

Truth Isn't Stranger than Fanfiction

The Serial Podcast and Citizen Journalism

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Summary

When the blockbuster podcast Serial became famous it was seen as the proof that this relatively recent medium, podcasting, was worthy of mainstream attention. Sarah Koenig's story drew in record numbers of listeners as she explored the case of Adnan Syed, a young man convicted of the murder his ex-girlfriend, Hae Min Lee, but who insisted on his innocence. However, the popularity of this true crime story led to an outcome only possible in our social-digital age: listeners, connecting over the social news networking service Reddit, began to investigate the crime themselves. This activity falls into the category of citizen journalism, where non-professionals participate in journalistic activity. Literature on citizen journalism tends to focus on the technological, political or procedural aspects of the phenomenon. However, approaching the Serial case study from a fan studies point of view, as I do in this thesis, draws to the fore a number of parallels between this investigative community and fan communities. The Reddit users engaging in this investigation can be better understood by looking at the social aspects that motivate fan communities. Through that lens, it becomes apparent that this group is driven both to solve a crime and to prolong the interaction of its socially connected members. This contradiction, as well as the other social aspects of citizen journalism, ought to be thoroughly explored if we wish to truly understand this emerging field of participatory culture.

Keywords

citizen journalism, fan fiction, podcasts, Reddit, participatory culture

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1. Introduction

1.1 Introduction

In November 2014, *Serial*, a podcast from the makers of the National Public Radio program *This American Life*, became “the fastest podcast to reach 5 [million] downloads and streams in iTunes’ history” (Dredge 2014). It follows the story of Adnan Syed, who was convicted in 1999 of murdering his ex-girlfriend, Hae Min Lee. Syed has been serving a thirty-year prison sentence since. A few years ago, a family friend convinced of his innocence contacted reporter Sarah Koenig and urged her to investigate whether Syed was wrongly convicted (Grant 2014).

Unlike *This American Life*, *Serial* reports a single story across multiple episodes, with Koenig opening up her reporting process to the audience and releasing episodes as each is completed, instead of waiting until all reporting has been finished and she has drawn her conclusions. The series is largely made up of interviews with Syed, friends and family of those involved, community members and law professionals, as well as documentation of Koenig’s attempts to verify or disprove the disparate pieces of the story, such as her going to a Best Buy parking lot where Syed allegedly made a phone call after the murder.

Just as they would for a popular film or television show, *Serial* fans took to the Internet to share their opinions on their favorite podcast. On Reddit’s *r/serialpodcast* thread, however, hundreds of these listeners went from merely debating the podcast to attempting to solve the crime themselves. As the series progressed, more and more listeners supplemented their experience of the podcast with the additional investigation provided by these so-called “keyboard sleuths” (Dickson 2014).

This type of activity can be categorized as citizen journalism, “a range of web-based practices whereby ‘ordinary’ users engage in journalistic practices” (Goode 2009, 1288). For many reasons, however, this definition seems insufficient for describing the Reddit listener activity surrounding *Serial*. Before we can look at the Reddit community, it is important to establish how the style of the podcast itself differs from traditional journalism and how that allows alternative readings (or listenings) of the podcast, meaning that the text is digested as something other than news reporting.

1.2 Two Alternate Readings

In the first alternative reading, *Serial* is actually about the journalistic process itself. One of the podcast’s characteristic features is the way it lets the listener inside the reporting process. The audience hears the reporter’s “sloppiness” and “dumb questions” that traditionally don’t get put into the polished, final story (Brodesser-Akner 2014).¹ One journalist described the podcast as “show-your-work journalism” (Levin 2014) with another emphasizing that the podcast “provides a

¹ □ E.g. in Episode 3, Koenig wonders aloud at length as to why the man who found the victim’s body, Mr. S, walked so far from the road to urinate. When Koenig finally goes to the location, it is immediately evident that the area just happens to be very exposed and he needed to go that distance for privacy.

level of procedural insight that straight reporting is specifically formulated to minimise” (Robertson 2014). This approach brings the reporter to the fore, exemplified by this quote from Koenig from the first episode: “I mean, anyone would wonder. I wondered. I wondered if maybe she was pressured into writing that affidavit. And I wondered if she was hiding something” (WBEZ Chicago 2014). Given this stylistic approach, it is ambiguous whom *Serial* is really about. One critical journalist found the emphasis on Koenig distasteful with such a serious case, asking “Was this really about the murder? Or about her?” (Simons 2014).

With the reporting so focused on Koenig's experience, her tone is of great significance. It affects how much stock the audience puts in the reporting being done. Koenig's choice to pepper her narration with expressions atypical for reporting, such as when she characterizes Syed's cousin as being “a little loosey-goosey with the details” (WBEZ Chicago 2014) or when she describes the results of her exploration into memory habits² as “no big shocker, I guess” (ibid), does more than make her reporting more colorful. It departs from conventional journalistic presentation and in turn has the potential to disrupt the listener's trust in the journalist as a reliable source of reporting.

This brings us to the other and I think more significant alternative reading, one where, for a variety of reasons, the listener stops thinking of the story as real life. While an informally-told story focusing on a narrator's experience may strike listeners as incongruous with factual news reporting, such qualities seem perfectly normal within a work of fiction. This is what makes the above stylistic choices problematic; they prompt the listener to question how much they ought to trust Koenig and, therefore, contemplate the real-life events with the seriousness they merit. One reporter cites as part of *Serial*'s appeal “the suspicion that Koenig might be an unreliable narrator holding back what she knows in a new form of gonzo journalism” (Grant 2014). (Gonzo journalism will be addressed in my theoretical framework.)

Not merely limited to tone and focus, Koenig makes many statements that foster doubt in listener's minds, saying that she is “not a detective or a private investigator [nor] even a crime reporter” (WBEZ Chicago 2014). She is upfront about her uncertainty throughout and at times even seems to be hoping the audience will confirm what she hopes to believe: “He's adamant about this. You can hear it, right?” (ibid). She remarks that her relationship to the case feels “undignified” and characterizes it by saying “'obsession' is maybe too strong a word—let's say fascination” (ibid). Hearing her ambivalent feelings about the man convicted of the murder, one finds it difficult not to question her objectivity and, therefore, the veracity of her reporting:

And the second thing, which you can't miss about Adnan, is that he has giant brown eyes like a dairy cow. That's what prompts my most idiotic lines of inquiry. Could someone who looks like that really strangle his girlfriend? Idiotic, I know (WBEZ Chicago 2014).

²□ Koenig asked some 18-year-olds to try to remember what they had done on a particular day six weeks prior, in order to see if Syed's difficulty with the same task was plausible.

The press and blogosphere are awash with conflicting claims about Koenig's reporting, many of which draw attention to formal elements that may also contribute to an interpretation of the story as a fictional narrative. Some take her at her word that she did not structure the story "for maximum suspense" (Brodesser-Akner 2014). Others think that she was withholding information in order to "craft...a compelling narrative" (Goldstein 2014). Regardless, Koenig's idiosyncratic methods facilitate a listener experience different from that of traditional news. As one reporter writes, "By employing a multitude of tactics typically utilized in fiction — cliffhangers, hunches, personal asides — Koenig's narration lands somewhere between straight reporting and something more personal" (Goldstein, 2014.) Given such a departure from convention, it seems reasonable that reddit fan investigators would follow in this ambiguous vein, with unorthodox journalism leading to an unorthodox citizen investigation.

Taking stylistic cues from fiction is certainly nothing new. Since New Journalism introduced the practice in the 1960's, it "has become part of our taken-for-granted world" and its practitioners have insisted on their commitment to factual reporting (Eason 1982, 142). As mentioned above, the blurring of fact and fiction in this case may lead the audience to think about the story in morally questionable ways as they become more engrossed in a titillating tale but forget the humans the story is supposed to be about. Henry Jenkins researched an online fan community that devoted itself to solving the murder at the center of David Lynch's *Twin Peaks*. Their relationship to the murder in that fictional story was logically detached: "As one fan explained 'I don't care who killed Laura Palmer. I just love the puzzle'" (Jenkins 1995, 55). Koenig's fiction-like tendencies make it easier for redditors to treat their murder investigation like a game and to maintain a fan-like relationship to the true-crime reporting. Given such a situation, one wonders in what ways this investigation more resembles fan activity than journalism.

1.3 Research Question

I see the potential for interpreting the Reddit investigation of Hae Min Lee's murder as a kind of fan(non)fiction. In "What Is Fanfiction and Why Are People Saying Such Nice Things about It?", Bronwen Thomas says that "writing stories deriving from one or more source texts has long been the most popular way of concretizing and disseminating [a] passion for a particular fictional universe" (2011, 1). In what ways are these reddit investigator simply performing their passion for the *non-fictional* universe of Serial? Through my research question, "How can we understand the citizen journalism activity surrounding the podcast Serial by applying the lens of fanfiction, specifically in terms of community interaction and narrative production?", I will find out what can be gained by viewing r/serialpodcast as a community of fan narrative creators that, through their investigations, expand the world of the podcast.

1.4 Theoretical Framework

Much of what's been written about citizen journalism sees it as a way for individuals to "increase the diversity of information that citizens have access to" (Carpenter 2010, 1064) or focuses

on the use of social media in countries with repressive governments (Khamis and Vaughn 2011, Ali and Fahmy 2013, Hamdy 2009). According to this view, citizen journalism is nothing more than what its name literally denotes: journalism performed by citizens. As stated in my introduction, Goode portrays citizen journalism as activities where non-professionals use the Internet to participate in “journalistic practices” (2009, 1288). Bruns et al. describe citizen journalism as “broadly journalistic activities...characterized by specific practical and technological affordances: they draw on the voluntary contributions of a wide-ranging and distributed network of self-selected participants rather than on the paid work of a core team of professional staff, and they utilize Internet technologies to coordinate the process and share its results” (2012, 4). Joseph Lasica more clearly defines the tasks of citizen journalists as “collecting, reporting, sorting, analyzing and disseminating news and information” (2003, 71).

I have two qualms with these definitions. First, they cite the use of “web-based practices” (Goode 2009, 1288) as the second distinguishing feature (after 'non-professional') of this group. Bruns and Highfield in particular argue that technology is the significant “disruptor and enabler” (2012, 1) with an expansion of potential venues for news content and the journalism industry's late embrace of Internet-based platforms creating an opportunity for non-professionals to encroach on the industry's domain (ibid, 2). While technology certainly plays an important role, I find that to be an oversimplification. Following Jenkins, these new practices cannot be understood purely in terms of technology, but rather as “a cultural shift as consumers are encouraged to seek out new information and make connections among dispersed media content” (2006, 3). A technological explanation fails to address the not insignificant question of what *motivates* individuals to collaboratively (and for free) perform a role typically considered a paid occupation.

My second issue with the given definitions is that they hinge on an assumption of what the term 'journalism' means. While I am sure that the above writers could offer further distinctions between citizen journalism and journalism proper, I contend that their conceptual starting point makes it very difficult to distinguish the many ways that citizen journalism, as I have observed it on r/serialpodcast, stands apart from traditional journalism. I do not *disagree* with their definitions, but rather I find them conceptually limited in their lack of effort to identify the social forces at play in a citizen journalism community. To get to the heart of what limits such concepts of citizen journalism, we first need to establish a sense of what 'journalism' is.

While the quoted authors imply an uncontested understanding of the term, debate continues globally as to what it means to engage in journalistic practice. As Deuze points out, this is really quite unsurprising considering the “variety of disciplines and paradigms deployed to understand journalism (2005, 443). He goes on to address this lack of consensus by departing from a practice-based definition and embracing an ideological one marked by “public service,” “objectivity,” “autonomy,” “immediacy” and “ethics” (2005, 447). Such a conception is particularly useful for understanding citizen journalism because it sets professionalism aside and allows amateurs to enter in.³

³□ This definition leaves out gonzo journalism, a term which refers to the “hybridization of unbridled fantasy and fact” (Feldman 2007, 420) used most notably by Hunter S. Thompson and wherein the voice of the “protagonist is exaggerated to such a degree that its subjectivity is defined through its physical and psychological excesses” (Hames-

The definitions of citizen journalism we have seen above make little effort to distinguish its practices from those of journalism as a whole. Therefore, in my efforts to better understand citizen journalism, I will draw attention to the ways that fan studies explains phenomena found in the case study that Deuze's conception of journalism does not.

My approach to fandom and fan communities will begin from Abigail Derecho's statement that fanfiction, or archontic literature, “allows, or even invites, writers to enter it, select specific items they find useful, make new artifacts using those found objects, and deposit the newly made work back into the source text's archive. An archontic text's archive is not identical to the text but is a virtual construct surrounding the text, including it and all texts related to it” (2006, 65). As a result, the work of fans creates an ever-growing archive (ibid, 73). In our case, the subreddit acts as this archive, at once connecting the original to new works while making a space for them.

Jenkins' research into fan activities, especially his book *Textual Poachers* (1992), identifies the significance of community in this culture, something we will see paralleled in r/serialpodcast. He portrays fans as creatively engaged with popular media and yet in an antagonistic relationship with the media producers who decide what happens to the characters and narratives fans love. Fiske echoes the conclusion, stating that “fandom...selects from the repertoire of mass-produced and mass-distributed entertainment certain performers, narratives or genres and takes them into the culture of a self-selected fraction of the people” (1992, 30). This same group, though seemingly defined by a shared interest, may come to itself influence the interests of the group members as they develop “a relationship of trust” (Thomas 2006, 231). As Grossberg has written, community interaction, rather than the media it appears to be centered around, becomes the true center of these groups (1992, 64). In order to continue enjoying these benefits, fans may find themselves following a new television series in order to enjoy the pleasures of being a member (Grossberg 1992, 38). Camille Bacon-Smith describes a group of women fans who, in their daily lives, “found themselves stranded in an alien culture whose values they did not share” but create a new home in the fan community (2014, 145). The significance of community relationships will prove to be essential to understanding my case study.

Fandom's communal focus leads to an opposition to capitalizing on fan-made creative works, which is seen as ‘selling out’ (Fiske 1992, 40) while ‘true’ fan fiction writers remain “defiantly amateur” and produce their art “for love alone” (Coppa 2014, 219). This is not to suggest that there are no rewards for creative contributions. Rather the rewards are social instead of financial. Fiske's research shows that, in fandom, societal members “who are subordinated (by gender, age or class)” may find a way to achieve status and respect unavailable in “official culture” (ibid, 36). Fans hew to the ideal of the “self-taught who often use their self-acquired knowledge and taste to compensate for the perceived gap between their actual (or official) cultural capital, as expressed in educational qualifications and the socio-economic rewards they bring, and what they feel are their true desserts” (ibid, 34). In fandom, one is not judged by their job title or degree but

by what they contribute. As non-professionals, it seems logical that citizen journalists regard one another in the same way.

Though popular conceptions of fans see them as passive consumers, scholars such as Angela Thomas more accurately capture fans as individuals who engage creatively with media in order to deepen the significance of the original narratives (2006, 230) by “writ[ing] in characters and plots that are relevant to their own identities and lives” (ibid, 234). Fans accept the imperfections and limitations of central works because they allow the creation of archontic works where fans can express their own messages (Jenkins 1992., 23). Constance Penley’s (2014) example of *Star Trek* slash writers are motivated by an urge “to transform the public sphere by imaginatively demonstrating how it could be improved through making it more answerable to women’s interests” (183) and as Camille Bacon-Smith points out, “when women in fandom write about women they are talking to each other about themselves in the symbolic language of their literature” (2014, 156). Yet choosing to intercede as an audience requires a “lack of deference to the artist and the text” as it implies that the fan may know better than the original creator (Fiske 1992, 40). Penley gives an example of *Star Trek* fan writers whose creative license is motivated by “the female characters... marginalized on the show by the sketchiness of their roles and the feminine stereotyping to which they were subjected” (178) which corresponds to Derecho's claim that any act of fan fiction can be interpreted as “an act of defiance of corporate control” (2006, 72). The tension between producers and fans and a 'lack of deference to the text' is necessarily a factor in citizen journalism, where practitioners are defined in opposition to their professional counterparts.

While there is obviously a distinction between fan communities and fan writing, I have found that many community aspects manifest themselves through the cooperative creative process, which I study alongside the community itself. To ground this aspect of my analysis, I draw from Thomas's “Fan Fiction Online: Engagement, Critical Response and Affective Play through Writing” which looks at “the nature of online fan fiction communities” and Angela Karpovich's "The audience as editor: The role of beta readers in online fan fiction communities," which focuses on the relationship between fan writers and the fan editors that offer them feedback, also known as “betas”:

The continuing dialogues between the fan writers and their betas help to maintain personal links within the community (2006, 174).

Becoming a fully fledged member of the community involves learning about and participating in the community practice of beta reading’ (ibid, 186).

These communities encourage collaboration between parties that recognize and take advantage of individual strengths and weaknesses (Thomas 2006, 230; Karpovich 2006, 180) in order to create fanfiction in a manner “closer to the collaborative making of a theatre piece than to the fabled solitary act of writing” (Coppa 2014, 236). Currently based largely in online communities, fans quickly adopt new technologies and put them to use in their creative endeavors

(princessofgeeks 2007) just as citizen journalists do for their investigation. These fan sites typically provide guidelines for writing and interacting in their communities with a focus on respect, manners and support (Karpovich 2006, 180). Karpovich and Thomas's depictions of expectations for active members of fan writing communities give clear examples by which to compare and contrast similar practices and community relationships in this case study.

1.5 Methodology

According to Dewalte and Dewalte's *Participant Observation: A Guide for Fieldworkers*, “participant observation is a method in which a researcher takes part in the daily activities, rituals, interactions, and events of a group of people as one of the means of learning the explicit and tacit aspects of their life routines and their culture” (2010, 1). The method is distinctly useful in that “it does not require that aspects of culture be available for conscious reflection” (Boellstorff 2015, 68). Traditionally done by physically embedding oneself in a community, it is now common for researchers to perform this observation by virtually entering into Internet spaces where they nonetheless are able to gain insights into “one valid yet particular way of living a human life” (ibid, 75).

Over a three-month period from February to April 2015, I performed a participant observation of the r/serialpodcast community. During that time, I read posts and comments on the r/serialpodcast subreddit, watched debates unfold over various particulars of the case and saw disputes arise between moderators and members. This experience led me to believe that definitions of citizen journalism, seen in my theoretical framework, limit the ability for critical observers to describe this phenomenon properly. I have chosen three post threads from the subreddit that exemplify the ways that a fanfiction approach can enhance one’s understanding of this community while simultaneously drawing attention to the limits of strictly adhering to that theoretical lens: a post from the “speculation” thread, the subreddit rules and the subreddit’s flair verification process. Using these threads as examples of activity typical to this forum, I will highlight the limitations of understanding this case purely in journalistic terms, while at the same gaining new insights into the field of citizen journalism by drawing in the following concepts from fan studies: (local) respect and renown, community significance, moving between fandoms, insertion of personal, creative engagement, imperfections with the original, ever-growing archive, and collaboration and support.

To be clear, the focus of this thesis is not the news aggregate site Reddit.com, but one of its specific discussions sections, or subreddits, r/serialpodcast. Users (also known as subredditors) contribute to a subreddit by posting links or other content which are voted on by other members. As users “upvote” a post, it rises in visibility, thus drawing more viewers (Bergstrom 2011). Each “upvote” from a reader grants the poster +1 karma while each “downvote” subtracts 1 karma (ibid). A user's karma number is visible next to the user's name throughout Reddit and signals “that the submitter is an active and respected participant” (ibid). However, many Reddit users do not contribute, as it is not necessary for use of the site, opting instead for “reading, voting, and

commenting on the posts made by other Redditors” (ibid). An account is not necessary to view most of Reddit (ibid).

The r/serialpodcast subreddit is quite large, with 43,674 followers as of June 22, 2015 (r/serialpodcast 2015) and has attracted the attention of journalists as well as the podcast creators themselves (Dickson 2014; Dockterman 2015; Goldstein 2014). As stated above, my analysis will focus on three pages: the most upvoted subreddit “speculation” thread, the r/Serial Podcast subreddit rules and the subreddit's flair verification process. The “speculation” threads are those where members submit and debate their ideas of what happened surrounding the murder of Hae Min Lee through information provided by the podcast, other sources and individual investigation. Other threads include “Debate&Discussion”, “Question” and “Humor/Off Topic”. I have chosen to present this “speculation” thread because it shows, through the initial post and the comment responses, how redditors engage with the content and with each other. I also present the rules and verification process, which, being dictated by the creators and moderators of the thread, show how the subreddit prescribes engagement and understands itself as a community. An analysis of these materials allows insight into both how the members relate to one another as well as how they relate to the organizing members (i.e. moderators, Reddit staff). These have a significant influence on the structure of the community and the relationship between organizers and non-organizers can be better understood through a fan studies depiction of power structures.

The most upvoted of the 'speculation' threads is “Jay's Grandmother's House: It's Not What And Where You Think It Is” from redditor animalrage. Upvoting a post or comment indicates community approval of content and pertinence to community goals, thereby allowing an individual's remark to reflect the views of all voting members of the subthread, either by their approval, disapproval or disregard. Visitors to Reddit can organize comments on a page according to their upvotes, downvotes, chronology or other criteria. The sort function I used, 'top', places comments from highest to lowest by number of upvotes (agreatperhapswaits 2013). As mentioned above, not all redditors actively participate in posting or voting and are therefore not necessarily represented by this sorting method. However, it does provide a way to look more closely at the messages that the community has expressed support for. In this thesis, I will concentrate on the initial post along with the 'top' 200 of the 960 comments from animalrage and other redditors.

My conclusion will finalize my thoughts on how knowledge of fanfiction practices can provide insight into the evolving trend of citizen journalism beyond a limited journalism-specific definition and how the melding of citizen journalism and fanfiction writing produces outcomes different from traditional fanfiction. It will also address the uniqueness of the case studied in this instance and how that may limit the applicability of these concepts to other citizen journalism events.

2. Speculation

For this section, I will be demonstrating the relevance of a fan fiction approach to this case with one of r/serialpodcast's many "speculation" threads, entitled "Jay's Grandmother's House: It's Not What And Where You Think It Is" and submitted by the user animalrage. For reasons of efficacy, I will cite particular comments by the submitter's username. All comments are to be found on that same page. I will cite animalrage as "OP" when referring to the original post, but will cite him/her by name when referring to a separate comment.

2.1 The Initial Post

In this post, animalrage draws from the original Serial podcast, official Serial website, a published interview with Jay⁴, his/her own personal experience and relationships, and posts from various r/serialpodcast redditors to attempt to accomplish a number of goals. S/he tries to clarify where Jay was living at the time: "Jay also notes that he lived at his grandmother's house" (OP). S/he tries to understand the emotional relationship that Jay and his family would have with that house: "Like my Nana's Falcon, she and her husband bought it new off the lot, moved into it and raised a family in it. It was Jay's grandmother's family home" (OP). S/he poses hypotheticals as to the meaning behind Jay's comments: "Could Jay have been scared—terrified, even—of his family?" S/he tries to apply this information to verify or refute claims made by Jay, the prosecution and Syed: "This last call comes at a very critical time in any timeline as well, and is very problematic to explain in terms of...the location from which the call originated" (OP). Finally, s/he makes a case as for why this information is important: "Since we now know Jay's grandmother's house (and Jay's family) are there, this permits us to explore the possible significance of those two trips" (OP).

At the end of the post, we see that animalrage has updated the post four times, in order to correct a broken link, add redditor chicago_bunny's summary of the post, perform general editing, add "interpretation of cell phone data" based on another user's recommendation and add the section on the importance of the post's content.

Below the initial post, one can scroll down through the 960 responses from other redditors, which one can individually respond to within the same page. This means that it is clear when a commenter is responding to another commenter or the initial post.

2.2 (Local) Respect and Renown

One of the initially striking characteristics of the page is the extensive amount of acknowledgment members give to one another. Throughout the comments section, redditors repeatedly make a point to give credit to others for their hard work. The original poster, in fact, references fellow redditor Susan Simpson as a source of information so habitually, that he ends up comically suggesting to the woman that she read her own work:

4 □ One of the main figures in Serial and the central witness for the prosecution.

Figure 1: Comments from "Jay's Grandmother's House..." (animalrage 2015)

[-] [ViewFromLL2](#) 45 punten 1 jaar geleden*
 One thing that might be worth making a bit more explicit in your post is the significance of the 12:41, 12:43, and 4:12 p.m. calls.
 One way of interpreting the cell data is that at each of those times, Jay was at Grandmother's House. And in between 12:43 and 4:12, the only tower that the cell phone pings is the Woodlawn tower.
[permalink](#) [oorspronkelijke post](#)

[-] [animalrage](#) [S] 47 punten 1 jaar geleden
 That's my working assumption.
 The problem with making the significance of those three calls clearer is that it would take a ten page post all on its own due to the many different versions of Jay's stories. However, a lot of my thinking on this issue derives from Susan Simpson's incredible analysis of the calls and tower data, found here: <http://viewfromll2.com/2014/11/23/serial-a-comparison-of-adnans-cell-phone-records-and-the-witness-statements-provided-by-adnan-jay-jenn-and-cathy/>
 She does a great job of summarising these calls. I refer you there. She's the master.
[permalink](#) [oorspronkelijke post](#)

[-] [Ilovecharli](#) 108 punten 1 jaar geleden
 lmao, look who you're responding to :)
[permalink](#) [oorspronkelijke post](#)

[-] [animalrage](#) [S] 68 punten 1 jaar geleden
 Oh holy hell.
 OK so I currently have two posts sitting at Hot #1 and #4 and I am typing furiously to keep up with the posts.
 I'm so sorry Susan! Hold on while I wipe the egg off of my face. No wait. I don't have time.
[permalink](#) [oorspronkelijke post](#)

Other instances of redditors building up the reputations of others include a dialogue where animalfury asks another user if s/he may incorporate his/her comment into the original post, offering “kudos, karma and good vibes” to which the other redditor responds that s/he “would be honored” and jokingly referred to the payment as “Internet immortality ;-)” (chicago_bunny).

While journalists necessarily cite their sources and verify information in order to maintain their own reputations and those of their publishers, such actions are formalized within the field. The exchange of 'kudos' on r/serialpodcast denotes more personal relationships, characterized by public dialogues between members. Not only do commenters show whom their work depended on, they salute their peers for their contributions. Without monetary payment, this public recognition and development of a reputation rewards users for their hard work, the same as in Jenkins' example (1990, 71) of fans exchanging VHS tapes. As Fiske writes, this “unofficial cultural capital... is a major source of self-esteem among the peer group” (Fiske 1992, 33).

2.3 Community Significance

Reading through the comments, it becomes clear that these redditors delight in their interactions with one another. This is most evident in the back-and-forth conversations that happen between two individuals as they explore a particular point. Members often show a graciousness towards one another that reveals their fondness for these discussions, such as one enthusiastic user posting “Any update on this ? I'd love to read it” (Serialobsessed). Another excited reader speaks with feigned annoyance about how animalrage's post has reignited their love for the mystery: “This post. This fucking post. It has pulled me back in. I had stopped it all because it was just getting too messy and confusing. But I'm back to wanting to read court transcripts and map things out and I get it. I see where you're at and I want to go there, so to speak” (brazendynamic).

The significance of community interaction as motivation for continued research would likely be overlooked while exploring this topic from a journalistic perspective, yet it is central to the functioning of the r/serialpodcast. The trope of the loner journalist chasing the big story at the expense of personal relationships is often seen in film and television, while for real life fans the community is the space “for talking about the text and engaging in a range of discursive practices beyond individual narrative” (Thomas 2006, 230). This engagement stems, at least in part, from “a desire for further interaction with a larger social and cultural community” (Jenkins 1992, 76). The unfailingly positive tone of comments shows affection for the community that stands apart from the nastiness of other Internet comments. By posing questions to one another, users encourage a continued dialogue, fulfilling Jenkins pronouncement that since “Fans thrive on debate... differences in opinion must be perpetuated so that the process of interpreting an otherwise completed narrative may be prolonged” (Jenkins 1992, 88). Where journalism demands resolution to a story, fandom demands its deferral.

2.4 Moving Between Fandoms

The centrality of community relationships to fandom means that “fandom does not presume an exclusive focus on an individual text” (Jenkins 1992, 91). Thomas shows us fan writers who draw on “a host of intertextual references from books, movies, and from their own personal identities” (2006, 233). The redditors in this case also drew on fictional works for inspiration, such as animalrage who came up with an idea for what kind of drugs were involved in the case “after watching Dexter.” Another likened the murder to “the Kubrick version of Little Red Riding Hood” (frimframsauce) while two others compared the inconsistency in Jay’s statements to a character from the film *The Usual Suspects*:

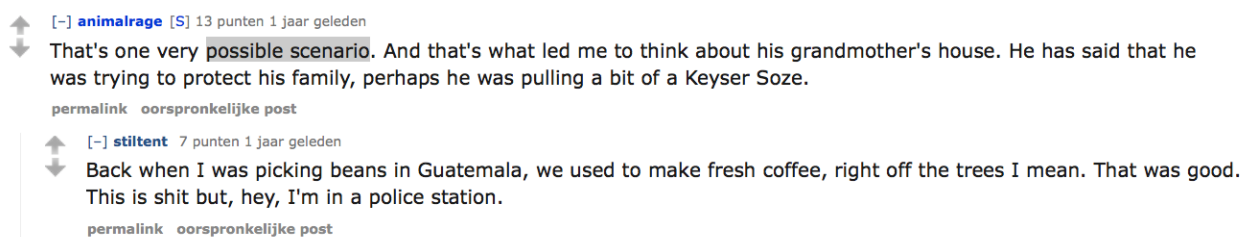


Figure 2: Comments from "Jay's Grandmother's House..." (animalrage 2015)2: Comments from "Jay's Grandmother's House..." (animalrage 2015)

While these comparisons may be used as a starting point for developing theories, the fictional nature of these works limits their applicability to this true crime story. By citing fictional stories as models for this investigation, the redditors suggest an interpretation of Serial as fiction. For them, Serial stands alongside crime movies and other entertainments. However, the tendency is not uniform, as other users cited non-fiction work as educational texts for their sleuthing, such as Steven D. Levitt and Stephen J. Dubner’s chapter on drug dealing from their book *Freakonomics* (animalrage) or the “episode about False Confession” from Serial’s sister podcast, *This American Life* (queenkellee).

A fan group, though seemingly defined by a shared interest, may itself come to influence the interests of the group members. Some online communities are characterized by an intertwining of different existing media universes as well as invented universes (Thomas 2006, 228), encouraging users to explore various narratives within the comforts of the fan space. For many, the relationship between community and media object is cyclical; fans join a community out of their passion for a media text while in turn devoting themselves to new media texts and paratexts in order to “participate fully” in the fan community (Jenkins 1992, 58). Outsiders may mistakenly assume that each fandom is built around a particular text, but most often fans direct their energies toward texts “with the potential of being accepted by sizeable numbers of other fans” (ibid, 91). With that understanding, r/serialpodcast is not only about solving the murder of Hae Min Lee (as it would for a professional journalist) but about providing a space for group members to interact. Were this case definitively resolved, would members migrate to another subreddit where they could continue to enjoy each other’s company in the pursuit of a new investigation?

2.5 Insertion of personal

Fanfiction⁵ has long been the vehicle for women and minorities to “record and/or publicize their opinions” and thus makes a point to include underrepresented groups or ideas (Derecho 2006, 67). Archontic literature has traditionally played a special role in giving voice to marginalized characters (ibid and McMichael 2005) and in allowing fans “to create new models in their art” that better reflect their lived experience (Bacon-Smith 2014, 147). Within this Reddit thread, we also see redditors drawing from their own lived experiences in order to make sense of the narrative:

And this is during Ramadan. He isn't getting full nights sleep for almost a month, fasting and binge eating everyday. The guy wouldn't be my #1 pick in a fight right now. I've seen Muslim friends faint during Ramadan... (neshmi)

I didn't weigh much in high school but I played soccer and grew up riding horses and was strong. So just saying "she was a small female" doesn't mean she wasn't strong and couldn't put up a fight. (cde2014)

According to Grossberg, a text's significance is directly tied to the background and circumstances of its audience, which allows them to “consume, interpret and use the text in specific ways” (Grossberg 1992, 54). Thomas's research into online fanfiction communities stresses the importance of connecting the fictional world to writers' lived experience; As one FF writer puts it, “[I see] the characters as I see my own world” (Thomas 2006, 232). On this subreddit, we find commenters connecting in a similar manner. One commenter recalls “memories of a roommate moving the refrigerator in front of the door in the middle of the night...” ([deleted]). Another identifies with Jay and Syed through his/her own past: “I knew guys just like this” (RatherNerdy).

⁵Such as “slash”, which focuses on homoerotic romance between otherwise straight characters (Jenkins 1992, 186).

While personal experience informs the work of any journalist, their focus is exterior. Fictional novels may be described as autobiographical when the writer's lived experience has a clear and traceable influence on the events in the text. Yet journalism attempts to maintain objectivity⁶ by keeping reporting focused on the event at hand and trying to prevent the journalist's biases and personal life from influencing the reporting. In the examples seen here, such strict divisions are not emphasized. Instead, we see a link to fan activity in that “much of that richness stems from what the reader brings to text, not what she finds there” (Jenkins 1992, 74) and readers turn to a text to see “a reflection of their own culture” (Bacon-Smith 2014, 153.)

2.6 Ever-Growing Archive

Each archontic work is a “repetition with a difference” which resonates with its predecessor, thus giving the new work “meaning and significance” (Derecho 2006, 74). The presence of these varied narratives dilutes the authoritative weight of the initial work and compound into an eternally unfixed composite. As fanfiction writers contribute their own variations on an initial text, the archive expands and the audience of the archive is forced “to admit that the text is never stable” (ibid, 76). These Reddit speculations follow the same pattern, with one timeline prompting the creation of another, each with its own particular variation and connection to the original. The comments show a particular awareness of the ‘instability’ around the story, saying things like “This is in preparation for another post coming soon I hope that will look a little deeper” and “while I keep telling myself we get closer and closer with each iteration, I know I'm just fooling myself...” (animalrage).

A journalist working on a story may create a personal archive of sorts, where s/he organizes possibilities for writing, areas to explore, people to interview, etc. That archive, however, is closed with the publication of the story and resolution of the case. Perhaps in the future, the same or another journalist will reopen that archive in order to reinvestigate, but in the meantime, the final draft of the story creates an appropriate moment for the archive to close. The Reddit archive has no such marker and thus fulfills the template Derrida proposed in *Archive Fever* by encouraging the production of ever more material, which “is why the archive is never closed” (1995, 45). One commenter cheerfully addresses the intrinsic conflict in creating an endless archive and trying to find a concrete answer as to who the murderer is: “Man, I am so done with all of this, lol. I can barely comprehend this story anymore. I feel like I understand what happened to Hae less than ever” (ernzo).

2.7 Collaboration and Support

Collaboration is an integral part of online fan-writing practices, where “reviewing each other’s individual work, recognising each other’s strengths and then using each other’s strengths has given [members] the opportunity to produce writing that truly excites them and motivates them to write further” (Thomas 2006, 231). Writers are encouraged to put out their work for beta

⁶□“fairness’, ‘professional distance’, ‘detachment’ or ‘impartiality’” (Deuze 2005, 448)

reading, where they “releas[e] a story to a selected (and trusted) fellow writer or other member of the fan fiction community before making it available to a general readership through a fiction archive, a newsgroup, or additional avenues” (Karpovich 2006, 172). The exact procedures vary by community, with many publishing their expectations on their website. Those expectations, like the rules of r/serialpodcast we will look at later, extend beyond mere practical guidelines to encouraging a friendly atmosphere, asking a beta reader to “[suggest] rather than [edit],” “[indicate] what she likes about the text,” and to be “tactful...but honest” and that both beta and author be “clear about [their] strengths and weaknesses” (ibid, 179).

Reddit posting, which allows the original poster (OP) to make edits to content after the initial submission, supports this type of feedback. As we saw in this post, the OP returned to make four significant edits to the original version. Some of this was directly taken from the comments section (with credit given, of course.) Another section was written after a commenter made a request, which, along with suggestions, pop up again and again:

So someone should do a post about that specifically. Hint hint. :) (animalrage)

There's a lot here that makes sense. I would also add... (Chezzy23)

Nobody would take that way to Campfield unless they had a reason. There is a much faster way (left on Dogwood) and is the way anybody from that area would take under normal circumstances (We_Need_Pitching).

Thanks for clarifying that. Google maps gave a different route, but local knowledge is always better. Thanks ([deleted]).

Efforts are openly made to be polite, grateful and to encourage further feedback. Both the OP and the commenters treat one another as though they have something to offer, yet make such requests from a personal, not professional, place. The sociality in this environment, while never mentioned in the journalism literature I have encountered, is a defining element of the redditors' interactions. It is hard to imagine a newspaper office putting so much emphasis on manners, yet here such an emphasis is evident and successful. Animalrage thanks a commenter for an “excellent question”. One insistent commenter apologizes for continuing to question the OP by saying “Sorry, I don't mean to linger” (aardvark27). One user even edits his/her initial comment to add “btw, really good post” (mostpeoplearedjs). A sense of cordiality and goodwill pervade the page, between commenters and each other, as well as between the commenters and animalrage, not unlike the way that much fanfiction “encourages feedback and advice from fellow fans about possible developments and resolutions” (Jenkins 1992, 161).

2.8 Creative engagement

For the activity of these redditors to be considered comparable to fanfiction, it requires a creative element. In Thomas's example of a fan fiction community, collaborative “construction of

fan fiction is clearly a playful manipulation” (2006, 232) while Jenkins points out that by actively creating content, “fans cease to be simply an audience for popular texts; instead, they become active participants in the construction and circulation of textual meanings” (1992, 23). Although the investigative activity on this subreddit involves active participation, it is not as distinctly creative as traditional fanfiction writing. Nevertheless, a close look finds these redditors using the information provided to them and filling in the gaps in imaginative ways:

Could Jay have been scared—terrified, even--of his family? That would definitely be understandable if someone other than Jay were running a drug operation out of his family's house. And that would be even more understandable if it were more than just a weed operation. (OP)

Speculation. Cops interrogate jay. Say “we know Adnan did it and you were with him. If you don't start talking we are going to search your home, etc.” This gets Jay talking but, none of it is true either he made it all up from nothing or did know something and recreated the story with Adnan instead of someone else. It seems he would have said anything just to keep the cops away from that house. (dcrunner81)

Of course, this is all wild speculation. (alisonstone)

Not only do these comments show us a creative contribution to the narrative, they show that the redditors are very much aware of the inventive nature of their ‘wild speculation’.

While speculation is part of any journalist's work, it is typically shared with the public only after it has been proven (and is, therefore, no longer speculation.) A strict adherence to truth, like objectivity, is central to a reporter maintaining her credibility (Deuze 2005, 449). Serial, in its particular manner of taking listeners alongside the investigation in real time, is not as discriminating in the substantiation of its suggestions. It seems appropriate, then, that its fan investigators feel comfortable with such creative engagement.

Citizen journalism on the other hand, because it is an open and communal process, necessarily disseminates unverified information. As a result, it can be a breeding ground for false narratives, like when Twitter spurred the circulation of rumors in the aftermath of the Boston Marathon Bombing (Reinwald 2014). Nonetheless, this public mixing of the provable with the merely possible remains at odds with traditional journalistic practice and seems more in line with the writing of fanfiction, where fans seek out ways “to intervene in the narrative, to reshape it according to their own plans” (Jenkins 1992, 74).

2.9 Imperfections of Original

Jenkins tells us that fans struggle with popular narratives because they “often fail to satisfy” (1992, 23). The shortcomings of these texts are part of what encourages “collective forms of creativity” (ibid, 54). There are signs that these redditors feel the need to rectify errors made by the

podcast: “Or, rather, it’s not where Jay’s house is marked on the Serial podcast map” (OP). Overall, however, their struggle is not with the podcast, but rather with the case itself, as it is composed of “shifting stories and [a] myriad of lies” (DaMENACE72). The ‘imperfections’ that allow their investigation to take place are not particular to Koenig’s work so much as to the mystery itself and the inherent difficulties of resolving a 16-year-old case with little physical evidence. Of special frustration to these redditors is the instability of Jay’s story:

That’s a maddening game and the moment you think you’ve got it figured out, he arranges an interview and moves the goalposts. (animalrage)

But that is the problem with Jay: you never know what to believe and what to call bullshit on. (animalrage)

Unlike some of the other topics I have discussed, this is not at odds with a journalist approach. All investigative journalism responds to questions previously unanswered. If Serial conclusively closed the case of Hae Min Lee’s murder, there would be little incentive to speculate on other possibilities. However, fan fiction does provide an interesting parallel. Citizen journalism is born of professional journalism that members of the public deem unsatisfactory (Bruns et al 2012, 4), just as imperfect fictional works allow fans “to try to articulate to themselves and others unrealized possibilities within the original works” (Jenkins 1992, 23).

2.10 Conflict with Structure

Just as traditional fan communities found themselves at odds with the media structure, so do these redditors harbor feelings of resentment. Yet in this case, their qualms are not with the makers and broadcasts of the Serial podcast, but with other parties, including the moderators who manage the subreddit.

What? How do we ‘know’ this? (chief_running_joke)

You have to infer so the OP doesn’t get banned. (whitenoise2323)

I know who you’re talking about. But are we really asking permission to post articles from newspapers now? (halvardo)

I don’t see why this needs to be run through the censors either. It is relevant, factual, and publicly accessible information (boomboxchina).

It’s hard though given the subreddit rules and the rules of common decency to talk about these things in a balanced manner (animalrage).

These users show clear frustration with the limitations placed on the discussion by the moderators and see the rules and the power structure as an obstacle preventing them from solving the case. Thomas shows us a similar example where two active members of a fan community start an ad-

junct community because their preferred writing style was unwelcome there and “they wanted more control over the community” (2006, 228).

Arguably, this spirit is present in any undertaking of citizen journalism: professionals with resources fail to get the job done, while amateurs must overcome greater obstacles to do it themselves (Bruns et al 2012, 4). This issue is echoed in fandom, where goals are also frustrated by broadcast media, by virtue of the fact that it “resists popular colonization,” leaving the power in the hands of a few at the top of the pyramid while the fans at the bottom have little ability to affect production (Jenkins 1992, 154). And while we do not see redditors here addressing frustrations with the news system or professional investigative journalism, they do use this space to speculate, criticize, debate, propose and negotiate their relationship with a media structure, just as fans do (ibid 86).

3. Formal Structures

3.1 Subreddit Rules

Throughout the r/serialpodcast reddit, a sidebar is visible that contains the site description, “Helpful Threads”, other links and a set of “Important Subreddit rules” (r/serialpodcast 2015). These rules detail technical requirements, social norms, punishments for infractions and directions on where to direct any “question, suggestion, or concern” (ibid).

Of these different items, the clear majority are guidelines on how to conduct oneself politely within the subreddit, items which seem more about manners than content. Before even addressing the practical information, such as how long a user must wait after opening an account to participate, the rules begin with the entreaty to “be civil” (r/serialpodcast 2015). Other appeals for politeness include bans on “profanity, offensive language...fighting [and] petty arguments” (ibid). This behavioral focus clarifies the subreddit's understanding of itself as a social community as much as a place to share information. As Fiske points out, “many fans report that their choice of their object of fandom was determined at least as much by the oral community they wished to join as by any of its inherent characteristics” (1992, 38). Delineating the social expectations makes it clear to subreddit visitors that this online community has behavioral expectations that, as we saw in 2.7, make much more sense from a fan studies perspective than from a journalistic one.

The ruleset on r/serialpodcast, which bans “doxxing...trolling...harassment [and] insults” (r/serialpodcast 2015) as well as “advertising or blogspam” shows an effort to elevate this page above the coarseness of the less friendly parts of the Internet⁷ (r/serialpodcast 2015). Acknowledging that the easy access to and anonymity of the subreddit facilitate behavior that would not be appreciated by the group, the moderators have made an attempt to steer the redditors toward creating a more amiable environment. As put by one fan in Jenkin's research, “We [fans] are still around because *we enjoy each other's company*...while we [fans] still enjoy the series and movies, we enjoy sharing our enthusiasm with others even more” (Jenkins 1992, 75). This formal emphasis on positivity between users, a quality not emphasized in journalism, makes sense when one considers the interdependency of members of online fan communities. As one fan fiction writer put it, “we're able to contribute so much more than we could alone” (Thomas 2006, 230).

Another aim of the rules is to focus the group toward an intelligent and thoughtful exploration of the podcast and the murder, enabling the group as a whole to perhaps reach conclusions beyond those offered by Koenig. In order to facilitate a productive discussion, redditors are called on to “critique the argument, not the user” and discouraged from posting “off-topic material” or being “misleading” (r/serialpodcast 2015). These rules push the group toward academic inquiry and urge members stay focused, conforming to the definition of fandom as “an institution of theory and criticism...where competing interpretations and evaluations of common texts are proposed debated and negotiated (Jenkins 1992, 86), a definition compatible with the

⁷e.g. YouTube comments.

journalistic aim of remaining “impartial, neutral, objective, fair and (thus) credible” (Deuze 2005, 447).

While the ruleset includes a number of small errors that betray the group's amateur status, such as redundancies and a seemingly random order, it conveys a clear attempt to be taken seriously. Members are made aware that they can be expelled for breaking the rules: “Offenders against subreddit rules may be banned and may be banned without warning” (r/serialpodcast 2015). Limiting voting to subscribers and restrictions on how soon new users may participate allow users to self-identify as separate from non-members and “to speak from a position of collective identity, to forge an alliance with a community of others in defence of tastes which, as a result, cannot be read as totally aberrant or idiosyncratic” (Jenkins 1992, 23). The establishment of norms identifies the community as such, facilitating “cultural identity construction” (Hellekson and Busse 2014, 9) around this media object and social group. Members are not just investigators, they are part of welcoming but not indulgent community. Despite it not having a place in our definitions of journalism or citizen journalism, these subredditors can be understood to construct their identities as much through their roles within this community as through their investigation. Attempting to formalize those roles, however, creates its own complications, as we shall see in the next section.

3.2 Flair

On November 21, 2014, moderator Jakeprops posted the following message to r/serialpodcast:

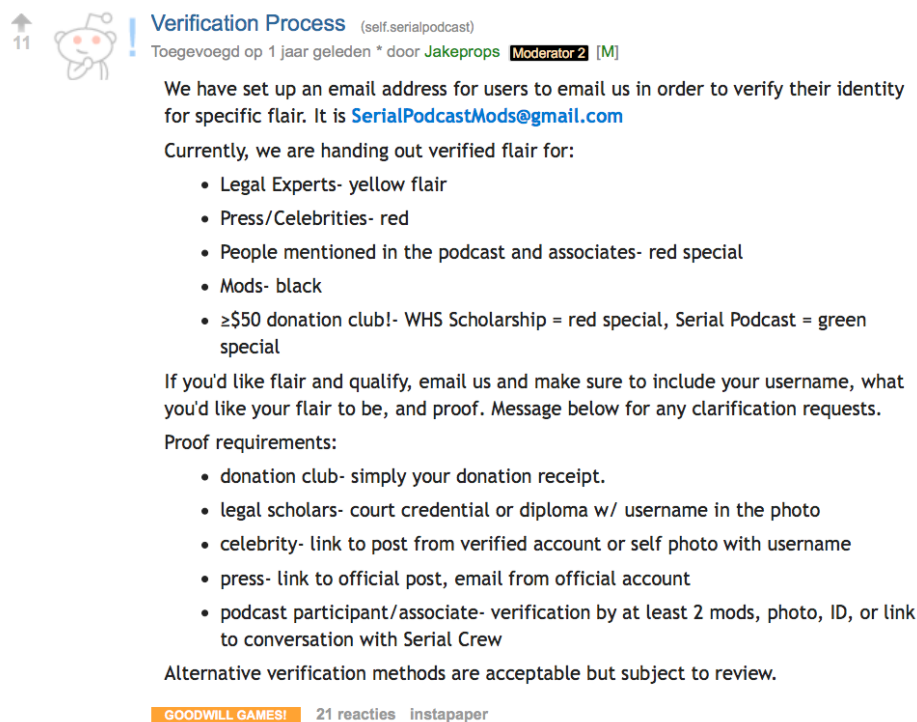


Figure 3: Verification Process (Jakeprops 2014)

One commenter responded “So you have to verify that we're lawyers? Why? Isn't that kind of stupid for this subreddit? It's not like we're giving legal advice or anything” (Jakeprops 2014). While in so many societal sectors, proof of qualifications is the norm, at least this Reddit user took

issue with the practice, seeing it as excessive. A moderator responded by saying “You don't have to. However people speaking from a position of experience sometimes wish to prove their authenticity, and users have asked us to vet them” (Jakeprops 2014).

Why would this commenter take issue with the practice of proving legal authority on a subreddit where legal knowledge is relevant? Seeing the subreddit as a fan community makes it easier to understand. Fiske's research shows fandom holds a particular allure for those who lack “cultural capital” and the “social prestige and self-esteem” that go with it, although it is not strictly limited to the “socially and culturally deprived” (1992, 33). In fandom, societal members “who are subordinated (by gender, age or class)” may find a way to achieve status and respect unavailable in “official culture” (ibid, 36).

A close look at this post shows the presence of many values congruent with the fan community. The significance of social recognition is central to the idea of flair, a label that appears next to one's username within a subreddit. (In Figure 3, Jakeprops' flair, “Moderator 2” appears in black and orange next to his username.) His flair establishes his position as a moderator, which means he has management authority and responsibility within the subreddit.⁸ The “Legal Expert” flair lets other users know of one's legal training. Meanwhile, the “Press/Celebrities”, “People mentioned in the podcast and associates” and “Donation Club” flairs offer social cachet that does not necessarily correspond to knowledge, ability or position. They offer members a more visible form of the renown that is so significant in fan communities.

The donation flair is particularly interesting because it gives someone who lacks any certifiable skill or connection to the case the ability to show their dedication by financially contributing to the podcast or to a charity established in Hae Min Lee's memory (CharitySmith 2015). This fits squarely alongside fan ideals of contributing to the group as its own reward. Jenkins wrote about how, in 1990s video exchange circles, fans would know the story of their video tape's origin and the different members whose work and generosity allowed them to possess a copy of a valuable tape (1992, 71). As members of the community make apparently altruistic contributions to the cause, be they taped television shows or donations to charity, they are rewarded with renown and admiration. The donation flair is a way of formalizing this fan practice and draws attention to the importance within the subreddit community of social acknowledgment for contributions for which one will not be otherwise compensated.

There are practical reasons for acquiring some flair, as in the case of the “People mentioned in the podcast and associates” flair. As one redditor commented, “Personally I find the comments and reactions from people involved in the case (or at least, mentioned in the podcast) to be the most interesting” (Jakeprops 2014). Furthermore, in October of 2014, Adnan Syed's friend Saad went onto r/serialpodcast to answer questions (Chaudry 2014). The value of his insights is directly

⁸I have chosen not to further address the role of the moderator here as the formal duties required of moderators are quite different from other members. Properly attending to this position would require going far beyond the confines of this subreddit (and the scope of this thesis.) For more on moderators, see Sheila Saden Pisa's “In Search of a Practice: Large-Scale Moderation in a Massive Online Community” (2003) and Scott Wright and John Street's “Democracy, Deliberation and Design: The Case of Online Discussion Forums” (2007).

related to the particularity of his relationship to Syed. For the Reddit Q&A to be useful, the subreddit users needed to be confident that they were talking to the real Saad mentioned in the podcast and not an imposter. Per usual, the requirements for “People mentioned...” are not particularly stringent: “verification by at least 2 mods, photo, ID or link to conversation with Serial Crew” (Jakeprops 2014). The subreddit moderators want redditors to feel confident in the identities of personalities from the podcast, yet maintain laxer standards than a journalist might require. In that way, they attempt to balance the concerns of both the amateur enthusiasts and the more rigid professionals.

This tenuous negotiation lies at the heart of the flair system, one which defies fan principles by giving those with status in 'official culture' a way to affirm and promulgate that status within the 'unofficial' institution of r/serialpodcast, thus problematizing an understanding of “the realm of popular culture [as a place where] fans are the true experts [who] constitute a competing educational elite, albeit one without official recognition or social power” (Jenkins 1992, 86). Asking lawyers for proof of a “court credential or diploma” (Jakeprops 2014) or members of the press for a “link to official post [or] e-mail from official account” (ibid) opposes the concept of the self-taught redditor who rejects the need for “educational qualifications” (Fiske 1992, 34).

There is a clear struggle between the inclusive nature of fandom and the yearning for credibility that official credentials provides. Fandom demands that one be judged by the merit of their work alone, yet official certification provides an effective alternative to building a reputation. Auto-didacts might scoff at the arrogance of journalists and lawyers who think that their credentials prove an otherwise unattainable expertise, while those with credentials might harbor suspicion towards those who claim to be self-educated specialists. This conflict, though more clearly present in this case study, is not wholly unknown to fandom where “textual discrimination and social distinction are part of the same cultural process within and between fans just as much as between fans and other popular audiences” (Fiske 1992, 37).

More importantly, however, this conflict embodies the split aims of this kind of community: to solve the case but also to provide a space for its members to enjoy one another’s company. The flair system introduces an element of hierarchy to an otherwise merit-based environment by allowing certain members to acquire special labels that mark their position, education, celebrity, altruism or connection to the podcast. These markers necessarily influence how their comments are perceived and how much attention they are given, challenging the notion that fan communities are “unimpressed by institutional authority and expertise [and assert] their own right to form interpretations, to offer evaluations, and to construct cultural canons” (Jenkins 1992, 18).

Yet at the same time, they seem appropriate when considered as an alternative to a journalistic system. While a journalist's lengthy resume could ensure higher pay or a position at a prestigious institution, such rewards are not part of r/serialpodcast's structure. By formally acknowledging one's credentials, contributions, position or experience, the subreddit creates an incentive for contributions as well as the participation of the formally educated, but through compensation congruent to fandom: prestige within the community.

4. Conclusion and Discussion

Looking closely at r/serialpodcast from the basis of fan studies allows certain insights that have application for understanding citizen journalism as a whole. Most of all, the workings of this community cannot be reduced to 'journalism performed by non-professionals.' This subreddit is a space where users are expected to support one another, to be respectful and to value the particular strengths of individuals. Social rules are as important as (if not more so than) journalistic ones. More in line with a popular understanding of citizen journalism, users contribute by engaging with the content in a collaborative way. However, their motivations for such actions are better understood within the framework of the fanfiction community, where prestige (within the group) is the reward for one's efforts.

Other motivations for these redditors' participation may include the ability to creatively make sense of the exterior world through the lens of their own lives. This type of approach is not easily reconcilable with the objectivity demanded by journalism. It is, however, quite normal in the field of fanfiction. Also typical to fanfiction is a frustration with the media power structure which keeps the fans with little influence over content. This parallel with citizen journalism is easier to draw, as state-controlled media (Khamis and Vaugh 2011) creates an obvious incentive for a media rebellion. By taking on the journalist's role, citizen journalists of all stripes, even those in countries with an open media system, are critically engaging with media structures by "assert[ing] their own right to form interpretations, to offer evaluations, and to construct cultural canons" (Jenkins 1992, 18).

Despite offering those insights, this case study has qualities that problematize attempts to consider it representative of citizen journalism at large. The style of the Serial podcast is unusual for journalism and, in the eyes of many, encourages it to be consumed as entertainment instead of news. As indicated by the title of the community, r/serialpodcast, the Reddit group is as linked to one particular news source, the Serial podcast, as they are to the Hae Min Lee case itself.

The case also identifies tensions between an investigatory community that looks outside itself to solve a real-life crime and fan values. The subreddit appears to have two perhaps incompatible goals: one, to investigate a crime and court case and two, to provide a welcoming social space. The flair system can be seen as one attempt to bridge these two points of view, those who see official titles, such as a law degree, as useful tools for identifying expertise and those who, like fan communities, prefer to let individuals abilities speak for themselves. This contrast stems from a deeper difference: while these citizen journalists ostensibly contribute toward the concrete goal of discovering who killed Hae Min Lee, the work of fan writers is either an end unto itself or has the greater purpose of expanding the never-ending archive. While both groups benefit in similar ways from the community built around these activities, the activities themselves are discrete in their stated aims.

The difference between those aims, however, becomes an important focus in thinking about citizen journalism from this standpoint. How many of the Redditors on r/serialpodcast truly want the case to be solved, thus removing this community and pastime from their life? Do they not stand to lose more than they gain? Just as the motivations of journalists and press publications are scru-

tinized for political or corporate bias, one should be equally skeptical of citizens performing that role.

Though the redditors themselves clearly see their work as being of the highest quality, how it compares to that of Koenig or other journalists remains an open question. One external article from EJ Dickson at the Daily Dot, however, validates the efforts of these redditors:

But for us hardcore Serial fans, who've spent hours blearily scrolling through r/serialpodcast and listening to podcasts about the podcast and getting into GChat arguments with work colleagues about the Innocence Project lady, the Serial finale was hugely disappointing. Not because it failed to reach any resolution about the case, as many fans featured, because even worse, it was just boring. Thanks to Reddit, it was all old news (2014).

This sentiment suggests a fascinating contrast to that of fanfiction. Instead of this Reddit Serial follower becoming even more invested in the podcast as a result of participation in a fan community, third party content wound up *replacing* the podcast. Because Koenig's work is based on a real life case, she does not have a particular claim on it. If, like Dickson, Serial fans are more interested in the crime than in the reporting, then they have no reason to stay with Serial once introduced to the citizen journal community. This dilemma gets to the heart of the ambiguous nature of this fanfiction/citizen journalism. If you are on Reddit as a citizen journalist, then the Serial podcast is one source of many that you use in your investigation and you leave it behind in time. If you are there as a fan, then your fan activity only deepens your relationship to the podcast and you will be back next season for whatever case Koenig investigates.

The field of citizen journalism will continue to grow as technological shifts make it easier for the average person to participate. Understanding these changes will require looking beyond traditional concepts of journalism and into participatory culture as a whole. Further research should take a closer look at the role of moderators in a citizen journalism environment and should explore how the concepts I have discussed can be applied to other case studies. I found that my own participant observation was limited by its strictly observational approach. Expanding the methods to include personal interviews would allow a better understanding of the social and communal significance of citizen journalism to those who engage in it. Engaging with these questions more deeply and in different ways will allow researchers to see more clearly how this particular practice fits into emergent participatory culture.

5. Works Cited

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