Personal networks and the social world of ordinary Star Trek fans: Method and first results

Daniel Chamberlain
School of Arts, Media and Culture, Griffith University
Daniel.Chamberlain@student.gu.edu.au

Malcolm Alexander
School of Arts, Media and Culture, Griffith University
M.Alexander@griffith.edu.au

Abstract
The fans of the science fiction franchise, Star Trek, are known as ‘Trekkies’ and are the only fan subculture to have an entry in the OED. This paper reports on a study of ‘ordinary’ Star Trek fans. The methodology uses in-depth interviews coupled with a study of respondents’ egonets (their circle of close contacts). We discuss issues associated with the use of these two techniques and report the main findings of the study. We find that Star Trek is an important part of the social world of these ordinary fans but that each fan is selective, in individual ways, about sharing their Star Trek interest with close contacts.

Introduction
The fans of Star Trek are known as “Trekkies”, the only fan subculture to have an entry in the OED. The obsessive behaviours of the fans and their devotion to the text have made Trekkies the subject of a number of studies in a variety of fields. There have been studies into the organisation of fan clubs and their influence on the production of Star Trek. Cultural, critical and literary studies have examined the text of Star Trek to better understand what makes it a cultural object of such significance for so many (Oglesbee 2004; Short 2003; Geraghty 2003). Researchers have looked at the politics of conventions where different groups fight for prominence and exposure (Bacon-Smith 2000). Cultural and literary studies have examined the ways in which fans interact with the text (Sandvoss 2005) and the textual poaching which may serve as the beginnings for other creative enterprises (Jenkins 1992). Anthropological studies have compared Star Trek fans with religious movements (Jindra 1994), and cultural studies have compared fan groups to cults (Hills 2000; Hills 2002).
Many studies of Star Trek occur in the broader literature on “media fandom” (Tulloch and Jenkins 1995; Bacon-Smith 2000), though it isn’t always identified as such. Studies into media fandom deal with the fans of dozens of TV shows and movies including Star Trek. Studies into popular music cultures are also a closely related field in that they also examine fans that make a text a significant part of their lives, and the various social manifestations of this fandom (Bennett 2001; Bennett 2000).

My research into Star Trek began almost a year ago, in an undergraduate class designed to teach the practical interview skills that a budding sociologist needs. The choice of Star Trek was an easy one; I needed something I could talk to a stranger about knowledgeably that would sustain my interest for more than fifteen minutes. Early in the research process it became clear that the interest in these interviews was the place of Star Trek in the respondents’ social worlds. Their stories prompted research questions such as “how do partners and family members influence a nascent interest in Star Trek?” and “what role does Star Trek play in people’s active personal relationships?” The initial in-depth interviews I conducted all contained statements about the role of Star Trek in the respondents’ social relations. The first respondent talked about Star Trek being one of many strands in a close friendship; the second respondent stated that Star Trek was something that her father had discussed long before she became a fan; the third stated Star Trek was something father and daughter went and saw together. The fourth respondent had became interested in Star Trek because his siblings were involved, and stated that a common interest in Star Trek was enough to form a bond with a stranger from which a friendship could grow.

Along with the four initial interviews, I have to date conducted eleven more. Four of these conducted at a Star Trek convention held in Melbourne in February 2005¹. These four fans provide a counterpoint to the “ordinary” fans I have studied as they have significantly greater levels of involvement. Of the eleven ordinary fans I have interviewed only a couple of the interviewees had ever been to a convention, none of them belonged to fan clubs or used the Star Trek universe as an outlet for their own creativity. Only one respondent has indicated that they collect memorabilia and models, and only one has ever written a letter to the producers of the show. The most remarkable fan behaviour among the eleven was one respondent’s extensive and
expensive collection of Star Trek television series (though not movie) DVDs. The majority of people I have interviewed are simply fans who enjoy the show for a multitude of reasons, and who like to watch the TV series or movies by themselves or with family and friends and, occasionally, discuss them quietly with a small group of people. The ordinary fans can be defined as “ordinary” because of their lack of involvement in the subculture of Star Trek. They do not join clubs, go to conventions (except on a rare occasion), nor create stories, songs or scripts based on the text of Star Trek, nor form friendships and relationships around common interests in Star Trek. They exhibit none of the behaviours associated with the stereotypical Star Trek fan.

This picture of Star Trek as a part of the normal family life and social world of ordinary people presents a very different picture from the stereotype of “Trekkies”. Trekkies are commonly thought of as embodying the stereotypical characteristics of the Star Trek fan; obsessive attention to trivial detail, inability to function socially (except with other Star Trek fans), etc.² The term is often applied by outsiders as a label to marginalise those they see behaving in a manner they consider abnormal. Though the term has been adopted by a large proportion of Star Trek fans it is the “abnormal” nature of Star Trek fandom that forms the focus of academic studies. Although these studies into Star Trek fans do not apply directly to the group of ordinary fans I am studying they are, nevertheless, relevant to their lives. The Trekkie phenomenon is part of popular culture, and there are very strong popular stereotypes about Trekkies. The often quoted Saturday Night Live sketch of William Shatner telling a room full of Star Trek nerds to “get a life” is typical of popular opinion about Star Trek fans. These popular stereotypes are thus part of the context within which my respondents must build their social relations. They may avoid the stereotypes, but they are nevertheless conscious of them.

My research is thus about how Star Trek has a place in the social relations and imaginative life of the “ordinary” fans. In this it is most like work done on ‘unremarkable cultural consumption’, or ‘leisure consumption’ (Warde and Tampubolon 2002). I explore this question initially through a semi-structured interview schedule based on my initial collection of four in-depth interviews. The
interviews allow me to explore their views on Trekkies and the popular stereotypes of Star Trek fandom as a constituent element of their social world. The second major element of my research is a social network analysis of the immediate social circles of my respondents, their “egonets”, in social network terminology. In this paper we [Chamberlain and Alexander] discuss my experiences in undertaking the egonet part of my research. I undertook this aspect of the study to ascertain whether these ordinary Star Trek fans were socially isolated “nerds” in ways that the popular stereotype suggests, and to provide a second perspective on the answers given in the interviews.

The egonet method.

Egonet social network studies focus on the circle of people around an individual; the two main exemplars of the egonet approach are Claude Fischer (1982) and Barry Wellman (1999). Data collection for egonet studies is straightforward. At the end of the semi-structured interview I explain to the interviewee what I am attempting to achieve with the social network questions, illustrated by showing an example of a social network diagram.

The first step is to ask the interviewee to name the people in their immediate network. These names are the ego’s network of close ‘alters’. How names are gathered is a very important methodological issue in egonet studies and is dubbed the ‘name generator’ problem. In a behavioural study a long list of questions will be asked to elicit as many names as possible, in order to allow the researcher to map how the respondent actually relates to their network alters. In this study I have asked a short set of name generators. However, my concern is not with network behaviour but rather a desire to understand how the respondent perceives their network of friends.

In each interview I asked respondents to list the persons they consider closest to them, this becomes their ‘intranet’. I then asked them to list the people they considered to be their friends. Thirdly I asked them to list any people with whom they maintain or try to maintain regular contact, and any family members and people with whom they have infrequent contact but consider significant. This provides a rough approximation of the extent of the subject’s egonet circle of close relations, friends and significant
contacts. Importantly for this study the names generated are those the respondent considers to be significant to them, despite the fact that it is far from being a comprehensive census of their total egonet.

The second step is to find out more about the relationships between the interviewee and the people they nominate as close. Egonet studies look at the composition of the close alters: how many are immediate kin, how many distant kin, how many are friends, co-workers etc.

The third aspect of egonet studies is the study of network density. This is the measure of how many of ego’s alters know one another. If most of the alters know the others it is a dense egonet, if only a few do, it is a sparse egonet. To get this information the subject is asked to estimate how well each pairing of close friends know one another.

I asked respondents to code how they perceive these connections in line with the initial questions, a “zero” indicates that pair of alters have never met, a “one” indicates a distant relationship, a “two” indicates a meaningful relationship and a “three” indicates a close relationship. From this I can then estimate the number of people in egonets, and determine the density and average strength of the intranet (close) ties.

The egonet study also allowed me to find out specific details about the place of Star Trek in the interviewees separate relationships. At the end of the egonet data collection each respondent is asked whether they discuss Star Trek with each of the people in their intranet.

The benefits of this additional level of analysis are numerous. They provide a way of verifying the answers given in the semi-structured interview. It can be seen that those interviewees who talked about Star Trek being a family oriented activity also indicate that they have discussed Star Trek with certain family members included in their intranet, but not with anyone else. It can be shown that general claims may not be true. Jeri³ was asked whether she had ever felt alienated or socially awkward because of her interest in Star Trek. Jeri laughed and stated firmly “No. I wouldn’t care”. Yet when asked if she had discussed Star Trek with members of her intranet Jeri laughed and said “No, you couldn’t”. This gives meaning to the guarded conditionality of her interview response.
Another benefit comes from comparing the social networks of multiple interviewees. In the instance of brothers Michael and Jonathan, both have indicated that they feel close to James. However, Jonathan indicated that he has discussed Star Trek with James while Michael indicated he has not. The reasons for this can be deduced from the interview content, Michael is a past fan who no longer actively seeks new episodes or texts to peruse; Jonathan made no such indication that he is no longer actively involved as a fan. The egonet diagrams also provide further information into the differences of Jonathan and Michael: Michael has a larger circle of close members than Jonathan but has limited his discussion of Star Trek to his siblings. Jonathan on the other hand has included everyone in his close circle. From this it can be deduced that Jonathan finds Star Trek a more useful tool for interacting with his peers than Michael does.

I reinterviewed Michael about his egonet to verify this finding. At this later time there were some significant and some subtle changes. The number of people in Michael’s egonet dropped from 29 to 23, because Michael chose not to include extended family this time around. The intra-network size reduced from seven to six, and the density changed from 93% to 100% (an introduction of one person to Michael’s parents). The average strength of the intranet ties rose from two to two point one nine. James was not included at all, despite having been a ‘close friend’ in the first interview. This indicates a change in the perception of their relationship, which Michael put down to James not having enough time for him. I asked if he had ever talked about Star Trek with James to make sure I hadn’t made an error the first time, Michael replied “I’m sure that it’s come up in a conversation or something, but no, I haven’t talked about it with him”.

Methodological issues in the egonet study.

The application of egonet techniques in my study has revealed some interesting problems with the technique. In the next section of the paper we comment on the things we have learnt about egonet studies from the research.

Michael’s results highlight one of the issues with egonet studies. Twelve of the names on Michael’s original interview do not appear on the updated version, which
have been replaced by six new names. This is a significant change in the larger network that has occurred over a ten week period. This shift occurs because of the change in Michael’s attitude towards certain people at the time. If the questionnaire were designed to be an exploration of the respondents’ behavioural personal network then it is highly likely that all the names on both sets of egonets would be included, with the probable addition of a number of others as well. A name generator of that sort would be less affected by the changed network perceptions of Michael.

One problem comes from inaccuracies in the reporting of names. This is the problem of recall accuracy. For instance Kate named her extensive family but neglected to include her mother in her egonet. Leonard and William are close friends who were interviewed by myself, and included each other in their intranets, but neither mentioned the others partner, despite their relationships existing for well over a decade. When I asked William about this he replied that Leonard’s partner wasn’t significant because there was almost no interaction to speak of between them. This is another standard issue in the egonet study; the questions produce an estimate of the significant members of a subject’s social network. Thus a respondent might have frequent contact with someone but not consider them as being part of their social network. For the purposes of this study this is not a problem as I am most interested in the people considered significant by the interviewees.

A third issue is the different motivations of respondents in providing names. Robert has a very large personal network that he organises to a very high degree to help him manage the large number of people that he interacts with. The interview went quite well, and he was more than willing to attempt the egonet questionnaire, despite the daunting size of the task. He gave each of the questions much more scrutiny than any other interviewee, and was very careful in considering who fit the descriptions of the questions I asked. For that reason he indicated only his immediate family in his intranet. For Robert, Star Trek is primarily a family affair, it is something they explore as a family and talk about as a family. But in the course of the interview Robert also indicated that he had discussed Star Trek with other members of his social network beyond his intranet. This is not indicated by Robert’s egonet diagram based, as it is, just on his intranet.
Results

So what has my qualitative research into ordinary fans shown, and how did the egonets help us to explore these results? Firstly there is a high level of social, ethical and political analysis that is a part of being interested in the text; only one of the interviews conducted to date has made no reference to the text’s exploration of issues and themes that are felt to be intentionally representative of issues in contemporary society. This exploration is the reason most frequently given for the interviewee’s sustaining an interest in the text, and often as the basis for conversations with friends about the text. This is not something that can be substantiated through the egonet study as it stands, as this relates to the personal motivations of the respondent and a quality of the social relationship that is difficult to test for; hence it has not been discussed.

Secondly, becoming an ordinary Star Trek fan is often a social process; most interviewees have cited family members (parents, siblings and partners) as having a role in introducing them to Star Trek or science fiction in general. Six interviewees have specifically cited a family member as the reason they became interested in Star Trek. The occasions when the interviewee indicated that a family member sparked their nascent interest was supported by egonet information.

Thirdly, the interviewees attitudes to Star Trek fans, feelings of alienation or social awkwardness because of Star Trek, and the extent to which they discuss Star Trek with their personal network is highly variable. Kate vigorously defended Star Trek fans, more than any other interviewee, and has discussed Star Trek with seven of the twelve members of her intranet, yet she is reluctant to discuss Star Trek with her colleagues because she feels it is not a respectable area of interest for an academic in her field. William had the harshest criticism of fans, but has discussed Star Trek with thirteen out of fourteen people in his intranet, and indicated that there were more people that could be added. Michael and Jonathan both have almost identical generally positive views of fans, with the same humorous reaction to the more extreme type of fan and the same feeling that there were some social situations in which it would be unwise to discuss Star Trek for fear of the general reaction.
Michael has discussed Star Trek with only three out of the seven/six members of his intranet and Jonathan has discussed Star Trek with all five of his intranet members.

Star Trek is a part of people’s social networks. The egonets refine and occasionally supersede the responses in the interviews. All of the egonets collected have indicated at least one person with whom Star Trek has been discussed. A common interest in Star Trek links people from all walks of life, despite the fact that it is often a minor interest in the grand scheme of things. The respondent’s might interact with the text only on a personal basis, but Star Trek will then be used in interacting with others in a social setting. The extent to which this occurs is not easy to determine, it might be a result of relative levels of involvement in the text, it might be a result of the significance it plays in forming social relations. It is clear that many restrict discussion of the text based on a fear of negative reception, despite claiming that they are unconcerned with what people think about Star Trek fans. It is also clear that negative views on Star Trek fans do not impact on the extent to which the text is used on a social level.

Footnotes

1. Sans Spock ears. They didn’t look professional, and they made it hard to hear.
2. There are numerous references in the literature to fans using the alternative label “Trekkers”, rather than ‘Trekkies’. ‘Trekkers’ is seen as having no pejorative connotations. However this is a distinction that was made only once in the course of the interviews.
3. All names are fictitious. Any resemblance to the names of the cast from the Star Trek television series’ is entirely intentional.

References


*TASA 2005 Conference Proceedings*


