HG2052 Language and Technology

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Assignment 1: Analysis of a medium of communication

Archive Of Our Own: An analysis of its effects on communication

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<u>**Introduction**</u>

According to Mirmohamadi (2014), 'fanfiction' is defined as an unauthorised adaption and re-writing of media texts by fans. Abigail Derecho claims that the first incarnations of 'fanfictions' occurred in "Jane Austen" and "Sherlock Holmes" societies in the 1920s, as well as "Star Trek" fanzines, otherwise known as self-published magazines by fans, in the late 1960s (Hellekson & Busse, 2006). Over the years, however, it has migrated towards digital platforms such as fanfiction hosting sites, thus making it more accessible to fans all over the world.

Due to its controversial nature of toeing the grey line between copyright infringement, there have many debates over the years about the legality of fanfiction. However, these debates remain largely speculative due to a lack of reported cases (Stendell, 2005).

Established by fans for fans in 2007, the Organization for Transformative Works (OTW) is the non-profit organisation behind Archive Of Our Own (AO3). As stated in its name, AO3 is an archive for fanfictions that aims to help protect fanfiction writers by arguing the case of 'fair use' for derivative fan-generated content. It justifies that fanfiction hosted on AO3 is non-commercial and largely transformative by adding new meaning or messages to the original copyrighted content (Works, 2009).

Starting out as a suggested initiative in a post by a fanfiction writer Astolat on LiveJournal ("An Archive Of One's Own", 2007), the idea quickly gained traction as it addressed major issues faced by fanfiction writers on other major fanfiction-hosting sites (Silver, 2015). Some of these issues included the censorship of fanfiction with mature themes, the inaccessibility of finding new fan writers and the idea that one of the existing archives was more preoccupied with earning advertising money through page views of fan

generated content. This idea further took shape and eventually became a reality through the creation of the OTW as a reaction to the widespread deletion of fanfiction content on one popular fanfiction-hosting site (Silver, 2015). In line with the ideas proposed by Astolat, AO3 does not allow third parties to buy advertisement spots on its pages. Instead, it sustains itself through donations from dedicated fans around the world.

To this day, AO3 has spawned much popularity between fans of different fandoms, ranging from Japanese animation and books to real life public figures. Additionally, it reached a milestone of 2 million registered users and 5 million fan works as of July 2019 ("July 2019 Newsletter, Volume 137 – Organization for Transformative Works", 2019). This shows the massive outreach AO3 has in fan communities.
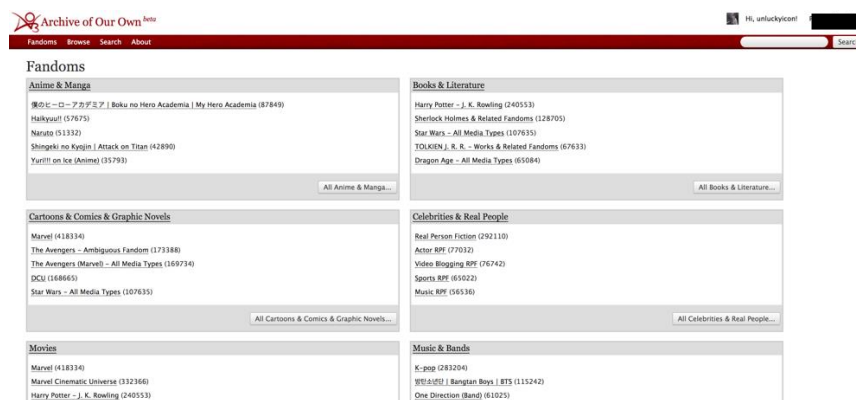
Archive Of Our Own supports a wide range of fandoms.

In this text, I aim to explore how AO3 encourages and affects communication between fans.

Relevant Literature

A study on fanfiction defined it as a collective authorship where fans gather in fan communities to create a joint-piece of fan-generated work together (Reißmann, Stock, Kaiser, Isenberg & Nieland, 2017). It found that many of these fans often involved others such as friends or acquaintances in the creation of their work at the revision stage, otherwise referred to as 'beta-reading'. This occurred usually through email or on social media networking sites. It helped to facilitate communication between fans before the publication of the fanfiction (Reißmann et al., 2017).

Additionally, the study found that post-publication on fanfiction hosting sites, the creators of these fanfictions typically received feedback from other fans through comments. This sometimes inspired, influenced or motivated the creators for future chapters and projects (Reißmann et al., 2017). Hence, this shows how fanfiction allows communication between fan communities to occur. Since AO3 acts as a fanfiction hosting site where comments are allowed, it provides a platform for similar feedback and communication to be given to fanfiction creators.

Another study on the analysis of interactions between fanfiction writers and its reviewers was conducted by Alecia Marie Magnifico, Jen Scott Curwood and Jayne C. Lammers (2015). They explored the types of reviews that were left by readers on online fanfiction spaces. Their studies found that most of the reviews usually talked about the content of the story, the reader's experience while reading the fanfiction as well as the feelings invoked by the author. In contrast, it was considered rare for readers to leave constructive criticism to help authors improve on their writing. In addition, readers that left constructive criticism were often found attempting to establish their right to comment on the story through painting themselves as a fellow avid fan of the original series or as a fellow fanfiction writer (Magnifico et al., 2015). This shows how fans choose to interact with each other on fanfiction hosting sites, especially when leaving reviews on a work created by another member of the same fan community.

<u>Discussion</u>

<u>1. Properties of AO3</u>

Serving its function as a fanfiction hosting site, users can upload fan-generated content in multiple media formats such as text, images or even hyperlinks to audio files in their fan work. This flexibility in AO3's content uploading system allows for several possibilities to be explored when fans wish to communicate their intended message. Some content creators have even taken the liberty to present their fanfiction as podcasts rather than written text. Writers are also able to leave an 'Author's Note' before and after their written texts in order to communicate outside of the story. Sometimes, this may include short explanations of why these fan writers chose to create the piece of fan work.

An example of a multimedia-formatted fanfiction.

Additionally, there is a simple system of other users being able to provide feedback to the fan work creator through a 'Kudos' button and a comment box. According to the fanfiction writer's discretion, there does not have to be any limits on the requirement to register for an account when leaving a 'Kudos' or a comment. This increases accessibility for other fans to casually reach out and communicate with their fellow fans, even if they are not registered as AO3 users.

The feedback system on AO3 allows fanfiction writers to know who has left a 'Kudos' on their works.

Further interactivity with the content posted is encouraged by allowing registered AO3 user readers to bookmark fanfictions. These bookmarks may either be set on 'private' or public. The former action allows these readers to save the story for future re-readings. The latter allows these readers to recommend the bookmarked fanfiction to other fans who visit the reader's AO3 profile. Additionally, these fans can leave comments or even notes about the work that they are bookmarking, thus sharing with the creator and other fans how they feel about the work and the reason that they are recommending it to other fans.

Moreover, readers can subscribe to either the writer or the fan work itself. Subsequently, an automated newsletter is then sent to the user's registered email address

either when the content creator uploads any new content or the subscribed fanfiction receives an update. Thus, members of the same fan communities are able to keep to date with what is happening in their fandoms on AO3.

Despite having a large audience of English-speaking readers and writers, the site also offers hosting for fanfiction in other languages such as Chinese, Russian and Spanish. Users can filter for fanfiction posted in other languages if they are more comfortable reading fanfiction in another language. Hence, this widens the reach that AO3 provides to fans all over the world, regardless of the languages that they speak or comprehend.

2. Comparison of AO3 to Speech and Text Features

According to David Crystal's book 'Language and the Internet', Crystal states that there are primarily seven features of speech and text (Crystal, 2006). The table below indicates these features.

Speech-like	Text-like
time bound	**space bound**
spontaneous	**contrived**
face-to-face	**visually decontextualised**
loosely structured	**elaborately structured**
socially interactive	**factually communicative***
immediately revisable	**repeatedly revisable**
prosodically rich	**graphically rich**

Table depicting Crystal's seven speech-like and text-like features (Crystal, 2006). Words in bold are traits applicable to AO3.

Text is heavily involved at both the publication of fanfiction and feedback stage, thus making AO3 leans towards being more space bound. Communication from fanfiction writers to readers at the point of publication is one-way. There does not need to be any known addressees in the communication. In fact, fanfiction writers typically do not know the singular identities of their readers beyond their shared collective identity as fans of the same fandom. Despite being space-bound, AO3 is not known to have a word limit for its fanfictions. Sometimes, this leads to novel-length fanfictions being published. The same

cannot be said for its comment box, which supports up to a generous limit of 10,000 characters.

Most fanfictions undergo planning. It may have taken weeks and months for the author to write the fanfiction before the actual publication on AO3. Additionally, AO3 fanfictions can be read multiple times and be subject to analysis by its reader based on its content, style of writing or language use. Hence, they are permanent unless subjected to edits or deletion by the writer. In cases where new comments or fanfictions are uploaded, manual refreshing of webpages is required due to the lag and processing time needed to upload the new attempt at communication onto the website. Thus, AO3 is more contrived when compared to the spontaneity of speech.

On AO3, face-to-face interaction cannot occur. Most information is disseminated either via text or the occasional multimedia formats such as images. In addition, readers are encouraged to imagine how a character might feel based on the delivery style and language used. Similarly, when reading comments from readers, the fanfiction writers tend to have to infer the readers' reactions to their piece of work through messages expressing gratitude, joy or anticipation for what will happen next. Hence, it tends to be visually decontextualized.

AO3 can be both loosely or elaborately structured. Fanfictions tend to follow a structure but based on the writing style employed by the writer, it could range from more elaborately structured text formats like prose, poem to more loosely structured text formats imitating a (text) conversation. Slangs may even be used in the writing if needed to establish certain characteristics of a character or cultural context of certain universe settings of the fanfiction. At the review stage, readers tend to leave comments in a more informal style of writing with loose structure, utilising internet lingo, punctuation, emoticons or capitalisation.
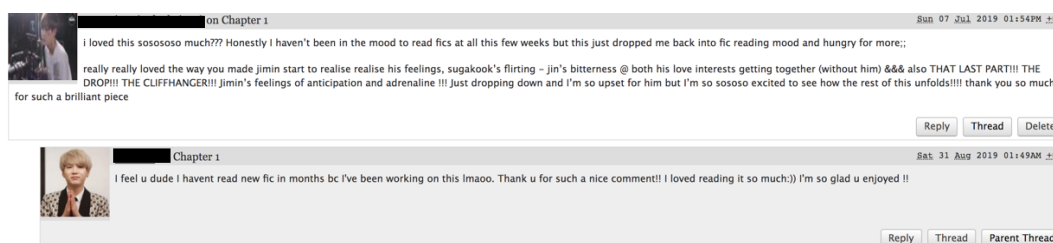
A reader expressing their gratitude for the fanfiction they've read with a gratuitous use of punctuations.

While stories on AO3 can be somewhat factually communicative by referencing certain plot points or including characters of the original source that the fan work derived from, fanfiction often takes a large amount of creative liberties based on the message that fanfiction writers wish to portray. Instead, AO3 encourages more social interactivity than factual communication through the use of Author's Notes, allowing authors to reach out to their readers and the comment box which readers can leave feedback for authors to reply to. It facilitates conversations about how fans feel about the original source of work, how they have made changes in order to transform the original work into their ideal and how other fans works react to these changes.

Since AO3 allows editing, it is revisable. However, editing requires one to load to a new webpage via the click of a button unlike speech where one can correct themselves immediately. While the fanfictions themselves can be edited repeatedly even after readers have read through the original draft, the feedback left by readers are only repeatedly revisable for a limited window of time. The editing function of a comment gets locked upon receiving a reply on the same comment thread. Hence, the limitations in the repetition of revisions differ between fanfiction and comments on AO3.

While most fanfictions on AO3 do not include audio except in the case of podcast fanfictions, one may argue for AO3 being prosodically rich as its content is mostly presented as proses or poetry. Hence, fanfiction writers may play around with the delivery of words, rhythm and pacing in a story. Similarly, details are often included in the proses and graphics such as gifs and images can be embedded. Hence, it is a safe argument to say that AO3 is graphically rich in terms of its fanfiction aspect. Unfortunately, the comment section does not support the use of multimedia files or emojis. Hence, users are limited to expressing themselves through emoticon symbols and text.

<u>Conclusion</u>

Through being able to legally take creative liberties of a copyrighted media material, AO3 has created a reliable platform that allows fan creators to share their thoughts on the original source of work with other fans. In addition, it allows them to create and invite conversations with these fans in the same community, regardless of which parts of the world the fans are living in. Hence, this creates a more tightly-knit community for these fans to indulge in their hobbies and to interact with each other.

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