Those Crazy Fangirls on the Internet: Activism of Care, Disability and Fan Fiction

Dean Barnes Leetal

Abstract: This article explores Activism of Care, a form of activism offering strategies, implementation of skills and accessibility different from those offered by traditional activism. Activism of Care suggests that activist strategies are not universal, but instead should be tailored for specific communities' structures, skills and intersectional positionings. This paper focuses on the implementation of Activism of Care by and for neurodivergent participants in fan fiction communities on Tumblr. It demonstrates ways Activism of Care is implemented to promote destigmatization of mental illnesses, and to celebrate participants with depression, anxiety or PTSD. This article describes how Activism of Care implements elements of Care Ethics in fan fiction communities to promote social change. Emotional, literary and social structures of these communities are used to promote the rights, well-being and pleasure of neurodivergent participants. Finally, this paper provides characteristics by which to recognize or create this type of activism, alongside or as an alternative for traditional activism.

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[Partial content warning list: ableist language, ableism, misogyny, mentions of other forms of

bigotry, sexual assault, torture, self-harm, abuse, negative self-image]

"here's to the kids that use fictional characters as a way of coping. Here's to the kids that stay up trying to their favorite characters. Here's to the kids that imagine their favorite character by their side when they're experiencing bad anxiety in public. Here's to the kids that need works of fiction to keep on surviving."[1]
 - - Arodaryldixon

A few years ago, I went through a rough time. I was experiencing new symptoms and

starting to realize how widespread and deep ableism was around me. A lot of people I had trusted

and loved were no longer in my life. Including a lot of my progressive feminist friends and a lot

of people who had been my family.

Around that time, an author I love wrote a story for me, personally. She wrote it about

characters I loved, going through things similar to those I was. She also wrote and reposted

similar stories, written for various people. I stuck around and read, and it shifted my worldview.

I remember one story, about a person with depression. Before reading it, I wasn't really

familiar with ideas about depression that weren't filled with hate. In the world I knew, a person

with depression had to keep it quiet, or they'd lose their career, have no friends, and be a burden

on their family. They'd be hated and miserable, full stop.

This author's story seemed to exist in a very different world. It was a kind little story,

about a day the protagonist was having a hard time getting up. Their friend swung by with a cup

of coffee, and they went together. For me it was mind-blowing. No one berated anybody, or

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[1] The following discussion on Tumblr asserted that it was not only kids, but people of various ages who relied on this.

made needling remarks. No one was suspicious or disdainful. Their friend loved them and enjoyed spending time with them. None of this was put into question for one moment. It was obvious for the friend, that the protagonist was wonderful and important. And it was clear that the author agreed.

I realized that it was obvious for me as well. I'd known and deeply loved the protagonist, Sam, from fandom. Suddenly I realized it was very easy for me to understand the friend's approach. Like many participants in the field, I'd spent years reading, writing and getting to know Sam, probably better than some of the paid creators. Had someone suggested Sam was any less wonderful because of something like depression, I would have been shocked and furious. Had Sam lived in my world, I'd bring them coffee. I'd check on them when they were having a bad day. It wouldn't be some amazing sacrifice, I'd be happy to hang out with my friend.

And I realized that this was possible. This wasn't a faraway, fictional, overly optimistic cutesy world. It was a real-life option. Such friendships were possible. Perhaps feeling otherwise wasn't some essential truth about disability or about me. Perhaps it was not the whole entire world that would find me worthless, that would treat me badly – perhaps it was just the people who were in my life.

The authors in the story opening this paper were performing a type of activism. Their work changed the social perceptions and behavior or their readership – and I can attest that at least in my case, this shift was deeply meaningful and effective. Yet this form of activism gets very little recognition and respect.

This paper explores this type of activism, naming it Activism of Care, and ways it is used in fan fiction communities for disability activism. This form of activism utilizes elements from

Care Ethics, as well at the idea that activist strategies don't have to be universal. It shows how fan fiction communities use and reinvent social and literary structures common to them to promote activist causes. This form of activism is effective and accessible in ways traditional activism is not, yet Activism of Care is often disregarded as a strategy, or left unrecognized when used. This may be because it is based on skills and values linked with socially disempowered groups such as women and neurodivergent participants. This paper suggests further implementing it and recognizing it. Activism of Care demonstrates some implementations of it in fan fiction communities, where it is used, for example, to destigmatize mental illness and celebrate neurodivergent participants.

Why Bother with Activism of Care?

Fan fiction (fic) are literary and other works borrowing characters from existing texts. Participants in fan fiction communities are characterized by various studies as nearly always belonging to socially disempowered groups. A lot of early research characterized participants as heterosexual women (Kustritz, 2003), with an implication of whiteness (Pande & Moitra, 2017) and cisgenderism (Leetal, 2018). Newer research works to re-establish the participation of erased groups within this structure, such as people of non-binary genders, and a majority of participants who have a sexual or romantic non/attraction disempowered identities (Centrumlumina, 2013). While there is still erasure and racism in the communities, people of color are important participants of them (Chander & Sunder, 2007; Pande & Moitra, 2017)

It also seems many participants are also disabled, as indirectly implied by previous research. Bacon-Smith describes dealing with pain, as essential and at the core of fan fiction

communities. She mentions participants with physical disabilities, as well as those experiencing what she describes as psychological suffering, apparently alluding to neurodivergent fans. She mentions oppression, abuse and rape, as well as the fear of them, as common causes of this suffering, seemingly describing unnamed PTSD. Discussing stories where characters suffered severely, she explained that "Stories about suffering mask real suffering" (Bacon-Smith, 1992), and that the lives of her informants were so filled with pain it was often transparent for them, while "[i]n fact, psychological pain pervades all the genres, if not all stories". However, she explained, "Pain is present, recognized, shared, but art is also present, and art is joyful. Fans learn to laugh with their friends, to stave off the fearful darkness with potato chips and chocolate ice cream" (Bacon-Smith, 1992).

People of these disempowered groups regularly experience varied and severe forms of oppression. At the same time, activism often leaves out the very people belonging to these oppressed groups. Activist groups often disregard the goals and needs of neurodivergent people, and many traditional forms of activism are not accessible. For example, an ongoing online debate, points out that most demonstrations or marches require participants to deal with crowds, pushing, yelling, and the being observed. Demonstrations can involve potential violence both from outside and from within the community, be it facing outside opposers or past assailants from within the community. Many images and materials displayed in them, are strategically intended to cause viewers mental and emotional distress. Some include being exposed to ableist, bigoted or triggering materials from both opponents and allies, and being told to comply "for the cause."

For many neurodivergent participants, this makes activism unnecessarily hard, or even impossible to participate in. This conveys the message that neurodivergent activists' participation

is not valued. It means that a lot of activist practices also end up promoting ableism, alongside their goals.

This isn't to say demonstrations should no longer be held. But organizers should consider working to make them more accessible. There is also room to reexamine the assumption that they are appropriate and effective activism for every situation and goal.

This paper suggests a different form of activism, that is more accessible for some. This activism implements different skills, meets different needs and has different qualities than traditional activism. Activism of Care often achieves different goals, that traditional activism is not likely to be able to. It is effective in different ways. As such, it is a useful additional or alternative tool.

Activism of Care

One definition for Activism of Care can be activism that takes the social structure into account, including the activist's positioning, and implements elements of Care Ethics. In disability activism it implements the social model[2] (Oliver, 2013) recognizing the oppressive social structure where it takes place. It highlights the idea that activism is not universal, and effective forms of activism can and should be chosen based on the needs, skills and social makeup of particular communities [3]

Activism of Care also implements elements of Care Ethics.

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[2] This differentiates it from charity.
[3] It is important to stress these practices were not all invented in fan fiction communities. Activism of Care in fan fiction communities implements ideas from movements such as Black Feminism, Cultural Feminism and of course Disability Studies.

Gilligan presents a model of ethics based not on emotional distance and supposed objectivity, but on care, emotional connection and subjective, specific situation's intricacies. She mapped a few characteristics that she found society[4] taught women to perform, such as a sense of personal responsibility to promote justice, as opposed to responsibility only to refrain from harm. Society focuses on the specific case rather than applying universalized concepts to everything; valuing care, empathy, communication and emotions. "[S]ensitivity to the needs of others and the assumption of responsibility for taking care lead women to attend to voices other than their own and to include in their judgement other points of view." (1993). In a later text she elaborated, "Caring requires paying attention, seeing, listening, responding with respect. Its logic is contextual, psychological. Care is a relational ethic, grounded in a premise of interdependence. But it is not selfless" (2013).

Gilligan believes this attitude and practice is deeply important and undervalued, and calls for recognition of them and those who practice them.

Kittay (2011) implements this model in conceptualizing a possible form of care for disabled people. It envisions care as given respectfully and with emotion, not based on a system of reciprocation in kind, but on a more humble, caring perception in which care is part of life. She suggests that it is better to promote relationships of giving and receiving care, that are based on "affective bonds that can transform otherwise unpleasant intimate tasks into times of trust and demonstrations of trustworthiness, gratifying, and dignifying to both the caregiver and the recipient of care[.]" Like Gilligan she calls for a recognition "that care is an indispensable, and

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[4] This is not to say these characterizations are true of all women, or of the requirements of women in any cultures and communities.

even a central good—one without which a life of dignity is impossible and which is itself an expression of a person's dignity [...] no less than the capacity for reason" (2011).

These Care Ethics are an important part of Activism of Care. Like other forms of Care Ethics, Activism of Care often remains unrecognized when implemented, as well as disregarded as a potential strategy for social change. This is, perhaps, because it involves traits linked with disempowered groups, and transparent labor. Gilligan found that the skills and practices she mapped, while imperative to society, were often devalued or not recognized. Similarly, these forms of activism are also often met with similar devaluation.

Activism of Care implements the community's practices and structure. Activism of Care creates spaces where many participants' lived experiences, points of view or identities are present, day to day. As will be described, in fan fiction communities, activists use communication and posting formats that are part of the community's culture (shout outs, prompts, asks). This makes their messages part of life in the community, not only in activist bubbles. This approach of activism as part of life may be what earned Tumbler its notoriety as a 'social justice warrior' space. In these spaces, people of many disempowered groups are likely to randomly come across positive mentions, or actions that take their presence into account. This is often done easily and without particular thought, let alone expectation of elaborate thankfulness. This is not to say these spaces are free of ableism or of backlash as well as racism, binarism, fatphobia and so forth. but in them, some disabled people might find positive reflections of themselves without looking for them, as part of the community and of the world.

While the following attributes are not all necessary for an iteration to be defined as Activism of Care, I found they often appeared together in fan fiction communities.

1) Care as Radical

Activism of Care respects emotions, needs, boundaries and limitations. It commonly involves a strong motif of emotion or care. Values are not just thought, they are felt and lived, experienced in senses and emotions, in personal and/or loved ones' lives, including the lives of beloved characters. This will be elaborated upon in the 'Crazy Fangirls' section.

In continuation of Audre Lorde (Ahmed, 2014; Lorde, 1988), it considers self and mutual care – forms of activism, when directed at those whom society doesn't privilege. It considers pleasure and wellbeing of disempowered people a meaningful and a worthy goal. This negates the common notion that activists must disregard their own and each other's well-being and safety as part of the performance of "real activists".

For example, the author in the story at the opening of this paper was working to make neurodivergent people feel safe and valued. She used the act of writing fan fiction, as well as a practice common in fan fiction communities - writing a story for a specific person, through a set of norms intended to take into account the needs of both author and recipient. In these communities, having a story written for you by a beloved author is quite meaningful. In writing and publishing lovingly for neurodivergent character and recipient the author made a powerful statement: neurodivergent people's needs and emotions matter, and their wellbeing and pleasure are worthy goals. In a world that devalues and at times actively works against neurodivergent people's existence, this act of care can be radical. This form of activism doesn't focus on support for people who already have relatively a lot of privilege, but on radical support, support of those society doesn't view as worthy of it.

Writing and publishing stories can be forms of self-care as well. One example of this Activism of Care within fic communities, is one which Camille Bacon-Smith (1992) describes as '*talking story'*. This practice revolves around a popular sub-genre of fic, *Hurt/Comfort*. Hurt-Comfort is defined by a plot in which one character hurts, and another cares or comforts them. It often involves disability, with or without naming it. This is one of the first and longest lasting genres within fic, and may be core of fic communities, according to Bacon-Smith (1992).

It is worth noting, that when Hurt/Comfort stories recognized by research or fic community discourse, they are at times described in ways that might make them seem shameful to enjoy, a 'guilty pleasure'. A different interpretation may consider these stories radical in valuing disabled characters and readers. Bacon-Smith (1992) considers such stories radical when addressing oppressed women's desires and fantasies. Perhaps the same can be said of disabled people. Rather than framing disabled people in objectifying ways (Richards, 2008) or as inspiration for non-disabled people (Ellis & Goggin, 2015), these stories put disabled people in the center and cater to their potential fantasies. This is radical, in a society that teaches disabled people their needs and enjoyment are secondary, amoral or unimportant (Onken & Slaten, 2000). This structure implements elements of Care Ethics, such as focus on a particular person and experience, as well as emotion and comfort that comes from being there.

2) Talents & skills

Activism of Care implements talents and skills of people in the community it takes place in. As mentioned, universalized forms of activism often don't fit the needs and skills of all involved. Activism of Care doesn't focus on type of action, remaining flexible enough to

effectively implementing talents and skills participants have, and in some cases, enjoy.

For example, many participants have a deep understanding of the way the communities they are part of work. On Tumblr, some use this knowledge to promote other activists' posts, make them more appealing for people of these particular communities, and increase their readership. Some use their knowledge of Tumblr's tagging system, to get posts exposure on relevant popular tags, used by groups who need them, at the right time of day.

Some participants implement their listening skills, understanding, and kindness. Some express their sadness or rage, bringing together those who relate, as in Hemmings' writing (2012), or describe their very specific intersectional lived experiences, educating others. As will be elaborated in the next sections, many are deeply familiar with the characters involved, and use that to come up with believable, funny, affecting or meaningful plot ideas and interpretations (headcanons).

Other participants are skilled authors or artists, and may use that to promote their social causes. Some write Activist Prompt Fic (APF), a practice currently popular in fic communities: a reader might write to an author they love, for example – 'I'm having the worst day, I can't get my prescription filled and I feel like crap. Would you write me a story to cheer me up?'. This may be done anonymously or not. In many cases, the author will respond with a short story, specifically tailored for the reader's request or taste. Many readers ask for stories in which their favorite characters go through the same thing the readers are, often with a better outcome or more socially aware responses.

These stories, writing and requesting them, negate ableist notions, provide better representations, and delight in disabled participants. They do so at the requests of disabled

participants and per their specifications, creating the representation they want as well as standing with and valuing them and other disabled participants. Unlike Talking Story, here disabilities are often named, and the prompter, author and readers often directly mention their own disabilities too[5]. These practices give back power to disabled people, who can choose how to be represented, and they do so for their pleasure or other needs. A step towards having space and a say in discussion about us. The stories are officially and directly written for the pleasure of disabled people, placing other readers as outsiders who are allowed to enjoy them too, rather than the ubiquitous center.

For example, Tumblr user Selenamasters (2014) published a request on their journal, and asked for comforting stories, after a five-year friendship of theirs ended badly and left them experiencing depression. Constellationsammy wrote a story for this prompt, in which the main character experiences nightmares, and starts sharing a bed with a loved one. This fic tells the story of a neurodivergent character who is loved and valued, and is recognized as deserving of comfort and support.

This form of activism reflects different aspects of Activism of Care. It implements emotion, care and specificity. It's first focus is the well-being of the disabled person who asked for the story, making the statement that this person's pleasure or comfort are worthwhile and important. Specificity is central in this practice.

APF, as well as Activism of Care, heroes an approach of kindness and creativity, being

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[5] Stories are usually written about characters, and not directly about people prompting them. Many prompts are made anonymously (a common practice on Tumblr in general), allowing the shy and the private to participate. However, some fic (named Reader Insert), is written using second person and techniques like "insert your name". This can make reading stories more personal still. While at first most 'general' reader characters were thin, white, not disabled young women, storied about characters who aren't are increasingly popular.

there for each other, specificity, asking for help, self-care, and pleasure as promoting social change. While these parameters are not compatible or accessible for everyone, it opens another option. For some of us, this approach is more sustainable, and possibly better takes into account influences on activists in the longer run.

3) Use of existing habits, practices, and structures

Similarly, Activism of Care also uses habits, characteristics and structures specific to the community it takes place in. For example, in a community of fans of the Marvel movies, a participant might use a common practice in such communities, a 'challenge', 'prompt meme', or a 'big bang', where authors and other creators come together to create works, often around a specific theme. She might initiate such an event promoting an activist goal of hers, for example, inviting authors to write about neurodivergent characters. This might give her activism some of the support and amplified visibility such events often generate, and in turn, give voice to community participants who need this visibility, and contribute more works to the community in general.

Other examples of use of community structures will be discussed throughout this paper[6]. Almost every aspect of this activism is entwined with the community's specific ways. For example, APF also uses another common structure in fic, 'shipping'. 'Shipping' describes fans' perception and expectations of devotion and care between characters they enjoy envisioning as romantic, sexual or platonic partners (romantic ships, friendship ships). APF uses this structure to increase the likelihood of readers envisioning love and protectiveness including respectful,

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[6] Implementation of the emotional structure 'fan's devotion', a literary structure, the trope 'hurt/comfort', a social structure, 'talking story', and the community practice of prompt fic, used for APF.

socially aware notions. Fics often use this format to negate stereotypes of angelic allies, by showing known and beloved characters being there for disabled people, in their own ways.

One example is a story by Waterbird13, in which Sam is going through a rough symptom day. Castiel, his partner, stays in bed with him, comforting and encouraging (Waterbird13, 2014). This story can be a comfort for someone having a rough day, or feeling like what they are going through doesn't matter to anyone. Additionally, it might encourage disabled readers to expect, or even just be able to envision, being addressed as if they, their needs, experiences, and wellbeing, matter.

4) Intersectionality

Activism of Care is at times intersectional[7]. This is a trait unfortunately not found consistently throughout iterations of Activism of Care. But intersectionality seems central in many iterations. For example, a common practice in Tumblr fan fiction communities, used for Activism of Care, is writing and sharing posts called 'Shout Out's. For example, Stimmyworkinprogress addresses the intersection between disability and financial issues, or experiences of family abuse, posting: "Shout out to everyone whose families don't understand their disabilities and what that means for their lives. [....] Shout out to everyone who's not in a position where they can safely cut toxic family members out of their lives".

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[7] Intersectionality is a term coined by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw (1991), to describe a concept developed by activist women of color. It points out that referring, for example, to the needs and lived experiences of 'women' in general, is a reductive universalization. It erases the differences between women, and frames the most hegemonic as universal. According to intersectionality, everyone is part of a variety or social groups, such as woman, transgender, white, asexual, heteroromantic, fat, neurodivergent, and so forth. The interaction between those social positions creates lived experiences that are unique to that combination. Different combinations bring different privileges or forms or oppression.

(Stimmyworkinprogress, 2018). In these few words, they address an issue rarely talked about, provide a glimpse into its lived experience and encourages those going through this that they are meaningful and noticed.

In shout outs, a participant writes positive words and encouragement, to people of a specific intersection of identities. Girls who have to go to school with depression; neurodivergent women of color; non-binary people who are recovering from sexual assault. These posts often address intersectional lived experiences, for example, validating that the identity of neurodivergent aromantic asexual people, is valid regardless of whether it's linked with their neurodivergence or not. These posts are often short and easy to read. They educate readers about some of the needs and lived experiences of people of specific intersections. They validate and encourage people of those intersectional identities. Sharing and reading them also establishes the presence and value of such people and experiences in the community.

At times stories are intersectional, addressing for example, needing treatment and having no legal documents. However, since most characters written are white men (Chander & Sunder, 2007), intersectional representations in this genre are not as comprehensive as one might hope. [8]

5) Specificity

One of the ideas at the base of Activism of Care, is the notion that it doesn't have to be universal.

Specificity is an important part APF, often written for one person's needs in one

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[8] While participants in the field are more diverse, characters' lack of sufficient diversity raises the question of who is perceived as worthy of care. It is arguably another reason we need more representations of non-white, fat, old, trans, poor and so forth fic characters.

situation. It is also part of the power of Shout Outs. As described, Activism of Care also creates specific activist practices linked with the community where it takes place, written personally for a specific recipient. This is a significant part of their effectiveness.

Strategies, practices, participants' needs and abilities are not always the same, and that needs to be taken into account. This specificity often prevents universalization and erasure of lived experiences. This paper suggests repeatedly reimagining it, so it may be recognized or utilized in a variety of communities.

Activism of Care in Fic Communities

This paper discusses Activism of Care through disability activism in fan fiction communities. It focuses on activism to destigmatize Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder ("PTSD"), anxiety, and depression in fan fiction (fic) communities (fandoms) inspired by the television show Supernatural and the Marvel Cinematic Universe movies – two of the most popular fandoms at the time of writing.

Fic is a genre or a specific work of literature that uses elements from existing texts, and that is created within the context of fic communities. For instance, if a fan of Harry Potter writes a story about what they imagine happened after the end of the series, and share it with fellow fans, the story is probably fic. Sometimes, research uses it as an umbrella term for not only literature, but various forms of art, voicework, editing and so forth, that are often erased. Fic is mostly distributed online and without pay, on sites and social networks such as Archive of Our Own and Tumblr. While, like AoC, fic is often looked down upon, possibly because it is associated with socially disempowered groups (Kustritz, 2003; Haney-Claus, 2016), it is

increasingly popular. At the time of writing, the web site Archive of Our Own, a main fic archive but by no means a comprehensive one, has 1,845,000 users and 4,640,000 works ("Archive of Our Own," n.d.).

As discussed, based on Bacon-Smith (1992), disability can be considered a theme in fic communities.

Bacon-Smith describes what I would consider an unrecognized form of disability AoC common in fic communities at least as early as the 1980s, 'talking story': where a writer asks a friend to help her with a hurt/comfort fic, and through discussing the story and the things the characters go through, the writer is able to work through her own experiences and receive comfort. Bacon-Smith writes about this practice bringing communities together, and enabling their members to work through pain. Discussing pain or distress as the characters' rather than the participants' enables authors to maintain some distance, their social standing and, simply, privacy.

Maybe fic communities' little-explored link with disability is the reason fic communities have, for example, been using content warnings (trigger warnings), often necessary for accessibility and the basic safety of neurodivergent people, long before the topic became as widely discussed as it is now. Since the 1960s, the early days of fic, participants used different forms of indication regarding the stories' contents, for users' comfort. In the days of Yahoo mailing lists, and later, LiveJournal blogging, using 'fic headers' warning for common triggers or disturbing content was and is the norm (Herzog, 2012). These days, Archive of Our Own, a central site for the communities, encourages authors to tick boxes informing of the existence or lack of existence of a few common triggers, and some add tags or notes warning for others.

Content warnings are often also used on fan communities on social network Tumblr. Participants are often aware of the issue, and in many cases will add relevant warnings when asked. Apps such as Tumblr Savior and Xkit are commonly used on the site, and enable users to hide different types of content, to different degrees, according to their needs. This also enables participants to regularly explore extremely personal, taboo, and subversive topics that are invisibly self-censored in other spaces.

Crazy Fangirls

A notorious trait of fic communities is some participants' strong devotion and protectiveness of favorite characters (Bacon-Smith, 1992; Williams, 2013).[9] This trait is often presented in pop culture as 'crazy,' amoral, perverted, dangerous and negatively feminine or young. Another way of framing it is as a desire to care, which deserves respect.

For a lot of fans, favorite characters, or the relationships fans like envisioning them in (ships), are very meaningful. They are often the only representations in media fans found of themselves, or ones they had to write on their own (Bacon-Smith, 1992; Chander & Sunder, 2007). For many, fic communities are an important refuge from rough daily lives (Kustritz, 2003). For some, support systems found in fic communities literally keeps them alive. Fans often

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[9] It is evident in general discourse, as well as memes and common sayings such as "[favorite character] is a precious cinnamon roll and must be protected", sometimes with the addition of "fight me". These are humorous yet heartfelt declarations meaning that said character is sweet and dear, and the speaker feels the urge to protect them. "Fight me" indicates playfully, emotionally, that the speaker would defend their beloved character chivalrously against any and all. Another indication might be the popularity of stories fixing bad things that happened to a favorite character in the original text (often called 'fix it' stories), and stories in which favorite characters are protected, partially indicated by popular story tags such as "protective Sam Winchester" ("Archive of our Own"). Fandom also includes groups such as "The Bitter Sam Girl Brigade", a group of fans who feel protective towards Sam, and The Robin Wood Deathwatch, which was created by Buffy, the Vampire Slayer's fans who were unimpressed with the show's repeated choice to kill off the few black characters to make it onscreen. It was later widened to include other characters, under the name Deadbrowalking: the people of color deathwatch (Chander & Sunder, 2007).

know these better than the creators. Relationships with characters or stories can be more important than heteronormative relationships. This is to say - for a lot of fans, these are not "just TV shows" for important reasons.

Still, this investment is often policed, pathologized, or ridiculed, and participants are often described as 'crazy fangirls', for being strongly involved. Mainstream pop-culture often mocks what is perceived as their extreme reactions. Participants are regularly berated for expressing devotion, unpaid investment, sexual pleasure, non-sexual pleasure, or anger. They may be berated out of fear of social disruption, particularly when they are women and other disempowered groups (Haney-Claus, 2016; Kustritz, 2003). Williams (2013) considers the combination 'crazy fangirls' to indicate ageism and misogyny against fans. I suggest it also indicates ableism, as implied by the use of 'crazy'.

Another indication of this is the way common accusations towards 'crazy fangirls' mirror ableist stereotypes. For instance, participants of fic communities are sometimes viewed as unworthy or dangerous (Haney-Claus, 2016; Williams, 2013), perverted or pathetic (Kustritz, 2003) - stereotypes commonly connected with disability (Kama, 2004). This correlation persists through most stereotypes of disabled people.

This is not to say fans' notions or actions are always in the right. Some conflicts are part of struggles about social hierarchy within fan communities (Busse, 2018; Pande & Moitra, 2017), such as struggles about text interpretation, or against berating racist or queerphobic remarks from actors or from other fans. Some reactions cross lines, like intentionally trying to trigger opposing participants, or, according to fan-based wiki Fanlore, rare occasions of Doxing, exposing a participant's personal information online against their will ("Outing," n.d.). But

berating 'crazy fangirls' rarely addresses these issues, and tends to focus more on them being a strong force, too wild, uneducated, young, feminine or passionate – issues relating to social hierarchy. It also should be noted that while the sort of violence that sometimes happens in fic communities is not something to brush off, it is often met with much more condemnation than online violence done by or for more privileged people. It is likely that condemnation towards "crazy fangirls", at least partially stems from bigotry, and an alarmist view of neurodivergent girls, women and non-binary people coming together with strong opinions and autonomous desires and delights.

Another criticism of fan's protectiveness and desire to care, concerns their own safety. Bacon-Smith (1992) considers fans' drive to care, for hurt or disabled characters, to be women's desire to comply with oppressive roles imposed on them by patriarchal society. But while this is one possible aspect of this desire, it can also be considered subversive, in that it negates the notion that disabled people are undesirable and a burden (Link, Struening, Neese-Todd, Asmussen, & Phelan, 2001). Additionally, many desires, as well as forms of attraction and satisfying practices, stem from patriarchal structures. This doesn't necessarily make them wrong. For instance, BDSM is described by different scholars (MacKinnon, 1989) as a result of a culture that subjugates women. Some feel this is true, but believe that it's nonetheless possible to use these structures for pleasure, to reclaim the body, or to work through trauma (Chan, 2010). Similarly, perhaps in some cases, the desire to protect or to care can be healing or enjoyable.

Changing Opinions about Disability

Reading and writing about favorite characters dealing with disability issues engages this

devotion to gain fans' emotional involvement and commitment against ableism. Since fic is commonly based on deeply beloved characters, the reader generally begins from a starting point of devotion and loyalty. When fans are committed to a beloved character, they would likely stand by them not only against supervillains, but against those who cause them pain through bigotry, so that even non-disabled fans may overcome some ableist notions. Reading about other beloved characters treating disabled characters with appreciation and respect, alongside the author behaving in that way, provides an example of how one should understand and behave towards disabled people. It also negates the notion that ableism is natural and universal.[10]

Perhaps even more importantly, this allows disabled readers to work through pain caused by living in an ableist society, and may help them deal with internalized ableism. For many fans, reading beloved characters going through what they do, can be deeply meaningful. For a reader who might be feeling worthless as a result of bad representations or stereotypes (Link et al., 2001), reading about someone like them, whom they value and love, might chip at the negative influence of living in an ableist culture. What if Batman had an eating disorder? What if Captain America were going through recovery from rape? How would Sherlock Holmes deal with flashbacks or disassociation? Society doesn't provide us with such representations, and when it does, it is rarely informed, intersectional or respectful. Fortunately, we make them ourselves.

As in the story at the start of this paper, I will attest that reading a character I have loved and cared about for years, feeling badly over their neurodivergence, often helped me reconsider ableist notions towards myself. It powerfully negates the ableist notion that no one would celebrate or value a person who has disabilities such as mine: I couldn't ignore the very clear

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[10] Garland-Thomson (2005) wrote about disabled people being influenced by bigoted representations, as participants in an ableist culture.

evidence of my own experiences. I could not envision a situation in which something like a beloved character's anxiety would, for me, negatively influence their worth, make them anything less than this person I love. I knew without doubt that this wasn't platitude, but truly was how I perceive things - as those were my own feelings and perception. From there, it was easier to fathom, that those same things about me might be viewed the same way, despite what ableist people and social structures say. Better still, stories depicted other characters that I loved and whose opinions I would respect, who felt a lot like I do. This helped me envision such a society.

This new awareness of possibility is meaningful. Kustritz (2003) considers part of the work of fic communities for social change, as envisioning how relationships can be more socially just. She discusses it in the contexts of women's oppression by men, suggesting reading and writing a mass of stories envisioning non-oppressive relationships might make it possible for women readers to envision them. Similarly, getting used to caring, more socially responsible and less ableist ways characters in stories behave towards beloved disabled people, might also help readers promote and create less ableist environments.

Through familiarity with multiple points of view, a reader may be able to identify both with a protagonist and with those who love, respect and appreciate them. Observing her own feelings towards the characters, and those of other characters she loves, can enable her to use the story to change her perception of disability, herself, and possibly people around her. This is made possible thanks to fans' protectiveness. Rather than mock 'crazy fangirls', perhaps we should respect their devotion and value their desire to care and to undo their own ableism[11].

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[11] If read using the split attraction model – a perception by which a person can experience a variety of sorts of attraction, that don't necessarily overlap (Hinderliter, 2009) the desire to stand by someone or care for them might be considered a form of attraction, much like romantic attraction, sexual attraction, or many others. Certainly, as described, there is fic that caters to this form of attraction – among others, hurt/comfort. Like any attraction, it might

Fans' Activism of Care Translated to a Larger Scale

This paper comes from the belief activism is not universal, that the subjective and personal are important, and that building specific forms of activism for different communities, needs, skills and even single participants, is a beneficial characteristic of Activism of Care. Implementation of this type of activism in fan communities is in itself meaningful and sufficient. However, these forms of activism might then be used by others, and applied on different scales. [12]

This may have been serendipitously helpful to Jared Padalecki's Always Keep Fighting campaign for destigmatization of mental illness. In 2015, Padalecki, who stars in Supernatural, launched a very personal campaign in which he discussed his experiences with depression and anxiety, and encouraged viewers with similar experiences to "always keep fighting." Later that year, Padalecki went through a rough time, flying home to be with his family, and asking fans to help him through it by sending supportive messages and stories. This request was unique in itself, since celebrities rarely ask their fans for direct, genuine support in dealing with mental illness. This was in the same vein of the campaign, where Padalecki talked to fans intimately, and seemed to wish to bridge the distance and hierarchy inherent in many exchanges between celebrity and audience. The response was heartfelt and widespread. People sent hundreds of thousands of messages a day, as well as stories, pictures and art. The campaign, along with this

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lead to wonderful and to horrible behavior. Regardless, there is no reason other than social norm to give greater importance and centrality to sexual or romantic attractions over this one.

[12] One might also point out that small scale or microactivism, made of many small actions by many participants, is wonderful in its unique ways. In addition, as fan fiction communities seem to involve millions of participants, activism taking place within them alone can also be fairly large scale.

show of support and care for a person going through a rough time with depression, made a difference in the communities, and according to some of the messages fans leave on Padalecki's social media pages, it made a difference in people's lives and views of themselves. It did in mine.

It seems that part of the movement's success came from Padalecki being one of the figures fic communities feel such devotion and protectiveness towards. Padalecki's public image, as well as his character, often receive that sort of care and love in fic and discourse. Padalecki sharing this deeply personal experience, talking about it vulnerably and reaching out to "the Supernatural family" for support and comfort, may have allowed participants to express their protectiveness and care towards a fandom figure already loved and respected, similarly to the model described in the previous section [13]. In this way, the effective small-scale model implementing fans' devotion to destigmatize disability, was used here a large scale, reaching millions of people.

Conclusion

Activism of Care promotes social change, in differently accessible ways from traditional activism. It uses pleasure, specificity, self- and mutual- care, and kindness, while heroing the social structures of the community. Drawing from Care Ethics, it focuses on the specific skills and needs of those involved. It creates a more socially aware community, and widens the range of imaginable possibilities. In fic communities, for many participants it educates, helps negate

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[13] Lately there seem to be signs of possible backlash over neurodivergent people being more visible in fic communities. For instance, in the Supernatural fandom, some have been writing and sharing posts berating neurodivergent people for sharing their stories in conventions.

existing bigotry, and is a rare source of pleasure, validation, awareness and power.

Dedication

To Snowy. You were my loving family, your kindness, attention and humor gave me life. I miss   you.

To all the animals with whom I was and am fortunate enough to share life or friendship. You deserve better than what this bigoted world, or I, ever did for you. You made my life happier by being in it, probably saved me, just by being there, just by   being you. Thank you for being my friends, my family. Thank you just for existing.

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