

## **A decade in the lives of online fan communities**

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This document is the Accepted Version [AM]

### **Citation:**

DELLER, Ruth A. (2014). A decade in the lives of online fan communities. In: DUIT, Linda, ZWAAN, Koos and REIJNDERS, Stijn, (eds.) The Ashgate research companion to fan cultures. Ashgate Research Companions . Farnham, Ashgate, 237-248. [Book Section]

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## Chapter X

### A Decade in the Life of Online Fan Communities

*Ruth A. Deller*

#### **Introduction**

Fan communities and ‘fan talk’ (Fiske 1992) have long been a concern of those researching fandom, from more traditional forms like fanzines and fan clubs to the newer congregational spaces of the internet. The likes of Henry Jenkins and Nancy Baym have highlighted the way that fans, feeling stigmatised by society and the media, seek solace, community and understanding amongst others with a common interest. Engaging in fan talk offers participants ‘pleasure and relief to find others who are like them’ (Pullen 2000: 53) and discover they are not alone. For Jenkins, ‘[f]andom functions as an alternative social community’ (1992: 280), whilst Clerc argues that ‘the most primal instinct of a fan is to talk to other fans about their common interest’ (1996a: 74).

Arthur Lizzie argues that fan talk can have a range of functions: information sharing, interpretation (e.g. of song lyrics), sustaining relationships, negotiating private issues, engaging in commerce, and ‘noise’ – mis-sent posts, spam, empty messages and so on (2009: 79-80). Fans create, discuss, communicate, share and speculate (Jenkins 1992, Bacon-Smith 1992, Baym 2000) in both offline and online contexts.

Fan talk often occurs in ‘unofficial’ spaces, set-up and run by fans, for fans. However, there are also ‘officially’-sanctioned online spaces such as Facebook pages and forums run by stars or their management. These spaces can attract large numbers of fans (Lachonis and Johnston 2008) but also lead to tensions over who ‘owns’ the space and how it is used (O’Reilly and Doherty 2006).

In this chapter, I draw upon these ideas about the nature and importance of fan talk, but – taking a longitudinal approach to the subject – I explore how online fandoms dedicated to two British music acts have changed over the course of a decade. I look at the importance of fan talk and the way fan communities respond to changes in technology, changes in the careers of the acts and changes in personal circumstances.

### **The communities studied**

In 2000/2001 I studied online communities dedicated to the band Belle & Sebastian and the singer Cliff Richard, combining observation of the norms and content<sup>1</sup> within the different spaces where fans ‘gathered’ online with a series of questionnaires and interviews with fans about their experiences of the online fan communities. Ten years later, I revisited the communities, again observing how they operated and conducting surveys and interviews.

Drawing upon previous studies of fan communities from the likes of Susan Clerc, Nancy Baym and Henry Jenkins, I look at how the different spaces operate with regards to fan talk, developing group norms and behaviours and building relationships – and whether these activities look different in 2010-2011 to 2000-2001.

The artists were chosen for three primary reasons. Firstly, the fans of each artist were of different ages. The majority of Belle & Sebastian fans (75 per cent) in 2000-2001 were aged 16-25 with none over 45 – those responding ten years later are predominantly in their late twenties and thirties. The Cliff fans were mostly (70 per cent) aged 36-55 in 2000-2001. In the follow-up, all but one (aged 26) were over 35, with 71 per cent over 50. The largest age range represented (42 per cent) was 60-70. These age ranges are based on the

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<sup>1</sup> Including posting frequencies, number and type of topics, community markers such as shared norms, group roles or sense of place, politeness strategies, conflict resolution, member welcomes and exits.

survey data and are likely to be representative of their fan bases in general, given the time-spans of their respective careers.

Secondly, the two artists were at different stages in their careers. Belle & Sebastian were a comparatively new act, formed in 1996, as the internet was increasing in prominence. Cliff Richard had been recording since 1958. His large fanbase had organised themselves through offline groupings, meeting houses, fan clubs and the ‘International Cliff Richard Movement’ for decades. In Baym’s (2011) terms, Cliff is a ‘legacy artist’ whose fame predates the internet, whilst Belle & Sebastian are part of ‘the last generation of analogue musicians’, those she identifies as beginning their careers in the 1990s with some degree of online activity but still selling music in traditional forms and building audiences via ‘offline’ means such as live shows.

Thirdly, their fans had received media attention in the months before the study: Belle & Sebastian’s 1999 BRIT Awards win was attributed to fans using the Internet (Plagenhoef 2010: 37), and Cliff Richard fans campaigned for ‘The Millennium Prayer’ to receive airplay (Sweeting 2000) – with the 1999 song subsequently reaching number one.

During the initial study, Belle & Sebastian were well-known within indie circles, featuring regularly in the music press and winning a BRIT award. They had top 40 singles and appeared on *Top of the Pops* (BBC 1964-2006). After they released their highest charting album, *The Life Pursuit*, in 2006, the band became relatively quiet with no new material<sup>2</sup> released until 2010’s *Belle & Sebastian Write About Love*. Cliff Richard had a larger public profile and had regularly released music and toured since 1958. As said, he had a number one single in 1999. He continued to release albums and tour regularly throughout the 2000s and 2010s.

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<sup>2</sup> Apart from side projects from different band members and former band members.

The initial study was concerned with how community was built and sustained within the different online environments where fans gathered. I discovered that whilst there was some sense of a population of fans congregating online over multiple environments (as suggested by Pullen 2000), each site of activity had its own distinctive ‘population’ and identity.

There was not one single unified Belle & Sebastian fandom, rather there were several interlocking communities (see Clerc 1996b: 43-44, Bacon-Smith 1992, Lachonis and Johnston 2008), overlapping but distinct. Cliff Richard fans were more likely to congregate across multiple environments, seeing them all as part of their online fandom, although there were still distinctive features within different Cliff communities.

### **Fan talk and online communities**

In the early days of internet studies, much discussion centred on whether virtual communities could legitimately be described as ‘communities’, with advocates such as Rheingold (1994) and Baym (1998, 2000) extolling their virtues and critics arguing that ‘the Internet does not sustain and develop communities...[it] is truly anti-community’ (Snyder 1992: 92-94, see also Doheny-Farina 1996). These debates have shifted over the years. ‘Community’ is now widely accepted as a description for groups of people gathering online and frequently used across web platforms<sup>3</sup>.

Several studies of online fan communities explore the way that this sense of community is created in online environments. This can occur through establishing group conventions and norms, creating a sense of ‘place’, communication about personal issues within groups, members communicating outside of the fan environment and members offering one another assistance. As O’Reilly and Doherty say, ‘participants develop forms

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<sup>3</sup> Whilst I acknowledge that ‘community’ is still a contested term, its widespread adoption means I will be using it as a catch-all term for the different environments studied.

of expression that are unique to the group, form and actively explore group identities and relationships, and create group norms and sanctions' (2006: 141, see also Baym 2000, Lizzie 2009). Lachonis and Johnston (2008) note that, often, this online fan talk can extend offline into fan 'meets'.

Although the studies mentioned above explore different aspects of fan talk, fan communities and online communities, few studies observe online fan communities over several years, compare multiple platforms or explore technological changes - a gap this chapter aims to go some way to addressing.

### **Methodology**

The research in each study consisted of two primary elements: observing and analysing the range of online environments where fan activity occurred, and talking to fans themselves via interviews and surveys. Forty-five Belle & Sebastian fans and fourteen Cliff Richard fans participated in surveys and interviews in 2000-2001. In 2010-2011, the figures were six Belle & Sebastian fans and thirty-nine Cliff fans.

In 2000-2001, internet searches, links from other sites and discussion with fans enabled me to source the different fan environments. These environments were observed over two years to identify norms and patterns of activity. During a detailed period of analysis in January-February 2001, each post was noted and analysed using a combination of content analysis, thematic analysis and linguistic analysis.

In 2010-2011, I searched for the same groups that I studied previously, as well as sourcing newer ones through internet searches and discussion with fans. Analysis was conducted in the same manner as in the previous study. As this study was not originally intended to be longitudinal, in order to ascertain how the online spaces changed during 2002-2009, internet archive search tool The Wayback Machine was used to search historically through sites to observe changes over time. Both mailing lists studied have

online archives allowing an overview of the number of posts made throughout the intervening years.

In the initial study, online questionnaire links were provided in all of the environments studied, and interviews were conducted within chat rooms and via email with participants who were willing to participate in further research.

In 2010-2011, Belle & Sebastian fans were recruited via an email to the Sinister mailing list. As there were only six respondents it was decided to conduct email interviews rather than a survey. A survey was created for Cliff Richard fans on the more active MoveIt mailing list, and users who indicated they would be interested in participating further were then interviewed by email. As the aim was to look at changes over time, it was decided not to solicit answers from users of newer platforms.<sup>4</sup>

In both studies, users were asked how they joined the fan communities, what they liked and disliked, which different communities they were part of, and what they used the communities for. In the initial study they were asked whether they perceived them as ‘communities’ and whether they thought the communities would survive if the artists stopped making records. In the latter study they were asked about developments to the communities over time. Email interviews enabled users to discuss issues in greater depth than in the surveys.

### **Going through changes**

In 2000-2001 the internet looked vastly different from the way we experience it today. Most people accessed the internet via a dial-up connection – if at all. Online forums were a growing but still comparatively new phenomenon, and mailing lists were highly popular

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<sup>4</sup> I was refused permission to analyse the official Cliff Richard forum in the initial study and so decided not to survey its users in the follow-up study as a close comparison could not be offered. In addition, the forum’s archives do not go back beyond the mid-2000s.

within fandoms. Personal home pages, rather than blogs, offered fans a place to share their interests, and music was still predominantly purchased and listened to on a physical format, often bought from a high street retailer. Newsgroups (see Baym 1998, 2000) were declining in popularity but still a part of internet culture.

A decade later, the internet had changed significantly. I wondered whether the rise of 'Web 2.0' and social networking had impacted the fan communities I had studied. In 2000-2001, many of the fans I researched confidently predicted that their communities would survive even if the artists stopped making records. But would they survive a changing internet?

### **The fan communities as they were: 2000-2001**

In 2000-2001, the most active Belle & Sebastian online fan community was a mailing list called Sinister. Set up in 1997 by Paul 'Honey' Mitchell, it has an associated website and at the time had an active IRC chat room, #sinister. In January-February 2001, it had 1405 members, with averaging 12 posts a day. The second most active online Belle & Sebastian community was found on the website for the band's then record label, Jeepster which hosted a chat room and several message boards. Two boards were dedicated to Belle & Sebastian: one for fan meet-ups and one for general discussion. The Jeepster forums had 838 registered users, and, on average, each thread had twenty-four posts and was viewed 296 times.

The most active Cliff Richard communities were similar – an official forum and an unofficial fan mailing list, MoveIt. The forum required membership to read and I was refused permission to study it. The MoveIt list, created in 1995, had 398 members and averaged thirteen posts a day.

The two mailing lists had very active fans, also the most vocal in questionnaires. Clerc argues that the preference for mailing lists can be down to 'the desire to make



personal connections with other people, to feel part of a community... [as] mailing lists must be sought out and joined, they require some commitment from members (“you have to be there every day”), and the mail comes directly to subscribers’ (1996b: 42). She goes on to note that mailing lists attract fewer ‘newbies’ and ‘trolls’ - certainly the case with the MoveIt and Sinister. The mailing list format also seems to lend itself to direct address, with over a third of posts on both lists being addressed directly to named individuals, despite being posted to the whole list.

Clerc argues that mailing lists appeal more to women although my own research contradicts this, with Belle & Sebastian fans in both studies being 60 per cent male, possibly reflecting a (slightly) more male interest in the indie genre. Cliff Richard fans in the early study were 76 per cent female and 77 per cent female in the later study, but this could suggest a more female-oriented fandom due to genre and his appeal to female fans, rather than the mailing list format.

Alongside the forums and mailing lists, there were several smaller communities, including newsgroups `alt.music.belle+sebastian` and `alt.music.cliff-richard`, a Cliff Richard chatroom, several Yahoo! Groups (primarily Belle & Sebastian oriented) and fan sites. However, these smaller communities had only a handful of posts per week.

Discussions on the MoveIt list occurred about other web sites and forums with greater frequency than within the Belle & Sebastian communities. There appeared to be a communal feeling across the range of Cliff Richard environments, echoing Pullen’s description of fan communities converging over multiple fan web sites (2000). This is exemplified by this quote from the links section of a fan page of the time:

With all the divide in this world one might sometimes feel that humanity is spiralling at an ever increasing rate toward the great abyss. The following sites, however, give us all hope that

perhaps one thing can bridge this chasms [sic] that separate us: CLIFF. (*The Cliff Richard homepage*, 2000)

However, many MoveIt users, despite belonging to the official forum, were critical of it and the way it was actively moderated, seeing this ‘official’ space as much more restrictive than the fan-created space:

We’ve had some interesting debates. FREE to be critical, FREE to praise. Even when there have been opposite opinions, we agree to differ. That’s healthy, shutting you up, ISN’T! Forget the forum, stick with MoveIt ... it’s "Simply the Best."!!! (Dawn, MoveIt list, September 2000)

The suspicion over the moderation of an ‘official’ space echoes the response of several New Model Army fans in O’Reilly and Doherty’s study of the band’s official message board (2006: 152-155) who did not always appreciate official attempts to control discussion and activity.

The Belle & Sebastian communities, whilst having some overlapping memberships, often appeared distinct. Each community developed its own set of group norms. For example, Sinister distinguished itself from Jeepster by its use of longer, often poetic or abstract, prose (see Plagenhoef 2010) and developing its own terminology, echoing Harrison’s claim that ‘often a writer will claim “in-group membership” by using first names and nicknames, by using familiar language or in-group jargon’ (2000: 76, see also Baym 1998). Terms such as ‘sinisterines’ were used to identify the group, and they developed their own ‘acronyms’ to refer to Belle & Sebastian albums (e.g. *Fold Your Hands Child, You Walk Like a Peasant* became FISHYCLAP), used ‘pet’ names for the stars (singer Stuart Murdoch became ‘Struan’), and employed deliberate misspellings (e.g. ‘bluddy grate’). #sinister had chatroom ‘bots’ named as if they were family: ‘auntwendy’, ‘auntsadie’, ‘niecekiki’ and ‘uncxavier’.

Users of the Jeepster forums and chat room created a similar sense of identity, albeit less nuanced<sup>5</sup>. The Jeepster chat room had ‘action’ commands, including ‘drink tea’ and ‘dance’, fostering a sense of common behaviour. Users tended to call themselves ‘Jeepster kids/folk’. Many claimed to belong to either Jeepster or Sinister, but not both:

i think jeepster chat and forum is far more welcoming than sinister ... for some reason users of sinister also have a problem with people from jeepster chat. (Anon, 16-25, survey)

do people still go to jeepster chat? ... you get a better class of person here. (stevietee, IRC channel #sinister, October 2000)

Cliff fans also developed behavioural norms within the communities. For example, MoveIt had a convention of participants describing their location (and the weather conditions) at the end of posts. One claimed this helped her feel close to other fans:

I do love it when moveiters put their country at the bottom of their letters and a little comment on the weather. It gives me a kick knowing we are united all over our small planet. (Margaret, MoveIt list, February 2001)

Across all environments, users employed several politeness strategies (Harrison 2000, Clerc 1996a) such as using phrases like ‘please’, ‘regards’ and ‘thank you’. Most environments required users to sign up to a series of rules which requested politeness and discouraged ‘flaming’. The most stringent was Sinister, where users had to wait in the ‘nursery’ for a fortnight before posting and needed to adhere to a long FAQ:

I know this document is long but please take time to read it before you use the list. Ignorance is no defence, and you’re expected to have read and agreed to these before posting... it’s taken some time and been reached at by agreement with the wishes of the majority of people who are on the list (Sinister FAQ).

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<sup>5</sup> Unlike the Cliff Richard fans, there did not appear to be a suspicion about moderation amongst users of this ‘official’ space.

Most respondents said they joined the communities for fan talk (Fiske 1992: 38). Talking about their collective object of fandom was a key element of discussions, although interaction was not solely related to the artists. Around two thirds of MoveIt messages contained direct reference to Cliff Richard and/or his music. This figure was lower for the other environments. Those dedicated to Belle & Sebastian contained direct references to the stars or music in fewer than half of the messages.

Jeepster's most popular sub-forum was dedicated to general 'Chit Chat' - and messages in the Belle & Sebastian sub-forum often strayed from the topic of the band or their music. Sinister described itself as 'a list for Belle & Sebastian but more importantly about the lives of People Who Listen 'To Belle & Sebastian' (Sinister FAQ). Across all environments users shared details of their personal lives, although this was more common in the Belle & Sebastian communities.

Fans encouraged participation in votes and polls, and other visible demonstrations of support. There was often a sense of 'duty' attached to such activities, whether to the stars themselves, or to other fans (as the term 'our Cliff' suggests):

I also will remind you all to VOTE for Cliff at both voting polls ... Please get our Cliff UP in those lists. (Greet, Cliff newsgroup, February 2001)

When asked whether the communities could survive if the artists stopped producing records, fans were split. Many claimed the communities were more about their members than the artists, and some argued that there would still be discussions to be had about the artists:

oh heck, i'd rather not think about it really. it's strange, if sinister went down for whatever reason i'm sure i'd still communicate with the friends i'd made, and there would still be a forum of some description. I think it would affect chat a lot less cos b&s are only mentioned once in a blue moon anyway. i think due to b&s' relative inactivity for the past year or so we've become a bit more self sufficient, maybe i'm just kidding myself. (CS, 26-35, survey)

if jeepster were closed because of the band splitting, i think the fans would set up or find somewhere else (Anon, 16-25, survey)

The communities most expected to survive were MoveIt, Sinister, the Jeepster forums and the Official Cliff Richard Forum. Others expected them to cease, if not immediately, then at some point:

[Jeepster] might last for a little bit. people may sift through the remains of what's left ... but ultimately, it all goes back to b&s. (Brendan, 16-25, interview)

### **The fan communities as they were ten years later: 2010-11**

The two fandoms have responded differently to the changing internet. It is difficult now to find visible Belle & Sebastian fan communities: the environments in the original study have either disappeared or become marginal. In Autumn 2003, the Jeepster website was redesigned and the forum removed. Several former users migrated to the (more wide-ranging) Bowlie forum, dedicated to the Bowlie music festival that was curated by Belle & Sebastian. This forum closed in 2008; some Bowlie users now populate the Anorak forum. Belle & Sebastian discussion can be found on Anorak, but the nature of community here is different to on Jeepster: it is an 'indiepop' forum, dedicated to a genre, and individual band discussion occurs in single threads rather than sub-forums.

Sinister's website remains, and appears unchanged from the first study. The list is still active, claiming 773 members in June 2012. However, posting has decreased rapidly. In 2011, there were only eight posts to the list. In 2010 (when Belle & Sebastian released an album and hosted the Bowlie festival), there were forty-seven posts - including my call for participants. The Sinister archives, available on the website, reveal the decline in posts to be gradual over the years rather than sudden.

I asked respondents where users had 'migrated'. Several Sinister users could be found on forums 'I Love Music' and 'I Love Everything in the mid-2000s' but there is now

little apparent evidence of the Sinister community on these (quiet) forums. Bowlie and Sinister also had last.fm groups but the most recent discussion was in 2008 and 2009 respectively. The newsgroup and homepages from the original study have either disappeared or become equally inactive.

Respondents pointed to four key factors in the decline of Sinister: the band becoming less prolific, the band's later output being perceived as less exciting or accomplished than their earlier material, changes in online culture and changes in the personal lives of list members:

When people do post nowadays, there's a lot less oversharing about their lives, which I think is a shame, since that's part of what made the list so much fun ... the band [are] producing debatably lesser quality music and being less prolific ... But you have stuff on the fans' side as well: the people on Sinister have changed and so has online culture. We've all grown up, a lot of people don't have the time or the inclination to write anymore. Plus, now that we all know that everything we post online will follow us around forever, we're a lot more careful than we were in 2000. (Holly, 29, interview)

They were once apparently an insurgent force, seemed to belong to the fans or to be closer to the fans and their interests ... That changed gradually and Belle & Sebastian became more like another band... [in addition] Mailing lists are now considered a relatively primitive kind of 'internet community'. They were superseded, if that's an appropriate term to use, by other technical and textual formats like the blog, the messageboard, and the manylinked pages of the social networking site... That's probably the main reason for what happened to sinister; you need to apply a certain technological determinism. (Joe, age not supplied, interview)

Joe suggests newer internet spaces have contributed to the community's decline, yet it is hard to find fan talk within these spaces. Belle & Sebastian's official Facebook page, launched February 2010, is approaching 154,000 'likes' as of June 2012. It is actively updated but it is difficult to ascertain a clear sense of 'community' in the same way it was

manifest on Sinister or Jeepster: interaction mostly consists of ‘likes’ or comments on the band’s updates rather than fan-to-fan interaction. There have been several groups set up on Facebook over the years, including ones called ‘Belle and Sebastian is love’ and ‘Belle and Sebastian. Best Band Ever!’ However, they had few members and most have disappeared. Those that have become ‘pages’ have little activity on them. The band uses Twitter, but it is again difficult to find a sense of distinct ‘community’ between fans using the service. This is not to say that Facebook and Twitter do not offer spaces for fan communities to form, just that it is hard to determine from surface observation how fan community occurs in these spaces with regards to Belle & Sebastian. The band’s official website seems to have a curious attempt to foster a sense of community with fans. It has a ‘map’ where fans can tag their location (5776 have done so), yet this is the only ‘interaction’ fans can have with one another on the site. Unlike other official sites (including Cliff Richard’s) there is no fan message board or other discussion space.

Despite it being difficult to observe distinctive fan community practices relating to Belle & Sebastian in 2010-2011, respondents indicated that members of Sinister were very still a part of their lives, with one married to someone they met on Sinister in 2001 and several claiming they are still friends with list members. CS reflected that:

I bet we’ve had more babies than the Cliff Richard list has!!! i reckon there’s at least half a dozen children that sinister is DIRECTLY responsible for, if not more, and at least ten weddings! (CS, age 36-45, interview)

Whilst the Belle & Sebastian online fan culture has changed significantly, the Cliff Richard community has remained relatively stable. Some earlier fan sites have disappeared, but MoveIt and the official forum attract steady, regular postings. The singer does not use Twitter, although he does blog on his official website.

His official Facebook page launched in January 2011. An existing fan page had over 25,000 fans and the official one attracted far fewer. By February the two had merged into one official page, a move that was subject to much discussion on MoveIt. As of June 2012, his page has just under 89,000 'likes'. His official forum has 42,859 members, averaging around thirty posts a day. The fan-run MoveIt list is comparatively small against these 'official' spaces - its website claims 400 members. However, Clerc argues that, on mailing lists, smaller numbers of members contributes to them having a strong sense of community (1996b: 47). The list averages 14 posts a day - in 2000-2001, the average was 13 posts a day with 398 members. The online MoveIt archives, dating back to 2000, reveal a fairly steady posting rate across time.

As in the early study, MoveIt members use other platforms. Ninety per cent visit other Cliff-related sites or belong to other groups, most notably the official site and forum (69 per cent), the official Facebook page (36 per cent), Yahoo! groups (18 per cent) and offline fan groups (23 per cent). Discussion on MoveIt often focuses on fans' opinions of other platforms, particularly the official site/forum and official Facebook page. This appears to be due to the active moderation on the official forum, as in 2000-2001, and speculation of the same moderation operating on the Facebook page. Users also expressed disdain for the way some Facebook users operated on Cliff's page, particularly with regards to poor spelling and grammar.

On MoveIt, YouTube links and links to news articles are regularly circulated, Wikipedia articles referenced and Twitter feeds from artists associated with Cliff (such as backing singers) discussed. During the observation period, several messages featured users helping one another with Twitter and Facebook. Despite using other technologies, several respondents cited a preference for the email format, considering it 'easy' to use and liking that they could respond to other users directly.



Whilst MoveIt's activity is steady, it is not clear if, or how, new users are recruited. I observed no introductory posts from new members and, whilst searching for 'Cliff Richard mailing list' provides a link to the list, it is harder to find when searching for terms such as 'Cliff Richard fans'. However, the community is relatively stable with very little evidence of people leaving the list (at least in terms of posting 'leaving' announcements). For many, use of the list is habitual. Seventy-four per cent read mails daily - although they claim to post less frequently, with 53 per cent posting less often than once a month. Fifty-three per cent of MoveIt users have been members for over ten years, and 82 per cent for over five years.

There appear to be several reasons why this community survives. One may be the age of participants. With 71 per cent of respondents over 50, and 42 per cent over 60, it's possible these older users prefer familiar technologies – debates over downloads and physical formats are commonplace on the list, particularly relating to Cliff Richard's sales being much higher in the physical format charts than the digital or combined sales charts. However, the use of social media by many fans indicates a willingness to follow their object of fandom across multiple platforms, and in some cases, learn new technologies to be up-to-date with the activities of the star and other fans.

Many of the list's norms remain from the early study, such as users addressing one another directly even when communicating to the whole group, and the convention of posting their location (and sometimes the weather) in their message. MoveIt users continue to employ a number of politeness strategies - users frequently request help, offer 'thanks' and use terminology such as 'regards', particularly when offering correction to another user's postings or putting forward a difference of opinion. Emoticons, particularly the smile and the wink, are employed frequently.

Users, even those who post infrequently, consider list-members friends, as evidenced in their off-list communication, which more respondents engage in than in 2000-

2001. Ninety-five per cent of MoveIt members communicate via personal email with other members and 58 per cent have met list members in person. Forty-eight per cent keep in touch with other users via Facebook, 42 per cent via forums, 32 per cent by telephone and 16 per cent by letter. Instant messaging, Twitter, blogs and Skype are also used, but by a minority. Only one respondent said they did not communicate with members away from the list. Users expressed how important the list had been in both their personal lives and their fandom:

I have loved meeting lots of new friends at concerts over the years. When my son was very young and I became a single parent, Move It became my lifeline to and social life as I was unable to go out socialising. It really did keep me sane and gave allowed me to express my opinions on my 'hobby' outside of nappies and feeding. (Lynne, age 46, interview)

We know each other, know the different personalities of people who write and bit about their backgrounds. I love that sometimes if I want to be really uber-analytical about Cliff's music I can be, and there'll be people who respond and love that, or I can be all fluffy and "lite" about it and people will respond to that. And last but not least, receiving Cliff news as soon as it happens. Gosh I remember when the only way to get Cliff news was through quarterly fan club magazines. So different now... we know each other now, we've become a community. Sometimes things happen to the Move-it list that affects us all, like when someone from the list dies or becomes really ill, that's when I realise how close we've grown to each other, in an online kind of way. But 16 years? Nope, can't explain that. (Fiona, age 39, interview)

As with other 'enduring' fandoms (Kuhn 1999, Scodari 2007), memory and nostalgia form are important to MoveIt. There is a daily 'this day in Cliff history' post, where one member posts a series of events in the singer's life that occurred on that day. Others then offer their own memories, reflections and clarifications.

The majority of content in all online Cliff Richard communities centres on the artist himself, his career/releases and fans' responses to this. Discussion focuses on his current

and past career with equal measure. Respondents acknowledged that his continued activity was a key reason why MoveIt and the forum continued to thrive:

Cliff is always trying out new and interesting projects which keeps the interest in him going.

It's Cliff's popularity which keeps the MoveIt list alive. (NearlyFamous, age 61, survey)

The status of MoveIt as a fan-space rather than an 'official' one also appears key to its success. As in the early study, many respondents pointed to it offering a safe, unmoderated space, as a key reason for its survival:

It's an uncensored family. (Chris, age 42, survey)

It isn't monitored and we get information many times before the official routes. (Betty, age 66, survey)

## **Conclusion**

In 2000-2001, it was possible to find several online fan spaces for both Belle & Sebastian and Cliff Richard, although forums, mailing lists and their associated chat rooms displayed the strongest sense of 'community'. Although each environment had its own distinct features and populations, there was a greater sense of Cliff fans congregating across multiple platforms than Belle & Sebastian fans, many of whom felt closer allegiance to one community than others. These younger Belle & Sebastian fans were more inclined to share personal information and to deviate from discussion about the artists than the older Cliff fans.

As the internet has changed and fans have become older, the Belle & Sebastian fans have migrated away from the spaces they once used. The communities now appear more diasporic in nature, with interaction occurring in the realms of private correspondence or via forums with a wider interest, such as Anorak. Although the use social media, the extent to which platforms like Facebook and Twitter can foster a sense of fan community is unclear and would merit further study.

The Cliff Richard fan communities, however, remain relatively stable. Whilst the newsgroup and some fan sites have disappeared, the official forum and MoveIt mailing list remain popular – seemingly a combination of the singer’s continued productivity and the members’ age and enduring fandom (many belonged to offline fan communities before joining online ones). As these environments, unlike the Belle & Sebastian ones, were dominated by fan talk rather than personal chat, perhaps this also indicates a reason for their survival.

The nature of interaction and discussion here is similar in 2010-2011 to 2000-2001. Whilst these older fans use Web 2.0 in their fandom, particularly Facebook, YouTube and Wikipedia, they integrate their use of these technologies with continued membership of older communities. For them, fandom remains ‘an international community who all find a certain security in the company of like-minded people’ (Lowe 1999: 31), and an important, enduring part of their lives, which they negotiate changes in technology to pursue.

In this chapter, I have drawn together findings from a longitudinal study of internet use by two fandoms. It is hoped further studies of online fandom will adopt a longitudinal approach so we can begin to see the impact continually changing internet technologies have on the fan communities that develop online. In addition, it is hoped that further studies will be able to provide a much more nuanced and detailed analysis of the nature of fan communities on social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and YouTube than it has been possible to provide within this study. Whilst it is clear that there is still a strong motivation for fan talk for the Cliff Richard fans in my study, they do not use social media to engage in this activity, preferring older forms, and it would be worth exploring how newer, younger, fandoms than the two featured in this chapter are using the internet and its newer technologies, to express their fandom and connect with one another.

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