Wherein Steven Moffat Says That Asexuality is ‘Boring,’ That Sherlock is Definitely Not Gay, and That Sherlock Wouldn’t Be Living With a Man If Men Were Interesting.” The discussion garnered 1,972 notes by May 2016, including comments such as the following that illustrate the type of response Moffat’s seemingly innocuous interview comments commonly generate:

missyankovic: Asexuals can be fun. ☹

raonddx: Whaaaaaaaat? Who says there’s no fun with asexuals? I beg to differ, Moffat! (Also, the reason there was no blatant indication in the original stories is that there was really no concept of heterosexuality back then. There wasn’t a concept of heterosexuality till there was a concept of homosexuality. So bite me.) [Presumably this person could make the same argument for asexuality, which also is not a term used or a concept publicly discussed during the Victorian era of the canon stories and is only just becoming part of popular culture now.] If Moffat resorts to limiting his definitions to language available during the Victorian era, he naturally will not find any references to asexuality.

flynnsarcade: Look, I get that I have a lot of followers who are defenders of his [Moffat's], and I'm not saying that he's consciously an asshole, but he's shown a complete disregard for the opinions of others and refuses to step up when he's called on issues he may be perpetuating. It's like the man has no brain-to-mouth filter. I tweeted him and said that if he researched asexuality he would find it anything but boring, told him that he had likely hurt the feelings of many fans, and linked him to a glossary of the different facets of asexuality.

Such comments not only indicate the type of discourse resulting from what the asexual community and asexuality advocates views as disturbing misinformation provided by the series' official spokespeople (in this case, Moffat), but the desire by those who, like flynnsarcade, host forums representing asexuality communities to educate the misinformed, whether Moffat or the mainstream *Sherlock* television audience. As noted on the home page, AsexualityEducation.Tumblr.org "was created for the purposes of educating, helping & supporting other asexual spectrum people and questioning asexual spectrum people." However, the educational focus also has been extended to *Sherlock*'s official media voices, like Moffat, who may inadvertently offend asexuals and provide inaccurate information about asexuality to fans who follow media interviews with the cast and crew. These "conversations," which are inspired by fans' dedication, are only possible because of the online environment in which they thrive. The immediacy of the comments and the access to an audience is unparalleled outside of the online environment.

However, we could still make an argument that making these processes overly efficient might reduce what Steinem perceives to be “special” about face-to-face communication. While this participatory medium is certainly a positive, some drawbacks exist as well in terms of these types of texts actually functioning as part of a social justice movement. One’s commitment to challenging and potentially dangerous tasks are mitigated when participating in an online dialogue. One would not face the same consequence (physical violence, incarceration) as would be possible in face-to-face activism (e.g., sit-ins, riots), though online attacks, as mentioned in the previous chapter can be quite damaging; the level of commitment for lending one’s support is notably lower, despite the potential of “outing” oneself online by posting assenting remarks/materials. Still, Janet Murray describes “agency” as “the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices.” She claims that agency is achievable in digital environments because those environments can provide immediate and even evocative feedback for actions. Lynnette Porter explains in an article for Pop Matters, “The bonus features [in *The Abominable Bride*] conclude with the ‘Sherlockology Q & A’, in which actors Amanda Abbington, David Nellist, Una Stubbs, producer Sue Vertue, and showrunner/writer Steven Moffat answer questions submitted to premier fan site Sherlockology. Although fan access to the *Sherlock* cast and crew is carefully controlled through this Q & A—questions are posed to cast members without the fans asking in person.” This indicates how Moffat and Gatiss attempt to reach out to heavily invested fans, but by the same token may be contributing to creating the illusion that fans have access to these celebrities in ways that they do not because celebrity participation in fan activities is so calculated and coordinated in *Sherlock* fandom. While it is certainly democratizing to see fan commentary replicated in mainstream

media alongside comments made by celebrities and fans elevated to a status in which their questions are deemed important enough to be entertained by the celebrities they like and though a more unfettered contact is possible when facilitated online, it is rarely utilized.

Nevertheless, sites like AsexualityEducation.Tumblr.org obviously reach hundreds, if not thousands of *Sherlock* fans with carefully crafted and archived content and the “encyclopedic” nature of digital texts, as Murray describes, does much for both accessibility and staying power. Tumblr sites are often used for sharing information or images instead of promoting education. On the “adult” (i.e., non-Tumblr) side of the Internet, websites like AVEN have an even more serious reputation as an educational forum with the potential for greater advocacy. Following the publication of the *Guardian*’s early 2012 Moffat interview, forum members posted their often-emotional reactions to the article:

sherlockhasthetardis: [after reblogging the paragraph that includes Moffat’s quotation about “no fun” in Sherlock’s characterization if he were asexual] So basically Moffat is saying that Sherlock [is] heterosexual and celibate? Very unhappy right now

TheGreatWTF: Thank you Mr. Moffat for yet again irritating the living hell out of me. This is why I stick with reading about Sherlock and ignoring anything that man does that doesn’t involve Time Lords [a reference to Moffat’s role as showrunner of *Doctor Who*]

JangoFett: Roughly translating as ‘asexuals can’t be fun or make good TV’. What a douche Moffat is.

Bat: [reposting JangoFett's comment] This. And it makes me sad that people think this.
Best stories are ruined that way.

Sinisterporpoise: I think Moffat just doesn't like the idea of Asexuality in general. It's not the first time he's said something like this.

The Great WTF: [This quotation is the last part of the post; other paragraphs have been deleted because they do not pertain to *Sherlock*.] I admire Moffat for his writing ability and the things he did with Doctor Who, then to hear him say something like that, especially about a character [Sherlock Holmes] that was a major part of my childhood and was actually a big part of teaching some of my friends about asexuality, is upsetting. . . . I've heard of him making a few other less than nice comments about asexuality. I guess it's not so much the Sherlock part of it that bothers me. It's Moffat himself and his apparent total ignorance/lack of regard for asexuality that bugs me.

Nogitsune: Why did he even feel the *need* to rule out asexuality like this? So maybe it's mostly asexual viewers who consider Sherlock to be ace. What about it? We're such a powerful majority now that we're taking the fun out of things? He could at least have left out the "explanation", because he *is* basically saying asexual characters interacting with other characters are boring, and that asexuals are interested in boring stuff. It's not his interpretation I have an issue with It's the fact that he feels the need to throw out a

valid and rare interpretation of a character's sexual orientation because it's just no fun . . .
. How about letting the fans decide for themselves what they find entertaining?

Several other posts provide similar information about being upset or angry that Moffat does not seem to understand asexuality. Whether Sherlock is indeed an asexual character is not as important in this thread as the fact that someone in a position of power, such as Moffat has within BBC entertainment as the co-creator/showrunner of *Sherlock*, either does not know or care to learn about asexuality and does not realize or ignores the impact that his comments have on asexual fans. Whereas about a third of the posts note that Sherlock has not self-identified as asexual and Moffat's reading of the character's sexuality is just as valid as anyone else's (including asexuals'), the most pertinent comments to my research indicate the need for additional public education about asexuality and derision or disappointment that someone as influential in television entertainment as Moffat continues to make statements that asexuals believe misrepresent their community.

This thread also illustrates how asexual community forums function; they allow a multifaceted discussion of a hot topic—such as Moffat's article in the first days following its publication—and, months or years later, as a way for readers to read what others have expressed as concerns or attempts to set the record straight about asexuality. Most readers of this forum are likely to identify as asexual or to seek such a site to learn more about asexuality. In this regard, the forum not only provides members with an outlet to express themselves, but it also creates an increasingly large archive of information from the asexual community that may be helpful to readers who seek out opinions about topics of concern to the asexual community. In addition,

Sherlock fans Googling a topic like “asexual Sherlock” or “Moffat interview, asexuality” may incidentally encounter the AVEN discussion. Such threads as those previously noted may indirectly promote advocacy within the larger community of *Sherlock* fans.

Whereas specialized forums within the asexual community serve several functions that can be tapped for advocacy or education, blogs produced by fans who, as part of their career (e.g., as academics, fiction writers, journalists), write professionally but post under pseudonyms to protect their anonymity often provide longer texts. Some texts, such as those posted within AO3, are considered “meta” and designed to reach *Sherlock* fans who also read fan fiction. These essays may provide in-depth insights into the ways that fans interpret *Sherlock* characters and respond to developments within episodes. Other essays/blogs posted to personal Tumblr sites usually respond to a “hot topic”—such as an interview with Moffat—and represent a thoughtfully written response that may serve to educate other fans about asexuality. Both types of longer texts illustrate the seriousness with which fans consider and respond to comments made by the series’ showrunners or actors. That these texts also may educate a wider public than “*Sherlock* fans who are asexuals or are curious about asexuality” is an important consideration in light of advocacy, but such advocacy may not be the specific impetus that compels these fan/authors to write and post their responses to *Sherlock* or articles published as part of the series’ promotion within mainstream media.

When Dreamwidth was more frequently used by fan fiction writers in the early 2010s, an early meta article in 2010 about *Sherlock*’s asexuality generated a lot of reading interest within the fan fiction community. scienceofdeduction posted “Ace + Fandom = Awesome” in the subcommunity of Dreamwidth entitled asexual_fandom. Although this meta is now outdated

because it only deals with Season One *Sherlock* episodes broadcast in 2010, scienceofdeduction's conclusion is still timely:

What's the best part about an asexy Sherlock? Thanks to this modern remake, *Sherlock* brings asexuality to the table in discussing sexual orientation like never before. Countless young (and old) people are joining the Asexual Visibility and Educational Network (AVEN for short) with either questions about or understanding that they, too, may be asexual. The first and most comprehensive discussion about Sherlock as an asexual character came up in *Sherlock Holmes: Poster Boy* for the AVEN. This discussion delves into the homoromantic arena, for it is obvious that if Sherlock has any kind of emotions for anyone, it is highly likely to be John Watson, the person who becomes his closest companion. Interestingly, not a lot has been written about Sherlock possibly being an aromantic asexual, possibly because of how incredibly possessive he tends to be about John. . . . This is definitely room to explore, for obviously these two men have a very complicated relationship together.

As is typical of meta posts, this one includes episode summaries providing evidence of an asexual reading. However, this early exploration of Sherlock's sexuality within the series also opens the discussion into a new direction: types of asexuals. Particularly in fan fiction, the exploration of Sherlock as, for example, aromantic or homoromantic, continues the discussion within the scope of Johnlock, which is also one of AO3's most popular meta categories, with 96 articles by February 2016 delineating the sexual possibilities within the Johnlock relationship.

scienceofdeduction's post anticipated these later explorations. As this post demonstrates, another purpose behind a meta analysis of characterization is to provide readers with evidence not only from episodes but from other sources. Thus, a single meta citing sources to previous posts on other forums helps direct even more online traffic to additional information about asexuality that has been posted on a variety of sites, from fan fiction to blogs to organizational sites and forums to mainstream media.

Whereas a meta article most often analyses a fine point within an episode or a theme across several episodes, blogs provide personal insights into a wider treatment of a topic. Blogs also seem to appeal to a wider audience, for example, asexuals in addition to asexual *Sherlock* fans. A widely read blog was published by Cuddlytogas on the author's Tumblr site, although the content was originally intended for a queer issue of *Honi Soit*, a weekly student newspaper produced by the Students' Representative Council at the University of Sydney. The writer is likely a student who felt the need to analyze "Queer Identities in Sherlock: A Study in Embarrassing Failures" for a mainstream campus audience but later revised the article for *Sherlock* fans. The article/blog covers what the author views as queerbaiting in many forms: character dialogue and portrayal (e.g., the way a character is dressed), the handling of the John-Sherlock relationship that focuses on love or infatuation but not sex, and, finally, asexuality. When discussing this latter topic, Cuddlytogas complains that "Sherlock and Moffat have a history of outrageously bad handling of asexuality. It has not been made a secret that many fans—particularly asexual-identifying fans in search of fictional representation—read Sherlock Holmes as asexual. The writers have proven themselves not to be ignorant of the phenomenon. However, Moffat's handling of the issue has left much to be desired." Cuddlytogas references

the much-quoted scene from first episode “A Study in Pink” in which John questions Sherlock about his relationships. The blogger explains that “Understandably, many a fan interpreted this scene as an implicit admission of asexuality. Whether Sherlock knows the term or not, he makes it clear that he is not interested in relationships, regardless of gender. At the time, the brief exchange was even praised as the closest anyone had come to making a Holmes explicitly asexual.” Despite what Cuddlytogas terms as a “promising start,” Moffat then disappoints the author by publicly stating in interviews that Sherlock is not asexual (or gay) and dismisses this reading.

Cuddlytogas states the problem that many asexual fans have with the showrunner’s stance, which goes beyond some asexual fans’ complaint that Moffat’s reading of Sherlock does not match their own. Instead, Cuddlytogas explains, Moffat’s stance is much more demeaning to asexuals: “He deliberately restrains the interpretation of Sherlock’s sexuality to comply with his own, and with his own ignorant ideas about sexual minorities. His faux-educated statements about asexuality are downright offensive.” When this blogger brings up Moffat’s statement from the previously discussed *Guardian* article, the tone shifts toward condemnation of a showrunner in such a position of power, as the co-creator/writer of a globally successful television show. Cuddlytogas concludes that “If Steven Moffat thinks asexuality is a choice, then he has misunderstood the concept entirely, and really has no authority to be talking or writing about the issue. If he thinks asexual people are boring, I can name one asexual at least who would like to exchange with him a few interesting words.” The argument that sexual orientation is a choice harkens to advocacy issues from the past several decades, when homosexuality was also considered a lifestyle choice. Asexual advocates are currently fighting the same battle—to

convince mainstream audiences (i.e., the public) that asexuality is a real orientation, not a choice. With this blog, Cuddlytogas not only illustrates a personal response to *Sherlock* and to Moffat's interview, but to the way asexuals are portrayed on television and discussed in the media.

Given the popularity of this blog (1,328 notes posted by May 2016, but undoubtedly many more hits), Cuddlytogas has reached an audience of *Sherlock* fans. However, it is also read by those who click the article's link because it comes up in the Google search results. In particular, this article may be an indicator of the author's "seriousness" in discussing the series and asexuality; the blog concludes with a bibliography of seven sources, including mainstream media articles and books about Sherlock Holmes. Such an academic approach and connection with the University of Sydney may give this blog additional weight because readers may think of a bibliography or academic affiliation as being more legitimate than most fan blogs.

Perhaps the most eloquent blogged discussion of *Sherlock* has been posted by Amphiboly on Tumblr in February 2013, about a year after the previously discussed Moffat interview became a hot topic within the asexual community. The introduction indicates a compelling, non-judgmental tone that explains the source of the conflict between those discussing Sherlock's "official" sexual orientation in the BBC series and those reading Sherlock as asexual:

In an age and a culture that so prizes sexuality, many people don't realize that some individuals have little or no inherent inclination to engage in sexual activity—not because they're celibate, but because they don't experience sexual attraction on a significant level. Still more confounding to the layperson is that these individuals may still experience romantic attraction, sensual attraction, and even a sex drive, all separate from the desire

to engage in sexual activity with another person. Though our society has become more and more open to different sexual orientations, the asexual orientation is largely marginalized. Yet there is convincing evidence that one of literature's most prized creations, Sherlock Holmes, is in today's terms an asexual. Recent treatment of his character as asexual in the fan community surrounding the BBC's modern remake *Sherlock* has arguably begun contributing to the validity of the identity in the mainstream.

Amphiboly does not only discuss the reasons why Sherlock Holmes in canon (viewed through a modern lens in a culture that has a vocabulary to discuss asexual behavior) and the BBC's adaptation can easily be read as asexual, although Cumberbatch and Moffat do not intend to portray the character this way. The author also summarizes the power of an asexual reading of Sherlock within a fan community that uses the tag *ace!Sherlock* to denote fiction featuring asexual Sherlock, who is sometimes in an aromantic or a homoromantic relationship with John. Perhaps more important for advocacy, Amphiboly notes that S. E. Smith posted both a blog entitled "Sense and Sensibility on *Sherlock*" to the Think Progress website and a more mainstream article entitled "Asexuality Always Existed, You Just Didn't Notice It" in *The Guardian*. (The *Guardian* article generated 596 comments from the public, many, as might be expected, criticizing the author or asexuals in general. However, at least some who posted comments created a thoughtful dialogue about what it means to be asexual; some posts were several paragraphs long.) As Amphiboly notes through his/her blog and by referencing blogs written by other fans, the asexual community, because of *Sherlock*, has more opportunities to

educate other fans and the public through online blogs, posts, and articles. Not every *Guardian* reader, for example, may understand all the issues associated with asexuality (e.g., claiming that asexuality is a convenient “excuse” for not having sex with people they want to turn down or that asexuals cannot face discrimination because no one can tell their sexual orientation by looking at them). Nevertheless, asexuals are using the popularity of *Sherlock* to gain an online audience for their blogs and articles in order to define asexuality within a public forum.

In the conclusion to this blog, Amphiboly summarizes what many fans believe about Sherlock as portrayed in the BBC series and the controversy surrounding an asexual reading of this character:

Less content exists addressing asexuality in the canonical Holmes stories than in BBC’s Sherlock, but I believe a rise in alternate interpretations of characters’ sexualities, particularly among members of the fandom, has lent credence to the possibility. Would Holmes have considered himself in such terms, living as he did in Victorian-era England? Of course not. But in today’s society, as we increasingly recognize and accept different identities, the discussion is one worth having.

As evidenced by these example posts, blogs, and articles, the asexual *Sherlock* fan community is invested in having such a discussion within the asexual community, but, more important, in taking that discussion to Moffat (via Tweets) and the public (through mainstream media articles and comments in response to articles). In this way, the asexual community helps to educate

individuals and the public at large and to advocate for greater understanding of asexuality and the social issues surrounding it.

Conclusion

Fan-generated media is a good *first* step for asexuality advocates, especially in the beginning stages of their social justice movement. It collects evidence that there is indeed a problem and provides compelling accounts that certainly encourage empathetic responses, and these online texts have the potential to reach people in power positions. What can be done to capitalize on those empathetic responses, to turn this campaign into a true social action movement? Can a more problem-solving approach be applied? New media has been cited as foundational to many current movements: the Kony 2012 viral video on YouTube is one example, but the actual usefulness of these tactics that often reduce the issue to no more than a sound bite has come into question. Though new media has the potential to inspire agency and become “transformative and immersive,” to use Murray’s terms, it is rarely used that way outside of fine art or video gaming.

What the types of online texts mentioned in this chapter do accomplish is embedded in our understanding of identity as discursively formed and maintained (e.g., Van Djiik, Fairclough). We know who we are, not simply because of some innate ability to apprehend our identity, but because we see ourselves reflected in others and either rejected or reinforced through those discursive interactions. Asexuals are still struggling with visibility, so much so that many lack even the basic language to apprehend their sexual identity in the mainstream. As more heavily invested people, like *Sherlock* fans, bring issues about asexuality to the mainstream, that

language begins to become accessible to those who need it to claim their identity and affiliation with an asexual community. The affordances of digital media control the way in which discourse online is mediated and spread, thus this chapter's focus on how both content and media "massage the message," as McLuhan would put it, makes this type of study critically important to understanding online identity and advocacy online.

CHAPTER 4: UNDERSTANDING REPRESENTATIONS OF ASEXUALITY IN *SHERLOCK* FAN FICTION AS ADVOCACY WORK

*“In the future, it will be possible to consider the extent to which a wider range of selves will be presented as the norm within postmodern geographies and subcultures. A number of activist movements are based on the need to move away from such hierarchical evaluations, and although none of us would claim that fanfic alone can replace activism, it’s worth considering the extent to which the stories blur boundaries, sexual and otherwise: between. . .writers, among characters, among readers and writers” -Eden Lackner, Barbara Lynn Lucas, and Robin Anne Reid, *Cunning Linguistics: The Bisexual Erotics of Words/Silence/Flesh**

Whereas the previous chapter explores the *Sherlock* series source text and Internet communities that are organized around the asexuality advocacy movement and connected to *Sherlock* overtly, this chapter examines the creative works of *Sherlock* fans that happen to focus on asexuality, particularly fan fiction. This type of creative fan endeavor is often “driven by two concerns,” according to Louisa Ellen Stein, “limitation” and “expansiveness” (247), limitation in that it must remain “true” to the ethos of the source text/characters and expansiveness in that the source text can be expanded via fan fiction. These stories widely range in topic, from a continuation where the previous season has left off to alternative universe re-tellings, and many include the ever popular graphic depictions of erotic relationships between characters (slash fiction). In this chapter, fan fiction based on *Sherlock* is limited in that the fans/readers expect the authors to be true to the source text in terms of characterizations/setting, but because of the way in which *Sherlock* has opened up the canon to a modern interpretation, as depicted in the previous chapter, the expansiveness is inclusive of asexual identities and relationships.

Therefore, these works of fan fiction provide excellent sites for examining digital community and continuing the examination of these sites as spaces for community, resistance, and advocacy.

Fan Fiction: Exploring Asexuality

Just as the BBC's and producer Hartwood Films' official *Sherlock* texts—the episodes—provide a wealth of critical readings that may form the foundation of social advocacy, so does the series' online fan community offer a plethora of texts primarily for their own entertainment, although these artifacts can also be used for the community's education or advocacy. Fan fiction encourages more than a passive experience for many readers; the comments section following a story often facilitates a conversation among readers and with the author and illustrates the “uses” of fan fiction that go beyond mere entertainment. There are more than only figurative connections between the creative work of fans and more overt advocacy. Stories in AO3, for example, have been written in honor of Asexuality Awareness Week and make specific reference and provide links to AVEN.

The *Sherlock* fans who participate in online communities may be perceived as privileged to engage in this type of communication, and many young fans in countries that do not highly regulate Internet usage or ban sites having anything to do with sex may benefit from participating in digital culture. However, not everyone is able to participate in discussions of, for example, asexuality because of a lack of access to digital technology. To gain the benefits of digital discourse, one must be able to become digitally literate.

To participate in digital culture, one needs a computerized device and connection; consequently, many people are barred from entering the important public discourses that are

emerging online because they are impoverished. Digital (and print) literacy skills are also required to participate in digital culture, so people who lack experience or who do not perceive value in navigating digital culture and creating/consuming digital texts are disadvantaged, too. Finally, if sites dealing with, for example, information about asexuality, remain relatively unknown, they cannot be accessed by those who might benefit from them, or access to some of these sites may be restricted to some.

Though these obstacles pose a significant problem when we frame creative and critical works online toward an ethos of advocacy, as in the previous chapter, in *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century*, Jenkins characterizes online “participatory culture” as one

1. With relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement
2. With strong support for creating and sharing one’s creations with others
3. With some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices
4. Where members believe that their contributions matter
5. Where members feel some degree of social connection with one another (at the least they care what other people think about what they have created). (7)

These hallmarks of participatory culture evident in online communities set the scene for advocacy work in which new knowledge is foregrounded in the form of the entertainment inherent in fan fiction and the mentoring/connection that members of the community share.

Most fan fiction communities have a relatively low threshold for entry. Anyone with an Internet connection and basic navigation skills can submit and post comments, though not all posts receive attention and feedback and posts may be censored at the discretion of the site's moderator. The digital community is responsible for which stories or information are deemed important and valuable. Stories or comments that strike a positive chord with readers often are rewarded with sometimes hundreds of kudos or positive posts that support what the writer has done with a character or a plot point or to address another reader's response to the story. Authors of fan fiction may solicit feedback, although simply the act of posting a story to an archive like AO3 means that readers can provide comments without direct solicitation from the author. Comments sections often make apparent that readers and writers of fan fiction, especially in the area of asexuality, feel that their contributions matter, as exchanges in which readers thank the authors and authors express their appreciation for their readers are commonplace. A high number of comments or kudos can contribute to a text's popularity and consequently bolster the author's perceptions about his or her work. Stories are awarded status based on the number of views, comments, and kudos, so consumers influence the popularity of the story in a direct way.

The way in which favorite stories are promoted within the community via kudos is similar to readers' good word-of-mouth promotion or independent reviews of well-written, professionally published stories that consumers post on sites such as Amazon (where books may

be purchased) or Goodreads (where readers share their opinions only). Unlike professionally published stories, however, fan fiction is not subject to the same editorial scrutiny as texts submitted to editors and marketers working for a publishing company. The fan community therefore has much more influence on what is considered “good reading,” because readers looking for either a topic (such as asexuality) in AO3’s vast archive of *Sherlock* stories alone often search secondarily by the number of kudos given to a story (in order to avoid poorly written stories) or the name of an author who regularly receives a high number of kudos.

Because the stories exist in digital sites, they may be extensively organized by keywords (i.e., tags) and archived so that readers may search by commonly used tags. Authors who post stories add these tags so that their work may be easily found by readers or other authors seeking stories about a particular topic; no one but the author has the digital capability to categorize a story or provide any warnings about content (e.g., a note that a story includes a topic that may trigger discomfort in readers, such as infant death or torture) However, authors in AO3 may alert readers that a story describes adult sexual content, but there is no warning, for example, that a story is about asexuality. Topics about sexuality are so common within AO3 and other fan fiction archives that many readers expect the majority of stories to include some type of sexual activity, whether it is described explicitly or implied as part of a character’s relationship. Novice fan fiction writers may easily access and use as models popular works of fan fiction related to the type of story they want to tell, just as readers may search for stories by topic or popularity. Stories discussed in this chapter, for example, often include a variety of tags related to the type of relationship—asexual Sherlock, bisexual John, first-time, marriage—that alert authors and readers to the subject matter.

As might be expected, fan fiction communities are united in their passion for the source text, for example, *Sherlock*. As discussed in the previous chapter, this “affective attachment,” as Hills explains, is a powerful motivating force, contributing to the extent to which community members take their contributions and the contributions of others very seriously, despite the “playful” nature of most popular, web-based fan sites. According to Roberta Pearson, in *It’s Always 1895: Sherlock Holmes in Cyber Space*, “ideological appropriation of popular heroes” is a hallmark of fan culture, and a “virtual community may be the perfect forum for such an appropriation” (45) because “those seeking community in cyber space have the desire to control exposure and create security and order” (54). This feat is most often accomplished because the digital environment allows “play.” Jenkins, in *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture*, defines “play” as the “the ability to experiment with one’s surroundings as a form of problem solving” (xiv) and because “appropriation” is such a part of participatory culture, the type of play that fans enact should prove unsurprising, when we consider their attachment to source materials as the impetus for their works. What may be surprising is the extent to which this “play” has the capacity to create alternate epistemologies within fan communities, to create an ethos of advocacy. Fans may be attempting to “solve the problem” of how to feel closer to the characters or actors and to continue their investment in *Sherlock* during the show’s long hiatuses between seasons, and the solution that the digital environment allows is their appropriation of their beloved characters to be used in service of their own creative works. Sometimes fans are motivated by a combination of things like their investment in *Sherlock* and in bringing awareness to and exploring asexuality, as is evidenced by some fan fiction being written specifically for Asexuality Awareness Week. These investments often lead to a critical part of advocacy work:

motivation. Participatory environments like fan fiction websites set the stage for motivated, meaningful participation.

In addition, as creators/designers of web content, such as those who contribute to fan fiction websites in some way, participants in new media can begin to feel and actually be empowered citizens. Gunther Kress claims that “[t]he world of communication is now constituted in ways that make it imperative to highlight the concept of *design*, rather than of concepts such as acquisition, or competence, or critique. . . . The world of the new economies . . . makes that an essential requirement” (27). This aspect of “design” enables those creators to be the architects not just of information but of new ways of knowing and understanding, in this case, asexuality. The act of hosting a fan fiction website, moderating it, or contributing an original work can be considered what N. Katherine Hayles describes as an “embodied cognition” “in which human agency and thought are enmeshed within larger networks that extend beyond the desktop computer and into the environment” (3). With the help of the embodied cognition enabled by digital media, the process of designing and contributing to web communities becomes the authentic moment in time in which the person and technics work together, while the mechanically-reproduced artifact that remains and is proliferated is fixed out of time in cyberspace. As a result, many, many others have a chance to see it and be influenced by it. One fan fiction story, for example, may reach thousands of readers because it is archived and can be retrieved at any time through a tag search.

Slash fan fiction, in particular, has benefited from the move from paper to digital prose as a means to reach more readers and have a greater impact, even secondary, on advocacy. When fanzines (i.e., fan fiction magazines) were available only in print, a person wanting to participate

in reading or commenting upon the stories had to search out those individuals who were in the know, risking judgment, especially if the stories involved a slash, or same-sex relationship. When print was the dominant format for fan fiction, readers could not anonymously search for fan fiction about asexual characters or asexuality, much less find links to related sources of information or become involved in a conversation about asexuality. According to Coppa's essay, "A Brief History of Media Fandom,"

The movement of media fandom online as well as an increasingly customizable fannish experience, moved slash fandom out into the mainstream. Whereas slash zines had often been sold at cons literally from a box under the table, the Internet allowed for slash-specific lists that fans who wanted to read homoerotic stories could join and that other fans could easily avoid. Similarly, slash-friendly discussions lists allowed these fans to consolidate and talk openly to each other; many began to articulate their reasons for slashing, reading strategies, and politics. (54)

Sherlock fans with access to the Internet have not faced the restrictions inherent in reading printed zines or possibly justifying their selection of reading material. Because a very robust international fandom is currently devoted to *Sherlock*, the series' messages about sexual orientation and non-heteronormative relationships have been particularly inspiring to fan fiction communities, which share information and develop their own texts inspired by the series. As a result, queer people (those with non-heteronormative desires that place them outside of mainstream culture, who are often disenfranchised by the hetero-centric ideological framework

that often dictates popular culture media) frequently and freely reveal their desires and sexualities, discuss the series' "messages," and interpret them in new online texts.

In the case of fan fiction, the creators and consumers of these texts are most often heterosexual women whose desire to indulge in fantasies about homosexual couplings position them as queer. Michel Foucault's ideas about discourse as a system of rules that dictate individual truths can reveal some interesting ways in which online communities may become the arbiters of new rules and shifting individual truths. For example, while dominant discourse tries to enforce one objective truth, this objective truth is always situated within the framework of the subjective "faith" of its constituents in what is being posited. The "truths" that govern the dominant discourse's social control are infallible when they operate within a certain system on which they all agree, a system based on traditional shared understandings about "universal" truths. Fortunately, according to Coppa, "Media fandom may now be bigger, louder, less defined, and more exciting than it has ever been. Arguably, this is fandom's postmodern moment, when the rules are 'there ain't no rules' and traditions are made to be broken" (57). For fans vested in Internet communities that create and support alternative discourse communities, these sites are, to say the least, difficult to control from the outside, though they remain quite structured and controlled from within by community moderators. I have observed that most fan fiction communities are governed by the archive's moderators, who follow a literal set of rules established by the community about posting stories and about the types of comments that are allowed. For example, the rules of the AO3 website, which archives and organizes many thousands of fan fiction texts, stipulates that any type of story is allowed within an adult fan fiction community and that "bashing" authors for their plotlines or characterizations is forbidden

in order to promote a mutually supportive creative community. Members “police” comments and report trolls who only post hurtful comments. The level of subversion within the community is thus minimized, while security and control is increased. In addition, although *Sherlock* characters, for example, are fair game for any liberties the authors wish to take with them, as previously mentioned, the stories are tagged by authors to alert potential readers to topics that may be emotional triggers for them (e.g., violence, non-consensual sex). In these ways, fan fiction communities strive to create and defend a safe space for authors to express themselves and for readers to participate as actively or passively as they wish.

Exploring Sexuality Via Fan Communities

Today people are less likely to wait for dictums about what is of value to know; we consider our needs and use the technologies at our disposal to help us both formulate questions and get answers. This process is particularly valuable for people who are exploring their sexuality or learning more about sexual identities. Advocacy sites such as AVEN rely on digital technologies to help others ask questions via discussion forums and get answers through an online conversation or read a Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) section to learn more. These sites that provide critical information are very useful for advocacy, as noted in the previous chapter, but this ethos of advocacy also is present in creative works online because of the intrinsic value of storytelling and the affordances of the digital spaces in which these stories are archived. Within *Sherlock* fandom, fan fiction archives such as AO3 provide a safe space for online conversations or explanations/exploration of an identity, as well as an exploration of, for example, asexual Sherlock’s experiences told through stories. Some *Sherlock* fan fiction authors

have posted lengthy explanations of asexuality, polyamory, pansexuality, etc., to provide information for readers who are unfamiliar with a term and to frame their creative work. Because the Internet is not subject to the same kinds of censorship and editorial control that is prevalent in other communication technologies and also offers a kind of anonymity, writers or readers can pose “dangerous” questions and engage in “dangerous” discourse (i.e., discourse that might be deemed inappropriate, risqué, or too overtly sexual for mainstream discussion boards, such as those attached to a newspaper or an official television website). *Sherlock* fan fiction, which often contains sexually explicit material, would certainly be deemed dangerous discourse. Although the archived content is not regulated, it is carefully classified, because both general fan fiction and slash stories are accepted. However, behavior in response to stories is regulated by the communities. Those who participate in the AO3 community are meant to abide by the site’s rules, and “hate speech” or bullying are reported to the site moderators, who can stop a participant from future posting under his or her registered name. Of course, there are ways around such digital sanctions (e.g., creating a new account and rejoining the AO3 community or anonymously posting), but, to date, the AO3 community has successfully handled any harassment of participants. This is not true of mainstream discussions (such as those previously described tweets), which often are not monitored and seem to be a magnet for extreme opinions on all sides of a controversial issue.

Composing a post in a discussion forum or submitting a comment in response to fan fiction often is a spontaneous action; the writer responds to a story, FAQ, or informative description as a result of an emotional response to what someone else has posted. This immediacy has implications that have inspired debate about the value of such digital

communication, with some scholars decrying the lack of considered, thoughtful communication. Carr, author of *What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains: The Shallows* and the article “The Google Effect,” disparages conventional Internet usage, despite all the possibilities afforded to us in digital environments, as “arms of the new establishment,” rather than as the new frontier that many current theorists of digital culture espouse it to be. People who harass others online and often instigate others to go as far as tracking down people behind a social-media identity, hacking someone’s website, or doxing others infiltrate even the “safe spaces” of insular fan fiction communities or advocacy sites; however, unlike social-media conglomerates like Twitter, small communities are more likely to monitor communication and attempt to rid a site of trollish comments.

Writers who do not post information that an online community approves of or agrees with often face public censure in social media such as Facebook or Twitter. Cyber bullying and flaming are unfortunate examples of a troubling aspect of “immediacy” that has resulted in an alarming rate of violence against or even the suicides of gender non-conforming or non-heteronormative individuals because of the ability to spread deleterious information in real time, en masse, across a platform in which young people are currently so vested. Turkle, in the book, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less From Each Other*, warns that this flaming and bullying are “endemic to the Internet,” and her observations about online community have led her to claim that online communities are more likely to induce anxiety about the authenticity of others online than to work in any productive way (237). While we do need to look critically at the extent to which digital communities may be productive sites for

community empowerment, both Carr and Turkle admit that their claims are fraught with the anxieties of the scholars, as well.

Although Carr and Turkle raise valid concerns about the potential for harmful aspects of digital communication, there also is evidence that computer-mediated communication often functions to expose all kinds of alterity to the light of knowledge and discourse. AVEN, for example, exposes site visitors to specific information about asexuality and can be explicit; however, it is considered a less socially stigmatized site than a fan-fiction community that includes sexually explicit fiction, art, or videos. AVEN's inclusion of specific terminology describing, for example, types of asexuals, may be considered socially acceptable because it is presented factually and clinically. Fan fiction, on the other hand, often has been stigmatized as prurient because of its vivid descriptions of sexual activities, which may be considered "pornographic" by mainstream readers. For example, a young person in a conservative, rural area, whose non-heteronormative sexual identity is beginning to emerge, may be unlikely to encounter information, resources, and support close to home. With the accessibility of online resources, such as AVEN, this person is more likely able to access all kinds of information and to join supportive online communities, some facilitated by other young people and some facilitated by field experts and advocates. He or she may even encounter valuable resources/communities by happenstance because of the hyperlinked structure of the web. Fans of *Sherlock*, investigating the show online, may encounter a link to information about a term they had not yet encountered and which may end up being significant to them, e.g., asexuality, bisexuality, polyamory. They may find information from less socially stigmatized sites, or they may venture into fan-fiction communities and choose to see more sexually explicit stories that

illustrate these terms in different ways. The “danger” or “beauty” of online discourse is that anyone searching for a term like *asexuality* in relation to *Sherlock* may easily encounter relatively benign counter-cultural content or subjects presented in a more culturally subversive or controversial manner. It becomes the opportunity or responsibility of the individual to choose which information is personally relevant or appropriate.

By accessing potentially “dangerous” discourse, we supplant the power of the institution with the power of the self to know things and to choose which things we want to know and to create language that accommodates our needs and discourse about things that we deem important. For example, as noted in chapter 3, new terms are emerging and gaining traction in mainstream culture for referring to different aspects of asexual identities. These terms include but are not limited to *asexuality*, *demisexuality*, *gray-asexuality*, *aromanticism*, *demiromanticism*, and *gray-aromanticism*. While these terms or concepts may not be deemed important by the dominant discourse, they may be perceived as central to asexual people navigating a non-heteronormative identity. These new regimes of discourse affect what one considers “true,” which may shake the foundations of traditional institutions. In other words, the institution assumes a commonly held “truth” based on its particular regime of discourse, but if that truth comes into question because someone is exposed to an alternative discourse, the locus of power and authority may be challenged. In terms of *Sherlock* fans, “authority” may not just mean the mainstream public’s perception of asexuality or asexuals in general or viewers’ perceptions of *Sherlock*’s sexual orientation but the opinions of those who create the show, such as showrunners Moffat and Gatiss or *Sherlock* star Cumberbatch.

Fan fiction stories often elevate Sherlock to asexual poster child/hero status, despite, as noted in the previous chapter, the showrunners' and the actor's insistence that Sherlock is just too focused on his work to consider intimate relationships, rather than leaving open the possibility that the natural expression of Sherlock's sexual identity is asexuality. The "head canon" created and maintained by fan fiction communities is evidence of the ability of these groups to upend traditional authority (showrunners), in favor of culminating alternatives to the dominant discourse, not just about Sherlock, but about asexuality.

In addition, Foucault asserts that studying discourse may reveal important shifts in the "mechanisms of power" and social control. What is of paramount concern for Foucault is not to assess whether sexual acts are accepted or prohibited but to "define the regime of power-knowledge-pleasure" and to investigate who controls or, more specifically, which institutions control the regime of discourse about sex and what affect this discourse has on the locus of power. He expresses similar ideas about sexual repression and power. He says that power "needs to be considered as a productive network which runs through the whole social body, much more than as a negative instance whose function is repression" (61). One cannot have repression without sexual expression (so in the discourse about prohibited sex, there is, at least, the affirmation that it exists!). The discourse of sexual repression sets the scene for rebellion—social action. Because computer-mediated texts afford authors relative anonymity and foster insular communities, people often feel free to express desires in online communities that they might normally suppress. For example, women find a place to express and consume non-normative desires in the supportive, insular communities who create, disseminate, critique, or simply passively read fan fiction. These actions and the positive reception that they receive empowers

those who participate to re-examine mainstream culture's dictums about what is acceptable sexual expression; this will be demonstrated in the forthcoming examples.

As potentially empowering as fan fiction communities may seem as safe spaces for creative, free expression, an example of mainstream media's intercession occurred when Caitlin Moran, a U.K. journalist, brought fan fiction to a question-and-answer session with *Sherlock's* lead actors, following a public screening of an episode. She asked them to read it aloud, like a script, claiming that it was innocent, but as the actors read their characters' dialogue, it became apparent that the story was, as much fan fiction is, sexually graphic. According to The Daily Dot, the writer of the fan fiction, Mildredandbobbin, was "mortified." Mildredandbobbin told the Daily Dot via Tumblr that she was "appalled" that Moran had used her work "for cheap laughs." Although the author enjoyed the relative freedom, anonymity, and even popularity afforded in a digital community, her work had become, out of its original context, the butt of a mainstream media joke. This exposure to the censure of the dominant discourse reinforces Foucault and others' perceptions regarding the power of dominant discourse to subvert alternative epistemologies. There is some good news, however, for those vested in minority voices. This incident has also inspired some writers of fan fiction to "come out of the closet," to claim their works publicly and take a stand for the value of their works.

Once that counter-cultural discourse begins to emerge, the meaningful ways in which online communities organize and express themselves, referred to as "civic pluralism" by The New London Group, become increasingly important to consider. Civic pluralism is a phenomenological response to the "decline of the old, monocultural, nationalistic sense of 'civic'

[which] has vacated a space that must be filled again” (14). The concept of civic pluralism assumes that

with the changed meaning of civic spaces, everything changes. . . . Instead of core culture and national standards, the realm of the civic is a space for the negotiation of a different sort of social order; an order where differences are actively recognized; where these differences are negotiated in such a way that they complement each other; and where people have the chance to expand their cultural and linguistic repertoires so that they can access a broader range of cultural and institutional resources (Cope and Kalantzis 1997a). (The New London Group 15)

Understanding this civic pluralism and how it operates within the context of *Sherlock* fan fiction directly affects our understanding of how to capitalize on the strengths of a digital medium and mitigate weaknesses. Fan fiction and the corresponding comments/conversations it inspires become artifacts of such access to “cultural and institutional resources.” They reference personal experiences, offer practical advice, and often include links to websites like AVEN, which is a hub for both cultural and institutional resources. In addition to expressing their desires or expectations about *Sherlock* online, fans form communities in which to live and learn, called “networked publics,” according to Ito et al. in *Living and Learning with New Media: Summary of Findings from the Digital Youth Project*. They define *networked publics* as participatory: “rather than . . . as ‘consumption’ by ‘audiences,’ the term ‘networked publics’ places the active participation of a distributed social network in producing and circulating culture and knowledge in the foreground. The growing salience of networked publics. . . is an important change in what

constitutes the social groups and publics that structure . . . learning and identity” (13). Because many people perceive identity as intrinsic—who we are, we can sometimes overlook the extent to which who we believe ourselves to be and how we understand the self is socially constructed, particularly through discourse. According to linguist Norman Fairclough, “Language use is always simultaneously constitutive of (i) social identities, (ii) social relations and (iii) systems of knowledge and belief” (134). It is a small step then to imagine that identity is influenced throughout our lives by our encounters with others: it is, in part, socially constructed. When these encounters are mediated via digital technologies within the shared surroundings and systems inherent in digital media spaces, as in the comments sections of a fan fiction archive, those encounters are made visible in such a way that those discourse communities may become sites for study, leading to a greater understanding of how identity is formed and navigated.

It is no accident that many computer-mediated encounters I examined in my research are dialectic and that it is through these exchanges that participants navigate perceptions regarding their own identities and the subject positions of others. They are digital exchanges/encounters that, at times, work to help participants and observers encounter and cope with alterity in many different forms. It is also no accident that Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman’s work, *Sex and the Unbearable*, is ostensibly a dialogue between the two theorists, allowing them to create a liminal space in which to exercise the critical and psychic moves necessary to hash out their ideas. This liminal space is not unlike the kinds of spaces that content creators engage in online; they endure, and sometimes thrive, on the exchange, making it possible to precipitate change. This “change” is likely a reaction to what Berlant and Edelman call the “negative,” which “signifies a resistance to or undoing of the stabilizing frameworks of coherence imposed on thought and

lived experience. . . . [N]egativity unleashes the energy that allows for the possibility of change.” Though Edelman and Berlant are concerned with the potential connotations that may be derived from their use of the term *negativity* (e.g., nihilism, defeatism), Edelman explains that “[n]egativity points to many kinds of relations. . . from the unbearable, often unknowable, psychic conflicts that constitute the subject to the social forms of negation that also, but differently, produce subjectivity” (ix). In other words, if the only way to define the self is in deference to the dominant culture, we are never going to achieve what they claim is “sovereignty,” which allows authentic responses to cultural expressions of desire, sex, gender, etc., and enables agency. While they question whether sovereignty is even a worthwhile goal, Edelman explains that

nonsovereignty and negativity are not precise synonyms (like most synonyms or proposals of likeness, they also imply a world of differences): the latter derives from a philosophical and psychoanalytic engagement, while the former derives from traditions in political theory that traverse social and affective relationality. The main political question is how we understand and mobilize the relations among these concepts, phenomena, and structures. (ix)

This mobilization of both the psychological and social construction of identity, as well as identity politics, realized through dialogue, is at play in the online works highlighted in the next section. This play leads to some serious revelations about what it means to be asexual and/or to respect asexual people, and because this is accomplished through narrative (fan fiction) or

exposition (comments) people are able to explore concepts that challenge traditional notions of sexual identity without suffering the consequences and risking themselves in the process that way that they would have to in a face-to-face situation. This has obvious advantages, but the disadvantage, of course, is that when we risk little, we stand to gain less than we might if the risk were great. For example, if one risks coming out as asexual, there is the risk of rejection/ridicule from family/friends but also the potential to find acceptance from the people from whom they most desire support. Although the insular/anonymous digital environment is a good place to begin understanding asexuality, it is certainly limited.

Archive of Our Own: Safe Space

By March 2016, AO3, the largest international fan fiction database, listed 849 individual English-language stories (868 including podcasts or art associated with print stories but having their own listing) resulting from a search of “asexuality” and “Sherlock TV” and further limited only to stories with characters from *Sherlock*. To create Table 1, I used the plot summaries provided by authors to categorize these stories by the subject matter and plot: asexual Sherlock Holmes in a sexual partnership with John Watson, asexual Sherlock Holmes in a non-sexual love relationship (e.g., non-sexual touching only) with John Watson, asexual Sherlock Holmes in a sexual or non-sexual relationship with another character (male or female, from the series or an original creation by the story’s author), asexual Sherlock Holmes in a polyamory relationship (usually including John Watson), asexual Sherlock Holmes in a “coming out” story or one in which he explains asexuality to another character, an asexual character other than Sherlock Holmes (e.g., Mycroft Holmes, Molly Hooper, John Watson, an original character created by the

author), and a case (or detective) fiction in which Sherlock Holmes' asexuality is mentioned but is not part of the plot. The table lists the number of fan fiction stories by year in each category, beginning in 2010, when *Sherlock* first was broadcast, through March 8, 2016, when the search results were tabulated. *Sherlock* episodes were broadcast in 2012 (second season), 2014 (third season), and early 2016 (special episode). As discussed later in this section, developments within the series, such as John Watson's marriage to Mary Morstan during the third season (2014), seem to have influenced the direction of many stories and involved asexual Sherlock Holmes in different types of stories reflecting additions to the television canon. However, fan fiction authors continued to write stories in the long hiatuses between new episodes, and they continued to promote a reading of Sherlock Holmes as an asexual character, despite whatever was happening in the television episodes

Table 1: Asexual Sherlock Holmes Stories Archived in Archive of Our Own (2010-2016)

Year of Stories' Publication	Asexual Sherlock Holmes in a Sexual Partnership with John Watson	Asexual Sherlock Holmes in a Non-sexual Love Relationship with John Watson	Asexual Sherlock Holmes in a Sexual or Non-sexual Love Relationship with Another Character	Asexual Sherlock Holmes: Polyamory	Asexual Sherlock Holmes in a "Coming Out" Story or One in which He Explains Asexuality	An Asexual Character Other than Sherlock Holmes	A Case Fiction in which Sherlock Holmes' Asexuality is Mentioned but is Not Part of the Plot
2010	2	9	0	0	0	2	0
2011	17	111	26	3	2	4	1
2012	41	100	28	5	5	14	5
2013	49	87	31	3	3	5	6
2014	36	69	44	25	4	8	1
2015	33	31	10	8	5	12	0
2016	8	5	1	3	2	3	1

The earliest stories were published in September 2010, within about a month of *Sherlock* debuting on the BBC in late July and months before PBS brought the series to the U.S. Authors writing about the series in 2010 would have seen the first-season episode “A Study in Pink,” in which Sherlock tells John that he does not have a girlfriend or boyfriend and is married to his work; “The Blind Banker,” in which John tells Sherlock he has a date and defines it for him—“It’s where two people who like each other go out and have fun”—to which Sherlock explains that is what he was suggesting he and John do as part of a case; and “The Great Game,” in which Sherlock realizes that John is the “heart” that archenemy Moriarty hopes to burn out of him, and John offers to sacrifice his life for Sherlock. Although the evidence used by fans can support a sexual Johnlock (i.e., John and Sherlock) reading, it also can indicate that Sherlock feels emotion (e.g., love) for John that he feels for no one else, but that he is not usually interested in a “typical” heterosexual or homosexual relationship. Because of scenes such as that in “The Blind Banker” when John feels he must define dating for Sherlock (and admits he hopes Sherlock is not suggesting that they are dating when they go out on cases together) and Sherlock shows up during John’s date, fan fiction authors often interpret Sherlock’s actions as an atypical, but very Sherlockian, way to “court” John. Early fan fiction featuring Sherlock as asexual emphasizes these themes.

The plots of *Sherlock*-based stories often end up with John and Sherlock in a committed relationship, although Sherlock is not interested in sex. Authors’ interest in pairing Sherlock and John does not diminish throughout the series’ first three seasons and special episode, even when the television-canon plots indicate such a development is increasingly less likely on television, whether Johnlock involves an asexual-heterosexual or a homosexual pairing. Whether John and

Sherlock have sex is not so much the point of these stories as John and Sherlock having a long-term, most often loving partnership in which each supports and understands the other. The number of stories in the category Asexual Sherlock Holmes in a Non-sexual Love Relationship with John Watson spikes in 2011, during the first hiatus between seasons, with 111; in 2012, 100 stories promote this relationship, often in reaction to a possible threat posed by a woman who is sexually interested in Sherlock.

During the second season, Irene Adler is introduced as a potential love interest for Sherlock, but he rebuffs her advances (“A Scandal in Belgravia”). Although he displays emotion for Adler, especially when he thinks she has been killed, he does not seem interested in any sexual activity with the professional dominatrix. Nevertheless, he is intellectually attracted to her, and she to him; she coins the phrase “brainy is the new sexy” in honor of Sherlock. What is perhaps most pertinent to this episode regarding Sherlock’s sexual orientation, however, takes place during a discussion between John and Adler after she returns to London after faking her death. She kidnaps John, who demands that she tell Sherlock she is alive. Adler forces John to reconsider his relationship with Sherlock. She asks if John is jealous of her relationship with Sherlock, and he replies that he and Sherlock are not a couple. “Yes, you are,” Adler counters. John vehemently denies this statement and protests that he is “actually not gay,” although “who the hell knows about Sherlock Holmes.” Adler replies, “Well, I am [gay]. Look at us both” (“A Scandal in Belgravia”). The relationship dynamic between Adler and Sherlock, as well as Sherlock and John, is not bounded by heteronormative standards. Although Adler self-identifies as lesbian but is bisexual in her roles as a dominatrix with her clients, she is infatuated with Sherlock, despite his lack of sexual interest in her. Similarly, whereas John may enjoy a

homosocial relationship with Sherlock, he, in canon, does not consider himself part of a couple, although he, too, acts jealous throughout this episode. This first episode of the second season allowed many fan fiction authors the opportunity to expand on the ways that Johnlock could be read, and asexual Sherlock in a relationship with John withstood the test of The Woman (as Conan Doyle first titled her and Moffat continued) coming between Sherlock and John—especially within the realm of fan fiction.

By the end of Season Two, Sherlock fakes his death in order to ensure that Moriarty's snipers do not kill the three people closest to him: Greg Lestrade, Mrs. Hudson, and, of course, John Watson. After Sherlock forces John to watch his apparent suicide, John goes into mourning ("The Reichenbach Fall"). Stories written in the hiatus after this cliffhanger episode often involve John expressing his continuing love for Sherlock, although he has died. When the third season begins with "The Empty Hearse," in which Sherlock returns to London and attempts to convince John to return to the life both have left behind for two years, authors often wrote reunion stories in which John and Sherlock realize they are indeed a couple and express their love for each other, whether that involves a sexual union or a platonic marriage. Even when television-canon introduces Mary Morstan as John's love interest and, after "The Sign of Three," his wife, fan fiction authors find new ways to incorporate asexual Sherlock into this trend. The stories involving polyamory (most often involving John, Mary, and Sherlock) allow Sherlock to remain asexual and uninterested in a sexual relationship but willing to actively participate in a permanent, loving domestic relationship. In 2014, the year when "The Sign of Three" was broadcast, the number of polyamory stories increased to twenty-five, the highest number of any year. The table indicates some trends in the themes of stories involving asexual Sherlock, but

each year since the series began, new authors take up this theme and find ways for asexual Sherlock to interact in (usually) loving, highly supportive intimate relationships with other characters, most often John Watson.

The stories that speak most to advocacy, albeit a much smaller subset of this collection of fiction, involve Sherlock “coming out” as asexual or dealing with others’ preconceptions of asexuality. In this way, authors can perhaps project their own experiences through Sherlock and receive (mostly) supportive feedback from the community. Between 2011 and early 2016, the number of stories per year ranges from two to five. Despite this small number, readers’ comments indicate that these stories have an important emotional or educational impact on audiences.

Sample Stories and Representative Reader Comments

The following stories illustrate the way that fan fiction can provide a potentially cathartic or educational (e.g., as a teacher) experience for writers and offer readers entertainment that may inform or educate them about asexuality. These examples were selected because of their plots and the number of comments regarding asexuality, but they are admittedly a very small sample of the types of stories involving some aspect of asexuality found within *Sherlock*. The first two, “Light Our Own Fires,” “Unusual Symmetry,” and “Inflammable,” involve Sherlock and John in an intimate partnership. Only Sherlock is asexual, and his relationship with John varies, depending upon the author’s perspective on asexuality. These stories are illustrative of fan fiction written primarily for entertainment, although readers often take away more than a few minutes’ reading enjoyment.

“Light Our Own Fires,” by BlackEyedGirl, presents demisexual Sherlock in the aftermath of the cliffhanger concluding “The Great Game,” which leaves viewers not knowing if the bomb on which Sherlock has trained his pistol will explode or whether Moriarty’s snipers will shoot John or Sherlock. BlackEyedGirl concludes that the bomb explodes and wounded John and Sherlock must attempt to get back to what passes for normal on Baker Street. By the end of the story, the shared trauma and caregiving lead Sherlock and John to a point where they share a bed and more frequently touch. BlackEyedGirl writes scenes such as the following that capture demisexual Sherlock’s physical relationship with John, who is

not sure that either of them know what they want, when it comes to fine details. Sherlock is quite content to sit across the room from him without speaking; he will allow hours to pass without a single exchange, a single touch. He lies beside John in bed, one night in three, curled up with his back to John. And yet if John leaves to get a glass of water, or to turn up the heating, when he gets back Sherlock is watching the door.

Sherlock will crowd John in a crime scene, tugging at his coat and pulling him across the room; in their own flat he will stare at John for long minutes before suddenly, without provocation, taking hold of his hand. Sometimes he drops it after a second or two, sometimes they sit together on the sofa while John watches the television and Sherlock mocks it.

When John asks Sherlock to identify their relationship, Sherlock counters by asking “Is it important to have a name, to have a reason?” This story suggests that neither John nor Sherlock has a vocabulary to describe their relationship, which is more than homosocial but less than sexual. *BlackEyedGirl* does not provide definitions or labels in this fiction but illustrates the viability of a relationship in which both partners are content and committed to each other but which may not be easily categorized by either themselves or society. The story ends with John wanting to offer Sherlock more sexually, but Sherlock is satisfied to have John by his side, whether they are working on a new case or living together in a non-sexual but loving relationship. Neither John nor Sherlock is able to label their relationship, and readers are left to speculate whether the relationship will one day involve sexual touching or even what these life partners decide to call their relationship.

“Light Our Own Fires” may be a suggestive title to some readers, who may assume that either John or Sherlock masturbates to sexual release instead of finding release through partner intercourse, or that they “light each other’s fire” through mutual loving touches that do not necessarily result in orgasm for one or both. The author leaves the title, as well as the plot and character development, open to interpretation. Readers seemed comfortable with this lack of definitive closure; by March 2016 they had given this story 573 kudos. The forty-seven comments are all positive, utilizing superlative adjectives and/or praising/congratulating the author, and all note the author’s fidelity to the television-canon characterizations. Although many readers cite the beautiful complexity and reality of the Sherlock-John relationship, no one specifically mentions asexuality. Like other aspects of Sherlock’s character, or perhaps because the story does not involve Sherlock choosing to identify his orientation, Sherlock’s apparent

asexuality (listed as demisexuality in the story's search tags) is merely part of his personality, not an element that is isolated and discussed separately.

Uploaded only a few days later in September 2010, mresundance's "Unusual Symmetry" deals with asexual Sherlock in a long-term partnership with John, who sometimes masturbates in front of Sherlock as part of their intimate relationship. By March 2016, this story had received 19,483 hits since its publication and earned 419 kudos and 82 comments. Furthermore, this story has become so popular that it also has been recorded as a podcast (or "podfic").

The author notes before the fiction begins that this is the first time he (a gender designation based on the author's profile photo) is writing about asexuality. The urge to write "Unusual Symmetry" is the result of mresundance's reading of two asexuality blogs (which are linked to the fiction). He indicates that Sherlock's experience is not his own and asks readers to let him know if he got it "horribly, completely wrong." Apparently the author's story resonated with many readers, who either deemed that mresundance got it right or, like the author, had no first-hand experience with asexuality but were intrigued by the Sherlock-John relationship. As with "Light Our Own Fires," the comments are all positive, as befitting a supportive fan fiction community in which "bashing" is prohibited. However, unlike the previous story, "Unusual Symmetry" generated comments specifically about asexuality:

Prentice (on September 18) noted "Oh, this is lovely. You've done an excellent job of making it clear that what they have is every bit as meaningful as what others have, it's just a bit different. The bits with Sherlock thriving in John's mental growth are delightful." The passage to which Prentice refers illustrates John's comfort level with being near Sherlock while masturbating and not needing to provide pleasure to his partner. John's innate need to reciprocate

pleasure is not something Sherlock expects or wants from their intimate relationship.

mresundance provides this description of the Johnlock relationship by the end of the story:

Sherlock doesn't mind that John does what he needs to while Sherlock translates obscure languages into even more obscure languages, or tries to build an impossible maze because he can. It doesn't bother Sherlock, . . . simply because John does not expect Sherlock to be responsible for his pleasure. At least, not in ways that Sherlock doesn't want himself.

Most concisely: John lets him exist on his own terms.

Other readers posted even more personal responses to this story and its depiction of a mutually satisfying relationship in which one partner is asexual. mustbehavingfun (September 21) used this story as a form of advocacy—to explain to others what asexuality is and what an asexual character does: “Thank you so much for writing this! I’ve shown it to a friend in an attempt to explain my own asexuality, and I think she understands, thanks to it.”

The author responded to this comment within a few hours. Not only does he thank mustbehavingfun for positive reinforcement of a story line with which he has no personal experience, but he also expresses his understanding of the value of a supportive fan fiction community:

I am not asexual and I admittedly have struggled to understand it better than I have. I will admit I've had all the usual judgemental, uninformed ideas about asexuality—and I still have a lot of them to work through. This fandom, particularly when we talk about Sherlock and his probable asexuality, has really helped me deal with my own prejudice constructively, rather than being in denial and trying to not educate myself. It makes me immensely relieved that self-identified asexuals like yourself have read the fic and it seems to have worked after all.

Such comments best illustrate the positive side of a fan fiction community in which asexuals, as well as readers and authors who self-identify with other sexual orientations, find value not only in a fan's creative work of fiction but in the online experience of sharing personal insights and learning about asexuality. Perhaps most important in this exchange is the note that mustbehavingfun found this story to be useful in helping others (or at least one friend) better understand asexuality.

By the time the next season of *Sherlock* episodes arrived in early 2012, stories tagged “asexuality” were not as often based on specific television-canon scenes but expanded the universe created by the television episodes. dreamlitleyo's “Inflammable” was published on AO3 as part of the “Combustion” series of related stories. With 306 kudos (by March 2016) since its publication in late January 2012, about two weeks after the three episodes comprising the second season had been broadcast in the U.K. (and near the broadcast dates in the U.S. a few weeks following the British premiere), “Inflammable” is notable for the way the story portrays

asexual Sherlock and the number of comments applauding this realistic, but different from early 2010, depiction.

“Inflammable” describes Sherlock’s attempt to sexually seduce John, who is confused because Sherlock already sees them in a committed relationship, but John believes they are still friends with the one-time benefit of Sherlock bringing him to orgasm with his hand. John believes that Sherlock is not interested in sex and is perplexed when Sherlock not only seems interested in not only bringing him to orgasm again but in playfully kissing and petting, as part of what he sees as an established relationship. Thus, a frustrated Sherlock must illuminate John about the true nature of their relationship and Sherlock’s asexuality.

John asks Sherlock a series of questions: Why would he want to initiate a sexual encounter if he does not want to participate in sex? Is Sherlock sexually attracted to John? Does Sherlock expect to have penetrative intercourse? Sherlock finds John’s questions tedious. “Of course, I’m attracted to you,” Sherlock explains, although John wants to verify that Sherlock is sexually attracted to him. “Why does that matter?” Sherlock replies, truly perplexed. John verifies that Sherlock is not interested in sex but is interested in him. Sherlock insists that “I *do* want this. What difference does it make whether or not you ‘*turn me on*’, as you so quaintly put it?” After a particularly pleasurable sexual experience for John, he asks Sherlock if he ever masturbates, because he seems particularly adept at getting John off. The author provides a thoroughly Sherlockian response akin to what his television counterpart would say: “‘Boring,’ Sherlock mutters dismissively. ‘Much more interesting to do it to you.’” The fact that Sherlock is an active participant in their intimate relationship and enjoys bringing John to orgasm, although he is not interested in meeting that objective himself, is only part of this story’s appeal to many

readers. Sherlock also knows what he wants, articulates it clearly, and enjoys being with John sexually.

For many self-identified asexuals who wrote comments regarding this story, Sherlock's demeanor is familiar but a seldom-addressed component of fan fiction about asexual Sherlock: he can enjoy being with John sexually, although he is not interested in achieving orgasm and, in fact, prefers that John not reciprocate. Among the twenty-seven comments posted by readers, veronamay (January 31, 2012) enthusiastically approved of this story: "Oh, yay! An ace! Sherlock/John fic where Sherlock really, really isn't interested in sex for himself and John is *okay with that*. These are rarer than you'd think. Loved it!" Author dreamlittleyo responded almost immediately with a comment suggesting that a character within a story responds much the way that many real-world potential partners would when faced with someone he presumed is completely uninterested in sex: "Getting John to UNDERSTAND (at least enough to be okay with the arrangement—I think that even at the end of this fic he doesn't understand completely) was a fun challenge." Perhaps the challenge is not nearly as much "fun" for real-world partners negotiating what, to many, non-asexuals may seem a one-sided relationship. However, this negotiation also reflects a real-world situation with which at least some asexual readers could identify. In this way, it can be considered a form of advocacy, in which a story primarily for entertainment engenders a conversation about real—not fictionalized—asexuality and possibly educates those readers who not only read the story but the comments attached to it.

Iwantthatcoat (November 10, 2012) presented the point of view of an asexual in a similar relationship to Sherlock's with John:

I love this sooo much!

(I'm asexual and married to a sexual guy and with a bit of luck and work, this is pretty much what I want to shoot for ;) So nice to see it in existence, even if only as a fanfic.) Sherlock is pretty solidly asexual in my head canon (but romantic), and so many writers think he must hate to be touched, or is just waiting for a good fuck to become ravenously sexual. This is perfect. Sex with John is interesting, even fascinating. Fun to be able to impress your John in yet another way. And your voices are spot on!

The verification of personal experience also can make such a story as “Inflammable” seem more legitimate to readers, as well as provide positive feedback to the author, who may decide to write further stories about asexual Sherlock.

Whereas many stories describing Johnlock have incorporated elements of television canon, such as John’s marriage, into the number of options authors may consider when they write a story primarily about John and Sherlock, the fan fiction about asexual Sherlock listed in the advocacy category does not appreciably change in reaction to television canon. Instead, the plot in each places Sherlock in a situation where he is misunderstood and must explain his sexual orientation, usually to a familiar character (e.g., John, Molly Hooper, someone in Sherlock’s family). Although the number of such stories is small, it is relatively consistent from 2011 through early 2016. Thus, these stories form a small but persistent core of asexual Sherlock stories in the archive that can help educate readers about the nature of asexuality and provide a supportive space in which authors may “come out” themselves or help others to do so.

One of the most respected writers in the Sherlock TV fandom is flawedamythyst, who has written more than 120 stories about *Sherlock*, many receiving more than 200 kudos. Such is the case with “It’s All Fine,” a story flawedamythyst wrote for Asexual Awareness Week in February 2011. In this story, Sherlock and John are investigating a crime scene alongside New Scotland Yard’s Sergeant Donovan, a character known primarily in fandom for calling Sherlock a “freak” and warning John away from him during the first episode (“A Study in Pink”). In this story, Donovan again calls Sherlock a “freak” when he makes comments about his lack of interest in sex. (The crime scene includes two dead bodies found entwined in bed.) After Donovan says that “Everyone does it” (i.e., has sex), Sherlock replies, “I don’t ‘do’ it.” The resulting conversation revolves around Donovan’s conviction that Sherlock is abnormal and Sherlock breaking down her assumptions, first, that he has not had sex because no one wants to be his partner and then that someone without a sex life is freakish. Sherlock explains that “I’ve had plenty of offers, but absolutely no desire to take any of them up. Sex is of no interest to me at all.” Only when John, in his role as a physician, supports Sherlock by telling Donovan that someone having no interest in sex is not only in the range of normality but more common than most people would think, does Donovan back off (after also terming John “a freak” who probably has a kinky sex life). Once again, John is supportive of Sherlock and, as he does in “A Study in Pink” after Sherlock explains that he does not have a girlfriend or a boyfriend, concludes that “It’s all fine.” flawedamythyst underscores her familiarity with television canon and fidelity to it by using John’s line from “A Study in Pink”; this stylistic choice bolsters her credibility with *Sherlock* fans and, by extension, may make some readers assume that this author is equally familiar with asexuality (i.e., is a “legitimate” source of information about asexuality).

Throughout the many years in which flawedamythyst has been writing *Sherlock* fan fiction, she has built up a reservoir of social capital within the AO3 community. Readers familiar with her work or those who read a story just because she is the author have, through “It’s All Fine,” been introduced to flawedamythyst’s interpretation of asexual Sherlock and to Asexual Awareness Week. Thus, this story in particular has the potential to reach a larger readership than stories by other authors who are not as well known within the *Sherlock* fan fiction community.

This story earned 232 kudos but generated only 7 comments. However, several of those comments are specific to asexuality and make more substantive comments than “Oh, I love this!” Kephiso, who does not self-identify a sexual orientation in this message, offers constructive criticism: “I would have found it nice, to read a bit more about Sherlock’s doubts—I doubt he’s always been so comfortable with being asexual with everyone around him being sexually active.” BookGirlFan, in contrast, begins the post with “As an asexual” and expresses her displeasure with Donovan expecting everyone to enjoy sex. Even with a limited number of comments, at least a few readers posted their thoughts about asexuality, and these comments are a permanent part of the archive that can be read for years to come. Because flawedamythyst also tagged and highlighted this story as being written for Asexual Awareness Week, asexuality is also “advocated” in this forum when authors alert readers to this week and write stories specifically to make others aware of asexuality. “It’s All Fine” also links this insular fan fiction community with the larger Internet community and organizations related to asexuality. Such a bridge between communities can help readers learn more about asexuality in the “real world.”

Another story published in 2011, Domina_Temporis’ “5 Times Sherlock Realizes He Doesn’t Fit In and Once He Unexpectedly Does,” consists of six chapters or mini-stories in

which Sherlock, at different ages from childhood to adulthood, faces difficult social situations with his family, at school, or on the job. Chapter 4, for example, covers a period during Sherlock's adolescence when his male peers discover romance, and anyone without a girlfriend at 14 is labeled "gay." Sherlock, however, knows that, although he is not interested in girls, he also is not attracted to boys. Like many young people, Sherlock could not find satisfactory answers from a parent and turned to the Internet to find out more about why he is not interested in boys or girls. Throughout one afternoon, he

dug deeper; somehow this question that he'd never given much thought to before had taken on more importance. Finally, he found a few references to a study that was already several decades old that said one percent of people stated they'd never been sexually attracted to anyone. He smiled to himself. So it does exist.

Sherlock does not have a vocabulary to describe what he is feeling, which reflects the experience of many asexuals, but he at least knows that he is not the only teenager who is uninterested in dating anyone. Domina_Temporis adds important information for readers who may be identifying with Sherlock:

Clearly [asexuality is] not something most people thought of, since the researchers back then hadn't even bothered to give this new orientation a name, and no one seemed to have done a study since. The few other people online who seemed to fit the label were calling themselves asexual.

The author provides the vocabulary for Sherlock to use and illustrates what is likely a typical real-world scenario for many people who have not heard the term *asexuality* but would identify with an online description provided by others who are similarly disinterested in sex.

By Chapter 6, Sherlock has created his own job as a consulting detective, which is yet another way that distinguishes (or isolates) him from the rest of society. He considers himself unique, and, when he meets John Watson and invites him to be his flatmate, is concerned about John's opinion of him. The line "It's all fine," first said by John in "A Study in Pink" and later in fan fiction, is used again in this story. Sherlock at first has trouble believing that John is so accepting of what surely has to be an eccentric (at best) flatmate—including that "he was asexual, married only to his work, incapable of anything more than friendship and those few and far between." However, that is exactly what John means when he says "It's all fine," and Sherlock finally "fits in" at the conclusion of the sixth chapter/end of the story. As is typical of the trope of "five times" stories, the protagonist faces rejection in a variety of ways in five situations before finally succeeding, or, in Sherlock's case, finding acceptance as an asexual, in the final story. It is not difficult to project Sherlock's doubts about his sexuality, if not his specific life experiences, on either the author or readers who are searching for a place where they, too, "fit." This story provides a fan fiction version of the "It Gets Better" campaign; Sherlock's happy ending may encourage readers who identify with Sherlock as "other" and provide them with a vocabulary that may be used to express their sexual orientation.

A final example published in 2015 indicates that, despite *Sherlock* entering its fifth year as the subject of fan fiction and the series in the middle of another long hiatus between new

episodes, “coming out” stories featuring asexual Sherlock were not only still being produced but generating comments that encourage further conversation about asexuality. In “A Regular Not At All Terrifying-for-Unknown Reasons Conversation,” written by Dodoa, Sherlock is unsure of his lack of sexual attraction to anyone and wonders if something is wrong with him. This story is considered an alternative universe because Sherlock and John are friends at university, and both are exploring their sexuality. Whereas John has a girlfriend and can easily explain to Sherlock why he is physically attracted to her, Sherlock cannot understand this attraction because he has never experienced it. Turning to John, the one person he can trust to tell him the truth, Sherlock explains his lack of interest in sex and inability to feel sexual attraction. Unlike the “five times” fan fiction in which Sherlock peruses the Internet in search of information or clues that others like him exist, in this story John does the research. He finds a definition: “An asexual person is a person who does not experience sexual attraction.” This information not only provides Sherlock with a term for self-identification, but it reassures him that there is nothing wrong with him and, in fact, other people are asexual.

One comment in particular illustrates how this story may be instructive to at least some readers. Scrub456 wrote that “This can be a terrifying subject, and you captured the appropriate anxiety and frustration. You delved deep into the subject, and kept the characters true. Both your John and Sherlock voices were wonderful here. A very enlightening read.” In response, author Dodoa mentioned that “Sherlock was rather easy to write because I had first hand experience of a similar conversation.” A note at the beginning of the story explains that the author “started writing this about half a year ago, when I was trying to figure myself out” and finally finished the story in time to post it during Asexual Awareness Week. Although not every author admits or

has the opportunity to verify that a “coming out” or other advocacy story may be based on personal experience, as Dodoa’s note and comment indicate, at least some authors use Sherlock as a character through which to share their experience and to come out to a supportive community.

The range of stories involving asexuality and characters within the *Sherlockverse* suggests that the AO3 *Sherlock* community provides a safe space in which readers may learn more about asexuality, identify with Sherlock as both “other” and asexual, share information about asexuality, and portray a world in which asexuality may not be as well understood or accepted as other sexual orientations but in which everyone has at least someone (e.g., John) in whom an asexual (e.g., Sherlock) can confide and find acceptance. As with many fandoms in which “other” characters face a less-than-welcoming society, the *Sherlock* fandom allows readers and authors to share experiences and feelings that they might be uncomfortable sharing under their real names or in face-to-face settings. However, the *Sherlock* fandom has an important difference: it revolves around a lead character that many readers and authors read as asexual. Its fan fiction can uniquely advocate a world in which asexuality is as well defined and internationally understood as homosexuality or heterosexuality. Although many stories reflect the reality that not everyone can accept that asexuality is real or acceptable, they still portray a character (usually Sherlock) who, in almost every plot, has a happy ending with someone who understands and accepts him for who he is. What he is or is not willing to do sexually is not part of the reason why Sherlock is valued or loved. That message can be powerful, especially to teenage readers who are questioning their own sexual orientation.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

“. . .New media transforms all culture and cultural theory into an ‘open source.’ His opening up of cultural techniques, conventions, forms, and concepts is ultimately the most promising cultural affect of computerization—an opportunity to see the world and the human being anew” - Lev Manovich, The Language of New Media

My research has been personally rewarding precisely because I have been able to document and investigate the generosity and creativity of *Sherlock* fans in service of their respective communities, while leveraging both what makes them unique as persons for whom fandom is a way of life/an identity and the affordances of digital literacy/digital media. That is not to imply that I have not witnessed and documented damaging behavior as well. This mixture of positive and disruptive behavior is not surprising. Cultural and socio-political forces exert all kinds of pressures that shape our media, the technologies themselves, and the user, which means that we take with us into the digital environment all those biases that exist elsewhere in our lives. My research and the scholarship associated with it have helped me to understand technology as extensions of ourselves, as part of the apparatus through which we experience and sometimes alter both the digital and physical world. This combination of influences affects how we reconcile personal identity, the identities of others, mediated communication, and social/political agency in the digital age. These shaping forces can be highly positive, as in a supportive community that can entertain, enlighten, or educate its members, or they can lead to bullying

behaviors exacerbated by the anonymity of much digital communication and the “herd mentality” that results in threats of or actual violence.

Because of the implementation of a scaffolded methodology that mimics fan practices, I have been able to investigate fan communities online as events unfolded. This contemporaneous approach has been critical in capturing ephemera, but, more importantly, it has been critical in making sure that my research focuses on what matters to fans at the current time or, in the case of fan fiction, what has and continues to matter to fans and consequently to advocates for asexuality awareness. In addition, this methodology was critical in allowing me to recognize the unique subcultural characteristics of the *Sherlock* community. Fandom, in general, engages in detective-type work, but the emulation of and regard for sleuth-like activity is certainly a focus of this particular fandom and is instrumental in making this fandom particularly suited to both creative work (especially fan fiction) and advocacy work. In this way, we see how participants in *Sherlock* fan culture are positively affected by the opportunities for community building and free self-expression that exist in unique ways in online environments.

The ways in which fans interact with and influence the world outside of their digital cultural environment, as they do through the #Setlock fan site and through advocacy and fiction sites, speaks to the extent to which this fandom has the potential to empower fans but also to impact culture at large. Interactions among fans, advocates (who might not know anything about *Sherlock*, for example, but understand asexuality), and fan/advocates (who, for example, understand both *Sherlock* and asexuality) have the potential to increase awareness, understanding, and even empathy. Very practically, these interactions also connect people with

resources and practical strategies for navigating their own identities or another's nonheteronormative identity.

Connections Between Chapters

In Chapter 2, I explore what it means to contribute to fandom in two very different communities, #Setlock and Sherlockology. This research is particularly timely because fandom is constantly evolving online, especially with the affordances of social media. This evolution marks a time in which fans are shifting from consumers of texts to producers of texts. This shift is fraught with challenges over control of content and public perceptions, as in #Setlock and AO3. While fan identity has always existed, it has shifted over time. Now, those for whom fandom is a way of life can devote their lives to creative endeavors like Sherlockology or AO3 and distribute those creations en masse via digital media, and this leads to questions about fan labor and exploitation, which are explored in chapter 2. The foundation set by this chapter informs the following chapters, which focus on advocacy work in different online communities, by establishing insight into how fan identity and fan-produced works may contribute to fandom in diverse ways, depending on the extent to which they are mediated by official sanctioning bodies like showrunners. This is integral to conceptualizing how the site of a fan's text might affect the production, recognition, and circulation of that text. Sites like Sherlockology which run on a gift economy in which fans strive for status and recognition from official sources are mediated strictly by those sources, while social media sites like #Setlock are able to resist such mediation both because of the ethos of those who participate and the social media platform. The example of the co-opting of the #Setlock tag by *Sherlock* celebrities and showrunners in order to

use the broad distribution of that platform has proved less than successful because fans who operate outside of the gift economy, in which recognition by officials is the goal, operate within a community that primarily values uncovering filming secrets or gaining the recognition of celebrities. The #Setlock community does not operate in the same type of gift economy as Sherlockology. Within the #Setlock community, the value lies in fans being recognized as sleuth-like *Sherlock* super fans and gaining status among other fans. They do not care how they are perceived by the establishment.

Being unconcerned about the establishment is beneficial when fans become fan/advocates. Within *Sherlock* fandom, in the face of all official sources saying otherwise, many fans still insist on their right to perceive Sherlock as asexual or gay, or whatever they might have plausible evidence to support through their own reading of the series. Because, as I mention in the introduction, visibility for nonheteronormative identities is a most important first step in advocacy, *Sherlock* fandom, especially the unmediated online communities, is fertile ground for advocacy work, which leads to the next body chapter in which fan work and interactions culminate in ways that work overtly toward advocacy practices online.

In Chapter 3, I began by explaining the need for an asexuality social justice movement and used the lesbian and gay movement's trajectory as a way to explain where the current asexual movement is and where it needs to go if asexuals want to reach or exceed the level of recognition that homosexual people have achieved. Because *Sherlock* includes ambiguous and nonheteronormative characters and there is much debate about the title character's sexual identity, some very interesting critical works and interactions have been produced and consumed

by fans and by asexuality advocates. Many fan/advocates' thoughtful engagement in advocacy practices have likely made a difference, at least to some interested fans, in the way in which they perceive not only Sherlock but asexual individuals.

Fandom has untapped potential that can and should be explored by advocates for many different causes. While my research focuses on a specific fandom and advocacy, what all well-developed fandoms have in common—"affective attachment" to the source text and an investment in community—equates to a passion that lends itself well to advocacy work.

In Chapter 4, I shift the focus of my research from critical fan production to creative fan production, but I remain invested in considering implications for asexuality advocacy. Honing in on the unique online practices of fans has led to opportunities for fans and their fans (consumers of the creative works of fans) to explore what it might mean if Sherlock were asexual and to explore what it means to be an asexual individual or someone invested in asexuality advocacy in the dialogue that follows fan fiction stories in AO3. In addition, the uncensored nature of fan fiction sites opens up a safe space to consider the lived experience of asexuals, even if it is relayed through fiction, in ways that foster important dialogue about desire and intimacy that may not be suited for more mainstream outlets. In these communities, recognition by celebrities or official showrunners can actually be destructive, as these authors are not writing for a mainstream audience; They are writing for and with each other.

Thoughtful participation in digital culture through fandom or any affinity group affords us new ways of "knowing" in this world. It isn't enough to be able to read words; we have to be

able to read new worlds. These new worlds rapidly emerge and rapidly dissolve online. My research captures some moments in time and some moments in a particular fan-driven subculture that provide a valuable window into the practice, purpose, and consequences of fan consumption and fan production in online spaces.

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