Introducing Vigilant Audiences

This ground-breaking collection of essays examines the scope and consequences of digital vigilance — a phenomenon emerging on a global scale, which sees digital audiences using social platforms to shape social and political life. Longstanding forms of moral scrutiny and justice seeking are disseminated through our contemporary media landscape, and researchers are increasingly recognizing the significance of societal impacts effected by digital media.

The authors engage with a range of cross-disciplinary perspectives in order to explore the actions of a vigilant digital audience — denunciation, shaming, doxing — and to consider the role of the press and other public figures in supporting or contesting these activities. In turn, the volume illuminates several tensions underlying these justice seeking activities — from their capacity to reproduce categorical forms of discrimination, to the diverse motivations of the wider audiences who participate in vigilant denunciations.

This timely volume presents thoughtful case studies drawn both from high-profile Anglo-American contexts, and from developments in regions that have received less coverage in English-language scholarship. It is distinctive in its focus on the contested boundary between policing and entertainment, and on the various contexts in which the desire to seek retribution converges with the desire to consume entertainment.

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Introduction

Over the past few years, various movie prequels, sequels and reboots have occupied cinemas. Most of these, like Star Wars and Ghostbusters, continued their original storylines in new, innovative ways. Although this led to praise from fans and movie critics, it also prompted critique. Take for example the debates that followed the releases of the Star Wars instalments The Force Awakens (2015) and The Last Jedi (2017). Both received a lot of criticism about their storylines and casting choices, particularly from a vocal minority of fans who were upset about the movies’ casting decisions. The protagonist of the saga, Rey (portrayed by Daisy Ridley) was female, which did not fit the typical ‘male-hero’ trope of the previous movies. Furthermore, adventurous companion Rose (portrayed by Asian-American actress Kelly Marie Tran) did not have the typical looks or body type of a Hollywood actress. Both Ridley and Tran (Rey and Rose) took their Instagram profiles offline due to criticisms and comments received by alleged Star Wars fans who heartily disagreed with their roles in the franchise.

These actresses going offline due to online harassment was not a stand-alone incident and seems to fit a trend of bullying celebrities on social media (cf. Condis, 2018 and Massanari, 2017). The harassment of Ghostbusters actress Leslie Jones in 2016 is another example: Jones
decided to (temporarily) remove her Twitter profile after she was repeatedly pestered by conservative writer and professional troll Milo Yiannopoulos and his followers. Twitter decided to ban Yiannopoulos from the platform, but the damage had already been done (see Proctor, 2017; Johnson, 2018; Blodgett & Salter, 2018 for detailed discussions of the *Ghostbusters* case). These diverse cases illustrate so-called toxic fandom (cf. Hills, 2018): harmful practices driven by fans’ feelings of entitlement, possessiveness or superiority, which enable them to make claims about their favourite franchise.

The growth of this phenomenon, perpetuated by an allegedly small group of fans who feel entitled to make these harmful claims, seems to align with a current trend in Western media, namely that of reboots, prequels, sequels or re-releases of formerly popular cultural products. *Star Wars* originated in the seventies, *Ghostbusters* in the eighties. The fans seemed to be split between either clinging to past portrayals or demanding for more faithful representations of today’s world. In other words, the fans seemed to hijack the narratives surrounding these franchises; for example, by publicly criticising casting choices and the film’s writer and director, or by objecting to the development of the film’s or a character’s storyline. Consequently, the group of unhappy fans has become (more) vigilant towards the story and character development of the franchise they enjoy. This vigilance leads to opposing viewpoints within these fandoms, which is predominantly visible online, where audiences express their love or hate for the franchise’s new developments on various social media platforms (Johnson, 2018). These strong differences *within* the pre-existing community of a fandom is a topic that has thus far gained little academic attention, whilst rivalry *between* different fandoms — particularly present in sports (Gushwan, 2012) — has received greater coverage.

This study aims to better understand this phenomenon of vigilance in fandoms by examining the interplay between fans, celebrities and producers. It will do so by exploring the different practices fans employ to ‘hijack’ franchise narratives using digital vigilantism (DV). DV is defined by Trottier (2017, p. 55) as the process whereby citizens collectively take action, in the online realm, against other citizens they feel offended by or who have opposing views about an issue. This resonates with Scott’s notion of toxic fan subcultures, which tend to
be “...instances of coordinated harassment on social media platforms against content creators, celebrities, and other fans” (2018, p. 144). Social media platforms are key to this phenomenon, as in practice they enable access to other fans, celebrities and content creators. Scott’s (2018) toxic fan subcultures can publicly express oppositional and otherwise hostile sentiment and are further legitimised by these content creators’ and celebrities’ direct responses (e.g. J.K. Rowling’s responses to fans via Twitter). In this way, fandoms and producers alike use (unwanted) exposure as an overt strategy. Visibility becomes a “weapon in the struggles they wage in their day-to-day lives” (Thompson, 2005, p. 31).

More particularly, visibility plays the most significant role in those cases in which celebrities and their private lives are scrutinised, and when these fandoms engage in the practice of mediated shaming: a “user-led surveillance practice to render other social actors visible in a punitive and denunciatory light” (Trottier, 2018, p. 171).

Purpose

To examine how DV plays a role in pre-existing communities, the purpose of this study is twofold: First, it aims to bring vigilantism and fan studies together by offering an understanding of online fan practices through the lens of digital vigilantism. Secondly, it provides an exploration of how DV is empirically manifest in pop-culture fandom, by providing examples from the fandom of the Harry Potter spin-off movie series Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them (2016–current). The different ways in which the fans hijacked narratives (e.g. related to character or story development) are discussed. First, I highlight how fans denounced the involvement of actor Johnny Depp and campaigned for him to be removed from the film. Second, the fans criticised film producer David Yates and author J.K. Rowling for not taking a stand against Depp’s involvement. Third, following Rowling’s continued lack of opposition to Depp’s inclusion, fans continued to hijack the franchise narrative by shaming Rowling. Fourth, this chapter exposes how these escalating situations surrounding the franchise challenged the norms and values of the fandom. Although this particular case is selected here, the phenomenon of vigilant fandoms reaches beyond new or old franchises, or movie fandoms solely, as mentioned in the introduction.
This chapter brings together two different fields that have a strong focus on active, resistant audiences. First, fan studies considers fans as active, participatory audiences that have a high affective investment in an object (cf. Jenkins, 1992). Second, digital vigilantism studies (cf. Trottier, 2017) considers how collectives turn to mediated tools to take action against something or someone. Digital vigilantism has its roots in the broad field of surveillance studies, which interprets ‘surveillance’ as a mode of organisation and behaviour, e.g. how to conduct oneself relative to the norms of society or online (cf. Lyon, 2017; Andrejevic, 2007). What makes this work different in comparison to other studies on vigilantes, which often tackle political or legal issues, is that fandoms form a pre-existing collective. Vigilant audiences are commonly theorised as spontaneous yet coordinated groups taking action (Trottier, 2017). Fandoms are a pre-existing group (though comparable to religious or political groups) of which a small cluster has become vigilant due to new developments surrounding their object of affection. Additionally, this sheds new light on the policing of ‘good vs. bad’ fans; a topic scarcely discussed in fan studies (notable exceptions are, for example, Twilight fans not being proper Comic-Con geeks, see Busse, 2013; or Twilight fans being interlopers in the Muse fandom, see Williams, 2013).

What follows is an overview of how studies on fans and DV offer a theoretical framework to understand resistant, active audiences. Then, a description of different online fan practices resonating with vigilantism is offered. Next, I examine the different ways in which fans hijacked narratives surrounding Fantastic Beasts by analysing online material (articles and tweets) and thus revealing instances of unwanted exposure, mediated shaming, denunciation, online campaigning and calling people out within pre-existing communities, like a fandom. The conclusion considers this study’s implications with suggestions for future work.

Understanding Fan Practices as Modes of Vigilantism

Fandom and vigilantism are united by the fact that both groups are participatory audiences. In his seminal work on fans, Henry Jenkins (1992) defined them as textual poachers: appropriating those bits of a storyline that are interesting to them, or re-creating the story by
building on poached elements, retelling the story with their own emphasis or adjustments. This implies that fans (although not all) have a tendency to go against dominant readings of certain narratives, or at least to negotiate their interpretation of a media text (e.g. a film, book or TV show). This also implies that fans have grown accustomed to re-appropriating or running afoul of the traditional canon of a story: they can add their own twist to it. But this is also a way to offer criticism of the original text, particularly if the fans consider it unsatisfactory. Jenkins’ work fits the so-called “‘fandom is beautiful’ phase” (Gray et al., 2007, p. 3), a categorisation of early studies on fan cultures that often focus on how fan audiences are indeed resistant and creative. While fandom is an important aspect of popular culture, there is still a need to consider notions of resistance and creativity with nuance, particularly when looking at recent toxic fan practices (Proctor, 2017; Hills, 2018; Scott, 2018).

Nowadays, via social media particularly, fans can poach material and render visible their re-appropriations more easily, which suggests that fans are also potentially more easily confronted with other interpretations of the original text. According to Barnes (2018), the emotions that these adaptations elicit might invite fans to comment on the adaptations. Besides, because of social media, fans’ objects of fandom are more accessible and visible than before (cf. Thompson, 2005), which also makes it easier to critique them. Barnes (2018) argues that this ‘commenting culture’ (fans’ expressions of (dis)like or (dis)agreement) is grounded in affective investment. That might also explain why fans respond so strongly to each other when a commenter is vicious or angry, as this inspires a feedback loop (cf. Barnes, 2018) of similar comments.

Challenged Doxas and Fan Policing

To understand this group of vocal fans, the so-called toxic fans, Hills (2018) takes a Bourdieusian position in defining them by drawing on field theory. He argues “what has been journalistically and academically identified as ‘toxic’ online behaviour emerges precisely when a field’s previously stable doxa has been disrupted and called into question by heterodox forces” (Hills, 2018, p. 107). For example, if new fans enter a pre-existing fandom like Star Wars then the older group’s doxa
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(the composition of the collective that has been taken for granted) is challenged (i.e. ‘these newbies cannot become as knowledgeable as the older fans’). Or, if a movie previously featuring an all-male cast (like *Ghostbusters*) is remade with a female cast, a doxa (the belief about who is best at portraying the story) is challenged. Hills continues by explaining that not all fandoms are toxic, but he does suggest that fandoms are always “doxic in specific ways that tend to exclude certain kinds of fans” (2018, p. 111). These conceptions of exclusion, policing or protecting one’s doxas resonate with the behaviour and practices of digital vigilantes (cf. Andrejevic, 2007; Trottier, 2018).

Notions of exclusion and belonging have often played a role in fan studies (cf. Sandvoss, 2005). Busse, for example, examined how fans practice an “internal fannish dismissal” (2013, p. 73) of new fans entering a fandom. When the popular teen series *Twilight* became part of the Comic-Con (CC) convention, the CC fans dismissed the *Twilight* teens attending the event. The CC fans felt that they were higher up the ladder of cultural hierarchies (a legitimate, longstanding convention versus a mainstream, fleeting, ‘smut’ success). By policing who is a ‘rightful’ attendee of Comic-Con, the CC fans aimed to protect their own sense of community (Busse, 2013). Peculiar to this instance of policing is its revelation of a gender bias: the largely female fan base of *Twilight* attending a male-dominated space such as Comic-Con did not fit the doxa of the conference’s regular “geek hierarchy” (Busse, 2013). Similarly, Stanfill (2013) examined how fans of the series *Xena: Warrior Princess* stereotype each other by denoting their activities as peculiar, stigmatised or simply a bit too much (e.g. a fan getting a back-piece tattoo of a particular scene from *Xena*). These previous works expose how fans have a tendency to create their own boundaries around the fan community and who can join it, as well as what constitutes the doxa of a ‘good’ fan (behaviour).

The doxic character of fandom confirms that exclusion, creating a hierarchy and policing are not new to fandom. Furthermore, fans themselves appear to be vigilant about who enters or is part of their community. Yet this denunciation of other fans or the franchise’s producers (e.g. *Ghostbusters*’ strategy of employing a diverse cast instead of creating a nostalgic reboot of the old product) seems to have become more visible due to social media. Some have even gone as far as shaming
other fans or celebrities involved in the franchises they care about, including the cases of Rey and Rose mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. The fans seem to watch and control who holds the right views, thus the right doxas. That turns this type of surveillance amongst these groups into a cultural practice (Monahan, 2011). Surveillance according to Monahan involves “exercises of power and the performance of power relationships” (2011, p. 495), which is present in these previous examples. As Monahan interprets Lyon (2001): “different forms of surveillance could be positioned along a spectrum from ‘care’ to ‘control’” (2011, p. 497). In other words, fans can go from watching over each other for protection to enforcing particular behaviour.

Fans seem to have grown more vocal and concerned about changing doxas (see Proctor, 2017; Scott, 2018; Barnes, 2018). Moreover, publicly expressing such comments online makes their criticism and concern visible to all. This in turn can lead to other fans joining in this practice of expressing their (dis)agreements and might potentially result in demands from the disgruntled fans that the doxas should continue unchanged. I thus propose that we can also consider them as (digital) vigilantes (Trottier, 2017): a loose, yet organised collective that takes deliberate action against an offence. Nowadays, the changing doxas of fandoms are rendered visible through online communication via various social media platforms (Thompson, 2005; Barnes, 2018). However, this development also needs to be nuanced. It is questionable if these people are fans at all, or whether they are just social actors that use fandom to pester others (Proctor, 2017; Hills, 2018). Likewise, those involved in practices like DV might also temporarily come together as a loose and spontaneous network of people (Trottier, 2018) who leave the discussion after the hype is over.

Bringing surveillance and fan studies together, by approaching fans’ online practices as modes of vigilantism, helps to explore how shared values and norms are debated. According to Trottier, DV campaigns express a form of collective identity based on, for instance, “national, religious or ethnic forms of solidarity” (2017, p. 57). The campaigns in fandoms against producers or franchise developments might express a form of affective solidarity building on a (former) mutual love and understanding for the media text and fandom that is now challenged and negotiated. The fandom and their beloved celebrities (and the
private lives of these celebrities) are placed under public scrutiny, and discussions are intense and enduring (Thompson, 2005; Trottier, 2017). This suggests that these franchise audiences also become more polarised, which is an interesting aspect to explore at a time when fandom can be considered a proven aspect of contemporary politics (Dean, 2017).

Trolling

In today’s world, due to the increase of social media platforms, it is possible for fans, stars and producers to (parasocially) interact. As Proctor states: “[f]an quarrels and conflicts are not a new phenomenon either, but the migration from the (analogue) margins into the (digital) mainstream has exposed the various operations of fan cultures to the larger online public...” (2017, p. 1124). That is, fans now have the (digital) tools to go beyond mere poaching, the typical way to re-appropriate or express criticism of the original media text. Now, the fans can reach out to producers, and express their criticism more visibly, thus more publicly than before.

The vocal criticism expressed by some of the fans within a fandom can be defined as trolling, a now polarised term often used in the public sphere for anything related to having fun at the distress of others. To clarify, I draw on Phillips’ (2015) definition, which conceptualises trolling as a form of amusement that one might have at someone else’s expense.¹ Unlike demanding change for affective reasons, trolling is often purposefully harmful or intended to upset media creators or other fans rather than elicit a sincere response. Yet, to troll, one needs to possess a certain amount of knowledge to make fun of that person, or to know when trolling becomes amusing for a wider audience. The humour of these trolls therefore leads to in-or exclusion: those in on the joke and those who are not. My use of the term then avows the idea that this group of fans who trolls also needs to have knowledge of their ‘target’. When Gamergate happened, the trolls were keen to release personal information (doxing) and chose their subjects based on their close involvement and (known) positions in the gaming subculture (Condis,

¹ Phillips, in Phillips & Milner (2017) indicates that the use of ‘trolling’ is ever-changing, and that the 2015 definition might already be outdated. Yet the overall sentiment that trolling is a practice that requires one to offend or be humorous at somebody else’s expense remains.
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Phillips (2015) argues that trolling can amplify certain issues or challenges at stake in society. Trolls are metaphorically starting a fire and walking away from it. The actual fire is not the ‘lulz’ (the fun or laughter at someone else’s expense), but the build-up to the action.

In asserting how trolling connects to fan studies, Scott clarifies why and when fans or producers can be labelled trolls:

When [...] they have become too aggressive in their affective claims to textual ownership, manifested in actively attempting to sway or collectively criticize particular representational choices. Producers are situated as trolls when they, for either industrial or personal reasons, insert themselves into fan communities of practices or actively attempt to contain particular forms of fannish reading (2018, p. 146, emphasis added).

So, trolling fans are perhaps not so much in it for the ‘lulz’ as argued by Phillips (2015), but rather are too passionate or too concerned about changes happening to their beloved object of fandom. Therewith they exclude or are vigilant of those who do not follow their ‘textual ownership’, or who do not accept or agree with their doxa. Scott (2018) clarifies her assertion of trolling by using the case of headmaster Albus Dumbledore’s unspecified sexuality in the Harry Potter franchise. Although J.K. Rowling has stated she envisions Dumbledore as gay, he is not (explicitly) portrayed as such in the existing movies or in the Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them spin-off. The fans however, ever since learning about Dumbledore’s sexuality, were also left divided: some fans objected to the idea, while other fans have regularly attempted via Twitter and various social media campaigns to make this more explicit. Yet neither the movie producers nor J.K. Rowling considered this an element that should be explicitly mentioned. That fans organised such actions does not per se mean that they are trolling (nor does it imply that movie producer David Yates does), yet there are resemblances with the vigilante mindset: fans organise themselves actively as a collective against a particular person or happening they were offended by (either Yates not willing to make Dumbledore’s sexuality explicit, or the thought of Dumbledore as gay).

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Totemic Nostalgia

On the other hand, if the filmmakers were to portray Dumbledore as homosexual, some fans might genuinely feel hurt by this change made by the adaptation. Proctor (2017), in his study of the Ghostbusters fandom who reacted toxically to the all-female reboot, describes this genuine pain as “totemic nostalgia [...] a fan protectionism, which is not toxic, centred on an affective relationship with a fan object, usually forged in childhood” (Proctor, 2017, p. 1122) and which should be read as “innocuous rather than explicitly toxic” (ibid, p. 1129). In other words, Proctor makes an argument that we should not refer to all fan behaviour as toxic.

The media often cherry-pick the worst cases of toxic fan behaviour, thus amplifying them. Yet some of the fans that denounced the casting of the all-female Ghostbusters reboot because of childhood nostalgia might also be those who engaged in the bullying of actress Leslie Jones. This leads us to question what the dominant doxa of a fandom is, and who determines this doxa.

Still, not all fans participate in these practices of trolling, totemic nostalgia or other ways of expressing their criticism. Yet these can be examined because fans, as Proctor (2017) argues, now quarrel online. Fan practices have gained more visibility (cf. Thompson, 2005; 2011), and are amplified more easily through the online reach of social media platforms. Moreover, they are no longer confined to fan-only spaces (e.g. secluded fora or fan conventions).

Case Study: Controversies Surrounding Fantastic Beasts

This chapter offers an empirical snapshot of vigilantism in an Anglo-American pop culture fandom, namely that of Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them (Fantastic Beasts or FB from hereon). These fans are not drawn together because of an event that happened; they were already formed as a collective. Yet they have been divided by new developments in the fandom and franchise they care so much about.

Fantastic Beasts is a spin-off series of the Harry Potter franchise. The series is created and written by author J.K. Rowling, and produced by Warner Brothers. FB was first mentioned in the Harry Potter series as a
popular book that the wizards read to learn about fantastic beasts, written by Newt Scamander, who is the main protagonist of the movies. Due to the enormous popularity of the Harry Potter franchise, the Fantastic Beasts mentioned in the original books turned into an actual published book of its own. A movie based on the adventures of Newt Scamander followed in 2016 (directed by David Yates, who had previously been involved in the Potter franchise as director of several of its films).

A second FB film was released in 2018, as part of a planned total of five. The Crimes of Grindelwald (shortened to Grindelwald), has stirred up commotion in the fandom because of its casting choices. Particularly controversial were the casting of Johnny Depp as Grindelwald, a powerful, dark wizard, and the involvement of South Korean actress Claudia Kim as Nagini, a woman/snake-like creature who later turns into the dark wizard Voldemort’s pet and horcrux (an object that stores part of Voldemort’s soul so he can return to power). Fans also condemned the lack of emphasis on Dumbledore’s sexuality. As a result of these controversies, several issues were highlighted in traditional media. Venues like The Guardian, USA Today and Vice criticised the lack of diverse ethnic voices shaping the wizarding world of Fantastic Beasts. According to these media, decisions about casting or (what is not included in) the narratives of the movies were made because J.K. Rowling and Warner Brothers sought to keep the movies accessible to all age groups, and did not want them to be rated PG (a more restrictive rating than the child-friendly U).

For this study, I looked at the controversies surrounding Fantastic Beasts. These controversies have their roots in fans’ tweets, but got picked up by members of the news and entertainment media. To analyse these controversies, a snapshot sample of fifteen articles was selected.\(^3\) The articles offered a more opinionated perspective on the franchise and contained tweets (N=56) from fans about the franchise. Although I will not refer to specific Twitter handles, the tweets can still be traced back to their origins (cf. Zimmer, 2010). I considered it a prerequisite that the tweets discussed in this chapter appeared online as part of a

\(^3\) In total, searching for all news related to Johnny Depp’s involvement in Fantastic Beasts in the Nexis database yielded 263 articles between January 2016 and December 2018. Articles on Claudia Kim’s casting as Nagini over the same time period offered 369 results.
news or entertainment media article, which implies that they have been taken from a public(ly accessible) account. However, this also might bring about a bias in the data: these media outlets might have selected cases they found most interesting (cf. Proctor, 2017). The tweets have, through this pre-selection, gained visibility, prominence and endurance by being part of a publication. However, I aim to overcome this bias by contextualising and analysing them in connection to each other, and not as sole expressions of criticism or dissatisfaction.

The articles selected all covered one of the controversial topics surrounding FB, with a particular focus on the casting of Johnny Depp as Grindelwald and the decision to cast South Korean actress Claudia Kim as Nagini. Articles included are from the online platforms of news and entertainment outlets NME, BuzzFeed, Slate, Floor 8, ELLE (Dutch version), Yahoo (Lifestyle) and Vice and the websites of British media BBC, The Independent and The Guardian. All were published between 2016 and 2018. These outlets (and articles) were chosen because of their accessibility and fit with the (adult) target audience of Fantastic Beasts.

To uncover these empirical manifestations related to the various controversies surrounding the FB movies, I conducted a thematic analysis (see Braun & Clarke, 2006). That means I aimed to identify patterns by assigning codes to the material, followed by grouping these codes together into overarching themes that summarise these patterns. Although these materials only form a snapshot of the vast amount of articles on these different controversies, they are by no means cherry-picked (cf. Proctor, 2017), nor do these practices only happen in popular culture fandoms. Sports fandoms thrive by cultivating rivalries, yet are considered a different type of fandom to study in comparison to pop-culture fandoms (cf. Gushwan, 2012).

Results

This section presents four patterns related to digital vigilantism in the fandom of Fantastic Beasts. The different steps discussed show how different narratives surrounding Fantastic Beasts (e.g. casting choices, story development) are hijacked by its fans, who engage in practices like denunciation, calling out and shaming actors and producers. These practices reveal how grievances escalated within the fandom (and in
the media) surrounding the development of the movie. First, I briefly discuss the unwanted exposure of the lead actor in Grindelwald, namely the fandom denouncing Johnny Depp as an abuser; second, following this casting choice the fans organised a campaign to remove Depp from the film and fans called out and shamed — meaning they publicly denounced and stigmatised (cf. Trottier, 2018)—the movie’s director, Yates, for casting him; third, the shaming of Rowling by fans, both for Depp’s involvement and for casting Kim as Nagini; finally, I illustrate how the fan doxas are challenged by changes in the franchise.

Unwanted Exposure

The first step in the ‘hijacking’ of Fantastic Beasts came after the alleged accusations, influenced by the #MeToo movement, against lead actor Johnny Depp. Fans started petitioning to remove him from the movie, condemning his involvement. Depp has a notorious reputation (accused by ex-partner Amber Heard of domestic abuse, see Rao, 2020) and was seen as a poor fit for the child-friendly and inclusive franchise. This generated unwanted exposure (Thompson, 2005; 2011) for the movie, but also for Depp. Comments like this one made by a Twitter user cited by NME “it really isn’t too late to replace Johnny Depp, guys” (NME, 2017) are exemplary. Another person expressed their excitement about the main character, Newt Scamander, but states “then I remember we’ll see more of johnny depp [sic]” (Independent). When the trailer appeared online, comments like this materialised again; one fan said “I legitimately love everything about this. Except the fact that Johnny Depp is still Grindelwald” (ELLE, 2017). In sum, they all contain phrases that denounce Depp, with the result that his involvement was heavily criticised. Madianou has described how such unwanted and unexpected exposure often reveals the “power asymmetries of shame” (2011, p. 5). Both Depp and the franchise itself were unable to control this sudden backlash. According to an article in People (‘Johnny Depp Sues UK Tabloid for Defamation over Story Slamming Him and J.K. Rowling’ by Ale Russian, published in June 2018), Depp even sued a British tabloid for libel over a story in which the actor was denounced as a “wife-beater”.

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Rowling defended Depp’s casting, trying to make the fans see why keeping him in the movie was justified after he and Heard settled in court. She is cited in an interview with *Variety* (Clarke, 2017) stating that she accepts that some fans will not be satisfied “however, conscience isn’t governable by committee. Within the fictional world and outside it, we all have to do what we believe to be the right thing”. By expressing her opinion publicly, Rowling might attempt to “contribute to the audience’s sense of acceptable social norms and thus, to the awareness of other’s regard” (Madianou, 2011, p. 6) and try to influence the outlook the fans have on the casting. To put it bluntly, she seems to argue that the case is settled and that it is not up to her or the fans to make judgements, and therewith commands the fandom to move on.

**Online Campaigns**

The second moment of escalation in which the fans were involved, and the second trend identified, is related to the continuing vigilantism of the fandom in the Depp case. They made an active comparison and initiated an online campaign (Trottier, 2017) for director David Yates to follow the example of Ridley Scott, who fired Kevin Spacey from *All the Money in the World* after several sexual assault allegations were made against the actor. Ridley decided to cease working with Spacey and even reshoot the movie with another performer in the role, completely erasing Spacey from the project. Tweets like the following demonstrate how fans considered this situation as exemplary for Depp’s position and future in the franchise: “If Ridley Scott fire Kevin Spacey after filming an entire movie with him and voluntary reshooting it a month before release, then y’all can do the same thing w Johnny Depp bc you still have a year to go [sic]” (*NME*, 2017). Likewise, another fan remarks,

>  If Kevin spacey can get ditched last minute from a movie they can recast johnny depp in fantastic beasts, his character canonically already changed his face so how about perhaps recasting with someone who’s not an abuser maybe [sic] (*ELLE*, 2017).

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This fan also mentions how the story of *Fantastic Beasts* would lend itself for a recasting, more so than the situation Ridley Scott had to deal with for his movie.

The choice to keep Depp in the movie led to the calling out and shaming of Yates as producer, but also to the denunciation of Rowling as writer: jokingly, one fan commented that “David Yates’ justification for having Johnny Depp in *Fantastic Beasts 2* is every bit as weak as Ron Weasley’s magic skills” (*Independent*, 2017). Another fan states more seriously: “[...] there’s Johnny Depp in it and I promised myself I would boycott all of his films. I just don’t get why someone as vocal as J.K. Rowling accepted that he play in the film [sic]” (*NME*, 2017, emphasis added). Similarly, another fan tweeted: “The only thing I really need to know is how @jk_rowling is so vocal on feminism and women’s issues, yet is willing to turn a blind eye to actual domestic abuser Jonny Depp starring in one of her book adaptions?” (*ELLE*, 2017, emphasis added). Rowling is denounced by these fans who shame her by pointing out the hypocrisy of her own behaviour — also a signal of totemic nostalgia, commenting on how Rowling ‘used to be’ (cf. Proctor, 2017; Barnes, 2018). Drawing on that past image of Rowling, as someone who usually advocates for women’s issues, was intended to highlight the apparent contradiction of her decision not to take action against an alleged abuser who was part of her own project.

**Shaming and Denouncing Rowling**

The situation escalated further thanks to fans’ continued shaming of Rowling, which intensified when the casting of South Korean actress Claudia Kim as Nagini was announced. Nagini never received much of a backstory in the original Harry Potter books, but was mostly known as Voldemort’s pet. Therefore, the reveal of Nagini as a woman of Asian heritage was remarkable. One fan denounced Rowling as follows “Apparently JK Rowling decided that Nagini (volemort’s pet snake) is a Korean woman and I am so sad that so much of my childhood was wasted on such an unsurprisingly racist white woman [sic]” (*Yahoo*, 2018). Another phrases their denunciation even more strongly: “JK Rowling is trash [...] If you don’t see anything racist about an Asian woman being the pet of a white man — who is basically magic
hitler, I don’t know what to say [sic]” (Floor8, 2018). Or as another commenter indicated “listen Joanne, we get it, you didn’t include enough representation when you wrote the books. But suddenly making Nagini into a Korean woman is garbage. Representation as an afterthought for more woke points is not good representation” (BBC, 2018). Another fan puts the discussion in relation to the Harry Potter movies, where another Asian actress/character (Cho Chang) was portrayed stereotypically: “I just want to say I’m impressed with JK Rowling. It takes a LOT of confidence to go 2/2 on racist Asian stereotypes. Cho Chang being the demure ‘gentle flower’ and #Nagini being the sexually attractive dragon lady” (Yahoo, 2018).

Rowling reacted with an explanation of why the character Nagini in the film is Asian: allegedly, the snake-like creature has its roots in Indonesian mythology. Journalist Hanna Flint, in her articles for The Guardian (2018b) and Yahoo News (2018a) marks this “constant rejigging of the original narrative furniture” as “retcon”, meaning retroactive continuity. This is a strategy or phenomenon that might (help to) overcome totemic nostalgia, as it enables new developments by creating a timeline that is already a part of the story, yet this might lead to dissatisfaction for some fans. As with the Depp controversy, the Nagini episode again exposed how fans “police” the norms and values of their fandom, and the franchise and its creators (cf. Busse, 2013; Scott, 2018). As is also illustrated in articles by author Nicole Clark (2018) for online platform Vice, Rowling has always been admired for her vocal attitude against inequality and injustice with regard to certain issues, for example, homosexuality, yet she was now (in the cases of the Depp and Nagini controversies) criticised for apparently not living up to these values, and she was consequently shamed for this change in behaviour and mindset. Nicole Clark (2018) illustrates this by bringing in Dumbledore’s alleged sexuality, noting that “there were no solid markers to confirm a lived experience of homosexuality” and “no representation that might suggest to young, gay readers that they too could grow up to be the world’s most powerful wizard”. She concluded that “[t]o claim that kind of power in retrospect is not only goofy, but deeply disrespectful”. Reporting on the case by Vice (Clark, 2018) further amplified the visibility of the dispute and seemed to
support the practices of shaming and calling out that fans engaged in via social media.

Likewise, Terry Nguyen (published in Vice, 2018) argued that Rowling glosses over the racist and colonialist histories that inspired the backstories for some other characters in Fantastic Beasts. He stated: “[t]hat ignorance effectively destroys Rowling’s progressive mirage and the significance of her characters of color [...].” Here too, the practices of fans are amplified through, or resonate with, the arguments of the journalist. The denunciation of Rowling suggests that fans do not always agree with her. Moreover, the fans render Rowling’s conflicting opinions and decisions more visible by calling attention to and shaming these instances online.

The Challenged Doxa

The fourth pattern identified in fans’ reactions is illustrative of the challenged and changing doxas (cf. Hills, 2018) of the fandom. In the Depp controversy, this relates closely to the topic of abuse, a topic brought up in 2017 by journalist Alanna Bennett from Buzzfeed, whose article generated another wave of condemnation towards Depp and his involvement in the film. She argued that abuse has always been a central theme in the franchise itself: “That was a big part of what made Harry’s escape into the wizarding world feel impactful — he was finally granted a reprieve from life with his abusers”. Abuse thus became the central theme these vigilant fans focused on in their online campaign against Depp. As one fan explained: “The Harry Potter universe is all about being against the abuse of power and yet you cast a known abuser?” (Buzzfeed, 2017). Similarly, another fan remarked: “What really gets me, is how many victims of abuse have used the Harry Potter franchise as a means to heal. How must they feel now?” (Buzzfeed, 2017). This also gives an insight into why the fans were surprised that Rowling did not challenge the casting of Depp. As one fan put it: “[...] the danger in looking the other way bc the truth is inconvenient. Jk rowling saying she doesn’t believe amber heard and is happy to keep a wife beater employed is disgusting. F*ck her [sic]” (Buzzfeed, 2017). Fans are making visible (cf. Thompson, 2005) and commenting (cf. Barnes, 2018) on what is
wrong with the path the franchise took, and particularly with this not having been challenged by its creators.

What these different modes (shaming, denunciation etc.) and the examples regarding *Fantastic Beasts* illustrate is that, when considering these fan practices, it is necessary to look at the different power relations at stake. Again, this highlights how the doxa of fandom is challenged, and what being a “good” fan (a contested notion: see Busse, 2013; Hills, 2018) entails: is it the fan defending Depp’s casting because J.K. Rowling approves, or the fan seeking social justice because Depp is an alleged domestic abuser?

The Nagini controversy is encapsulated by tweets like the following: “How did nobody involved in Fantastic Beasts 2 look at this Nagini situation and think, ‘huh, this sounds problematic…?’” (*USA Today*, 2018). However, some fans suggested that this clinging to the past by some fans is limiting for the franchise and fandom at large. For example, this comment illustrates such a sentiment: “So...Jk Rowling is racist now for casting a POC as a villain? What has this world gone to... People need to stop attacking their own allies for no reason [sic]” (*BBC*, 2018). Or this one: “jk rowling is not a racist by making Asian woman as nagini’s true form. I believe it’s just an act of bringing up some race diversity to the movie [sic]” (*Yahoo*, 2018), which then continues with “nagini is not a ‘white man’s pet’, she so precious to Voldemort he turned her into his closes horcrux [sic]”. Although these two comments resemble claims about the diversity of the franchise, they could likewise be interpreted as trolling other fans: they suggest that those fans concerned about Nagini’s casting should not be so easily offended by these “retcon developments”. Twitter comments mostly do not offer much context or space to further clarify these opinions. However, this fan provides some background as to why she has a particular opinion on Nagini’s casting “as an Asian woman I’m not particularly offended about Claudia being nagini [...] people are just so easily offended these days, you can’t enjoy anything without it having some sort of racist deeper meaning [sic]” (*Yahoo*, 2018). She also criticises the fans who are offended for over-analysing or being judgmental about the meaning behind this casting choice.
Conclusion and Recommendations

This chapter illustrates how a combination of fan and surveillance studies offers tools to understand vigilant, sometimes toxic practices that fans engage in. It has done so through looking at the fandom of Fantastic Beasts and various controversies surrounding the franchise that led to the hijacking and escalation of its narratives, as well as disagreements within this pre-existing community.

For the Fantastic Beasts fans, it might be argued that the fans gave greater visibility to the stories about Johnny Depp as an (alleged) domestic abuser, generating unwanted exposure for him and the franchise. They continued to amplify this allegation by campaigning for his removal from the film, and calling out David Yates and J.K. Rowling for not taking action. The fans organised themselves collectively against this casting decision, yet to no avail. Consequently, this episode spilled over into anger about the other controversy, and the two fuelled each other, with Rowling becoming the target of the Nagini casting controversy and being denounced as racist, and as an author who sought to pay lip service to diversity without properly engaging with what diverse representation in her books and films would involve. Again, this escalation illustrated the affective ownership of fans, but also indicated how these fans found it unacceptable to retro-con Nagini’s identity as an Asian woman prior to her transformation into a snake. The Depp and Nagini controversies are examples of how the fandom hijacked the franchise’s narrative, while also exposing fans’ reactions to changes in the doxa of the fandom and the franchise. The fans were asked to include and embrace these characters, but some fans considered the way these characters were introduced to be wrongful, and this led to conflicting views within the fandom.

This chapter demonstrates how the framework of vigilantism is applicable to and is present in fan studies. The ‘policing’ behaviour of fans, be it out of affection or totemic nostalgia, might influence surveillance studies to consider further the affective dimension of vigilant practices, in addition to looking at surveillance as a cultural practice (Madianou, 2011). Moreover, albeit on a micro level, the challenged doxas offer strong indications of how using visibility as a weapon (cf. Thompson, 2005; Trottier, 2017) might result in the
inclusion or exclusion of individuals in such strong pre-existing entities as fandoms. These vigilant practices can move beyond the practice of trolling (cf. Scott, 2018) or policing good or bad fans. We must examine these practices by looking at the role affection plays in these doxas of communities, and what might be the consequences when these doxas change. Small shifts in the doxa can lead to significant (perhaps not always intended) implications that might be challenging for groups known for coherence and belonging (Barnes, 2018). Moreover, these challenged doxas also inform us about the cultural norms and values that those involved with these groups are so passionate about. Understanding these challenges on a micro level might help us to understand them on a macro or societal level.

The case examined here is a brief exploration of vigilantism in pop-culture fandoms (also present in the fandoms of *Ghostbusters*, and *Star Wars* mentioned previously). Yet, the schisms within a fandom illustrated on this micro level — between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ fans, and the involvement of ‘toxic’ or ‘vigilant’ fans — might be a helpful framework in understanding the polarisation of contemporary politics (Dean, 2017), or the so-called ‘culture wars’. Future work could look at political groups, and the practices they engage in to campaign for or against someone. Yet to better understand this phenomenon, such research would also need to consider these vigilant-fan practices globally, as this analysis offers an Anglo-American perspective. The current discourse of labelling these audiences as toxic or trolls needs to be carefully (re-)examined: what makes one toxic, totemically nostalgic, too affective or a troll? And would these fans consider themselves vigilant or rather affective fans? Due to the scope of this study, the different terminologies have been briefly characterised, yet it would be valuable to explore this further (see also Proctor et al., 2018).

To conclude, much like vigilantes, fans form communities defending what they stand for. This interdisciplinary framework of fandom and vigilantism then offers a point of departure to understand other socio-cultural challenges.
References


Introducing Vigilant Audiences


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