

Getting Back to “So What?”

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There is, of course, no grand, all-encompassing answer to our prompt's questions, but it is important nonetheless to ask them—and to engage each other through our answers. The easiest place for me to enter such a discussion is through my perspective as an audience and fan scholar. Like most media and cultural studies scholars, my work is driven by an interest in how power circulates through popular culture texts and the people who interact with them. Like many audience scholars, I attempt in my work to comment on macro-political topics by taking a close, careful look (what Fiske has called taking “snapshots”) at the micro-political level of the everyday. Audience studies had its heyday in the 1980s and 1990s, but the subsequent growth of fan studies has given the field new energy, and I believe, it has also fragmented it, developing new interests and agendas, and, at times, taking attention away from our overarching and enduring questions about the relationships between culture and power that can be observed when we study the users of media texts.

As many scholars have suggested, fan studies' recent growth is due to the development and proliferation of fan spaces online and the increasingly positive cultural view of fans and fandom. Thus, it is now easier for scholars to locate and observe fans and fan communities, and the cultural stigma against calling oneself a fan has waned, encouraging “regular” media users to feel more comfortable describing themselves and their behaviors as fannish. This led to incredible innovation (and some disillusionment and concern) in fan studies scholarship, but this growth also confused its ties to the audience studies (reception) tradition, and obscured the overarching missions that guide both traditions. I argue that in our focus on everyday micro-political processes, we've lost sight of our guiding questions, the questions that could unite us. Rediscovering these questions would move us past explorations of what constitutes a fan or an audience, to questions about how people's engagements with media texts is changing, and what those changes mean for meaning making, identity construction, and our culture at large.

One suggestion for engaging such questions involves examining *how* we do our research. Online observation of fan behavior is unquestionably useful—as is textual analysis of fan comments online—but easy access to fans via the Web has made audience and fan scholarship opportunistic—and has also stunted the questions we ask. Online posts are poor substitutes for dialogue with audience members and fans. We know, given the range of communication tools and texts we use in our own lives, that people are audiences of many different media texts and forms, and part of our task is to figure out not only what meanings audiences and fans take from the texts with which they engage, but also how, when, why and for how long they use media texts. What roles do these texts and media forms play in people's lives? Just as Radway and Morley (among others) sought

to observe audiences in their daily lives alongside textual analysis of the texts they enjoyed, we will better understand the micro-politics involved in people's media use if we can place it in the greater context of their lives, identities, and community involvements. Thus, pairing interviews with online observations and analyses of online comments will give us a clearer picture of when, why, and how people engage with media texts.

But speaking more to the questions raised in the prompt, I suggest that the micro-political observations audience and fan scholars make must engage broader questions of purpose and contribution. It's easy to get caught up in the micro-processes of audience and fan behavior; but doing so results in work that reads like disparate commentaries on what a certain group thinks or does. We needn't agree upon a list of guiding questions that unify our work, but I believe we would be more focused and more relevant if we were consciously speaking to macro-political questions—questions involving identity, representation, engagement, community, reception, ideology, and power. Without a focus on macro-political interests, our work has little resonance. If instead we research and write toward these greater issues, we create a dialogue, we build understanding—and hopefully produce scholarship that has a significant influence on both the micro and macro levels.

We needn't be too concerned about the diversification of the objects and cultures we study—this, of course, ensures us many years of rich research material. And while we should also welcome the changes to the fields of media and cultural studies, it is important to see these changes as opportunities to re-engage with our scholarly foundations and with each other to refresh and reshape our scholarship to keep it as dynamic and relevant as the texts, people, and processes we study. I look forward to our conversation!