Fanthropology Part 1 with Meredith Levine
Ologies Podcast
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Oh heeey, it's that TBT pic from when you wore baggy jeans and shell necklaces, Alie Ward. I'm back with a pop-cultural, psychological episode. It's going to become very dear to your heart because it's about *why* something is dear to your heart.

First, you're dear to me, Patrons. Thanks for paying a dollar or more a month to submit your questions to ologists. Thanks to everyone who talks and tweets about the show. Thanks to everyone leaving reviews, of which I read every single one and churn one back at you, such as this one written this week by Michigander Lady TLav, who wrote:

> *Yeah! Love Ologies!*
>
> *While sitting in my car in the elementary school pick up lane I was listening to Ologies with my windows down, and as another mom walked by, she shouted, "Hey! That's Ologies!!" I got so excited to happen upon another Ologite in the wild I became flummoxed and could only reply, "Yeah! Love Ologies!"*
>
> *Finding your own people – So fun.*

Lady TLav, so timely! You have no idea.

Fanthropology, let's do this episode. You ready? Fanthropology is indeed a real term. It was coined by Kristen Longfield, a marketing strategist who used to work at Trailer Park. They make movie trailers and they have a very confusing name if you are not in the entertainment business. But the 'fan' part of fanthropology comes from the word 'fanatic', which stemmed from the Latin for a temple or a sacred place. Fanatic meant 'insanely but divinely inspired'. But we have been using it to mean a person who hella digs something since the mid-1600s, long before we had TV series to gobble up and comic books to love. Although, let's be honest, illuminated manuscripts from the Middle Ages? Kind of like comic books, but with more horses, and demon babies, and gold leaf.

Either way, this ologist happened to meet my now-fiancé a year or two ago, and he demanded her business card to give me, and I have wanted to record this episode at least for a year. We're both LA-based and we kept waiting for the pandemic to pass, but alas, we just recently recorded over the phone. It was such a compelling and interesting look at why we love what we love. We talked for nearly two hours! Didn't even take a pee break, to be honest. I just adore her.

She studied Communication and Culture at Indiana University (Go Hoosiers!) and got her master's at UCLA in Critical Media Studies and Fan Studies. She has been consulting and on staff as an anthropologist and a researcher at marketing firms and entertainment companies. She runs her own, called Random Machine. We talked so long about so many things that y'all love that I could not cut this down into a single episode. So, feast your ears on a delicious two-parter. Next week we're going to dive in even more into stans versus fans, where's the line? Shipping people, toxic fandoms, formulas on attaining internet fame.

In this episode you're about to hear, we lay all the groundwork. Talking about the history of fandoms, what a fandom even is, Disneybounding, her favorite things, and sports versus art fanatics, K-pop politics, Trekkies, *Star Wars* prequels, the curse of the algorithm, what to do when your favorite books are penned by problematic trolls, creating your own fanbase, self-identifying,

morality, all kinds of stuff. So cozy up and get to know and love Behavioral Researcher and legit professional-on-her-business-card, unironically, Fanthropologist Meredith Levine.

Meredith Levine: I am Meredith Levine and my pronouns are she/her.

Alie Ward: Great! Now, you are a fanthropologist.

Meredith: I am!

Alie: You're the first fanthropologist I have ever heard of. Are you the only one on Earth?

Meredith: I am by no means the only one on Earth. In fact, the title is not even of my origin. The title, I heard… While I was still in graduate school, I went to a session with a woman named Kris who was working at Trailer Park at the time, who now has her own consultancy called Fanthropology. And it matched onto what I was studying at the time and I said, "Hey! I want to do that for a living." So it stuck with me for the last ten years of my professional career.

Alie: It's so perfect. I love that it just says everything, and it also is anthropological, right?

Meredith: It is! And I use a lot of mixed methods research in my work. Increasingly I'm using a lot of analytics dashboards on social platforms, but I have done participant observation, I have done quantitative research. I've done survey design and focus groups, and all sorts of other methods that researchers would use in the field, and a lot of it is qualitative interpretation and very anthropological.

Alie: Are you a fan of any particular thing that you feel like really has grasped your heart?

Meredith: Yes. And my origin story of Fanthropology dates back to age 13 with a research project in middle school. So, there's a long history there as far as the professional interest is concerned. But my current fandoms are a little sad right now, as are many people's fandoms, because I'm a fan of Disney theme parks.

Alie: [*sad agony*] Ah! And it's off limits.

Meredith: So, they're a little sad right now, but that's okay. It needs to be in order to be safe. Increasingly, I'm fans of fewer things just because of the nature of the experience of being a fan and how tied it is into identity. So, I like to say I'm a fan of fans. And my two biggest fandoms are Disney theme parks and Nerdfighteria, which is the fandom centered around the internet properties of John and Hank Green, especially the Vlogbrothers.

Aside: Hank and John Green, if you don't know of them, have built a bit of a media empire after starting a vlog channel together in 2007, and they now have several channels under their umbrella, like Hank's *SciShow*. They're also both prolific writers. John is the author of *The Fault in Our Stars*. They have many titles between them. And they fundraise for their charity which is called The Foundation to Decrease World Suck, and they are essentially trying to make the internet closer to the happiest place on Earth.

Along those lines:

Alie: Have you ever Disneybounded?

Meredith: I have Disneybounded, and I've also done cosplay. And one of my favorite personal fan memories is that several years back I did a costume of the tightrope walker from the Haunted Mansion ride.

Alie: Oh my god! [*laughs*]

Meredith: And I went during Halloween, which is one of the only times where, when you get the extra ticket, adults can wear costumes in the park.

Alie: [*excited squeal*]

Meredith: So, I got to wear the costume in front of the Haunted Mansion, and I have some great photos from that.

> **Aside:** This tightrope walker, I looked it up, is in a petticoated dress and holds a parasol, and when the elevator drops – spoiler alert for the Haunted Mansion – you see that she's balanced on a rope right above the gaping jaws of a gator. What a costume!

Meredith: I'm not a professional cosplayer by any means or a professional Disneybounder, but yes, I have done those things.

Alie: Would you ever want any of your ashes scattered in the Haunted Mansion, even knowing that someone would just vacuum it up at the end of the day?

Meredith: No, because I know that people vacuum it up at the end of the day.

Alie: [*laughs*] Aww! They know that, though! At this point, they know that… maybe there might be an iota of them left, right?

Meredith: Yeah, and people try and do this a non-zero amount. One of the interesting things about the Haunted Mansion is their air filtration system is so good that they have to keep faking the dust.

Alie: Ah!

Meredith: It's genuinely a really great air filtration system. [*laughs*]

Alie: So, you're 13 years old… When I was 13, digital media did not exist. We had, like, laserdiscs or something. But at 13, what was your middle school project?

Meredith: So, I went to a middle school in Los Angeles, and we had a project called the I-Search, which was designed to teach us about research methodologies. It was a year-long project where we got to choose our topic and then proceed to research it with a list of methodologies we had to do with, like, minimum levels of kinds of sources, and do primary research and secondary research. And at the time, the first three *Harry Potter* books had come out and… Mind you, I was not doing a research project on *Harry Potter*. I was doing a research project on *Harry Potter* fandom. [*clip of Ron Weasley: "One person couldn't feel all that. They'd explode!"*]

And I could sense that there was a "there" there because of the midnight book parties that were starting to happen at bookstores and the way it was sweeping through students at the school. So, my 12 or 13-year-old self went the route of, "Clearly we like this because it taps into archetypal characters and personality types," which was the angle I went for as 13-year-old me. Which, as 30-something-year-old me, I was not super far off.

Alie: Nice!

Meredith: Because of the way that archetypal characters cater to our abilities to project our identities into them, it turns out the fandom is very identity-based. But that's where it started. I knew there was a "there" there. I read the only two non-fiction, full-length books about *Harry Potter* at the time. One was a guidebook to all of the, like, Wiccan and witchcraft references. And the other was a how-to-teach-it-in-school sourcebook for English teachers.

Alie: You know, we did a Potterology episode about a chemist in Nebraska who uses Potter spells to talk about high-level chemistry, which is really cool.

Meredith: That is really cool!

Alie: Yeah, she's very passionate about it.

Aside: Sidenote: I have since added a disclaimer on that episode's show notes that says:

> *Since this episode was first released, J.K. Rowling has said and written some deeply transphobic sentiments, and for this, Alie no longer stands nor supports her. So in listening to this episode, let's marvel at the ologist herself and her love of chemistry and remember that feminism is intersectional, trans women are women, and trans folks are welcome and beloved in the Ologies universe.*

Okay. Let's talk about fictitious people.

Alie: When you talk about archetypal characters, is there some basis... or is there some correlation between what personalities psychologists find? Like, you know, ENJR... or whatever?

Meredith: Yeah, the Myers-Briggs-type stuff?

Alie: Yes! Thank you.

Meredith: So, I haven't gone the psychological route, but I had the opportunity to work on an amazing study in 2016 under the guidance of a business anthropologist named Susan Kresnicka. She's amazing and a genius. And we did a yearlong study of fans and fandom about what the experience of being a fan is at its most essential levels, and how being fans differ depending on what you're a fan of. The framework we used for that was Moral Foundations Theory, the framework established by Jonathan Haidt in his book *The Righteous Mind*.

Aside: For a deeper dive, I'll link that Johnathan Haidt book, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion*.

But as for right now, I will just scream, "YES! WHY WHY WHY WHY THOUGH" into the sky. And Meredith explains:

Meredith: And so, fandoms do differ based on the way they perceive morality in the world. Fandom is a proxy for our identities. So where do archetypal characters fit in? Our abilities to see ourselves reflected or our future selves reflected. Because aspects of identity are different depending on what people are fans of. So, sports fandom has a very interesting sense of placemaking that media fandom and music fandom do not necessarily have.

Alie: And what is placemaking, exactly?

Meredith: It's ties to space. So with sports fans, often they are fans because they were born into it based on where they group up. I'm saying "they" because I'm not specifically a sports

fan, but I totally understand it because it's where you grew up. Oftentimes people are born into it and it's a family tradition, in which case, being a fan of a team from home helps contribute to a sense of "home."

We've also seen in some of the research that we did, that sports fans will also adopt new teams if they're moving to new homes as a way to feel more at home in the new place they're in and connect with other people who are in that new place.

Alie: Have you ever done any studies on why sports fanatics in general use the first-person plural when… like, "We're going to win," or "they're going to win." *We're* at home eating nachos. *We* are absolutely not doing any physical exertion. Why is it a 'we're?

Meredith: Because it's such a proxy for identity. Like, going down the street wearing a jersey; you see someone else wearing the same jersey and there's a sense of kinship there. Same thing with, like, if you're on a date or at a networking mixer or something and someone's wearing jewelry that's oddly specific to a very niche thing and you notice. We're finding our like-minded people and expressing ourselves.

The way we use fandom… and this was such an interesting thing from this study. Oftentimes it's to express ourselves, but also to build community and create self-care rituals.

Alie: Oh! Self-care rituals? Really?

Meredith: Yeah, like mood regulation and experiencing feelings in a safe way as preparation for real-world feelings and exploring new feelings, as a way to get a full range of human emotions. One of the frameworks we thought of in the beginning that's often talked about in the fan studies discourse is if fandom is a proxy for religion. There are reasons why they're similar. There are reasons why they're different.

Aside: Meredith says that while sports might make you feel belonging to a certain set of values about right or wrong or particular rituals, religion requires, for the most part, unwavering faith. And spirituality and religion also address things like life after death, philosophies you're not going to get from wearing a hat shaped like cheese.

Alie: Oh my gosh, I have so many questions for you! I'm so sorry! [*laughs*] This is so interesting!

Meredith: Oh, ask! Ask! You can edit this part out, but I've got nothing but time today. So, as much time as you want to take, I am happy to chat.

Aside: That's right, my babies. This is going to be a two-parter about why we love things.

Alie: Okay, I'm going to double back. Exactly what is fandom? Such a basic question, but what is it? How do you define, like, just liking something versus being a fan?

Meredith: So, we asked that question in Susan's research. And one can like something and not be a fan of it, and one can identify as a fan of it. Fandom is the portmanteau of fanatic and kingdom, where -dom is the suffix of, like, 'realm of'. It was first used in religious contexts, and then it was used in baseball, and now it's used mostly in media. So, fandom has a few different definitions. There's Fandom with a capital F when you're saying, 'The Fandom,' which is generally in reference to a group of media fans who express a certain set of behaviors that largely revolve around transformative works in cultures, and fan labor, and creativity. This is when you think of, like, fan fiction, and shipping, and that

sort of thing is associated with the Fandom, which can be IP specific or in general based on these practices.

But then you have fandom, which can be a proxy for the experience of being a fan (because that's a mouthful), or any community of fans. So, not all sports fans will say they're part of a fandom. They'll say they're a fan of this thing. Whereas fandom is more commonly used in those spaces of transformative works and cultures.

Aside: Like books and movie franchises.

Alie: That makes sense. When it comes to those archetypes and identities, do you find that there are certain archetypes that keep getting repeated? Like, do you remember the show *Gilligan's Island*? Have you ever heard this theory?

Meredith: Yeah. No, please tell me the theory.

Alie: The theory that each of the seven people on *Gilligan Island* represents a sin from the Bible, from sloth to greed…

Aside: I'm going to run through these really fast. Coveting – Mr. Howell. Anger – Mrs. Howell. Lust – Ginger. Gluttony – The Skipper. Envy – Mary Ann. Sloth – Gilligan. And Pride – the Professor. Pride is also vanity, which I didn't know, but that's what asides are for.

Alie: So, it's like they all represent a sin and they're in purgatory. I don't know if you've ever heard that.

Meredith: That's a great theory. I'm following so far.

Alie: [*laughs*] But are there certain, kind of, stamps of people that, when people are creating fictional works, they know this is a part of our personality that is going to really identify with this character? Do we identify with all the characters because of different facets within ourselves? Or do people typically find a character that they say, "I'm a Hans Solo"?

Meredith: "I'm a Carrie."

Alie: A Carrie! Exactly.

Meredith: Yeah, it's so personal. It's so personal because it's how someone sees themselves. Right now my husband and I are watching *Frasier* for the first time as adults. [*clip from Frasier: "Good evening, Dr. Crane." "Doctor Sternin. Nice to see you again."*]

And everyone there is so relatable to us, but I can also understand how that's not the case for a lot of people. So, it really depends on sense of self, and how people conceive of themselves, and how their identities change over time, and how their values systems change over time. For example, I am a Hermione but also I'm not a Gryffindor.

There's seeing yourself in characters, but then there's also the world-building and the negative space to play around in. One of the things that we love about *Frasier* right now is how much negative space there is. So, in the history of fan studies, one of the typical examples of "more is not always better, sometimes more is just more," is midi-chlorians.

Alie: What's a midi-chlorian?

Meredith: In *Star Wars*. It's from the prequels.

Alie: Oh!

Aside: [*clip from Star Wars Episode I*]

> *Qui-Gon Jinn: Midi-chlorians are a microscopic life form that resides within all living cells.*
>
> *Anakin:They live inside me?*
>
> *Qui-Gon Jinn: Inside your cells, yes. And we are symbionts with them.*
>
> *Anakin:Symbionts?*
>
> *Qui-Gon Jinn: Life forms living together for mutual advantage. Without the midi-chlorians, life could not exist and we would have no knowledge of the Force. They continually speak to us telling us the will of the Force.*

So, from what I gather, your midi-chlorians are kind of like your microbiome, but instead of good poops and more serotonin, you can, like, perform telekinesis.

Now, you can check out the Microbiology episode to learn how your gut party works on Earth if you are not a Jedi Knight. And Jarrett would also like to add that midi-chlorians sounds too much like mitochondria and he thinks it's too on-the-nose! Like, "Augh! Come on!" Right, Jarrett?

[*Jarrett in the background*] "That is what I think! Thank you."

[*back to Alie*] Cool. [*laughs*]

Meredith: People did *not* want to know how the force worked. We did not need this information! This was too much information because it squeezed out room for imagination. It squeezed all of the imagination out of it. We did not need a canonical explanation of why the Force exists, because our conceptions of it and thoughts around it were doing so much of a service to fans that the explanation was, one, worse than what we would think of, and two, filling in this vital negative space where fans can project and imagine.

Alie: Ah! Got it. That makes so much sense. So, *Frasier* has a lot of negative space?

Meredith: It has a lot of negative space. It's a show with, like… We're halfway through season one, and one of the character's wives is referenced, and we never meet her and we don't see her. She's just talked about while she's not in the room. There's a lot of negative space there to imagine and play. The same is true… This is why a lot of, like, multiverse, time-travel genre fare also… It's one of the reasons why I think that pulls so much fandom, because when you have that, when you have a very nebulous metaphor for others and outsiders, as aliens tend to be, there's infinite possibilities to play.

Alie: Right. Is that why maybe sci-fi, and, you know, *Star Trek*, *Star Wars*, *Rick and Morty* have, maybe, a more engaged or zealous fandom? Because it lets their mind run around within the universe?

Meredith: Yes, and also infrastructure. So, *Star Wars* and *Star Trek* have two different kinds of infrastructure built around them, and fan scholars will all cite a book called *Enterprising Women* about the history of female *Star Trek* fans and the role of that.

Aside: This was the 1992 publication *Enterprising Women: Television Fandom and the Creation of Popular Myth* by Camille Bacon-Smith, who examined how fanfiction written by women was often derided. And even prominent, proficient, or heroic female characters have been frowned upon as being too unrealistic. And this trope is called a

Mary Sue, and it's a complex issue in fanfic circles, I found out, by reading too many blogs.

Meredith: But oftentimes, finding fans in the '70s and '80s of nerd culture stuff, it was still a time when well-roundedness in people was a desired trait, as opposed to being well-lopsided. Whereas, in a narrow-casted world where everything is niche, being well-lopsided can be a way to find a community. So, sci-fi also has this culture of gathering and of sharing; 'zines, and home edits of VHS tapes, and having conventions. Pulp and science fiction literature have had conventions since, like, the early 1900s. So, there were gathering places and ways to meet people who were similar to you.

And with that came a lot of safe havens for people who may not have had other safe-havens. Like the comic book shop was a place for nerds to go and be welcome. [*clip from The Simpsons, Comic Book Guy: "Someone has mixed an Amazing Spider-Man in with the Peter Parker, The Spectacular Spider-Man series! This will not stand!"*] As opposed to school or home where that may not have been the case. And so there is this community-building element to it as well.

Alie: And how do you feel about the sustainability of that community building as niche? Is there any part of you that's watched geek culture and nerd culture be commodified to where it's no longer something that is a subculture?

Meredith: Yeah. This is in parallel with media history. So, sports fandom can be inherited because sports teams have been around long enough to be inherited. We're just now hitting the point where media franchises can be inherited. So, Disney has been inherited for generations. Like, go to Disneyland, go to Disneyworld, and grandparents are just as much fans as their four-year-old grandchildren. So there's a lot of longevity there because it's intergenerational and can be taught from parent to child and part of home culture. Whereas sports fandom generally was part of home culture; it was broadcast on televisions, or people would gather in bars. So there's that.

But now we're hitting a point in media history and media distribution where something that wasn't on the air or isn't on the air anymore can discover new fandom…

Aside: For example, bingeing old *Frasier* episodes at the touch of a button without needing a film archivist and a dusty projector.

Meredith: … or is around in franchise form to be discovered and rediscovered by generation after generation. So, now we're in the point where media can be big, more mainstream fandoms in general. Especially with properties that have been around for more than ten years that have robust cultures around them that are pretty easy to find somebody else who likes those things, à la *Star Trek*, *Star Wars*, *Dr. Who*, *Supernatural*. That sort of thing.

Alie: I forgot to ask. What *Harry Potter* house are you? You're not Gryffindor.

Meredith: I am not Gryffindor. I am… I'm a Ravenclaw, and if I had to pick a second house, it would be Slytherin.

Alie: [*laughs*] From my limited knowledge, I think you are a Ravenclaw. You're so, like, academic and brainy, and analytical, and smart. But that's me only knowing you for 15 or 20 minutes. But of my limited knowledge…

Meredith: I'm definitely a knowledge-for-the-sake-of-knowledge kind of person. And then, I think the secondary trait might be ambition, which gets a really bad rap according to Harry as an unreliable narrator.

And the things I could say about the *Harry Potter* fandom, of like, what happens when you have a body of work that trains a generation of people to be activists because of the themes in the text and, like, what it's actually representing to people at a young age, only to be expanded, commodified, and lose those activist undertones in the narrative itself, and also, like, the author. So, basically, a generation of fans were raised to be more liberal than the franchise was willing or able to sustain.

Alie: Yeah, greater than the sum of its parts, sort of.

Meredith: Yeah.

Alie: I was going to ask how you felt about that because I know so many people who grew up on it are… not disappointed, but devastated, rightfully, by the personal choices that the author's made, and opinions and platforms. Is there any kind of grief of identity or disillusionment that you have noticed or felt?

Meredith: *Yes.*

Alie: Yeah. [*"I'd call that a big yes."*]

Meredith: It's mourning the loss of what was a big part of one's identity because we have all these frameworks and all of this cultural shorthand amongst a generation of people who were raised on these texts who now have the question of, "Should this be an intergenerational IP?" Like, "Do I teach this to my children?" Where is the merit of the story versus all of the stuff surrounding the story? And what are the ethics of financially supporting an institution that people no longer agree with?

Alie: Mm-hm. I'm so disheartened by it and grossed out. But it's not woven into, necessarily, my history the way it is some other people's. But that was definitely a question we got from patrons, like, "What do you do?!" Especially since things like appropriating Indigenous language about spirit animals is, like, "Patronus" is a better way to say that. And now it's like, "Nnn!" you know? There's all these shorthands that felt like a safe, inclusive space that no longer feels that way, you know?

Meredith: Yeah, and the question is also, like, how much does the infrastructure behind the IP and the author impact the experience of the IP? And from a literate media perspective, the answer to that is a lot, because of the intersection of media, storytelling, and commerce. Like, do you support the *Fantastic Beasts* franchise as a result, or not? Do you continue to buy merch or not? Or do you only buy merch by, like, fan artists? Or to what extent is this artist making livelihoods? And where does all of that intersect? All of that is deeply personal, and very complicated, and I wish there was a good right answer. But the answer is, it's deeply personal and really complicated.

Aside: So, from what I understand, it's really complicated and deeply personal.

Alie: Real Talk: Would it be easier if she were… not alive still?

Aside: I'm not in any way talking about putting a hit on her, and I hope she knows what I mean. *Does* she know what I mean?

Alie: Do you know what I mean?

Meredith: Yeah.

Alie: The way it is to separate the art from the artist in posthumous works, you know?

Meredith: Yeah. I mean, maybe. There's also the, like, John Green notion of "books belong to their readers," like the author doesn't matter. Also, it depends on the kind of fan one is and if authorial intent matters. Or is only what matters what ended up on the page?

Alie: Right. That's so interesting. You know, you mentioned really early on something about a, kind of, moral parallel to the fandoms that you choose. Can you tell me a little bit more about that? What fandoms tend to have what ideals?

Meredith: Yeah. So, media fandoms tend to be a little bit more liberal and activist. Sports fandoms tend to be a little bit more conservative. Music fandoms tend to be very, like, live-and-let-live.

Alie: Okay! [*laughs*]

Meredith: Music fandoms also, like, really experience flow states from their fandoms.

Alie: Ooh! What does that mean?

Meredith: Like, a scholar whose name I'm about to butcher… Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi did a lot of research on flow states. And with music, it's easy to be at a concert or be listening to an album or something and feel the state of timelessness, effortlessness, sensory richness…

> **Aside:** This was discussed in the books *Stealing Fire* by Steven Kotler and Jamie Wheal, who called this flow state STER: Selflessness, like a sense of self disappears; Timelessness, hours just seem like minutes and microseconds can drag on and you can see them in vivid detail; Effortlessness; and R for Richness, gaining a lot of info and insight in really vivid detail. According to the book, getting into this flow state increases creativity and productivity by 400%. So, sick jams: The Cure for what ails us.

Meredith: When you have a moment when the world feels bigger than yourself and you feel connected as, like, just one tiny piece of this giant, electric experience of life and that everything just kind of melts away for a little bit. There's a book called *Stealing Fire* all about this and how people get to this state. Music is one of those things, or like adrenaline junkie-type things like BASE jumping or skydiving. So are… meditation is, like, the slow, long road. Drugs are the fast, dangerous road. There are a lot of ways to achieve this state and it's one of those states that people genuinely love being in.

Alie: Maybe because of that, do fanthropologists think that music fans are less judgmental?

Meredith: Yeah, a little bit. So, the internet also has changed a lot of that experience for some kinds of fans, depending on how internet literate they are and how organized and activist they are. So, like K-pop fans are really good… and this past year has shown just how good K-pop fans are at, like, organizing for something outside of the cause in order to wreak a little pro-social trolling on parts of the internet that they do not agree with.

Alie: Ah! Such goblins for good!

Meredith: Goblins for good! Yeah. They're a delight. They're a delight and a force not to be messed with.

Alie: Yes. Why is that? Why do you think they're so pro-social, so organized, so zealous? I have a niece (Sophia!) who is a big K-pop fan and… What do we find especially in that age group? Maybe it's gender-identifying specific. Is there a reason why K-pop just gets its hooks in people's hearts?

Meredith: So, I haven't done a ton of research on the subject, and I'm sure there are a lot of scholars in the fan studies community who have taken dives extensively into it. But from my more broad experience researching fandom, there's the internet nature of it, and… A concept that Henry Jenkins… I think it was Henry Jenkins who coined it, called 'Pop Cosmopolitanism', which is essentially being a citizen of the world and importing your culture from elsewhere. And that used to be very difficult in the days of anime, and manga, and like, coded VHS per-country code and needing to mail things. That used to be prohibitively difficult.

But with online spaces, it is now much, much easier. There's a lot more of an opening to what life is like in other places. I mean, K-pop and J-pop have a little bit more of, like, an androgenous culture about them. Asian countries are also a little bit more communally oriented. Part of it, I think, is just now. Like, this is all happening at a time when Gen Z has access to it.

I was at CES a couple years ago listening to a longitudinal study about generational differences, and Gen Z is different from preceding generations because of how pro-social they are. They are much more community oriented and much less individually minded than prior generations.

Alie: Is there any knowledge that you have on how they got that way? Because I feel like with the rise of social media in the last, you know, 13 or 15 years, there were so many drums being beaten about, like, "This is going to be the most narcissistic set of assholes the world has ever raised!" And then they're, like, the most pro-social! How did that happen?

Meredith: That's a great question. I think part of it has to do with thinking about the cultures of the generations around them and the world that they're inheriting. Like, I still was at the tail end of a generation who, like, played outside in the middle of my street with neighbor kids.

Alie: Me too.

Meredith: I don't know to what extent that happens now unsupervised. I don't have kids, but I would be curious from listeners of the pod, like, whether or not that's… I mean, covid aside. Pre-covid, is that still a thing that parents do? Because oftentimes with device culture, the device is the connectivity to friends in absence of geographic communities.

> **Aside:** I wondered: Do parents let their kids play outside? And in googling it, I found out that there are actually laws now making it illegal to just let your kids peace out and hit the park solo, despite crime rates being lower than they were, perhaps, a generation ago. And I don't have kids, I just have one very hairy daughter, and I have to watch her like a hawk outside so she doesn't feast on cat poo. So, we all have different challenges.

> Now, speaking of challenges in parenting, each week we donate to a cause of the ologist's choosing, and Meredith chose Partners in Health in the Sierra Leonean Ministry of Health's work to reduce maternal mortality in Sierra Leone's Kono District. That money will go toward everything from hiring more community health workers, to building and supplying a maternal care center of excellence, and a neonatal intensive care unit. And this effort was organized by the Vlogbrothers Green. More info can be found in the link in the show notes.

> That was made possible by sponsors of the show who I'm going to talk about for a second.

[*Ad Break*]

Okay. Back to our interview. So, Meredith continued saying that kids finding connection through devices is a double-edged sword. It's been great when we needed the physical distance of the last year in particular. But also, that the content delivered is controlled algorithmically by the platform itself.

Meredith: I could go on and on about algorithmic curation and its role in trends and culture, which is where a lot of my research is now.

Alie: Oof! Oh my gosh!

Meredith: This is where a lot of my research is now, like creator culture, and algorithmic trends, and how that shapes communities, and also how that shapes the creative process in influencer culture and parasocial relationships. That's where a lot of my research is.

Alie: Is the thesis that it's fucked? [*laughs*] Is that the basic thesis? That people are getting fucked by the algorithm?

Meredith: [*loaded sigh of frustration*] [*laughs*]

Alie: I feel very lucky that podcasts seem untouched by the algorithm, and I'm knocking on all of the wood possible. But it seems like The Algorithm is, like, capital T capital A. And it feels a little bit like a specter.

Meredith: So, yes and no. In prior media eras, there was commercial exchange for the piece of media in a lot of instances. Like movie tickets, or live shows, or something like that.

Aside: In the olden days, you paid dollars of money to see stuff.

Meredith: Such that having a good end product was the point. Media was a product. And some industries can get away with still treating it that way, especially because the metrics of success often come from a body of peers giving out awards, where metrics of success can be decoupled from commercial success.

Aside: Think movies and Oscars, maybe even streaming services that are ad-free and eligible for Emmys, and Academy Awards, and Golden Globes, and SAG Awards, and Tonys, and Grammys. So, prestige, trophies, bragging rights, facemasks that match your couture gown, and lots of publicity.

Meredith: But now we're in a place where the creation of media… Media is not the point. It's not a product, it's a process because the business models have changed in a lot of instances such that what matters is not the product, it's the process. Because what's happening is it's an industry of audience development where we're shifting into attention economics here of, like, what is the value of an audience who is receptive to messaging?

Alie: [*frustrated groan*] Aaah!

Meredith: This is where it's going to get meta and weird, I guess, because here I am talking about this to you, a professional creator, in front of an audience, who enjoys listening to you, and maybe would be happy to hear you read the phonebook.

Alie: I don't know about that, but… [*laughs*]

Meredith: But there's a lot that goes with that because there is the process of getting better over time. Where, like, the early work, if revisited, is noticeably worse than contemporary work.

Alie: Oh yeah! Oh for sure. Oh god.

Meredith: But that's part of the process and part of the point because there is this emotional ownership and stake in these businesses because the model is so transparent. It is: "Without an audience, this work would not exist." Versus if you're at a major film studio, there are a zillion layers between the audience and the creative process because media is viewed as a product, not a process. And so in those instances where media is a product not a process, it is absolutely counterintuitive to contemporary methods of distribution, namely algorithmically distributed platforms, because measurement is different.

Aside: In the amazing Futurology episode with *Flash Forward*'s Rose Eveleth, we talked about the adage coined by a guy named Andrew Lewis, who once mused via a comment on MetaFilter: "If you're not paying for it, you're not the customer. You are the product being sold." Attention economy, right there in a nutshell, folks, which is one reason why I love Patreon so much, but that's a whole other episode.

Meredith: Whether you're an advertiser measuring the impact of a campaign, or a creator measuring, like, success metrics for a YouTuber, or podcaster, or whatever, they're very different things. If you're concerned with opening box office weekend, that's timebound. It either hits or it doesn't, which is, essentially, the viral video strategy. It's either good or it isn't, straight out of the gate.

Aside: As opposed to the platforms providing distribution altering that distribution via algorithms to weigh the better-producing or emerging products, Meredith explains.

Alie: So, the person who is disseminating the product is, kind of like, putting their thumb on the scale. Sort of like, "Let's take eyeballs away from this which is getting mediocre eyeballs, and let's throw those eyeballs on *this* thing, which is getting a little bit better," to sort of propel it?

Meredith: Yeah, or like, some creator made a creative choice to do something different, and a fewer percentage of that audience stuck around to care about it. "Let's just stop showing that content to those people, because clearly they have stopped being interested regardless of any actions they have taken or not taken to indicate disinterest.

Alie: Yeah. That is so terrifying for creators because it's like, to grow as a creator and to keep your fanbase engaged, it seems like you do need to have growth, you do need to keep things interesting. But at the same time, if you take a creative risk that someone doesn't like, say 10% of people dip, you could fuck your whole career. [*pained laughter*]

Meredith: Well, temporarily.

Alie: Temporarily.

Meredith: Temporarily! Because with enough persistence, like, the rebuilding process happens. It's like the stock market, almost, of "stuff happens, and then people get spooked, and then new people show up again depending on what the thing is." In the 1970s, if you didn't like a creative decision on television, you had to write a letter to a studio! With no guarantee that anybody would read it.

Alie: [*laughs*] Yeah!

Meredith: And now, all that has to happen is a tweet. And if people are sufficiently unhappy, it's possible to community organize to get a lot of people to tweet.

I just read a book called *So You've Been Publicly Shamed*. Just read that one. And it's really interesting because it means that shame can be wielded by communities in any direction because that's one of the big tools that they have. Like, K-pop is really interesting right now because they're not wielding shame; they're wielding randomness. This whole, like, pictures of pancakes for the Million MAGA March thing? They're wielding internet culture to, like, derail things.

Alie: The pen is mightier than the sword, and the meme is mightier than the pen, is what we're learning. [*laughs*]

Meredith: Yeah. Pretty much.

Aside: Meredith says that businesses are starting to realize that the object of fandom, the influencer, or the TikTok star, wouldn't exist as a commodity without the fandom supporting, and flocking to, and fueling it. The pandemic brought this to light even further.

Meredith: We're starting to see this with sports a little bit because there are no stadiums with live sports fans. So now, like, where do they congregate? Where do they go? How do these businesses sustain themselves? And what happens to their licensing and merchandising divisions? There are all of these networks built up in these business models around communities being able to congregate and have these experiences. Now there's threat to identity as much as there is the ability to find, and choose, and build identity as well.

Alie: How do you feel about names for fandoms, like Trekkies, Twihards, Ologites, for example? I feel like that's something you can't name yourself but someone else can name it and then you go along with it. Where do those come from? How long have those been happening?

Meredith: I think it's really important, personally, to be able to address the community as a name. They come from a sense of community and a sense of wanting to actually belong. Ultimately, as humans, we all want to belong. So, I think it's a really important thing to have if it works. Like Beyoncé has the Beyhive, and there are Swifties. There are a lot of them, and sometimes they come from point-of-origin-unknown; possibly a journalist, possibly the fans themselves, possibly something someone said offhand as an object of fandom. I haven't dived super deep into the etymology of names of fandoms, but I think from a community-building perspective, it's important.

Alie: You know what would be amazing is if Vonnegut fans called themselves the Granfalloons. [*laughs*] Have you ever read a lot of Vonnegut?

Meredith: Only in school.

Alie: Vonnegut used to talk about how a granfalloon is a group of people who think they're connected but they're not, like Hoosiers. Like, "Ooh, are you a Granfalloon? I am as well!" But...

Aside: Okay, I just looked on the book website Goodreads, and there *is* a Kurt Vonnegut fan club, and they are called: The Kurt Vonnegut Fan Club. Okay.

Alie: This is a big question I feel like has come up in the last couple of years. People who are called famous for the sake of being famous, or famous for being famous. What is the difference between an influencer and a celebrity? I feel like "celebrity" is still a compliment, but an "influencer," there's something kind of snide about that. How does that come up in fanthropology?

Meredith: So, the whole study of celebrity and fame is almost like the inverse process of fanthropology, where fandom is concerned with the community and celebrity fame is objective fandom. But celebrity and fame generally refer to a person rather than, like, IP. So, one could be famous, or a celebrity… Helen Zaltzman on *The Allusionist* had a great episode of that.

> **Aside:** This was the October 2020 episode of *The Allusionist* titled, "Celebrity." It also happens to feature Hank Green as well. Hello, Hank!
>
> Also, for more of the just phenomenal Helen Zaltzman, you can listen to her *Ologies* episode, which is Etymology, and you can listen to me fanatic-girl over her.

Meredith: The other thing about celebrity and fame is oftentimes… One of the distinctions made that I really liked is, like, "Do you care about their personal lives or not?" Not everybody cares about their personal lives, just the work. Like, Jennifer Aniston is famous, but do we care about her personal life and would you buy a t-shirt with her on it?

> **Aside:** I mean… I do care about her personal life just a little bit. I just want for her to be happy and for tabloids to stop painting her – a fit, wealthy woman – as a tragedy because she didn't have a lot of babies and she went through a divorce. So yes, maybe I do care a tiny bit.
>
> And maybe I did google 'Jennifer Aniston t-shirts', and aside from the 98% of search returns that were just paparazzi photos of her wearing a thin shirt when it was apparently a little chilly out, I did find some shirts with her face on them. And earnestly, [*smiling so big*] there was one that was just wall-to-wall, all over, full-color print of various stages of Aniston and hairstyles. All her face. And no joke, I kind of want to wear this shirt, but I can't decide if it would be, like, post-post-post-ironic, or just too casually vulnerable. Anyway…

Meredith: That is totally up to you. [*Alie giggles*] And this is one of those magical things where, like, the community of people who care imbues the power. And to stop caring, like willfully stop caring, not just like fades-out-of-your-life stop caring, is really hard.

Alie: You do a lot of work, too, with brands and cultivating brands. When you look at fandoms of IP or of people, how do you translate that to, kind of, encourage, at least, authenticity?

Meredith: This is the brand loyalty question.

> **Aside:** I didn't even know this was my question. But I love Meredith so much for knowing that this was going to come up! She rules.

Meredith: How does it translate to brands? So, most people… many people will have brand loyalty but not identify as a fan because the brand is not a proxy for identity necessarily; like on-display proxy of identity.

> If you go into someone's house… which, I'm just that kind of nosy person who does. Like, back when there used to be dinner parties, I was the kind of person who would absolutely go look in the fridge of the host.

Alie: [*laughs*]

> **Aside:** I'm telling you: I love her.

Meredith: Because everything… From my perspective, what you own is also a proxy for a value system, which is why aesthetic, I think, has come up so much in, like, internet culture – like cottage core or bohemian – because it's the kind of thing that is a little bit more of a

beacon and there are some assumptions to be made of you based on brands. What does it mean if you have Tom's of Maine toothpaste? Is anybody going to be a fan of Tom's of Maine toothpaste? When I say this, I'm sure someone in the comments will be like, "Well, *I'm* a fan of Tom's of Maine toothpaste." But really? Or do you just like it and are using the word 'fan' as a proxy for the idea of liking something? Is it the kind of thing that you would wear merch for? Or talk to other people about?

So, there is brand loyalty, which largely has to do with, "Did you inherit the brand? Is it what you grew up with? Or does it serve a function for you such that other brands can't compete?" I was reading some white paper, I think, that was talking about how we inherit our mothers' tampon brands and something big has to be different… There either has to be, like, big innovation such that it makes it a markedly better product, or there is some other factor like price point that shapes a choice other than that choice, which I can say is true for me. And with toothpaste, it was true for me until my dentist recommended I use toothpaste for sensitive teeth, and then I deviated from my family's inherited brand because of a feature of the product.

And sometimes it can be about identity. So you have, like, Toms shoes and values-based brands, the whole concept of a benefit corporation, and non-profits as brands, and transparency of production.

Aside: You know, those feel-good, do-good brands that we gravitate toward like moths to an energy-efficient LED light.

Meredith: Because it turns out that the story of the product is a story that, in telling, reflects on ourselves. So, if you were to come into my home, I would tell you the story of our dining room table, which was my grandmother's, which was a Gerald McCabe dining table, which came from a collaboration he did with a furniture maker and an architect in the era of mid-century furniture, which was unusual because Gerald McCabe primarily made guitars.

Alie: Mm!

Meredith: Yeah, but… like, the table is a table. You've probably seen a lot like it. But the story of the table is more interesting than the object itself. So, are we building social capital for ourselves when we get to tell the story of the brands and products we surround ourselves with? Which is a different thing than fandom. It is personal social capital building. Like, are you a tastemaker in your friend circle? Is this an interesting story?

Is this something that reflects some level of values for you, like conservation and ecology, or upcycling, or vintage culture, or wellness and holistic medicine? If I were to come into a friend's house and it was dreamcatchers, and hooves, and burning incense, that's a whole vibe that communicates a belief system and a value system.

Aside: [*singsonging an upbeat, made-up tune*] PS: Leave the dream catchers to Indigenous folks… as they're an item originating with the Ojibwe people and not something you should casually buy cheap knockoffs of or make yourself out of stuff from Hobby Lobby… because it's boho… I'm singing this to make it less awkward…

Alie: I feel Steak-umms is killin' it. I don't know if you've seen Steak-umms on Twitter, but… just… real chef's kiss. [*laughs*] They, like… It's a frozen beef brand, but whoever they got as their social media manager just goes full-on about, like, progressive politics.

Aside: I should say, not so much progressive politics, but pro-science sentiments, which I feel like, in the heart of 2020's anti-mask movement, was important. On April 6th, 2020, Steak-umm's official, verified account tweeted:

> *Friendly reminder in times of uncertainty and misinformation: anecdotes are not data. (good) data is carefully measured and collected information based on a range of subject-dependent factors, including, but not limited to, controlled variables, meta-analysis, and randomization.*

19,000 retweets. 70,000 likes. Who knew 2020 could deliver a blast of fresh air from the bullhorn of a really disgusting processed meat product?

Meredith: So the follow-up question to you: Have you bought Steak-umms?

Alie: I've thought about it. I've thought about it and then I'm like, "Mmnn... I'm trying to eat less beef." So... [*laughs*]

Meredith: Yeah, because there's also the, like, "everyone now has to be a publisher" mentality that exists with the internet that means the product can't stand on its own anymore because now every brand is in the audience development game. And every brand wants fans. Like, everyone wants fans.

Alie: Right. I think probably to a point... It's interesting because...

Actually... I'm going to make us go through Patreon questions because there are questions that I want to ask you that patrons asked, so I'm going to ask their questions through my mouth. Is that cool?

Meredith: Great! Let's do it.

Alie: Okay!

So next week we will ask this very smart and lovely person plenty of pretty basic, stupid questions because that's how we do it around here. Now, whether you're trying to build a brand for yourself or you want to have more perspective on why you like what you do and why you like other people who like what you do, tune in next week. Trust me. We cover aaaalll kinds of really juicy stuff.

Meanwhile, you can follow [@MeredithGene](#) on Twitter and on Clubhouse where she's been leading discussions on things like fandom and the attention economy. You can follow me, @AlieWard on [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#) or [@Ologies](#) on [both](#). You can join the [Ologies Podcast Facebook Group](#). Thank you, Erin Talbert, for adminning that. You can find other Ologites in the wild with merch at [OlogiesMerch.com](#). Thank you, Shannon Feltus and Boni Dutch of the comedy podcast *You Are That* for managing that. Thank you Noel Dilworth for helping manage all my shoot and recording schedules, which I'm very bad at. Thanks, Emily White and all the transcribers, for making transcripts available on our website at [AlieWard.com/Ologies-Extras](#). There's a link to those, they are free. The link is in the show notes, as well as bleeped episodes. Thank you Caleb Patton for bleeping them.

Thank you, editor Jarrett Sleeper, who hosts Quarantine Calisthenics every weekday at 9am Pacific on Twitch. And thanks to *Jurassic Park* fanatic and kitty lover Steven Ray Morris of the podcasts *See Jurassic Right* and *The Purrrcast*, and the new *Everything But The Movie: A Star Wars Book Club Podcast*. Nick Thorburn of the very good band Islands wrote and played the theme music.

And at the end of each episode I tell a secret, and this week the secret is that I was able to get my first Moderna shot this past week because I work on an educational TV show and I can't wear a

mask on camera for it, and I travel a lot for it. And I'm really, so thrilled to be vaccinated. I can't even tell you. The rollout in California has been a little weird. Last week they were shelving or throwing away more vaccine doses than they were administering, so there were tons of open Dodger Stadium appointments.

And as I was waiting in the car to get the shot, I scrawled "Thank You" and a heart on my arm in ballpoint pen to surprise the health tech who gave me the shot. And it was very corny, but they liked it, and I'm glad I did it. And my arm hurt for a couple days, but my heart has never been more at ease. So, I hope your turn comes soon and I hope when it does that you take it.

Until next week. I'm a fan of you.

Berbye.

Transcribed by Emily White at TheWordary.com

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[Kresnicka Research: The Human Needs Model](#)

[The Brothers Green: John and Hank](#)

["Stealing Fire" book about flow states](#)

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[Enterprising Women: Television Fandom and the Creation of Popular Myth](#)

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[Steak-Umms makin' headlines](#)

[Frozen Meat Against COVID-19 Misinformation: An Analysis of Steak-Umm and Positive Expectancy Violations](#)

[Nathan Allebach: the guy behind the Steak-Umms](#)

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