

Smark Power: The Collective Intelligence of the Internet Wrestling  
Community (IWC) and its Influence on the Career of Former WWE World  
Heavyweight Champion Chris Benoit.

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***Certificate of Authorship and Originality of Thesis***


The work contained in this thesis has not been previously submitted either in whole or in part for a degree at Central Queensland University or any other tertiary institution. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the material presented in this thesis is original except where due reference is made in text.

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### *Abstract*

Typically they are known as ‘smarks’, collectively they are known as the Internet Wrestling Community (IWC). This study of the mostly internet-based texts of the IWC shows that members of that informal alliance largely conform to the norms of fan culture and behaviour described in previous studies of fans in other entertainment genres. Celebrity is shown to be a product of publicity, promotion and fanaticism, and audiences connect with stars through involvement with the characters they portray and they identify with actualities as presented in the media. Fan culture involves obsession to know everything about the stars, worship and moral judgement. However, it is contended in this dissertation that there are factors that distinguish the IWC from other large fan groups. These arise in part from the unique format of pro-wrestling as a blend of theatrical and sporting product, and in part from the convergent technological ground that enables such a widely-disbursed, anarchic and yet cohesive body to exist and exert influence. It is argued that the collective intelligence of the IWC members who produce, filter and remediate all manner of source material from gossip, rumour and speculation, to news, to secret wrestling ‘insider’ information has forced the dominant industry player, *World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE)* to reevaluate its production strategies. The role of the IWC in the breaking of *kayfabe*—the industry code of silence on the illusory aspect of wrestling—is highlighted. Using textual analysis technique this study focuses on the career rise and tragic downfall of former *WWE* performer Chris Benoit. It is contended that this wrestling veteran became a significant marketing image of the *WWE*’s global media empire as a direct result of the influence of the smarks of the IWC.

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## ***Chapter 1- Introduction***

### ***Introduction***

This dissertation is a study of contemporary wrestling fans on the internet. The fundamental questions for this study will be: (1) Is there such a thing as “collective intelligence”<sup>1</sup>, and can this be used to describe the cumulative texts of the conglomeration of internet activity that has come to be collectively known as the Internet Wrestling Community (IWC)? (2) Are extant theories of myth, sport, theatre, stardom and celebrity relevant to understanding international wrestling industry culture? (3) Can it be claimed that the online activities of the IWC influenced the production strategy of the world’s largest wrestling company *World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE)*? (4) Can it be claimed that the collective intelligence as voiced in the texts of the IWC in support of their champion, celebrity, star, ultimately played a part in former World Heavyweight Champion Chris Benoit’s downfall?

This study will analyse the discourse of these fans in a network of chat forums and websites that comprises the IWC. This segment of wrestling audiences has transformed itself from a small minority group on the internet into an influential cluster of vocal critics, creative thinkers, rumour circulators, industry historians and multimedia contributors to the wrestling genre. This fan group has challenged the wrestling industry to reevaluate its product marketing strategies, wrestling television production and its relationship with audiences in general. Towards the end of the 20th century, the world’s largest professional wrestling company, the *WWE* started to abandon the colourful television personalities and storylines that had often been associated with pro-wrestling

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<sup>1</sup> Pierre Lévy, *Collective Intelligence: Mankind’s Emerging World in Cyberspace* (New York: Plenum Trade, 1997), 20.

during 1980s and 1990s. The *WWE* would adopt a more realistic production strategy in an attempt to better connect with the more knowledgeable and mature contemporary audience. Comic book style caricature personalities from the 1980s and early 1990s such as Matt Borne ('Doink the Clown'), Terry Taylor ('The Red Rooster'), Ed Leslie ('Brutus the Barber Beefcake'), Sione Vailahi ('The Barbarian') and Jim Hellwig ('The Ultimate Warrior') were replaced with characters like 'The Next Big Thing' Brock Lesnar, 'The Olympic Hero' Kurt Angle, 'The Legend Killer' Randy Orton and 'The Canadian Crippler' Chris Benoit. These characters embodied a sense of actuality with their names and character garbs but their gimmicks also represented beliefs, roles and myths persistent in popular culture. The once popular cartoon style family friendly storylines were replaced with plotlines that often touched on controversial subjects in popular culture such as gender, racial and socioeconomic issues.

The development of the character of Chris Benoit was to become a noteworthy example of the influences of the IWC. The general consensus within the IWC quickly favoured Chris Benoit as a potential World Heavyweight Champion despite his status as a 36 year old veteran heading towards the twilight of his wrestling career. The analysis of fan discourse surrounding Chris Benoit will focus on evaluating the reading patterns of this fan group which is shaped by interpreting the wrestling genre on the merits of the official narratives and information acquired from independent wrestling news sources concerning the private lives of wrestling stars. Through their collective knowledge of everything related to Benoit, wrestling fans on the internet viewed Chris Benoit as not only a *good wrestler* but also a *loving family man* who deserved to be the world champion. *WWE* media producers would eventually reconstruct Chris Benoit's television

character by implementing the synonymous images internet-based wrestling fans had connected to him. He subsequently became the face of the *WWE*'s global media empire. His rise to the pinnacle of wrestling demonstrates a change in the relationship between media producers and contemporary audiences and, more significantly, how audiences took on the position of power as their discourse over the internet played a vital role in the *WWE*'s new marketing strategy for Chris Benoit.

### ***Chapter Overview***

This study will begin with a literature review examining scholarly works that concern online communities, celebrities in popular culture, contemporary fan groups and the genre of professional wrestling. Works by Howard Rheingold provide vital concepts for understanding the functionality and influences of online social communities in contemporary society. In *The Virtual Community*, Rheingold relates to how individuals can communicate online much like they do in a physical face to face community. He argues that relationships can be formed and real communities developed when individuals communicate on virtual grounds. He also conveys that relationships formed online can manifest into relationships in physical communities.<sup>2</sup> In *Smart Mobs: The Next Social Revolution*, Rheingold explores the social evolution of new communication platforms like mobile phones and the internet. He conveys that the usage of new communication technologies have become an integral element in shaping communication trends in contemporary culture.<sup>3</sup> Celebrity studies conducted by Richard Dyer allow for a clearer understanding of how and why star figures are a prominent facet of popular culture. Dyer breaks down the phenomenon of stardom by examining the industrial

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<sup>2</sup> Howard Rheingold, *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000), xv.

<sup>3</sup> Howard Rheingold, *Smart Mobs: The Next Social Revolution* (Cambridge: Perseus Publishing, 2002), 30.

creation process of star images and how they function in popular culture. Perhaps the most important literary sources for this study are Pierre Lévy's *Collective Intelligence: Mankind's Emerging World in Cyberspace*, Henry Jenkins' *Textual Poachers* and *Convergence Culture* and Nancy Baym's *Tune In, Log On*. Lévy's work contextualises the concept of collective intelligence through knowledge societies. Collective intelligence is shared knowledge which emanate from collaborations and contributions from many individuals.<sup>4</sup> Lévy's work is important to this thesis because contemporary fan groups like the IWC are knowledge communities which circulate data contributed by fans and industry insiders. Jenkins conveys that collective intelligence can largely be linked to new media convergence and participatory culture.<sup>5</sup> Like this thesis, Baym's study focuses on a community of fans who use the media spaces of the internet to pursue their fandom.<sup>6</sup> Jenkins' studies into media convergence and Baym's ethnographic insight into online fan communities are perhaps the nearest comparatives for this study.

However, pro-wrestling fans, and more specifically the IWC, exhibit a unique fan culture which has been subject to minimal academic scrutiny at the time of this writing. Studying this fan group may provide insights that audience studies into other media genres have not been able to reveal. For instance, internet wrestling fans compulsively rely on the consumption of industry news and rumours to shape their knowledge of pro-wrestling and they obsessively like to use industry jargon to display their proficiency. They see themselves as expert fans with acquired tastes for alternative ways to consume the wrestling product such as their preference for performers who are perhaps not as popular to mainstream casual audiences. It is perhaps their obsessive eagerness to be

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<sup>4</sup> Lévy, *Collective Intelligence*, op.cit. 20.

<sup>5</sup> Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture* (New York: NYU Press, 2006), 243.

<sup>6</sup> Nancy Baym, *Tune In, Log On* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1999), 216.

accepted as the most knowledgeable of wrestling fans that provides such fascinating data for discourse analysis.

Chapter 3 will provide an overview of the IWC by focusing on the different ways members of this particular fan group interpret wrestling characters and storylines. The culture of professional wrestling is intriguing. The hybrid format of the wrestling genre of sport/entertainment blends the drama and suspense of theatre and the athleticism and unpredictability that is often associated with sports. Chapter 3 will begin by focusing briefly on the historical operational procedures employed by the wrestling industry, such as the methods media producers employed to maintain the mystique of wrestling stars. Media producers created hype for upcoming wrestling events by fabricating news and rumours to aid in portraying the illusion of actuality of wrestling characters and storylines through the company's own line of magazines and telephone information hotlines.<sup>7</sup> Information items were often depicted as 'leaked' news or 'secrets' that only industry insiders were supposed to know.<sup>8</sup> This promotional method was successful because it presented the illusion of actuality of televised texts to wrestling fans who, at the time, were envisioned as easily conned and gullible by media producers.<sup>9</sup> Such assumption by media producers were justified on the grounds that wrestling companies controlled most facets of wrestling media production from television programming to the publishing of industry news. Independent wrestling newsletters operated by industry journalists were

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<sup>7</sup>Larry Matysik, *Wrestling at the Chase: The Inside Story of Sam Muchnick and the Legends of Professional Wrestling* (Toronto: ECW Press, 2005), 66; Irvin Muchnick, *Wrestling Babylon: Piledriving Tales of Drugs, Sex, Death, and Scandal* (Toronto: ECW Press, 2007), 72 -74; Scott Beekman, *Ringside* (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2007), 97.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Patrice A. Oppliger, *Wrestling and Hypermasculinity* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2004), 157; Sharon Mazer, *Professional Wrestling: Sport and Spectacle* (Jackson: University press of Mississippi, 1998), 159; Billy Graham and Keith Elliot Greenberg, *Superstar Billy Graham: Tangled ropes* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2007), 87; Beekman, *Ringside*, op.cit. 62.

popular but by the time many fans received them through postal services, the information was often out of date.

As the internet became more widely preferred as a communication variable in popular culture, industry journalists ventured into distributing their wrestling newsletters through their websites, providing fans with fresh wrestling news and gossip on a daily cycle. Information once considered as 'secret' by wrestling insiders became widely accessible via the IWC. Chapter 3 will look at how such information dissemination can influence the psyche of contemporary wrestling fans because their knowledge now often rivals that of the industry insiders. This has created an uneasy relationship between fans who are relentless in their pursuit of wrestling knowledge and media producers who are adamant in maintaining the uniqueness of their product at all costs. Textual data collected from the forums of the IWC will be analysed to examine the unique ways the internet wrestling fan group interpret and respond to the official wrestling texts. In doing so, this chapter will highlight the blurring of boundaries between the wrestling genre enthusiast and the media producer and show how response to the growing influence of internet-wise wrestling fans has become a key element in the production strategies of wrestling event producers.

Chapter 4 expands on the critical analysis of contemporary wrestling fandom by exploring the IWC fan group's influence in the career of former *WWE* World Heavyweight Champion Chris Benoit. A product of the strictest wrestling training regimes in Japan and Canada, Benoit's workman-like approach gained respect from industry insiders as the ideal pro-wrestler. However, standing at 5 feet 10 inches tall, weighing 220 pounds, media producers considered the naturally coy Benoit too small and

too uncharismatic to ever succeed in an environment where muscle-clad giants over 6 foot tall, weighing nearly 300 pounds dominated the industry. Instead, media producers utilised his wrestling abilities to aid in enhancing the superiority and authenticity of his larger and more charismatic opponents within official televised texts. His primary role was to enhance the credibility of his opponents by putting on convincing displays of technical wrestling while at the same time absorbing the full brunt impact from the powerful wrestling manoeuvres performed by his larger sized opponents.<sup>10</sup> His willingness to sacrifice his physical well-being for the sake of wrestling performance and his mechanical like precision of manoeuvre execution inside the wrestling ring earned him the admiration and respect of the internet segment of wrestling audiences. Information concerning Benoit's personal life would also surface on the internet allowing fans to further attach a sense of actuality with him. Despite his physical short-comings and the perceived lack of charismatic appeal by media producers, Benoit became a cult hero throughout the IWC. This support would eventually manifest at live *WWE* events where his followers continuously rallied for him to become World Heavyweight Champion.

Chris Benoit murdered his family before taking his own life in 2007. An analysis of fan discourse will demonstrate that news and rumours on the internet once again played a crucial role in shaping the psyche of the contemporary wrestling fan. The content of information on the internet revealed an alleged darker side to this once respected gentleman of the pro-wrestling universe. The Chris Benoit star image no longer met the mental or intellectual needs of the more knowledgeable wrestling enthusiast. In the end

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<sup>10</sup> Matthew Randazzo, *Ring of Hell* (Beverly Hills: Phoenix Books, 2008), 272.

this same group of fans would come to detest the man who they once communally admired.

The fifth chapter of this thesis will examine the production process of star images in the pro-wrestling industry. Works concerning the celebrity culture conducted by Daniel Boorstin, Graeme Turner and, in particular, Richard Dyer will be used as foundation for this section. An examination of the production process of wrestling media before the internet became a widespread entity will reveal that the creative strategy for production of wrestling characters is similar to the star image production process in mainstream entertainment genres such as film. This section will then further expand on the analysis of the Chris Benoit character. The contemporary audience group now play a crucial role in the creation of official texts. The analysis of Chris Benoit's star image will demonstrate the success *WWE* media producers enjoyed when they altered their traditional character production methods by capitalising on active internet fan behaviour. The IWC's perceived actualities of Chris Benoit were used as foundation in crafting his image as a World Heavyweight Champion.

In addition, this chapter will question the functions of stardom, such as, why popular figures in mainstream culture attract such immense adoration from fans globally? Data collected from the spaces of the IWC will show that internet wrestling fans exhibit similar behavioural trends to those who do not pursue their hobbies online, but tend to extend expression of their fandom further than those fans. This new and emergent wrestling audience was no longer simply connecting with wrestling stars on the basis of television gimmicks. Through the circulation of information within the IWC, fans gained

understanding of the industrial practices of the wrestling world and insights into the personal lives of wrestling stars.

Chapter 5 will conclude by discussing the contemporary status of pro-wrestling in popular culture and the wrestling industry's past attempts and recent efforts to break away from the negative stereotypes that have historically been associated with professional wrestling. It will also look at how the *WWE* now promote their stars in mainstream media by presenting their actualities rather than their television gimmicks. This new promotional strategy has also taken effect in the *WWE*'s own company line of media ventures, from print publications to digital media and, in the official website *wwe.com*.

Pro-wrestling's unique textual format and the industry's vocal and, at times boisterous internet-based fan culture provides for a compelling case study for exploring the ever changing complexity in the relationship between contemporary fan groups and media industries. The internet wrestling fan group's obsession to define itself as elite wrestling spectators and the fanatical behaviour they often display in their attempts to be acknowledged and respected by industry workers is a central characteristic of this fan culture. The convergent technology of the internet and the fanatical wrestling fan base that makes up the anarchic constitution of the IWC combine for an intriguing set of data that will be explored in the following chapters. This study will conclude with a brief discussion considering the possibilities for further research into the field of audience/producer relationship studies.

## ***Chapter 2- Literature Review and Research Methodology***

### ***Introduction***

This chapter will begin by reviewing literature focusing on two aspects of popular culture; online communities and celebrities. As Howard Rheingold detailed in *The Virtual Community*, members of online communities can develop passionate bonds that manifest into real relationships in the offline physical world.<sup>11</sup> Rheingold first published his book in 1993 after his involvement with a very early online community called ‘The WELL’, an internet-based social network he had been logging into since 1985. He writes,

*Millions of people on every continent also participate in computer mediated social groups known as virtual communities and this population is growing fast.*<sup>12</sup>

This can largely be attributed to the development of new media platforms which enable users a luxury of access and convenience older media formats were not capable of. The world of online communities is not a single giant subculture but rather it is a collection of different subcultures providing the spaces for discussion across a variety of topics and individual interests.<sup>13</sup> Communication mediums like the internet have facilitated proliferation of exposure to certain cultures in the physical community such as the world of celebrities. The public’s fascination with celebrities has long existed before the common use of the internet in popular culture. Studies into the culture of celebrities by Richard Dyer and Daniel Boorstin suggest the primary functions of the celebrity are to evoke emotional and financial attachment from audiences.<sup>14</sup> With the integration of the

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<sup>11</sup> Rheingold, *The Virtual Community*, op.cit. xv.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. 31; Caroline Haythornthwaite and Barry Wellman, *The Internet in Everyday Life* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2002), 6.

<sup>14</sup> Richard Dyer, *Stars* (London: British Film Institute, 1998), 12; Daniel Joseph Boorstin, *The Image* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 255.

internet into the daily routines of individuals this new communication medium has become an extension of the media space that Dyer and Boorstin wrote about. Stars are more able to contribute to the actuality of their promotional images and fans can more readily follow the careers and the private lives of their favourite stars.

The internet is a convergence of new and old technologies.<sup>15</sup> On the internet, fan culture arises from individuals pursuing their fandom by sharing their knowledge among other net users with similar interests from around the world. Information gets circulated, images are shared, videos are watched and collectively this creates a unique reading process in which discourse is often dominated by the critique of official texts and the evaluation of authenticity regarding news and rumours. While the internet has made communication much easier, its accessibility has also enabled fanatical behaviour to develop as part of fan culture. False rumours or fabricated gossip are at times misconceived as facts due to the high volume of information that is published on the internet. Some rumours circulated from the internet have had drastic influences on careers and industries. This has often created a tension between unyielding fans who want to know everything and media producers trying to protect the uniqueness of their product. For example, the professional wrestling industry, in recent years, has been forced to relax its strict tactical stance of shielding information from dedicated fan populations.

### ***Online Communities***

Rheingold writes,

*A close examination of the origins of today's mass media reveals that many were not designed for social purposes, but were appropriated by people seeking to satisfy*

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<sup>15</sup> Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, op.cit. 14; Haythornthwaite and Wellman, *The Internet in Everyday Life*, op.cit. 7.

*the apparently insatiable human need for social communication and group formation.*<sup>16</sup>

The general perceived idea of a community usually has both functional and symbolic definitions.<sup>17</sup> That is, we tend to group or direct ourselves into communities which suit us the most whether our situation be urban, suburban, rural or sometimes even deserted. We are essentially grouped by various subdivisions related to our lifestyles, interests, religion, political beliefs and so on. We can see similar patterns in the ways different sub-communities are formed on the internet.<sup>18</sup> For example, car enthusiasts can join networks specially designed for members of the car culture to pursue their passion. Similar patterns are also evident in other cultural interests whether they are sports, politics or art.<sup>19</sup> Internet-based social networks have become a space where the spirit of camaraderie and emotional attachment between members is evident through the activity of user participation in which passionate communities are formed.<sup>20</sup>

The internet is rapidly becoming an important communication variable in contemporary society, not only in developed civilisations but it has also increasingly become a part of the core communicational habits in different social groups in much of the world.<sup>21</sup> Haythornthwaite and Wellman write,

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<sup>16</sup> H. Rheingold, "Mobile Virtual Communities" *Receiver Magazine*, June 2002, 2.

<sup>17</sup> Jan Fernback, "There is a There There: Notes Toward a Definition of a Cybercommunity" in *Doing Internet Research*, ed. Steve Jones (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1999), 218; Anabel Quan-Hasse and Barry Wellman, "How Does the Internet Affect Social Capital" in *Social Capital and Information Technology*, ed. Marleen Huysman and Volker Wulf (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004), 113.

<sup>18</sup> Manuel Castells, "The Internet and The Network Society" in *The Internet in Everyday Life*, ed. Caroline Haythornthwaite and Barry Wellman (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2002), xxix; Quan-Hasse and Wellman, *How Does the Internet Affect Social Capital*, op.cit. 115.

<sup>19</sup> Rheingold, *The Virtual Community*, op. cit. xvii; Mary Chayko, *Connecting* (New York: Suny Press, 2002), 6.

<sup>20</sup> Rheingold, *ibid.* 25; Philip N. Howard and Steve Jones, *Society Online* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2003), 5.

<sup>21</sup> Castells, *The Internet and the Network Society*, op.cit. xxix; Howard and Jones, *Society Online*, op.cit. 2.

*...ignoring the internet is as huge a mistake as seeing it as a savoir...it is the boringness and routineness that makes the internet important because this means that it is being persuasively incorporated into people's lives.*<sup>22</sup>

The online community functions like any environment we are already familiar with in our physical surroundings but with the added elements of user anonymity, access to information variety and, for some net users, freedom of speech. Like physical communities, internet-based social networks function with their own rules and structures for interaction. They develop core group characteristics, trends and language.<sup>23</sup>

As the internet becomes more globally accessible in private households, the social revolution of online communities has continued to grow with rapid developments in new media formats.<sup>24</sup> According to Jenkins, “every important story gets told, every brand gets sold and every consumer is courted” within the contemporary online-based community.<sup>25</sup> Cultural practices are increasingly enmeshed on the spaces that are:

*at the same time global and local: global in its interaction, local in its sources of emission and in the destination of its messages...multidirectional networks are the stuff of which the media world is made, the heart of the system of collective images and representations.*<sup>26</sup>

Because the internet is now such a broad and widely used communication variable, it is almost impossible to govern all facets of user activity.<sup>27</sup> Information items covering a

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<sup>22</sup> Haythornthwaite and Wellman, *The Internet in Everyday Life*, op.cit. 7.

<sup>23</sup> Fernback, *There is a There There*, op.cit. 215; Rheingold, *Mobile Virtual Communities*, op.cit. 1.

<sup>24</sup> Rheingold, *Smart Mobs*, op.cit. 30; Castells, *The Internet and the Network Society* op.cit. xxix.

<sup>25</sup> Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, op.cit. 3.

<sup>26</sup> Castells, *The Internet and the Network Society* op.cit. xxx.

<sup>27</sup> Jack L. Goldsmith and Tim Wu, *Who Controls the Internet?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 125; Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, op.cit. 2.

broad range of topics are mass circulated on a consistent cycle. Internet users now have access to all kinds of information, even that not initially meant for public distribution.

A key function of online communities is to connect users by providing access to information for all members. This is achieved through a collective effort of knowledge contribution by community memberships.<sup>28</sup> This active interaction within community members allows internet-based social networks to function on a more convergent level. Jenkins writes:

*convergence occurs within the brains of individual consumers and through their social interaction with others. Each of us constructs our own personal mythology from bits and fragments of information extracted from the media flow and transformed into resources through which we make sense of our everyday lives.*<sup>29</sup>

That is, because information available online about any given topic is perhaps more than one individual can take in, it gives community members extra incentive to talk among themselves about the information they consume. This notion of “collective intelligence”<sup>30</sup> enables all members of a community to have access to knowledge because as Lévy states, “within a knowledge community, no one knows everything, everyone knows something, all knowledge resides in humanity.”<sup>31</sup> Consequently, this collective effort among members allows the internet-based social community to become more personal and authentic in which friendships are formed and norms within the community are, as

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<sup>28</sup> Teresa M. Harrison and Timothy Stephan, “Researching and Creating Community Networks” in *Doing Internet Research*, ed. Steve Jones (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1999), 223; Lévy, *Collective Intelligence*, op.cit. 20; Rheingold, *The Virtual Community*, op.cit. xvii.

<sup>29</sup> Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, op.cit. 3.

<sup>30</sup> Lévy, *Collective Intelligence*, op.cit. 20.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

Rheingold says, “established, challenged, changed, re-established and rechallenged, in a kind of speeded-up social evolution.”<sup>32</sup>

Early research into virtual communities has been based on the assumption that members would be interacting with individuals who are outside of their pre-existing social and geographical proximities, thus liberating them to form communities through common interests rather than shared geography.<sup>33</sup> While this observation remains true, online communities also present opportunities for individuals with existing connections in the real world to cement their relationships. As Wellman et al note,

*Although CSSNs [computer supported social networks] do transcend time and space, not all ties are either totally on-line or off-line. Much on-line contact is between people who see each other in person and live locally.*<sup>34</sup>

As communication media formats continue to progress, the “social evolution” of online communities has also extended to new boundaries.<sup>35</sup> Networking sites specifically designed for social interaction between individuals such as *Facebook* and *Myspace* have become a cultural phenomenon.<sup>36</sup> At the time of writing *Facebook* boasts a global membership of over 250 million users while *Myspace*, as of 2008, has a membership eclipsing the 100 million mark.<sup>37</sup> These social networks have the capacity to host photo, audio and video media as well as enabling the functions of conversation through e-mail,

<sup>32</sup> Rheingold, *The Virtual Community*, op.cit. xvi.

<sup>33</sup> Haythorhwaite and Wellman, *The Internet in Everyday Life*, op.cit. 5.

<sup>34</sup> Barry Wellman and others, “Computer Networks as Social Networks: Collaborative Work, Telework, and Virtual Community” *Annual Review of Sociology* 22 (1996): 222.

<sup>35</sup> Rheingold, *The Virtual Community*, op.cit. xvi; Rheingold, *Smart Mobs*, op.cit. xxii; Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, op.cit. 16.

<sup>36</sup> Ana M. Alemán, Katherine Lynk Wartman and M Aleman Ana, *Online Social Networking on Campus* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2008), 19; Nicole Ellison, Charles Steinfield and Cliff Lampe, “Spatially Bounded Online Social Networks and Social Capital: The Role of Facebook” *Annual Conference of the International Communication Association (ICA)*. Dresden, Germany (2006): 2.

<sup>37</sup> Facebook, “Facebook Statistics” *Facebook*, <http://www.facebook.com/press/info.php?statistics> (accessed May 1, 2009); Nick O’Neal, “Facebook & MySpace Hit New Milestones”, *Socialtimes.com*, <http://www.socialtimes.com/2008/08/facebook-myspace-hit-new-milestones/> (accessed May 1, 2009).

private messaging and personal journals (blogs). Increasingly, net users fit visiting social networking sites into their daily work patterns, engaging in social interaction parallel with working or studying.<sup>38</sup> The overlapping between online and offline social activity suggests that online connections can often lead to face-to-face meetings. For instance, in *The Virtual Community*, Howard Rheingold discusses how his online friendships would eventually manifest in the physical world through social group outings.<sup>39</sup>

The overlap between online and offline social interaction perhaps also suggest that ideas and trends which exist within online discourse may also influence cultures in the physical world. Jenkins suggests “this conversation creates buzz that is increasingly valued by the media industry.”<sup>40</sup> For instance, the music industry and in particular musicians from lesser known independent recording studios have benefited from advertising their material through social communities online. Nancy Baym argues that “musicians and their fans were largely responsible” for the success of *Myspace* in popular culture.<sup>41</sup> The *Myspace* interface encourages its members to interact with musicians as part of constructing their own identity on their profile pages. *Myspace* members can add their favourite songs onto their profiles and at the same time have access to recordings from musicians. In 2005, *Myspace* launched their own record label *Myspace Records* aimed at discovering and signing recording artists who maintained profiles on their social network.<sup>42</sup> Music artists like Colbie Caillat, Lily Allen, Sean Kingston and rap musician ‘Souljah Boy Tell’em’ gained mainstream fame through sharing their music on

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<sup>38</sup> Alemán, Wartman and Ana, *Online Social Networking*, op.cit. 6.

<sup>39</sup> Rheingold, *The Virtual Community*, op.cit. xiv.

<sup>40</sup> Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, op.cit. 4.

<sup>41</sup> Nancy Baym, “The New Shape of Online Community: The Example of Swedish Independent Music Fandom” *First Monday* 8 (2007): 1.

<sup>42</sup> A. Bruno, “EA, Myspace Launch Labels” *Billboard Magazine*, November 12 2005, 10.

*Myspace*.<sup>43</sup> Since 2005 various incarnations of music-themed social networks have launched including *Last.fm* and *Myspace Transmissions*, which features live in-studio recordings by artists.<sup>44</sup> This aspect of social interaction allows the commercial sector to capitalise on the popularity of online social networking because it allows them to publicise their product and it encourages fans to provide testimonial and critique of their brands.

### ***Stars***

In Richard Dyer's book titled *Stars*, questions are posed about celebrity stardom through the examination of the development and representation of the star in popular culture. In his analysis of film stars, Dyer describes them as "socially grounded" and, "over determined by the historical conditions within which they are produced."<sup>45</sup> Dyer initiated a semiotic notion that celebrities should be studied as a collection of signs which serve as a system of signifiers to communicate certain meanings and representations to audiences. Stardom combines the spectacular with the everyday and the extraordinary with the ordinary.<sup>46</sup> It is seen as an expression of contemporary values, a standard for which fans can strive to become. The creation of star images results from fabrication of the works and personalities of the star. This is supported by the actions and narratives of

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<sup>43</sup> Camilla Rossi, "Web 2.0 and Music: The Case of Myspace" *STS Italia Online Paper* 19 (2008): 4, [http://www.stsitalia.org/papers2008/7\\_2\\_rossi.pdf](http://www.stsitalia.org/papers2008/7_2_rossi.pdf) (accessed March 8, 2009); Mike Celzic, "MySpace Sensation, 17, Tops Music Charts Without Using Bad Language", *Msnbc.com*, <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/20051770> (accessed August 7, 2009); ); James Montgomery, "You Hear it First: Lily Allen", *MTV Networks*, [http://www.mtv.com/news/yhif/allen\\_lily](http://www.mtv.com/news/yhif/allen_lily) (accessed August 7, 2009); Josh Catone, "The Future of the Music Business: Soulja Boy?", *Sitepoint.com*, <http://www.sitepoint.com/blogs/2009/01/08/the-future-of-the-music-business-soulja-boy> (accessed August 7, 2009); Inthenews.co.uk, "Colbie Caillat: I owe MySpace", *Inthenews.co.uk*, [http://www.inthenews.co.uk/inconversation/entertainment/music/colbie-caillat-i-owe-myspace-\\$1173227.htm](http://www.inthenews.co.uk/inconversation/entertainment/music/colbie-caillat-i-owe-myspace-$1173227.htm) (accessed August 7, 2009).

<sup>44</sup> Baym, *The New Shape of Online Community*, op.cit. 2.

<sup>45</sup> Dyer, *Stars*, op.cit. 14.

<sup>46</sup> Dyer, *ibid.* 35; Lee Harrington and Denise D. Bielby, *Popular Culture: Production and Consumption* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2001), 271.

other cultural workers, media producers, image consultants and gossip reporters. These star images are produced across a variety of categories ranging from publicity, promotion, rumours, critiques and the official stories presented by the media producers themselves. Dyer sees the social significance of stars as “a set of media signs with various ways of understanding the world which influence how people felt about the star.”<sup>47</sup> That is, stars should be seen as major signifiers of ideas about different aspects of society such as gender, race, religion, morals and so on. Stars operate as ideological signs which foster images of ‘self’ that are promoted as sources of identification.<sup>48</sup>

Traditionally we have admired individuals because of their abilities to achieve great results in their respective fields.<sup>49</sup> Because of this, athletes, actors, singers and those alike have always been viewed as heroes or idols.<sup>50</sup>

In his analysis into the cultural role of celebrities, Daniel Boorstin describes them as “well known because of their well-known-ness.”<sup>51</sup> He contended that they are fabricated to satisfy the expectations for human greatness by society. However, celebrities develop their capacity for fame, not primarily on their achievements but rather by establishing and portraying their unique personalities to the public.<sup>52</sup> Society in some way conspires to portray the status of celebrities as a privileged group of individuals. Media producers are always creating new ways to better connect with consumers in order to maximise their

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<sup>47</sup> Richard Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies* (London: Routledge, 2004), ix.

<sup>48</sup> Harrington and Bielby, *Popular Culture*, op.cit. 272; Lynn Kahle and Chung-hyŏn Kim, *Creating Images and the Psychology of Marketing Communication* (Routledge: London, 2006), 162; Graham Saxton, “Collections of Cool” *Young Consumers* (2005): 20.

<sup>49</sup> Susan Drucker and Robert Cathcart, *American Heroes in a Media Age* (Bonn: Verlag für die Deutsche Wirtschaft, 1994), 3; Robin Gunston, “Play Ball!” *The Futurist* 39, no. 1 (2005): 31; Joshua Gamson, *Claims to Fame* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 43.

<sup>50</sup> Chris Rojek, *Celebrity* (London: Reaktion Books, 2001), 184; Kahle and Kim, *Creating Images*, op.cit. 163.

<sup>51</sup> Boorstin, *The Image*, op.cit. 58; 61.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

economic potentials.<sup>53</sup> Celebrities form the basis of a considerably larger part of everyday discussion of films, music and sports. Fans worldwide invest great amounts of time and effort into consuming all facets of the celebrity. Dyer writes,

*...the economic importance of the stars is of aesthetic consequence in such things as centring of spectacle on the presentation of the star and the construction of narratives which display the star's image and so on.*<sup>54</sup>

Celebrities are presented as individuals who are in a privileged position in the definition of their social roles and types which help to shape how people believe they can and should behave.<sup>55</sup> Today, celebrities are not necessarily limited to being known for their personalities, achievements or physical appearances. Their private lives will be likely to generate as much interest as their professional lives. The dramatically different lifestyles of celebrities give people the belief that we live in an interesting culture and that they are the pinnacle of popular culture's socioeconomic standards.<sup>56</sup> It would be difficult to ignore the persuasiveness and influence of celebrities through mass media within popular culture. This has been the trend for many years and it serves as a further reminder of the emotional power of the fans' connection to the characters whom they know only through their representations by the media.<sup>57</sup>

Over time a celebrity acquires a certain status which is a consequence of mass publicity either through their accumulated excellences or rather, their ability to utilise

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<sup>53</sup> Graeme Turner, Frances Bonner and P. David Marshall, *Fame Games* (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 2; Gamson, *Claims to Fame*, op.cit. 150.

<sup>54</sup> Dyer, *Stars*, op.cit. 12.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid. 4.

<sup>56</sup> Joseph Epstein, "The Culture of Celebrity" *The Weekly Standard* 11 (2005): 22.

<sup>57</sup> Turner, Bonner and Marshall, *Fame Games*, op.cit. 2; Michael O'Shaughnessy and Jane Stadler, *Media and Society* (South Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2002), 17.

their star image to connect with fans.<sup>58</sup> In turn, fans may ‘poach’ star styles and “construct their cultural and social identity through borrowing and inflicting mass culture-images, articulating concerns which often go unvoiced by the dominant media.”<sup>59</sup> Popular culture as we know it has become fascinated and obsessed with knowledge regarding celebrities.<sup>60</sup> This fascination with image in many instances would come at the expense of grounding, substance and reality.<sup>61</sup> Turner states that “the loss of community as human relations attenuate and fragment under the pressure of contemporary political and social conditions” is a possible reason for the rise of celebrities in popular culture.<sup>62</sup> He points to the decline of social relations with the nuclear and extended families as well as relationships with friends. In order to compensate for the loss of personal community, there has been an increased attention directed at celebrity figures and a greater emotional investment made towards “specific versions” of these figures.<sup>63</sup> That is, celebrities are gradually being used as means of constructing a new dimension of community through mass media. Advances in mass media have further enhanced the emotional connection of fans to stars who they only really know through representations of the media.<sup>64</sup> This in turn may increase the effectiveness of celebrities in both their persuasiveness and their appeal to fans. The commercial significance of celebrities and their increasing influence within popular culture leads to an intensified focus on their private lives.

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<sup>58</sup> Graeme Turner, *Understanding Celebrity* (London: Sage Publications 2004), 5; Gamson, *Claims to Fame*, op.cit. 41

<sup>59</sup> Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers* (London: Routledge, 1992), 7; 23.

<sup>60</sup> Boorstin, *The Image*, op.cit. 48; Rojek, *Celebrity*, op.cit. 191; Turner, *Understanding Celebrity*, op.cit. 5.

<sup>61</sup> Boorstin, *ibid.* 49; Turner, *ibid.* 6.

<sup>62</sup> Turner, *ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> Turner, Bonner and Marshall, *Fame Games*, op.cit. 2; Drucker and Cathcart, *American Heroes*, op.cit. 6; Gunston, *Play Ball!*, op.cit. 32.

The journalist community who frequently report on celebrities has become more focused towards producing information about the private lives of stars. This development has been largely influenced by the growth of both fan magazines and television programmes and was central to the emergence of movie fan culture.<sup>65</sup> The primary focus of those earlier media applications was essentially to sell the star images. The ‘ideal’ star images were glorified to fans through narratives concerning ideologies of athleticism, femininity, masculinity, romanticism, sexuality and so on.

Turner writes about the significance of what he calls ‘flashpoints’ in focussing wide-spread public attention. He says,

*...the power of a globalised media to saturate all media forms and outlets with...the relatively recent but now fundamental importance of the everyday celebrity story for contemporary media producers and consumers have dramatically enhanced that emotional potential in recent years...increasingly we encounter ‘flashpoints’ in contemporary culture where a particular celebrity completely dominates media coverage producing an excessively focused global public.*<sup>66</sup>

Usually flashpoint instances occur when something of significance happens to a particular celebrity whether it is a controversy, death or marriage. Many may argue that contemporary society’s fascination with famous figures is simply a matter of personal choice rather than an integral part of popular culture. However, in the past there have been significant global media frenzies surrounding some of history’s most well known celebrities such as ‘Beatlemania’ in the 1960s, Elvis Presley’s death in the 1970s and the death of Princess Diana in the 1990s. More recently in 2009, the instance of a flashpoint

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<sup>65</sup> Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, op.cit. 54; Harrington and Bielby, *Popular Culture*, op.cit. 5.

<sup>66</sup> Turner, Bonner and Marshall, *Fame Games*, op.cit. 2 - 3.

surrounding a celebrity figure is evident in the global media focus directed at the death of singer Michael Jackson. From the web to the television screen, circumstances surrounding the singer's death dominated the headlines of mainstream media. After news of the singer's tragic death, demand for Jackson's music soared with his recordings once again topping and dominating music sales charts worldwide.<sup>67</sup> The public memorial service dedicated to Jackson was viewed both live and on delayed telecast by millions on television and millions more on the web globally.<sup>68</sup> This possibly suggests that our everyday lives have often been "indelibly marked by celebrity events" regardless of whether they are birthdays, deaths, marriages or controversies.<sup>69</sup> Observation of the lifestyles of stars is almost akin to the fulfilment of fantasy for many fans because the seemingly extravagant and luxurious lifestyles of the celebrities seem to be a very different reality to ours. For a fan, the next best thing to being a celebrity is perhaps to consume all facets related to a favourite star and to develop the idea that they are indeed a part of the celebrity's journey towards a successful career.<sup>70</sup> Essentially, the images of stars capture the imaginations of the fans through the illusions of the characters they portray on-screen. Star's promotion of these images in public life transforms into hype

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<sup>67</sup> Matthew Moore, "Michael Jackson's death sparks Google and Twitter frenzy", *The Daily Telegraph UK*, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/music/michael-jackson/5643795/Michael-Jacksons-death-sparks-Google-and-Twitter-frenzy.html> (accessed July 13, 2009); Keith Caulfield, "Michael Jackson Music Dominates Billboard Charts, 800K Albums Sold", *Billboard Magazine*, <http://www.billboard.com/bbcom/news/michael-jackson-music-dominates-billboard-1003991520.story> (accessed July 13, 2009); Andrew Murfett, "Jackson: Big hit in life, bigger in death", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, <http://www.smh.com.au/lifestyle/people/jackson-big-hit-in-life-bigger-in-death-20090712-dhe5.html> (accessed July 13, 2009).

<sup>68</sup> CNN, "Michael Jackson Memorial Draws Crowds Online", *CNN*, <http://edition.cnn.com/2009/TECH/07/07/michael.jackson.web.traffic> (accessed July 13, 2009); Fox News Network, "Jackson Memorial Rivals Obama Inauguration in Nielsen Rankings", *Fox News Network*, <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,530822,00.html> (accessed July 13, 2009).

<sup>69</sup> Turner, Bonner and Marshall, *Fame Games*, op.cit. 2.

<sup>70</sup> Epstein, *The Culture of Celebrity*, op.cit. 21.

and consequently into greater demand.<sup>71</sup> The relationship between celebrities and fans can be viewed as a symptom of popular culture resulting from the practices inherent in the traditions of mass mediation.<sup>72</sup>

### ***Star Images***

Star images are a vital aspect of the production and marketing strategies of media companies. In one respect they provide audiences with identities which are consistent with stereotypes of popular culture such as masculinity, femineity, sexuality and athleticism. Equally however, star images are also important because of their focus on individuality. That is, each star represents a unique personality which media audiences are able to conceptualise with distinct individual identities. For example: Brad Pitt, ‘Madonna’ or Michael Jordan—each name represents a unique star identity.

Stars represent the typicality of culturally shared meanings while maintaining their own uniqueness at the same time. Stars have become commercial assets for media companies. Through the means of mass promotion and publicity, stars are marketed to attract large and faithful fan communities.

The star image construction process relies largely on a “success myth.”<sup>73</sup> That is, the illusion of the star image leads people to believe that success is available to everyone because stars can achieve greatness in the same physical environment. The success myth orchestrates several contradictions in which it maintains that ordinariness is the basis for every star and their uniqueness is rewarded by the star system such as promotion by

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<sup>71</sup> Ying-Ching Lin and Chien-Hsin Lin, “Impetus for Worship” *Adolescence* 42, no. 167 (2001): 576; Turner, *Understanding Celebrity*, op.cit. 4.

<sup>72</sup> Turner, *ibid*; Drucker and Cathcart, *American Heroes*, op.cit. 261; Ray Eldon Hiebert, Sheila Jean Gibbons and Sheila Silver, *Exploring Mass Media for a Changing World* (New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2000), 129.

<sup>73</sup> Dyer, *Stars*, op.cit. 42.

media producers or popularity through fan support.<sup>74</sup> The success myth also promotes success as something which is worth having. Stars represent this notion in the form of their salaries which provide them access to the world of extravagance and luxury.<sup>75</sup> Turner states that contemporary celebrities are a “product of media representation.”<sup>76</sup> That is, the notion of celebrity is fabricated and marketed to attract consumers. Success largely depends on the response to the illusions and myths by consumers (the fans). What is presented is the illusion of something real through set texts. These blur the distinction between the star image and the human being. This is because the off-screen personalities of stars have become an important aspect to the creation of star images. Boorstin suggested there was a “common quality” among star figures and he alluded that this common quality was the:

*...need to be authentic...conforming to fact and therefore worthy of trust, reliance or belief...the charismatic has an uncanny outside source of strength, the authentic is strong because he [or she] is what he [or she] seems to be.*<sup>77</sup>

Off-screen personalities must be understood as part of the star image-making process in which it is used to construct the illusion to market towards fans.<sup>78</sup> The characters which stars portray within televised narratives are often recognised as an insight into the actual personality behind the star image. Therefore the star seems harder to reject because their existence essentially guarantees the values they embody.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid. 42.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid. 43.

<sup>76</sup> Turner, *Understanding Celebrity*, op.cit. 8.

<sup>77</sup> Boorstin, *The Image*, op.cit. 50.

<sup>78</sup> Dyer, *Stars*, op.cit. 20; Lin and Lin, *Impetus for Worship*, op.cit. 582.

<sup>79</sup> Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies*, op.cit. 12; Hiebert, Gibbons and Silver, *Exploring Mass Media*, op.cit. 130; Lin and Lin, *ibid.* 584.

### *Athletes as Celebrities*

Professional sports today are constituents of the entertainment industry in which the revolution of communication technology has changed the way entertainment is consumed.<sup>80</sup> The advances in the fields of broadcasting and interactive media, have allowed athletes to gain worldwide exposure similar to figures of other entertainment forms.<sup>81</sup> As professional sports gained more exposure through mass media commercialisation, star athletes have played significant social roles in popular culture. Professional sport is now largely exposed through facets of mass media on a significant scale with coverage no longer limited to the sporting events themselves but also encompassing the personal lives of the athletes. Thus athletes are not only recognised for their sporting achievements but also for their well-known-ness just as Boorstin has argued about celebrities. And, following Boorstin's argument, sporting relations may amplify in a particular sporting domain, Boorstin says,

*A celebrity is a person known for his well-known-ness. Celebrities intensify their celebrity images simply by being well known for relations among themselves...a kind of symbiosis, celebrities live off each other.*<sup>82</sup>

However, well-known-ness is an independent variable of "being known", and athletes do not fit Boorstin's distinctions entirely. The popularity of the athlete relies on the public recognition of their prowess on the sporting field and once that is noticed by fans, their star image creates public intrigue. If they were not overachievers in their fields; there possibly would not be as much demand for them because it would imply their

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<sup>80</sup> Ernest Cashmore, *Making Sense of Sports* (London: Routledge, 2005), 400; Gunston, *Play Ball!*, op.cit. 33.

<sup>81</sup> Melinda Jones and David Schumann, "The Strategic Use of Celebrity Athlete Endorsers in Sports Illustrated: An Historic Perspective" *Sport Marketing Quarterly* 9, no. 2 (2000): 69; Gunston, *ibid.* 33.

<sup>82</sup> Boorstin, *The Image*, op.cit. 57.

accolades would be achievable by anyone. Even so, when sports stars appear in magazines or television programs, they are for the most part indistinguishable from other celebrities.

Contemporary sporting stars such as Michael Jordan and David Beckham are able to build on a dual career as distinguished athletes and as influential celebrity endorsers through revolutions of mass media coverage. Their reach goes beyond their individual status as conquerors of their sporting professions. Their name and image have become global brands endorsing a diverse range of products.<sup>83</sup> They often endorse products which are paradoxical to the images of their profession. For example, in the early 1990s, basketball players Michael Jordan and Larry Bird featured prominently in advertising campaigns for *McDonald's* hamburgers. The idea of athletes endorsing what many consider to be junk food did not seem to be contradictory for fans. The commercial was played in 103 countries and statistics indicated that *McDonald's* fed one percent of the world's population daily during the prime of the commercial's broadcast.<sup>84</sup> More recently, Beckham along with other football stars featured in an advertising campaign for soft drink brand *Pepsi Cola*, the ads featured Beckham and his football alumni consuming the drink as a source of energy boost for their athletic prowess.<sup>85</sup>

Gunston envisages that extensive media promotion of sporting figures could lead to a scenario where sports and hero worship rivals that of religion creating a 'religiosport'

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<sup>83</sup> Mary G. McDonald and David L. Andrews, "Michael Jordan: Corporate Sport and Postmodern Celebrityhood" in *Sport Stars: The Cultural Politics of Sporting Celebrity*, ed. David L. Andrews and Steven J. Jackson (London: Routledge, 2001), 20; Raj Purohit, *Beckham and the Conquest of America* (Bloomington: IUUniverse, 2008), 11.

<sup>84</sup> Walter Lafebar, *Michael Jordan and the New Global Capitalism* (New York: Norton Paperbacks, 2002), 156.

<sup>85</sup> Ernest Cashmore and Ellis Cashmore, *Beckham* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2004), 170.

scenario.<sup>86</sup> That is, the compounding of issues in popular culture such as the demand for instant entertainment and the decline in personal relationships and social values will “create a spiritual value into which sports may move.”<sup>87</sup> Gunston’s observation is evident in the sense that sporting fans are just as loyal and passionate as fans of other entertainment genres. Sporting fans emotionally engage professional sports through interaction with other audiences and respond to the joys of triumph or the agony of defeat that their favourite athletes experience.<sup>88</sup> They buy the merchandise and they want to consume everything about sporting icons.

### ***Popular Figures and Media Networking***

Boorstin believes that the hallmark purpose of celebrity promotion is so that it can be reported or reproduced by mass media to attract audience attention.<sup>89</sup> This, in succession, builds significance for the star and ventures they may be involved in through widely circulated media coverage. For Boorstin, this comes as a result of contemporary culture’s “fundamental unauthenticity” influenced by the increased dominance of mass media’s presentation of the world in what he described as a “pseudo event.”<sup>90</sup>

The cultural phenomena that Boorstin described are arguably more evident in the contemporary networked media environment than they were at the time that Boorstin was observing what we now understand to be the traditional broadcast media and movie industries—and perhaps nowhere more obvious than in the intersecting spheres of influence of online social networks. Many contemporary social networking sites offer

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<sup>86</sup> Gunston, *Play Ball!*, op.cit. 35.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Matthew Shank and Fred Beasley, “Fan or Fanatic: Refining a Measure of Sports Involvement” *Journal of Sport Behaviour* 21 (1998): 436.

<sup>89</sup> Boorstin, *The Image*, op.cit. 255.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid. 57.

free and paid advertising allowing media producers and stars to capitalise on the popularity of convergent media formats emerging through the application of internet technologies.<sup>91</sup> This method of advertising star actuality is achieved through interaction with fans on socially networked websites.

Many activities and images that in the past may have been considered by consumers in the offline physical environment as a fantasy have become actuality in virtual arenas. In the past, a common trend was for fans to consider the distance between themselves and celebrities in the context of their drastically different lifestyles.<sup>92</sup> It was as if the stars were glamorous figures who lived in a distant remote world that fans could only imagine. However, in the world of contemporary social networking, both fans and the stars appear to share common ground and may interact as equals. The apparent equality of stars and fans in the online environment is illuminated on celebrity page profiles on social networks like *Myspace* and *Twitter*. The structural design of these web pages enables celebrities to not only exhibit their individuality but also demonstrate their accessible commonality through the sharing of texts and photo and video media. For instance, stars can offer fans glimpses into their private lives by sharing photo and video media of themselves in a domesticated environment such as in their homes or with their pets.<sup>93</sup> The presentation of celebrity ordinariness is furthered with texts that appear on their pages which often reveal simple facts such as, their favourite things or, particular habits they

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<sup>91</sup> Kristine Murray and Rhonda Waller, "Social Networking Goes Abroad" *International Education* 16 (2007): 2.

<sup>92</sup> Lin and Lin, *Impetus for Worship*, op.cit. 582; Cashmore, *Making Sense of Sports*, op.cit. 397.

<sup>93</sup> Joshua Gamson, "The Web of Celebrity" *The American Prospect* (2000): 41; Hiebert, Gibbons and Silver, *Exploring Mass Media*, op.cit. 275; Turner, Bonner and Marshall, *Fame Games*, op.cit. 12; David Robinson, "Celebrity Power" *The American Prospect* (2007): 94; Nicolas White, "Celebrity Twitter: Too Much Information!", *People Magazine*, <http://www.people.com/people/article/0,,20282275,00.html> (accessed July 15, 2009); John Metcalfe, "The Celebrity Twitter Ecosystem", *New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/29/fashion/29twitter.html> (accessed July 15, 2009).

may have.<sup>94</sup> The presented normality establishes a sense of authenticity in the star image.<sup>95</sup>

Another interesting example of the current trend to capitalise on the popularity of online fandom may be witnessed in the world of politics. In recent years, political campaigns have prolifically targeted users of social networking sites like *Facebook*, *Myspace* and *Youtube*.<sup>96</sup> Recent political campaigns in Australia, Canada, South Korea and the United States were described as “Youtube Elections” or “Internet Elections” due to the overwhelming focus on engaging with voters through new media platforms.<sup>97</sup> By the 2000 American presidential campaign, promotional movements for candidates included maintaining a strong web presence through their official websites supported with images, videos and interactive features such as e-mailing and campaign contribution forms.<sup>98</sup> Today, virtual campaigning is now as much a part of the political campaigning process as television advertising. Politicians encourage voters to communicate with them on social networks by simply making themselves available on social networks for supporters to seek them.<sup>99</sup> That is, by ‘adding’ a political candidate to their ‘friends list’,

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<sup>94</sup> Gamson, *ibid.* 41; White, *ibid.*; Metcalfe, *ibid.*

<sup>95</sup> Rojek, *Celebrity*, *op.cit.* 11; Metcalfe, *ibid.*

<sup>96</sup> Edward Erikson, “Hillary is my Friend: MySpace and Political Fandom”, *Rocky Mountain Communication Review* 4 (2008): 3.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*; Jim McNamara, “E-Electioneering: Use of New Media in the 2007 Australian Federal Election” ANZCA08 Conference, *Power and Place*, Wellington, New Zealand (2008): 2; Han Woo Park and Yeon-ok Lee, “The Korean Presidential Election of 2007: Five Years on from the Internet Election” *Journal of Contemporary Eastern Asia* 7 (2008): 3; Tamara A. Small, “The Facebook Effect? Online Campaigning in the 2008 Canadian and U.S Elections” *Policy Options* (2008): 87.

<sup>98</sup> Bruce Bimber and Richard Davis, *Campaigning Online: The Internet in US Elections* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 46.

<sup>99</sup> Erikson, *Hillary is my Friend*, *op.cit.* 10.

followers are essentially creating an online support group that helps reinforce the support for that particular politician.<sup>100</sup>

Jenkins suggests that contemporary fandom is a new way to engage voters in politics.<sup>101</sup> He writes “entrenched institutions are taking their models from grassroots fan communities, reinventing themselves for an era of media convergence and collective intelligence.”<sup>102</sup> The architecture of social networks like *Myspace* and the commentary which appears there resembles more closely to fandom than political discussion.<sup>103</sup> However, it is perhaps no accident that politicians such as Kevin Rudd, Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama capitalised on the functions of contemporary fandom and new media convergence. Fandom within online media networks encourages community building by gathering affective support bases for specific beliefs and interests.<sup>104</sup>

### ***Contemporary Fandom***

Henry Jenkins believes that “within popular culture fans are the true experts; they constitute a competing educational elite, albeit one without official recognition or social power.”<sup>105</sup> That is, fans have always been sophisticated in the sense that they interpret media texts in a diversity of interesting and at times unexpected ways. They exhibit this sophistication through communal activities such as weekend gatherings to critique, discuss, evaluate and interpret media texts of their favourite genres.<sup>106</sup> Fans are “textual

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<sup>100</sup> Erikson, *ibid.* 14; Nick Anstead and Andrew Chadwick, “Parties, Election Campaigning, and the Internet” in *Routledge Handbook of Internet Politics*, ed. Andrew Chadwick and Philip N. Howard (London: Taylor & Francis, 2008), 61; Small, *The Facebook Effect?*, *op.cit.* 85.

<sup>101</sup> Henry Jenkins, David Thorburn and Brad Seawell, *Democracy and New Media* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004), 1.

<sup>102</sup> Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, *op.cit.* 22.

<sup>103</sup> Erikson, *Hillary is my Friend*, *op.cit.* 5.

<sup>104</sup> Matt Hills, *Fan Cultures* (London: Routledge, 2002), 138; Karen Hellkeson and Kristina Busse, *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2006), 29.

<sup>105</sup> Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, *op.cit.* 86.

<sup>106</sup> Hills, *Fan Cultures*, *op.cit.* 29; Jenkins, *ibid.* 277.

poachers”<sup>107</sup> because they are passionate about media genres and they actively seek different ways to connect with the fictional storyline plots and character personalities.

Perhaps because fans have always shown the desire to read deeper into official narratives, fandom has had an uneasy relationship with producers of media. Because of their relentless yearning to critically analyse every aspect of official set texts, fans were mostly perceived as violators of the media production process.<sup>108</sup> Due to the lack of credibility given to them by media officials, fan communities were an underground world.<sup>109</sup> The immediacy and convergence of new media platforms has enabled the enhancement of fandom. The internet has become a popular gathering point for fans who want to showcase their passion for media genres.<sup>110</sup> For instance, fans can publish their works of fan literature (fanfic) showcasing not only their knowledge but also advocating alternative ways to view media genres. The multidirectional function of the online community enables fans to simultaneously shift between the role of consumer and unofficial media producer.<sup>111</sup> Commonly, an online fan community will be based around a website or a discussion forum (usually both) accommodating for various aspects of discussion, analysis and critique much deeper than the average coffee shop conversation. Perhaps the most notable fan exponents of online communities are contemporary soap opera audiences. Soap opera or serial drama fans as a group regularly use internet discussion forums to analyse the televised texts and predict the future of storylines and characters. They compulsively analyse, critique and advise on ways which producers and

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<sup>107</sup> Jenkins, *ibid.* 156.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.* 10.

<sup>109</sup> Henry Jenkins, *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers* (New York: NYU Press, 2006), 54.

<sup>110</sup> Baym, *Tune In, Log On*, *op.cit.* 216.

<sup>111</sup> Baym, *ibid.*; Hills, *Fan Cultures*, *op.cit.* 30.

actors can improve their presentation of televised texts.<sup>112</sup> The combination of critique and creativity has been common among fan cultures. Jenkins writes:

*...the fan's response typically involves not simply fascination or adoration but also frustration and antagonism...it is the combination of the two responses which motivates their active engagement with the media...popular narratives often fail to satisfy, fans must struggle with them...because the texts continue to fascinate, fans cannot dismiss them...but rather must try to find ways to salvage them for their interests.*<sup>113</sup>

Although soap operas and other television dramas are designed to encourage audience speculation, their “rough spots”<sup>114</sup> such as plot or character disinformation offer fans added motivation for creative and critical input.<sup>115</sup> For instance fans of the popular serial drama *X-Files* often used the internet to develop alternative ways to interpret the programme's official texts.<sup>116</sup> They often used *X-Files* fan forums on the internet to discuss the possibilities of a romantic connection between the show's two leading characters ‘Mulder’ and ‘Scully’.<sup>117</sup> Fans who believed in such theory became known as ‘Relationshippers’ or ‘Shippers’. While the romance between the two characters never came to fruition within official texts, fanfic literatures concerning ‘Mulder’ and ‘Scully’ as a romantic couple were common among *X-Files* fan communities. It enabled fans to imaginatively take on the role of an unofficial producer in their creation of fan literature.

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<sup>112</sup> S.E Bird, *The Audience in Everyday Life: Living in a Media World* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 53; Baym, *ibid.* 106.

<sup>113</sup> Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, *op.cit.* 23; Baym, *ibid.* 96.

<sup>114</sup> Baym, *ibid.* 106.

<sup>115</sup> Bird, *The Audience in Everyday Life*, *op.cit.* 127; Hills, *Fan Cultures*, *op.cit.* 1; Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, *op.cit.* 56.

<sup>116</sup> Christine Scodari and Jenna L. Felder, “Creating a Pocket Universe: “Shippers,” Fan Fiction, and the X-Files Online” *Communication Studies* 51 (2000): 239.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.* 240.

The reading patterns of ‘Shippers’ also created a division between them and more casual viewers of the show. ‘No Romancers’ or ‘NoRomos’ viewed the relationship between ‘Mulder’ and ‘Scully’ as purely platonic citing the emphasis of the professional association between the two characters in official texts.<sup>118</sup>

In more recent years, contemporary fandom is perhaps most evident in the genre of reality television. The format of reality television is that it is usually pre-taped to allow editing production before it is broadcasted on television. The popular reality television programme *Survivor* follows this production format. The premise of the show pits 16 strangers against one another on a deserted landscape. Weekly episodes of *Survivor* are crafted out revealing anticipated results of competition between contestants. According to Jenkins “Survivor is television for the internet age, designed to be discussed, dissected, debated, predicted and critiqued.”<sup>119</sup> Because of the show’s pre-taped format, its most hardcore audiences are eager to figure out the results of weekly programmes before it is broadcasted on television. The winner of the show has become one of the most heavily guarded secrets with media producers stipulating enormous fines into contestant contracts to prevent the leakage of results. The most devoted contingent of *Survivor* fans known as the ‘Spoilers’ invest much time and effort in exposing the results and the production procedures of the show. Through a methodical process, they collectively seek to determine the accuracy of information items in which they extensively analyse already-aired programmes looking for hidden clues and evaluate discourse accumulated from fan contribution and internet news sources.<sup>120</sup> Online fan communities like the ‘Spoilers’

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, op.cit. 25.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

have become influential factors to the production strategies of media because these communities are bonded together under a voluntary common interest with a specific goal.

The contemporary fan community is a resemblance of what Lévy calls “knowledge communities”<sup>121</sup> where fans as a group exert their collective understanding in order to be as knowledgeable as they can about their genre of interest.<sup>122</sup> As the fans of the show get together and collect and process information, at the same time they are forming a knowledge community. Such communities serve as sites for

*...collective discussion, negotiation and development...unanswered questions will create tension...indicating regions where invention and innovation are required.*<sup>123</sup>

The online contingent of *Survivor* fans is essentially collective intelligence in practice. The unpredictability of the programme such as the elimination of contestants creates an intrigue for fans to try and fill in the gaps by communally seeking for potential hidden clues and answers in regards to it.

Contemporary fandom poses a major problem for media producers, most notably through information sharing. ‘Spoilers’ communicate with the knowledge that the programme has already been filmed and their primary interest is to seek answers to what only the media producers know while the show is still in its broadcast season. Thus, it creates an “Us” [fans] versus “Them” [media producers] mentality in the sense that media producers will invest a great deal of effort to protect the mystique of their work while fans are always trying to figure out the story, spot the con and uncover the hidden clue.<sup>124</sup> The high volume of online discourse surrounding *Survivor* would become one of

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<sup>121</sup> Nicolas Negroponte, *Being Digital* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 54.

<sup>122</sup> Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, op.cit. 24.

<sup>123</sup> Lévy, *Collective Intelligence*, op.cit. 217.

<sup>124</sup> Baym, *Tune In, Log On*, op.cit. 115.

the key elements that make the programme intriguing for fans. But because all interaction is under one space, the influx of information is a concoction of pure facts, fabricated gossip and false rumours. False information can easily lead to misconceptions of new insight by readers.<sup>125</sup> Therefore information tends to be closely scrutinised by community members with each individual offering to share their knowledge if occasion arises. While gossip and rumours are often part of the intrigue for media genres, they can at times have harmful ramifications on media productions. This was the case when a fan published inside information which revealed the order of contestant eliminations for the 6<sup>th</sup> season of *Survivor*.<sup>126</sup> It created immense intrigue among *Survivor* fan communities on the internet. Some fans disputed the authenticity of the facts while others took the information and formed it as part of their core knowledge about the show.<sup>127</sup> While it created an interesting topic for discussion among online-based *Survivor* fans it also effectively ruined the unpredictability that had been vital in making the programme so popular. Fans who were exposed to the leaked information were more concerned about whether the rumours they read online would come to fruition when the show began broadcasting rather than the plot and characters of the official narratives.

The phenomenon of knowledge communities on the internet is an interesting aspect of contemporary fandom. They function in a democratic manner whereby every individual is allowed to contribute any material, from personal opinion, to factual information, to damaging rumour. In order to ensure the functionality of the knowledge community, information items are collectively scrutinised in a process by which authenticity is dynamically determined. Contemporary fan groups also exploit the

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<sup>125</sup> Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, op.cit. 28.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid. 31.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

convergence of online communities as a tool for prolonging their passion for programmes that are no longer in production, such as *X-Files*. Through the collaborative production of original fan literature and collective evaluation of knowledge regarding the genre, discourse within online fan cultures provides compelling insight into the psyche of contemporary audiences. However, the egalitarian functionality of online communities also gives contemporary fan cultures an anarchic constitution. User activities may be maintained through community rules but ultimately they are difficult if not impossible to control. Turner writes,

*...fans, readers and viewers have their own menu of personalities and attributes in which they maintain an interest- and their own reasons for doing so.*<sup>128</sup>

Online communities are voluntary and tactical because fans can disband from them if they no longer meet their “emotional or intellectual needs.”<sup>129</sup> The main attribute of new media platforms are its multidirectional functions; this same concept applies with respect to information items on the internet. Opinions are shared and rumours are spread within fan discourse on the internet. The validity of news and rumour items is essentially determined by majority consensus among online community members. While fan discourse creates valuable exposure for media productions, at the same time alternative interpretations of media genres based on information circulated on the internet have at times been perceived by some producers as commercial risks.

It is also important to keep in mind that the interests of fans and producers are different. Knowledgeable fan cultures can prove to be beneficial contributors because of their alternative reading patterns to official narratives. Jenkins situates contemporary fan

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<sup>128</sup> Turner, *Understanding Celebrity*, op.cit. 110.

<sup>129</sup> Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, op.cit. 57.

groups as a new form of media culture and believes the co-operation between media industries and audiences are vital because:

*net discussions tend to centre on those issues that are of the most interest...commentary and criticism not only of the specific characters and episodes, but even of specific moments within the aired episodes; attempts to develop aesthetic criteria for the evaluation of television and other popular texts; speculations about media authorship; critiques of ideology; and self-analysis of the netters' own involvement with the broadcast materials.*<sup>130</sup>

However, at the same time, they may also be a media producer's worst nightmare regarding their production strategies due to fans' relentless desire to read deeper into official texts and their continuous exposure to information variety on the internet.

### ***Previous Works Studying Pro-wrestling***

One of the earliest scholarly insights into the world of pro-wrestling was from Roland Barthes. In his essay titled *The World of Wrestling*, Barthes examines the textual format of pro-wrestling. He believed, unlike legitimate contact sports such as boxing, the primary aim of professional wrestling was not to determine a victor through a "demonstration of excellence" but rather a "spectacle of excess" that acted out the basic social ideals of good and evil, justice and injustice, triumph and defeat, joy and suffering and so on.<sup>131</sup> According to Barthes, professional wrestling is essentially a morality play which

*...offers excessive gestures, exploited to the limit of their meaning...a man who is down is exaggeratedly so, and completely fills the eyes of the spectators with the*

<sup>130</sup> Jenkins, *Fans, Bloggers and Gamers*, op.cit. 116.

<sup>131</sup> Roland Barthes, "The World of Wrestling" in *Culture and Society: Contemporary Debates*, ed. Jeffery C. Alexander and Steven Seidman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 87.

*intolerable spectacle of his powerlessness...each sign is endowed with absolute clarity since one must always understand everything on the spot.*<sup>132</sup>

For instance, villains in pro-wrestling texts engage the audience by blatantly violating the symbolic laws which the spectacle is based on, creating a ‘crisis’ situation in which the hero must somehow resolve. Wrestling fans according to Barthes were mainly concerned with authentic presentations of the morality battle between good and evil.

Henry Jenkins’ 1997 study titled *Never Trust a Snake: WWF Wrestling as Melodrama*<sup>133</sup> uses Barthes’ theory as foundation to examine *World Wrestling Federation* (WWF) television programming in American culture during the late 1980s to early 1990s – in 2002 WWF became *World Wrestling Entertainment* (WWE). Jenkins compares the textual format of pro-wrestling on television to that of conventional melodrama in film and television where the protagonists endure through the motions of adversity and struggle within scripted plots to restore the status quo while the villains break every rule in the book to reinforce their social and moral oppositions.<sup>134</sup> He observes that, like serial dramas, wrestling plotlines span for months and sometimes years pitting competitors of moral opposites in a series of dramatic conflicts on television through rehearsed speeches and improvised wrestling action. Wrestling characters within televised narratives are exaggeratedly portrayed as indestructible figures. This, he says, transforms

*wrestlers into cartoonish figures who may slam each other’s heads into iron steps, throw each other onto wooden floors, smash each other with steel chairs, land with*

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<sup>132</sup> Ibid. 88.

<sup>133</sup> Henry Jenkins, *The Wow Climax: Tracing the Emotional Impact of Popular Culture* (New York: NYU Press, 2005), 75.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid. 82.

*their full weight on other's prone stomach and emerge without a scratch, ready to fight again.*<sup>135</sup>

Such portrayal allows for the emphasis of might where the notion of morality is linked to physical strength and where the 'stronger' hero always prevails over the "mental craftiness" of the antagonist.<sup>136</sup> The presented illusion of the real fight and the legitimate conflict is protected at all costs. Jenkins also noted that wrestling television programmes mimic the formats of sports coverage, news broadcasts and talk shows. Performers are profiled in accordance to their television character in company-run magazines and storylines are recapped in the form of sporting highlight packages.<sup>137</sup> There is never an acknowledgement of the production or the creative planning process.

Pro-wrestling is a unique industry which bridges the gap between theatrical melodrama and professional contact sports. It is an industry which has its own unique operating procedures, borrowing elements from theatrical and sporting industries. For example, wrestling industry jargon combines language from both the theatre and sporting professions. Wrestling performers are known as 'talent', locker rooms are referred to as 'dressing rooms' and event schedules are known as 'cards'.<sup>138</sup> Like actors, the success of pro-wrestlers are predominantly determined by their charisma and their ability to draw emotion from audiences rather than any kind of athletic prowess or sports scoring system.<sup>139</sup> Wrestling competition results are pre-determined and the significant moments are pre-scripted to evoke maximum audience emotion. Similar to film directors and

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<sup>135</sup> Ibid. 90.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid. 83.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid. 91.

<sup>138</sup> Sharon Mazer, "The Doggie Doggie World of Professional Wrestling" *The Drama Review* 34 (1990): 98.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

producers, wrestling company owners decide a wrestler's position within set texts and dictate which performers should be champions and so on.<sup>140</sup> In the 1980s and 1990s, wrestling company owners furthered their attempts to break into the cultural mainstream by developing connections with performers from film, music and sporting industries.<sup>141</sup> Due to this emphasis on presenting stories through the emotionally charged demonstrations of performers rather than their athletic abilities, non-wrestlers were indeed able to guest star in wrestling television productions. In the past, *WWF/WWE* wrestling productions have featured popular figures such as music artist Cyndi Lauper, world champion boxer Mike Tyson and actor 'Mr. T'. Company owner Vince McMahon even guest starred as an active performer on wrestling television programmes.<sup>142</sup> The studies of professional wrestling conducted by Barthes and by Jenkins focused on the industrial practices of the genre as predominantly the production of official texts. As such they provide a substantial critical basis for understanding the fundamentals of wrestling culture. However Barthes' study was conducted in the 1950s and Jenkins' in 1997. In the intervening decades there have been significant changes in pro-wrestling culture and especially in the typical discursive profile and the collective behaviour of those who comprise a major section of the wrestling fan population. This is a major focus of the dissertation that follows.

### ***Conclusion***

The phenomenon described as collective intelligence can be said to have accumulated in the formation of a knowledge community compromising of the most

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid. 104.

<sup>141</sup> Gary Michael Cappetta, *Bodyslams!: Memoirs of a Wrestling Pitchman* (Toronto: ECW Press, 2006), 70; Beekman, *Ringside*, op.cit. 125.

<sup>142</sup> Oppliger, *Wrestling and Hypermasculinity*, op.cit. 17; 23; Beekman, ibid. 125 - 126; 188.

passionate and well-informed wrestling fans. As a result, alternative reading patterns with regard to professional wrestling culture are fostered where the private life of the wrestling performer is as much of a discussion topic as their star image. News items are widely circulated, nostalgic moments are often prolonged and practices of industry are consistently the target of criticism among fans on the Internet Wrestling Community (IWC). False rumours at times are wrongly evaluated and interpreted as new conceptions to the core knowledge often creating flashpoint hysteria across the networks that make up the IWC. Fan allegiances and loyalties can be as temporary as they are voluntary; wrestling stars can gain cult-like support one day and yet be collectively and decisively dissociated with the next, through the discourse on fan discussion forums. More knowledgeable wrestling fans, as a group, have drastically influenced the industrial production strategies that have been in place since the beginning of the history of modern professional wrestling. A power struggle emerged between those fans who are persistent at enhancing their knowledge of the genre and the media producers who are just as dedicated to maintaining the secrecy that has traditionally been a part of pro-wrestling's myth and mystique. Official wrestling institutions like *World Wrestling Entertainment* (*WWE*) have increasingly been forced to acknowledge the reading patterns of contemporary fan groups and to implement more sophistication based on their preferences into the presentation of official televised narratives.

In this thesis, observations of the online records of contemporary fan behaviour and producer intentions regarding the career of former *WWE* World Heavyweight Champion Chris Benoit will be shown to effectively characterise the portrayals of the nature of celebrity and stardom discussed in this preview of relevant literature. In addition subtle but

relevant points of difference that arise out of the contemporary socio-cultural circumstances and technological environment will be elucidated.

### ***Research Methodology***

The objective of this study was to collect and review data from discussion threads and website articles of fan-operated wrestling-oriented networking communities and official media producer web portals that comprise what is broadly known as IWC for the purpose of addressing the research questions outlined in the introduction to this dissertation. Research for this thesis loosely utilised the practices of open coding. The open coding method is an analytical procedure which allows for the identification of common themes through collected data.<sup>143</sup> That is, by categorising the data into groups in accordance with their content similarities and differences, it allows for common themes to be established providing for a clear insight into the research topic. Collected data for this thesis comprised of thousands of website articles and discussion forum postings from throughout the IWC.

During the course of the study key narratives from *WWE* television programmes were also reviewed. With the focus of the study narrowed down to following the career of Chris Benoit this became a manageable task.

The very nature of the source texts means, as outlined in the literature review and detailed in subsequent discussion, that they are not necessarily all reliable sources in terms of veracity or factual truth. Indeed, in some cases they are little more than rumour, speculation or subjective and emotional tirade. In other cases they are well informed and often based on eye-witness and electronically recorded audio-visual accounts. Most

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<sup>143</sup> Colin Lankshear and Michele Knobel, *Teacher Research: From Design to Implementation* (Berkshire: Open University Press, 2004), 38.

important and key to this dissertation is that wholly they comprise an often shifting, hardly ever fixed, cultural actuality wherein the tension between the expectations of a knowledgeable fan group and the commercial imperative of the wrestling promoters is played out, with the celebrated star performers enacting scenarios that they ultimately cannot control, the reality of which can only be imagined from some of the insights these collated texts provide.

All of these texts were analysed in accordance with topical themes relevant to the thesis and are systematically cited as the discussion of the dissertation proceeds. In all cases the sources have been recorded and incorporated into the thesis referencing.

### *Chapter 3- What is the IWC?*

#### *Introduction*

The fictional world of professional wrestling has been a popular cultural entertainment alternative since its humble beginnings as a carnival novelty to its current form as a dramatic sporting spectacular. At the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, professional wrestling remains a key entertainment alternative in popular culture. Wrestling's range of popular products includes: its global syndicate of television programmes; live events in sporting arenas around the world; and, interactive media on the internet. This last area is unique because, in some cases, fans can take roles not only as spectators but also as performers and active contributors to the production of official texts.

The popularity surge of professional wrestling in the last decade<sup>144</sup> coincides with the increasing popularity of internet technology use in contemporary culture. The internet has become the site of fan discourse throughout different cultural forms. One of the more influential online fan communities in the last decade is the Internet Wrestling Community (IWC). The IWC is a term used to define a section of the professional wrestling audience who pursue their fandom on the internet.<sup>145</sup> This relatively recently emerged segment of fan demographics routinely uses the internet to accommodate their consumption of, and participation in professional wrestling through memberships on fan websites and contribution to web forums. Members of this fan population are a diverse

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<sup>144</sup> Brian Fritz and Christopher Murray, *Between the Ropes: Wrestling's Greatest Triumphs and Failures* (Toronto: ECW Press, 2006), 150 - 153; 163; Craig J. Calhoun and Richard Sennett, *Practicing Culture* (London: Routledge, 2007), 151 - 152.

<sup>145</sup> Pro Wrestling Wikia, "Internet Wrestling Community" *Pro Wrestling Wikia*, [http://prowrestling.wikia.com/wiki/Internet\\_wrestling\\_community](http://prowrestling.wikia.com/wiki/Internet_wrestling_community) (accessed June 25, 2008); Thewrestlingvoice.com, "The Butchershop – Microcosmos", *Thewrestlingvoice.com*, <http://thewrestlingvoice.com/columns/thebutcher/headlines/133155611.shtml> (accessed February 15, 2009); Lordsofpain.net, "Take up thy Wrestling Boots and Walk - Wrestling court - Wrestling vs. the IWC" *Lordsofpain.net*, [http://www.lordsofpain.net/news/2005\\_/articles/1129684403.php](http://www.lordsofpain.net/news/2005_/articles/1129684403.php) (accessed February 25, 2009).

group of individuals, many of whom relish the opportunity to showcase their expertise by sharing their “collective intelligence”<sup>146</sup> of professional wrestling. The internet provides the cultural space for fans to follow the behind-the-scenes industry practices of wrestling companies. The bond of the IWC is further solidified due to the elimination of time constraints and geographical boundaries.

This chapter will firstly provide some historical context with regard to wrestling media. It will then explain the basis for this examination of the system and structure of modern professional wrestling through an analysis of texts collected from the online wrestling fan community collectively known as the IWC. The pro-wrestling world has traditionally been secretive in terms of information regarding all facets of operational practices. However for the better part of the last decade, the increased capabilities offered by communication technologies have changed the way the wrestling industry operates. This in turn has enabled the IWC to open the ‘back doors’ to the world of professional wrestling as never before witnessed or experienced by fans. Today the IWC is comprised of various applications of internet technology such as file-sharing, websites, chat rooms, blogs and discussion forums. Information which was traditionally unavailable is now likely to be widely available within the communities of the IWC.

Henry Jenkins’ study, *Textual Poachers*, examines how active segments of the fan population extend the fantasised worlds of television programmes through fan fiction.<sup>147</sup> Seminal studies conducted by Nancy Baym in *Tune In, Log On*, and Elizabeth Bird in *The Audience in Everyday Life*, examine the extension of Jenkins’ “textual poaching”<sup>148</sup> theory through soap opera fandom in the virtual sphere of internet websites and

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<sup>146</sup> Lévy, *Collective Intelligence*, op.cit. 20.

<sup>147</sup> Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, op.cit. 155.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid. 23 - 27.

discussion forums.<sup>149</sup> Soap opera and pro-wrestling fans share similarities in their behavioural trends whereby they use the internet as a communicative tool to share and acquire knowledge about their favourite genres. However, pro-wrestling is not just a form of television programming; it is a live event as well, which fans attend as spectators. In the last decade, there has been a gradual trend emerging where fans use knowledge they have acquired on the IWC in shaping their responses to narratives at live wrestling events.

One of the key objectives of this dissertation is to show how the internet based fan cult known as the IWC has influenced change in approach to the production of official texts broadcasted on *WWE* television programmes. It will be shown how fan interpretations of professional wrestlers, independent from the marketing strategies set out by media producers, have played a key role in some of the biggest wrestling headlines in recent years such as: the Matt Hardy / Amy Dumas ('Lita') / Adam Copeland ('Edge') love triangle; the *WWE* departures of former world champions Bill Goldberg and Brock Lesnar; and, the Chris Benoit murder/suicide in 2007. An analysis of audience interaction from two wrestling matches (Bill Goldberg Vs Brock Lesnar from *Wrestlemania XX* and Kurt Angle Vs Chris Benoit from the *2003 Royal Rumble*), will be used to demonstrate how the stimulus of discussion on the IWC can influence the creative strategies of media producers. It will also highlight the concerns and criticisms voiced by industry insiders in response to behind-the-scenes information emanating from the IWC.

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<sup>149</sup> Baym, *Tune In, Log On*, op.cit. 3; Bird, *The Audience in Everyday Life*, op.cit. 132.

Because they are passionate about the industry and are focused in their consumption of the product, contemporary wrestling fans believe it is not only their right but also their duty to critique all facets of professional wrestling. However, many fans believe that no matter how profound their criticisms or how brilliant their ideas, media producers would not cater for the feedback of the IWC. The reading process of fans on the IWC is not limited to the viewing of wrestling narratives on television. They also interpret wrestling storylines and characters in accordance to information documented on the IWC. Wrestling news sites operated by industry journalists offer readers an alternative view to the world of pro-wrestling by providing information which focuses on exposing the production strategies of media officials and revealing the real-life personalities of fictional wrestling characters. This has created an uneasy relationship between contemporary wrestling audiences and media producers because fans not only view the wrestling product as spectators but also as insiders, due to their acquired knowledge of the inner workings of the industry from the IWC. With reference to the analyses of professional wrestling from previous eras performed by Roland Barthes and Henry Jenkins, and using the data collected from contemporary wrestling narratives as part of the topical study, this chapter will highlight the changes in pro-wrestling textual production. It will be argued that these changes were in no small part influenced by the contemporary fan's alternative understandings of wrestling storylines and that this knowledge became available through the activities of participants in the conglomeration of mostly web-based information and activities that are encompassed by the term 'the IWC'.

### ***Earliest Forms of Wrestling News & Information***

Intrigue and authenticity is imperative to the aspects of mystery and suspense in professional wrestling. Prior to the internet, wrestling companies had considerable control over the nature of information which was accessible to wrestling viewers. Wrestling magazines and wrestling companies operated their industry news and rumour services in the form of postal mail newsletters and telephone information hotlines. Access to industry news and rumours through telephone hotlines were advertised on wrestling television programmes and magazine publications. Fans were encouraged to call the hotlines to receive ‘exclusive’ gossip about wrestling storylines and characters through phone announcements recorded by media producers.<sup>150</sup> Wrestling telephone hotlines were considered an important element of creating hype and re-enforcing the illusion of pro-wrestling.<sup>151</sup> The wrestling business was built on promoters’ assumption that their audiences are a collection of gullible individuals who could be conned into paying money to believe an illusion. In the earliest periods of professional wrestling in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, journalists would report wrestling news as if it were a legitimate sport like boxing.<sup>152</sup> Journalists would attend the wrestling events and make notes in order to retell the significant moments of the spectacle and reported them for newspapers or radio broadcasts.<sup>153</sup> By the late 1980s, magazines, telephone hotlines and the traditional newsletter service became the dominant sources for wrestling information. Wrestling

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<sup>150</sup> Adam Kleinberg and Adam Nudelman, *Mysteries of Wrestling: Solved* (Toronto: ECW Press, 2005), 141 - 143.

<sup>151</sup> Eric Bischoff, *Controversy Creates Cash* (New York: Pocket Books, 2007), 175 - 177; Muchnick, *Wrestling Babylon*, op.cit. 72.

<sup>152</sup> Gerald Morton and George O’Brien, *Wrestling to Rasslin: Ancient Sport to American Spectacle* (Madison: Popular Press, 2004), 24; 47; Tim Hornbaker, *National Wrestling Alliance: The Untold Story of the Monopoly that Strangled Pro Wrestling* (Toronto: ECW Press, 2007), 119; 47; Beekman, *Ringside*, op.cit. 4; 9; 14 - 15.

<sup>153</sup> Beekman, *ibid.* 9; 16 - 17; Morton and O’Brien, *Wrestling to Rasslin*, op.cit. 30.

news services before the predominance of the internet provided extensive coverage of pro-wrestling by implicating all aspects of official texts as legitimate events.<sup>154</sup> For example in 1997 the *WWE* presented a storyline which saw wrestling characters unified into ‘gangs’ in allegiance to their ethnicities, a *WWE* magazine journalist reporting under the pseudonym ‘Vic Venom’ compared the situation as more dangerous than the gang lifestyle on the streets of South Central Los Angeles.<sup>155</sup> Later that year when Steve Williams (‘Stone Cold Steve Austin’) threw the *WWE* Intercontinental Championship belt belonging to Dwayne Johnson (‘The Rock’), into the Oyster River during a *Monday Night Raw* event in Durham, New Hampshire, wrestling journalists would describe the event as the craziest incident that could ever happen in the wrestling industry.<sup>156</sup> Wrestling storylines were retold with exaggeration in the format of sports coverage or news broadcasts through print and on television to reinforce the illusion of the fictional texts as legitimate events.<sup>157</sup>

The early wrestling news outlets such as company hotlines and magazine publications were utilised as a unilateral one-way communication channel and served to reinforce the relationship of authority between producer and audience. Wrestling promotions had the power to maintain the ideology of ‘kayfabe’. The term kayfabe is used by industry officials to describe the deception of wrestling’s official narratives as genuine in order to reinforce the illusion. Originally a slang term derived from the North

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<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

<sup>155</sup> V.Venom, “It’s a Westside Story” *WWF Magazine*, September 1997, 7.

<sup>156</sup> Andrew Cunningham, “History of Pro Wrestling News”, *Wrestlesmarks.com*, <http://wrestlesmarks.com/item/1> (accessed 29 June, 2008); *Monday Night Raw 08.12.97*, VHS, directed by World Wrestling Entertainment (Durham, NH: World Wrestling Entertainment, 1997).

<sup>157</sup> Jenkins, *The Wow Climax*, op.cit. 91.

American carnival circuits in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, kayfabe meant “be fake.”<sup>158</sup> Among the professional wrestling alumni, the notion of kayfabe carried the responsibility of maintaining the deception of pro-wrestling which required wrestlers to stay in character inside and outside the ring.<sup>159</sup> Therefore information which could potentially dispel the illusion of pro-wrestling had the potential to be particularly harmful to a wrestling promoter.

### ***The Beginning of the IWC***

The world of professional wrestling is an illusory world with its own set of laws and its own characters. This modern day adaptation of the morality play mixes planned and improvised events. For instance, although storylines and match outcomes are predetermined, the actual wrestling matches are improvised. Incidents can sometimes transpire not according to the scripted plan and diverge away from the strategic plans outlined by event producers. Incidents sometimes include legitimate injuries suffered by wrestling characters to unanticipated crowd responses during live television broadcasts. It is common practice for media producers to incorporate fake injuries to enhance storylines within the official narratives.<sup>160</sup> The line of confusion between what is constructed and what is unexpected occurs when media producers choose to incorporate unplanned real-

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<sup>158</sup> Bob Ryder, *How I Helped Kill Kayfabe: From Internet Geek to Wrestling Insider* (Toronto: ECW Press, 2007), 5; Brian Blair, *Smarten Up! Say it Right* (New York: Kayfabe Publishing Company, 2001), 6; Beekman, *Ringside*, op.cit. 40.

<sup>159</sup> Harley Race, *King of the Ring: The Harley Race Story* (Champaign: Sports Publishing LLC, 2005), 50; 139; Ryder, *ibid.* 5; Bischoff, *Controversy Creates Cash*, op.cit. 38; 76.

<sup>160</sup> Ryan Michael, “WWE’s fake Jeff Hardy Car Accident Storyline Crosses Line”, *Bleacher report*, <http://bleacherreport.com/articles/109083-wwes-fake-jeff-hardy-car-accident-storyline-crosses-line> (accessed January 19, 2009); Scott Keith, *Wrestling’s Made Men: Breaking the WWE’s Glass Ceiling* (Sarasota: Kensington Publishing Corporation, 2006), 106; Mazer, *Professional Wrestling*, op.cit. 164.

life circumstances into the official narratives as well.<sup>161</sup> The ever present tension between constructed reality and actual reality adds to the intrigue and suspense of professional wrestling narratives. It is also this tension that would drive wrestling fans to have the desire to read deeper into the official texts in pursuit of seeking the authentic.

Wrestling newsletters by the mid 1990s had begun catering to a subculture of fans who wanted to be more familiar with other aspects of professional wrestling such as dispelling the illusion of kayfabe and figuring out the surprises of future wrestling events.<sup>162</sup> A new format of wrestling newsletters would target its focus on reporting inside information which is commonly known as ‘dirt sheets’ or ‘the sheets’.<sup>163</sup> This term is used by industry workers to describe the news and rumour bulletins presented by non company affiliated wrestling journalists.<sup>164</sup> For many hardcore wrestling fans in the 1980s the *Wrestling Observer* newsletter was a transformative moment in their fandom. The newsletter opened an entirely new perspective on the wrestling universe that was completely hidden on televised wrestling programmes and company-run magazines. However, insider fan newsletters were distributed via postal services during that period and by the time subscribers received the newsletters much of the information was already out of date.<sup>165</sup> As the internet became a more universal form of communication, wrestling readers who had subscription to newsletters services would publish the information they

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<sup>161</sup> Catherine Salmon and Susan Clerc, “Ladies Love Wrestling too: Female Wrestling Fans Online” in *Steel Chair to the Head: The Pleasure and Pain of Professional Wrestling*, ed. Nicolas Sammond (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 185; Oppliger, *Wrestling and Hypermasculinity*, op.cit. 83.

<sup>162</sup> Douglas Battema and Philip Sewell, “Trading in Masculinity: Muscles, Money and Market Discourse in the WWE” in *Steel Chair to the Head: The Pleasure and Pain of Professional Wrestling*, ed. Nicolas Sammond (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 288; Vince Russo, *Forgiven* (Toronto: ECW Press, 2005), 17; Dave Meltzer, *Tributes II: Remembering More of the World’s Greatest Professional Wrestlers* (Champaign: Sports Publishing LLC, 2004), xv.

<sup>163</sup> Blair, *Smarten Up! Say it Right*, op.cit. 43; Pro Wrestling Wikia, *Internet Wrestling Community*, op.cit; Bischoff, *Controversy Creates Cash*, op.cit. 198.

<sup>164</sup> Bischoff, *ibid.* 198.

<sup>165</sup> Hills, *Fan Cultures*, op.cit. 179; Jenkins, *Fans, Bloggers and Gamers*, op.cit. 141.

had access to on their own fan sites for free.<sup>166</sup> Progressively fans who did not wish to disburse their money for wrestling newsletters had access to dirt sheets through the internet. These news and opinion sites are unofficial because they are not affiliated with the *WWE* or any other wrestling company. While fan-created news sites can be considered as amateur, a majority of them have the presentation and feel of a professionally designed website. These fan portals feature opinions from columnists, some of whom are well known within the IWC, along with regularly updated news features and discussion forums for members.

Today, almost all the information available on fan controlled news sites is likely to have stemmed from websites operated by veteran industry news journalists who have focused their careers on reporting wrestling news. Websites such as *Pro Wrestling Insider* (pwinsider.com), *Pro Wrestling Torch* (pwtorch.com) and, *Wrestling Observer* (f4wonline.com) are amongst the most popular sources for wrestling news and rumours. The attraction to fans is their capability to cater for the growing expectations of the contemporary wrestling viewer. Dirt sheet reports comprising leaked storyline plans and wrestler contract disputes are often first reported on wrestling news sites. Increasingly, information irrelevant to the official televised texts has become an integral aspect of IWC news portals. Information of this nature is circulated independently from the control of media producers and exposes the actual people behind the wrestling characters. Dirt sheet reports tend to focus on the premises of controversy surrounding the backstage politics between performers and their private relationships outside of the illusory wrestling universe.

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<sup>166</sup> Pro Wrestling Wikia, *Internet Wrestling Community*, op.cit; Scott E. Williams, George Tahinos and Shane Douglas, *Hardcore History: The Extremely Unauthorized Story of ECW* (Champaign: Sports Publishing LLC, 2007), 2.

In direct competition with media producer operated websites, the IWC functions like a continuous tabloid about the wrestling industry. Online wrestling news outlets encourage contributions from wrestling supporters, encouraging them to share their experiences from live events, wrestler sightings or the scrutiny of wrestling texts via e-mail or through mobile phones. These ‘amateur’ websites have no affiliations with wrestling companies and so may provide information independent from the control of the official company line. Official media providers have a duty in restricting admission of reputation-damaging information such as news and gossip which stem from non-affiliated sources.<sup>167</sup> Throughout the discourse analysed for this study, there is suspicion among members of the IWC that official producer websites like *wwe.com* may censor fan published content in order to uphold their public image and to maintain kayfabe.<sup>168</sup> Negative responses voiced by fans could very well be removed in order to preserve a positive reputation for wrestling promoters. This consensus amongst the IWC readership coincides with Nick Couldry’s theory of “the symbolic hierarchy of the media frame.”<sup>169</sup> Couldry’s theory is primarily concerned with media organisations’ adopted procedure of limiting the contribution of material from consumers.<sup>170</sup> However websites and forums operated by fans usually encourage open and detailed dialogue between members

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<sup>167</sup> Bertha Chin and Matt Hills, “Restricted Confessions? Blogging, Subcultural Celebrity and the Management of Producer-fan Proximity” *Social Semiotics* 18 (2008): 260.

<sup>168</sup> Bobby Spade, “WWE Fan Nation Not a Fan of Randy Savage?”, *Nodq.com*, <http://nodq.com/wwe/214097578.shtml> (accessed June 19, 2008); Ryan Clark, “More Behind the Scenes News on WWE.com’s ‘Industry News’ Section”, *Wrestlinginc.com*, [http://www.wrestlinginc.com/news/2008/313/318675\\_2.shtml](http://www.wrestlinginc.com/news/2008/313/318675_2.shtml) (accessed June 19, 2008); D.Meltzer, “*Wrestling Observer Newsletter*” *Wrestling Observer*, 10 March 2008, 7.

<sup>169</sup> Nick Couldry, *The Place of Media Power: Pilgrims and Witnesses of the Media Age* (London: Routledge, 2000), 20; Chin and Hills, *Restricted Confessions?*, op.cit. 258.

<sup>170</sup> Jane Singer, “The Political J-blogger: “Normalising” A New Media Form to Fit Old Norms and Practices” *Journalism: Theory, Practice and Criticism* 6 (2005): 188; Chin and Hills, *ibid*.

regardless of its nature—be it positive or negative. Thus, the fundamental procedures of the IWC appear to destabilise the hierarchy of the media frame.

***The Emergence of the Smark: The Contemporary Wrestling Fan***

The emergence of wrestling fan communities featuring behind-the-scenes exposés and the re-circulation of information throughout the IWC has fundamentally fragmented the confidentiality and mystification of the kayfabe decree. Consequently, those within the wrestling fan population who had access to news and rumour websites became smarter in the sense that they were more knowledgeable about wrestling's industrial procedures. These fans were familiarised with the theatrical wrestling gimmicks but also gained more intimate glimpses into the private lives of the fictional wrestling characters. The inner workings of the industry were exposed.

The reading process of wrestling fans and the apprehension of them by media producers had begun to change in contrast to previous eras. Wrestling fans had previously been treated as passive audiences who consumed everything media institutions presented them with.<sup>171</sup> In *Textual Poachers*, Jenkins described fandom as a “weekend only world”<sup>172</sup> because the audience were at a cultural disadvantage. Their input rarely pressured the practices of media officials.<sup>173</sup> Fans were either not as advanced in their knowledge of the genre as the media professionals or did not have the technological capabilities to re-circulate their differing opinions fast enough.<sup>174</sup> However, as Jenkins contends with respect to his field of research, so too wrestling fans had the desire to read

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<sup>171</sup> Hills, *Fan Cultures*, op.cit. 31; Robert Drew, “Anyone Can Do It: Forging a Participatory Culture in Karaoke Bars” in *Hop on Pop: The Politics and Pleasures of Popular Culture*, ed. Henry Jenkins, Tara McPherson and Jane Shattuc (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 255.

<sup>172</sup> Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, op.cit. 281 - 282.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid. 24; 280.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid. 87.

beyond official texts and did so in the form of fan fiction and other cultural activities such as fan conventions.<sup>175</sup> Jenkins' ideas are reinforced and exhibited through Baym and Bird's examination of soap opera fans that use internet discussion forums to converse about the official and potential hidden narratives behind televised texts.<sup>176</sup> Online soap opera fans could also be thought of as smarter audiences for their genre similarly to internet wrestling fans.

Casual fans who respond to the wrestling industry purely from a television standpoint are labelled as 'marks'. A mark is an insider term used to describe casual fans who consume all facets of the wrestling industry from a scripted perspective.<sup>177</sup> The expression originated from the carnival circuits where its workers called paying customers 'marks' in reference to them being the target of the scam. Regular participants on IWC discussion forums gained more inside knowledge than had previously been possible. A schism between wrestling fans slowly developed. These fans became known as 'smart marks', 'smarts' or 'smarks'. The term smark first emerged in the 1980s and was a derisive expression that insiders used to describe wrestling fans who possessed the passion to follow the inner functions and behind-the-scene aspects of the industry.<sup>178</sup> Contemporary smarks display their enjoyment of wrestling texts by engaging in active discussion. This often shifts between knowledge of narratives to insider news. The nature of the discussion often calls into question boundaries between fiction and fact; reality and

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<sup>175</sup> Ibid. 90.

<sup>176</sup> Baym, *Tune In, Log On*, op.cit. 17; Bird, *The Audience in Everyday Life*, op.cit. 131.

<sup>177</sup> Williams, Tahinos and Douglas, *Hardcore History*, op.cit. 76; Matysik, *Wrestling at the Chase*, op.cit. 54; Beekman, *Ringside*, op.cit. 53.

<sup>178</sup> Williams, Tahinos and Douglas, *ibid*; Sharon Mazer, "Real Wrestling / Real Life" in *Steel Chair to the Head: The Pleasure and Pain of Professional Wrestling*, ed. Nicolas Sammond (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 80; Harley Race and others, *The Professional Wrestlers' Workout & Instructional Guide* (Champaign: Sports Publishing LLC, 2005), 128.

actuality. IWC smarks simultaneously engage official texts as both spectators and critics. This emphasises the unpredictability and the multidirectional nature of contemporary wrestling fandom discourse.

Internet technology use has played a significant role in the evolving identity of the smark wrestling fan. Smark fandom allows a wrestling viewer to move from simply enjoying the genre to understanding the reasoning behind the determination of good and bad performances. Smark audiences stay tuned to the product not only for the wrestling action. Motivation factors include admiration for a wrestler's work ethic outside of the ring and, anticipation of a significant event—such as an appearance of a wrestler from another company—because of something read on the internet. Because of their access to at one time confidential or privileged information, and to comments and stories, smark fans and wrestling news websites influence decisions made by industry leaders; thus influencing outcomes for the industry. Supporter communities enabled by internet technology have become a prominent source for fan membership and the re-circulation of media content that ranges from intimate discourse to the sharing of wrestling multimedia. Subsequently, the wrestling fan population can no longer be perceived as submissive or culturally disadvantaged because they possess knowledge previously only accessible to insiders. Moreover, wrestling fan communities have become actively and creatively involved in suggesting and demanding what they expect and prefer from media producers within the official narratives. In addition, the expression of fandom is no longer a weekend only world.<sup>179</sup> It is around-the-clock, everyday.

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<sup>179</sup> Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, op.cit. 282; Jonathan Alan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss and Lee C. Harrington, *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World* (New York: NYU Press, 2007), 361.

### *The IWC Today*

With an ever expanding knowledge of the inner industrial practices of pro-wrestling, online fan communities gradually became more concerned with the notion of authenticity. The fascination with the genuineness of the wrestling action became more focused on a wrestler's ability to make the illusion of competition appear as authentic as possible. Fans became more fascinated with the inner workings of the industry. Wrestling news insiders used the internet to sustain the increasing demand. The pursuit of supreme authenticity would result in the reporting of more controversial issues concerning the wrestling world.

Within the vast networking of fan communities it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between the constructed and the actual. At times the pre-released, 'leaked' and rumoured information is so rich in detail that fans would have a precise idea of planned storylines months before it was actually broadcasted on television. Instead of an upset victory or a shocking storyline development on television, a headline might be about the political reasons behind a competitor switching companies, or a wrestler failing a drug test. According to some insiders, the revelation of such information is possible because many of the top news site operators have either previously been employed by wrestling companies or maintain relationships with wrestling company workers.<sup>180</sup> Wade Keller, Dave Meltzer and Bryan Alvarez are among the leading journalists who bring wrestling fans insider news every day of the week. At the time of writing, they are full time workers operating a profitable internet business by providing a service which is clearly in demand to wrestling fans worldwide.

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<sup>180</sup> Jerry Jarrett, *The Story of the Development of NWA-TNA: A New Concept in Pay-Per-View* (Oxford: Trafford Publishing, 2004), 149; Bischoff, *Controversy Creates Cash*, op.cit. 198; Kleinberg and Nudelman, *Mysteries of Wrestling*, op.cit. 144.

Considered by many as the greatest wrestler of all time, 16-time World Heavyweight Champion Ric Flair provides a detailed account in his autobiography about how the upper echelon (main event) wrestlers in *World Championship Wrestling (WCW)* treated dirt sheets from insider newsletters as if they were “The Bible.”<sup>181</sup> Changes and swerves to storylines were implemented when company professionals realised that information which posed potential threat to their plans had been leaked online. Media production teams in the wrestling industry believed they needed to maintain mystery and suspense in order to satisfy wrestling audiences. The dilemma for media producers was that there exist countless networks of online fan communities dedicated to reporting wrestling news and predicting what the next significant moment might be.

An example of a storyline swerve is evident in the *WWE*’s handling of the ‘Lita’ character in 2005. Throughout her tenure with the *WWE*, ‘Lita’ had been promoted as the top female protagonist within the official narratives. Having been a part of numerous successful storylines, such as her alliance with fan favourites ‘The Hardy Boyz’, she had established a reputation as a likeable character within the fantasised universe of the *WWE*. In April 2005, damaging information had surfaced throughout the IWC revealing her involvement in a love triangle controversy in her personal life. As the news quickly spread throughout the IWC fans around the world condemned the ‘Lita’ character at live events and expressed their displeasure towards her actions. *WWE* management had no alternative but to turn one of their most marketable stars into a villainous antagonist.<sup>182</sup>

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<sup>181</sup> Ric Flair, Keith Elliot Greenberg and Mark Madden, *Ric Flair: To be the Man* (New York: Pocket Books, 2005), 158; Kleinberg and Nudelman, *ibid.* 138.

<sup>182</sup> Lordsofpain.net, “The Wrath of Tito - Hardy/Lita/Edge”, *Lordsofpain.net*, [http://www.lordsofpain.net/news/2005\\_/articles/1121981027.php](http://www.lordsofpain.net/news/2005_/articles/1121981027.php) (accessed January 25, 2009); Jamie Jones, “Good Article on Lita and Her Current Mindset About the WWE”, *Letstalkwrestling.com*, <http://www.letstalkwrestling.com/2008/01/good-article-on-lita-and-her-current.html>

This extraordinary chain of events would become the biggest wrestling story both within and outside of the *WWE*'s fictional world in 2005 and will be examined further in depth later in this chapter.

A more recent example of a storyline swerve unfolded in January 2008 involving multi-time *WWE* Champion John Cena. Through the content analysis of fan dialogue collected from IWC sites and forums, this dissertation contends that most internet fans had widely speculated Cena's re-introduction to *WWE* audiences would take place at the prestigious *Wrestlemania XXIV* event. This was as a result of a lengthy absence due to major surgery on a torn pectoral muscle.<sup>183</sup> Wrestling fans online were convinced Cena would not play a role at *Wrestlemania XXIV*'s most important lead up event, the 2008 *Royal Rumble*. The main catalyst for such assumption was that it had been widely reported on the internet that Cena was to take a long term hiatus from in-ring competition to rehabilitate from his injuries.<sup>184</sup> As the *Royal Rumble* neared its conclusion, Cena made a surprise return only 3 months after major surgery. He would eliminate Paul Levesque ('Triple H') to win the 2008 *Royal Rumble* and subsequently earn a *WWE* title opportunity at *Wrestlemania XXIV*.<sup>185</sup> Audiences both in attendance and watching at home were stunned to see the accelerated return of Cena to competitive action. Internet

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(accessed January 25, 2009); Dale Mills, "In This Very Ring.... (Column #113) Thoughts on Big Vis, Randy Orton, Lita", *Wrestleview.com*, <http://www.wrestleview.com/news2005/1116709717.shtml> (accessed January 14, 2009).

<sup>183</sup> Daniel Pena, "WWE News: The Latest on John Cena's Return to the Ring", *Lordsofpain.net*, <http://www.lordsofpain.net/news/2008/articles/1201554448.php> (accessed February 20, 2009); Richard Gray, "John Cena Injury Update - More News on His Surgery, Recovery, & Rehabilitation", *Rajah.com*, <http://www.rajah.com/base/node/9490> (accessed February 20, 2009).

<sup>184</sup> Ibid.

<sup>185</sup> Dale Plummer and Nick Tywalk, "Cena Wins Rumble in Surprise Return", *Slam! Sports*, <http://slam.canoe.ca/Slam/Wrestling/PPVReports/2008/01/28/4797664.html> (accessed February 20, 2009); Ricky Giri, "WWE Royal Rumble: John Cena Eliminates HHH to Win the Rumble", *Wrestlinginc.com*, [http://www.wrestlinginc.com/news/2008/127/john\\_cena\\_314723.shtml](http://www.wrestlinginc.com/news/2008/127/john_cena_314723.shtml) (accessed February 20, 2009).

wrestling fans in particular were impressed with the *WWE*'s resourcefulness to swerve even the most knowledgeable of fans:

- *Solidly booked and full of surprises...I definitely was shocked to see Cena come out at #30.*<sup>186</sup>
- *Cena's return was a huge surprise and very well done.*<sup>187</sup>

### ***Multimedia Communities***

An evolving element of the IWC is those communities that encourage multimedia service, share or trade. The myriad facets of the IWC serve as advantageous advertising spring boards for wrestling companies worldwide, in particular smaller companies that do not possess the financial stability of already established companies like the *WWE* or *Total Non-Stop Action (TNA)*. The sector in the wrestling industry which is perhaps most influenced by the IWC and in particular its multimedia extensions is the independent (indy) wrestling circuit. Indy wrestling organisations are important to the wrestling industry because they serve as stepping stones for new performers to learn their craft and gain exposure to larger companies such as the *WWE* or *TNA*. Prior to the internet becoming a popular communication variable, indy promotions gained exposure through word of mouth within local communities. Like fan communities at that time, indy wrestling officials operated at a cultural disadvantage because most indy wrestling promotions did not have television exposure. They were unable to compete with large wrestling organisations like the *WWE*, who were exposed globally through their syndicate of weekly television programmes. Thus, with a lack of funds and technological

<sup>186</sup> BlackShadow215, "Official 2008 Royal Rumble Thread 1/27/2008", *Rajah.com*, January 28, 2008, <http://forums.rajah.com/showthread.php?t=131435&page=60> (accessed January 31, 2009).

<sup>187</sup> Spanish Announce Table, "Official 2008 Royal Rumble Thread 1/27/2008", *Rajah.com*, January 28, 2008, <http://forums.rajah.com/showthread.php?p=5407940#post5407940> (accessed January 31, 2009).

capabilities to promote their product, indy promotions were unable to compete with more financially stable wrestling companies. Indy promotions were limited to operating within their local vicinities on weekends. Independent pro-wrestling was a weekend only world.

Today's IWC allows smaller companies to gain universal promotion with an enhanced possibility of growth from VHS and DVD sales through online video vendors. The significance of multimedia networks on the IWC is further expanded as many fan communities possess the capability of providing members with media content through personal and free file-hosting networks including peer-to-peer file sharing (P2P). International fans can frequently access videos of their favourite wrestling television programmes before they are broadcasted in their own country! For instance, regarding the *WWE*'s marquee television programme *Friday Night Smackdown*. The show is pre-taped every Tuesday and aired on Friday nights in most countries including the United States, Canada, and in Australia through the *Fox8* network. So after the programme that is aired on Friday nights in Australia, because of the standard time differential bootleg copies may become readily available for download via multimedia communities hours before it is broadcasted in key markets around the world like the United States. These time zone differences with respect to access to multimedia services available via the IWC have lead to the occurrence of fan discussion regarding the official narratives before they air in other parts of the world. Similarly, fans who attend the Tuesday tapings of *Smackdown* often e-mail live results including their own commentary about the quality of the event. This notion of "just in time fandom"<sup>188</sup> has progressively become the trend within the IWC. As Hills explains,

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<sup>188</sup> Hills, *Fan Cultures*, op.cit. 179.

*The practices of fandom have become increasingly enmeshed with the rhythms and temporalities of broadcasting, so that fans now go online to discuss new episodes immediately after the episode's transmission time or even during ad breaks perhaps to demonstrate the 'timelessness' and responsiveness of their devotion.*<sup>189</sup>

Technologically enabled extensions of media allow fans to discuss professional wrestling prior to, during and after telecasts.

### ***Influences of Smarks***

The IWC crowd is particularly opiniated. These people often display viscious behavior towards media officials if they become unsatisfied with particular facets of the wrestling industry. Such protestation may result from discontent with a wrestler's personality outside of the ring or distatisfaction towards the official narratives. The disclosure of information about the core fundemantal practices of professional wrestling has turned naive fans into dedicated connoisseurs of the industry.

Fans are exposed to the language used within the wrestling industry. For example, the term 'jobber' is used to describe a competitor whose sole purpose is to lose in order to enhance the superiority of his opponent.<sup>190</sup> Insiders of the industry would know this. Consumers may be expected to either not know or to not care about such unauthenticity. The continual exposure of such 'sham' practices by contributors to the IWC has created an uneasy relationship with the wrestling industry.

Contemporary wrestling fans relish the opportunity to read deeper into wrestling texts and they want to avoid being labelled as 'marks'. They want to appear as

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<sup>189</sup> Ibid.

<sup>190</sup> Bobby Heenan and Steve Anderson, *Chair Shots and Other Obstacles: Winning Life's Wrestling Matches* (Champaign: Sports Publishing LLC, 2004), 70.

individuals who are knowledgeable about the wrestling industry.<sup>191</sup> Community members who show distinct higher levels of knowledge such as the extensive use of wrestling jargon, tend to earn more respect from fellow members and their discourse is often interpreted with additional respect and credibility compared to less conversant casual fans.<sup>192</sup> This hierarchy of knowledge refers to a unique characteristic that is often displayed in fandom whereby fans feel the desire to exhibit their degree of understanding about the genre among other fans.<sup>193</sup> Fan communities like the IWC have become more sophisticated as knowledge gains credibility through circulation across the diverse cultural extensions of the internet.<sup>194</sup>

One of the main activities fans partake in when they converge online is the accumulation of intelligence. The internet technologies provide the infrastructure to support the archives of the information that fans share. As a result, fans can build consistent, comprehensive and searchable knowledge archives, arguably more complete than any other media company can create. When knowledge becomes widely available to all members of fan communities; the notion of collective intelligence ensures even the most casual of wrestling fans are exposed to facts previously unknown to them.

Examining fan dialogue on IWC websites and forums showed that for smarks, it is not only about viewing the wrestling genre from a dedicated fan's standpoint. These individuals also critically analyse what they see. They judge events according to how

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<sup>191</sup> James Guttman, *World Wrestling Insanity: The Decline and Fall of a Family Empire* (Toronto: ECW Press, 2006), 197; Nicolas Sammond, "A Brief and Unnecessary Defence of Professional Wrestling" in *Steel Chair to the Head: The Pleasure and Pain of Professional Wrestling*, ed. Nicolas Sammond (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 10; Mazer, *Professional Wrestling*, op.cit. 81.

<sup>192</sup> Jenkins, *Fans, Bloggers and Gamers*, op.cit. 126; Hills, *Fan Cultures*, op.cit. 73; Baym, *Tune In, Log On*, op.cit. 148.

<sup>193</sup> John Fiske, "The Cultural Economy of Fandom" in *The Adoring Audience*, ed. Lisa A. Lewis (London: Routledge, 1992), 39; Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, op.cit. 88; Hills, *ibid.* 55.

<sup>194</sup> Jenkins, *Fans, Bloggers and Gamers*, op.cit. 126.

storylines and wrestling manoeuvres were mistimed or executed successfully. For instance, wrestling smarks will critique performers on the basis of their ability to suspend audience disbelief. Smarks are aware that the main objectives of wrestling companies are to attract potential fans by intensifying melodramatic conflict and producing satisfying outcomes. This, at times, is in contrast to the sensibility of the average internet wrestling smark who prefers the product to be more realistic. This is exemplified by a member of the *WWE-Club* discussion forum who stated:

*If there was not an internet community, we would not know half the stuff we know about the wrestlers. It adds a bit of realness when you know the past of a wrestler and other things.*<sup>195</sup>

### ***Trends and Hysteria Originating From the IWC***

In the past, the defiance of smarks as a group has jeopardised the narrative objectives of media producers. Content analysis of fan discourse and response on the IWC and recorded wrestling events show that the classic example of fan defiance transpires in the form of unexpected crowd enthusiasm, such as the acceptance of a villainous character (heel), or the rejection of a fan favourite character (babyface).<sup>196</sup> The reading practices of wrestling audiences on the internet are complex. Fans and wrestlers alike have used the IWC as a tool to expose the industry and to create hysteria in order to

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<sup>195</sup> 2 Fast 2 See, "WWE-Club Debate -- The Internet Wrestling Community, Is it Good or Bad for the Business" *WWE-club.com*, March 26, 2007, <http://www.wwe-club.com/phpBB3/viewtopic.php?t=70892> (accessed June 28, 2008).

<sup>196</sup> *Wrestlezone.com*, "Circuitry", *Wrestlezone.com*, <http://www.wrestlezone.com/column.php?articleid=121355112> (accessed June 9, 2008); Daniel Wilcox, "Thoughts From the Top Rope 09.25.07: 411 is Jericho!", *411mania.com*, <http://www.411mania.com/wrestling/columns/60388> (accessed February 28, 2009); *Wrestlingforum.com*, "SMARKS Ruin Wrestling...", *Wrestlingforum.com*, <http://www.wrestlingforum.com/rants/441272-smarks-ruin-wrestling.html> (accessed June 13, 2008); *Ewbattleground.com*, "Smarks vs. Marks, Debate.", *Ewbattleground.com*, <http://www.ewbattleground.com/forum/index.php?showtopic=16655> (accessed June 13, 2008).

influence the official narratives of wrestling programmes. A good, previously cited, example is the commentary regarding an infamous real-life love triangle between *WWE* entertainers Matt Hardy, 'Edge' and a former *WWE* Women's Champion 'Lita'. The significance of this incident was that the entire saga transpired on the IWC.

### ***The Love Triangle- Matt Hardy, 'Lita' and 'Edge'***

The real-life dramas of popular wrestling figures Matt Hardy, 'Lita' and 'Edge' would become the catalyst for a sequence of events that would create controversy among the industry and plunge *WWE* media producers into damage control mode. Matt Hardy, angered by the adulterous betrayal of his then girlfriend and best friend, fellow *WWE* wrestlers 'Lita' and 'Edge', published intimate details of the scandalous affair on his official website.<sup>197</sup> Hardy's actions would lead to his eventual contract termination from the *WWE*.<sup>198</sup> While he parted ways from the company he had competed for over his entire career, Hardy's presence was still being felt at *WWE* events.<sup>199</sup> Feeling unjustly treated by his former employers, Matt Hardy utilised the IWC and rallied fans to aid his reinstatement into the *WWE*. Selections from this discourse trail are recorded in the footnotes and comprise the sources for the narrative and its analysis in this dissertation.

The multi-time *WWE* Tag Team Champion interacted regularly with fans on his website and fan forum and gave numerous interviews with wrestling news communities

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<sup>197</sup> Stu Starrs, "Further Details on Matt Hardy/Lita/Edge Love Triangle!", *Lordsofpain.net*, <http://www.lordsofpain.net/news/2005/articles/1110141427.php> (accessed July 5, 2008); Stephen Ashfield, "T3C: Matt Hardy - A WWE Career Returned and Moral Principles Lost", *Wrestling101.com*, <http://www.wrestling101.com/101/article/ttc/661/> (accessed February 3, 2009); Tpw.net, "Matt Hardy Breaks up With Lita After She Cheats on Him With Edge?", *Tpw.net*, <http://www.tpw.net/headlines/1110232710.html> (accessed February 3, 2009).

<sup>198</sup> Stu Starrs, "Matt Hardy Speaks About Possible WWE Return, Reality TV Show & More", *Lordsofpain.net*, <http://www.lordsofpain.net/news/2005/articles/1110141427.php> (accessed July 5, 2008); Adam Martin, "Matt Hardy Interview: Talks about WWE Release, Hardy's Reunion, More", *Wrestleview.com*, <http://www.wrestleview.com/news2005/1114792357.shtml> (accessed July 5, 2008).

<sup>199</sup> Ashish Pabari, "Matt Hardy News: Details on Lita/Matt/Edge Love Triangle", *411mania.com*, <http://www.411mania.com/wrestling/news/24007/Matt-Hardy-News:-Details-On-Lita-Matt-Edge-Love-Triangle.htm> (accessed July 6, 2008).

on the internet.<sup>200</sup> Hardy had created a movement for his cause on the internet and over the course of coming weeks he would rally his loyal fans to voice the slogans “we want Matt” and “you screwed Matt” during sightings of ‘Edge’ and ‘Lita’. This news quickly spread throughout the spaces of the IWC. The support for Hardy would manifest at *WWE* events with ‘Edge’ and ‘Lita’ frequently being on the receiving end of taunts from wrestling fans. During a *Monday Night Raw* event in April 2005 ‘Lita’, a babyface, was greeted with a jeering reception by the 20,000 strong crowd. The segment itself was deemed a disaster by media officials because ‘Lita’s opposite Patricia Stratigias (‘Trish Stratus’) was portraying a newly scripted heel gimmick. The crowd was so focused in their shunning of ‘Lita’ that even when ‘Stratus’ addressed them as “a bunch of idiots” they persisted to enthusiastically chant “we want Matt” and “you screwed Matt.” The situation escalated when choruses of “slut” chants echoed throughout the arena making it near impossible to conclude the segment.<sup>201</sup> ‘Trish Stratus’, as the antagonist, was forced to improvise with the crowd by sarcastically pleading to the live audience to “don’t call her a slut!” which only lead to a more incensed fan response towards ‘Lita’. Recaps of the event were circulated throughout the IWC and fans became more convinced in reaffirming their support for Hardy. This type of unexpected fan response became a movement at *WWE* live events throughout the world. At *WWE* events in South Korea and the Philippines live audiences engaged ‘Edge’ and ‘Lita’ with chants of “you screwed

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<sup>200</sup> Starrs, *Matt Hardy Speaks*, op.cit; D.Meltzer, “*Wrestling Observer Newsletter*” *Wrestling Observer*, 18 July 2005, 5.

<sup>201</sup> Nick Tywalk, “Raw: Lotteries, Locks and Lethal Lacerations”, *Slam! Sports*, <http://slam.canoe.ca/Slam/Wrestling/2005/04/19/1003769.html> (accessed July 10, 2008); Steve Rennie, “Matt Hardy Pulls no Punches on Between the Ropes”, *Slam! Sports*, <http://slam.canoe.ca/Slam/Wrestling/2005/04/21/1006877.html> (accessed July 10, 2008).

Matt” and “slut” just like fans had in the United States.<sup>202</sup> The vicious response wrestling fans showed towards the adulterous couple substantiates the claim that the internet’s influence has effectively introduced smark behaviour amongst a large proportion of wrestling fans.

In the ensuing weeks this controversy gathered more momentum throughout the spaces of the IWC as Hardy continued to rally the support of wrestling smarks. Hardy’s brother, Jeff, and close friend Jason Reso (‘Christian Cage’) also shared their feelings on the controversy through interviews with wrestling websites. Furthermore, ‘Edge’s wife became involved via the discussion forum on Matt Hardy’s website.<sup>203</sup>

Media producers were faced with several dilemmas both inside and outside the fictional *WWE* universe. The *WWE*’s image with wrestling fans suffered a battering as Hardy’s contract had been terminated while he was rehabilitating from knee surgery.<sup>204</sup> Heel contestants who performed against the protagonist character of ‘Lita’ were not able to effectively establish their positions within wrestling texts due to the crowd’s overwhelming rejection of ‘Lita’. The complications that were presented to the *WWE* would eventually lead to the re-instatement of Hardy and a subsequent storyline feud incorporating the real-life controversies between the three wrestling personalities on *WWE* television programming.<sup>205</sup> The *WWE* creative team rushed to turn ‘Lita’ into a

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<sup>202</sup> Daniel Pena, “WWE House Show Results from Manila, Philippines 02-24-06”, *Lordsopain.net*, <http://www.lordsopain.net/news/2006/articles/1140798246.php> (accessed July 10, 2008); Tim Johnson, “WWE House Show Results (6/30/05) - Seoul, South Korea”, *Rajah.com*, <http://www.rajah.com/base/2005/3543> (accessed July 10, 2008).

<sup>203</sup> *Lordsopain.net*, “Breaking News: Edge’s Wife Breaks Her Silence”, *Lordsopain.net*, <http://www.lordsopain.net/news/2005/articles/1113889411.php> (accessed February 13, 2009).

<sup>204</sup> Adam Martin, Matt Hardy Interview: Talks About Going Public with Edge & Lita + More”, *Wrestleview.com*, <http://www.wrestleview.com/news2005/1115232400.shtml> (accessed July 5, 2008); Rennie, *Matt Hardy Pulls no Punches*, op.cit.

<sup>205</sup> Eric Cohen, “Matt a Real-Life Love Triangle”, *About.com*, <http://prowrestling.about.com/od/wrestlerprofiles/p/hardyprofile.htm> (accessed July 1, 2008).

heel character and coupled her with ‘Edge’. ‘Lita’ remained a heel for the rest of her career and the chants of “slut” would also become the standardised fan response for her character throughout the world.<sup>206</sup> She retired in 2006, citing the intense scrutiny she had been consistently put under by wrestling fans as the chief impetus to her decision.<sup>207</sup>

***IWC’s Favouritism for ‘work rate’, Technical Wrestling and the Industry Underdogs***

Jenkins argues fan audiences are a subculture which draws resources from the traditions of the genre and popular culture in the reworking of official texts that serves as development for alternative interests.<sup>208</sup> This may help to explain the compulsion with which the wrestling smark seeks other alternative forms of the genre.

Smark fandom is fundamentally based on the acknowledgement that wrestling storylines are scripted, and that wrestling contest results are pre-determined. For smarks, such acknowledgement is different than judging that wrestling is fake, since fake could carry illusions of painlessness, which would not only be false but would unjustly depreciate the physical sacrifices made by professional wrestlers for the sake of entertainment. Smark-ism is essentially an aesthetic stance where alternatives to official formats are seen as an acquired expertise. These fans believe they could only respond to wrestling texts this way when performers presented the illusion strongly. Smarks believe wrestlers who perform otherwise leave them submersed in the fictional world with a desire to seek other alternative forms. The investigation into alternative forms of the genre by smarks can range from acquiring media of other wrestling institutions to sharing

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<sup>206</sup> Brian Cantor, “WWE News: WWE Follows Up on Lita’s Retirement Announcement”, *Lordsofpain.net*, [http://www.lordsofpain.net/news/2006\\_/articles/1164141242.php](http://www.lordsofpain.net/news/2006_/articles/1164141242.php) (accessed February 1, 2009); Craig Tello, “Lita Says Goodbye”, *World Wrestling Entertainment*, <http://www.wwe.com/inside/news/archive/325276811> (accessed February 1, 2009); Jones, *Good Article on Lita*, op.cit.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid.

<sup>208</sup> Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, op.cit. 154.

their own critiques of wrestling shows on the internet. Bird, in her analysis of soap opera fans on the internet argues,

*[T]echnology has allowed the soap genre, as well as the episodic drama genre, to escape the ephemeral fate that long hampered fans' ability to develop a more mature aesthetic appreciation.*<sup>209</sup>

The structure of professional wrestling fandom exhibits distinct similarities. Fans on the IWC tend to show partisan for the 'political underdog'—performers who do not appear on television every week and do not possess the same win/loss ratio as the more recognised stars. Internet wrestling smarks are also renowned for unconditionally supporting wrestlers who are smaller-framed or lesser-known to casual audiences. Smark fans have a tendency to appreciate 'work rate' rather than the conceptions of sports-entertainment such as 'mic skills' – referring to the theatrical aspects of professional wrestling – such as acting in backstage segments to develop the tension between wrestlers in a storyline within televised texts. For smark fans, the best wrestling matches are the ones in which competitors put their bodies through uncompromising circumstances to bear the burden of the performance. The technical style of wrestling is highly valued among smark fans. The technical wrestling discipline rarely involves any high-flying manoeuvres, or the explicit use of weapons. Rather, the performers who specialise in the technical style enact a range of traditional wrestling holds, throws, submission manoeuvres and reversals. To achieve victory with a submission manoeuvre means an opponent must be in such pain that they signal the intent to surrender to the referee. As a result, obviously wrestling matches look more legitimate.

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<sup>209</sup> Bird, *The Audience in Everyday Life*, op.cit. 133.

The preference for alternatives to official texts has created a division between smark and mark wrestling fans. For example some wrestling marks on the internet claimed that Chris Benoit competed as a mid-card wrestler most of his career because he was not as talented as the marquee performers of the *WWE*, citing his many defeats and lack of physical size as attestation to this fact.<sup>210</sup> Internet wrestling smarks, on the other hand, were more in depth in their analysis of Benoit's career. They argued that Chris Benoit's early non-success was the result of backstage politics within the company in which wrestlers such as 'Triple H' who maintained strong associations with management were placed in more favourable positions within the official texts.<sup>211</sup> One IWC commentator writes:

*Benoit will be thrown to the lions like all the other men who have gotten in Triple H's way.*<sup>212</sup>

Another IWC member adds:

*There are many politics backstage behind the move to push Benoit and have him jump to RAW...Triple H wants a strong in-ring babyface who can work a mat hold and submission based type of match, but also someone who he can beat clean without much controversy.*<sup>213</sup>

Because these smark testimonies were widely reported throughout the IWC, Benoit often had the reputation as the best pure wrestler for the better part of the past decade, if

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<sup>210</sup> Wrestlingdb.com, "Why Chris Benoit Sucks", *Wrestlingdb.com*, <http://www.wrestlingdb.com/articles/2002/09/04/Da-Met> (accessed February 11, 2009); Wrestlezone.com, "Backstage Politics", *Wrestlezone.com*, <http://forums.wrestlezone.com/showthread.php?p=467813> (accessed February 11, 2009).

<sup>211</sup> Randazzo, *Ring of Hell*, op.cit. 280 - 281.

<sup>212</sup> Dumass, "A Dumass Thought - WWVD: What Would Vince Do?", *Lordsofpain.net*, February 18, 2004, <http://www.lordsofpain.net/news/2004/articles/1077085544.php> (accessed May 2, 2009).

<sup>213</sup> Matt Boone, "Inside Politics behind Chris Benoit's Jump to RAW?", *Ennewsnewrestling.com*, January 15, 2004, <http://www.ennewszone.com/wrestling/news/1074217780.html> (accessed May 2, 2009).

not of all time.<sup>214</sup> The preference for a more wrestling-based product was read throughout columns written by IWC reporters and within discussion forums in general.

The common theme amongst the samples of feedback on Benoit's lack of opportunity at a World Heavyweight title reign was that the *WWE* was treating him unjustly.<sup>215</sup> The support for Benoit to be a legitimate world championship contender gained significant momentum as early as 2003. The following citations serve as examples of the majority consensus of wrestling fans in the IWC:

- *Chris Benoit deserves to win the Heavyweight Championship...Why won't they let him win it?*<sup>216</sup>
- *He is constantly one of the most over guys at shows, always puts on a good match, usually the best match on the card. His lack of mic skills is no reason to not push a guy.*<sup>217</sup>
- *The story needs to be Benoit as the guy who did it on his own. That's how I'd like to see it. Also, any title run is good, because at least he'd get one. A long one is better.*<sup>218</sup>

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<sup>214</sup> Randazzo, *Ring of Hell*, op.cit. 279; Tim Livingstone, "Love Equals Death", *411mania.com*, <http://www.411mania.com/wrestling/columns/78580> (accessed July 2, 2008); Lee Andrew Henderson, "WWE Wrestler Chris Benoit and His Family Found Dead", *Associatedcontent.com*, [http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/293030/wwe\\_wrestler\\_chris\\_benoit\\_and\\_his\\_family.html?cat=14](http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/293030/wwe_wrestler_chris_benoit_and_his_family.html?cat=14) (accessed June 29, 2008).

<sup>215</sup> Randazzo, *Ring of Hell*, op.cit. 279.

<sup>216</sup> Hbkdx, "Why Won't They Let Benoit Win the Title?", *Rajah.com*, November 4, 2003, <http://forums.rajah.com/showthread.php?t=51870&highlight=benoit> (accessed June 28, 2008).

<sup>217</sup> Some Slap Nutz, "Why Chris Benoit would make a Great World Champion", *411mania.com*, October 12, 2003, <http://www.411mania.com/ubbthreads/showflat.php?Cat=0&Number=4705309&an=&page=0&vc=1> (accessed June 29, 2008).

<sup>218</sup> Ponyboy84, "Why I Think Chris Benoit Should Get a LONG World Title Run...", *411mania.com*, November 7, 2003, <http://www.411mania.com/ubbthreads/showflat.php?Cat=0&Number=4477517&an=&page=0&vc=1> (accessed June 29, 2008).

There is disparity between these representations of Benoit on the internet and the *WWE*'s portrayal of Benoit's star image at the time. *WWE* commentators would often mention Benoit's overaggressive tendencies in the ring as the main catalyst for his failures in world championship title bouts. During *WWE* telecasts play-by-play commentator Jerry 'The King' Lawler often referred to Benoit as someone "who had all the tools to make it, but could never quite get there."<sup>219</sup> Lawler's references alluded to Benoit's numerous missed opportunities as a world title contender. Benoit's frequent position as a runner-up in championship situations became a focal point for competitors who wrestled against him within the *WWE*. At the *2004 Royal Rumble*, Ric Flair, a 16-time World Heavyweight Champion confidently confronted Benoit with the words; "Chris Benoit, you might be the best technical wrestler in the world, but you will never win the big one!"<sup>220</sup>

In 2007, Chris Benoit was once again at the centre of discussion and hysteria amongst internet wrestling fans. However, this time his status within the official narratives was not the focal point but rather the circumstances and details surrounding the sudden and tragic deaths of Benoit and his family. Reminiscent of the love triangle incident between Matt Hardy, 'Edge' and 'Lita' two years earlier, the preponderance of information relating to the incident originated from the internet. The details and the circumstances surrounding this unexpected event still have wrestling fans worldwide

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<sup>219</sup> *Monday Night Raw 25.09.00*, VHS, directed by World Wrestling Entertainment (Pittsburgh, PA: World Wrestling Entertainment, 2000).

<sup>220</sup> *2004 Royal Rumble 25.01.04*, DVD, directed by World Wrestling Entertainment (Philadelphia, PA: World Wrestling Entertainment, 2004).

divided to this day. Whilst official investigations have shown the event to be a murder/suicide,<sup>221</sup> some fans dispute these findings altogether:

- *[H]e was mentally ill... Benoit's mind isn't the same as ours, therefore should not be judged the same way.*<sup>222</sup>
- *Benoit had absolutely no control over what he was doing that weekend.*<sup>223</sup>
- *Considering how fucked up his mind was as a result of the steroids Vince [McMahon] FORCED him to take, you could argue heavily diminished [Benoit's] responsibility. Actually, I'd have prosecuted Vince for it. But he's smart enough to have buried any evidence.*<sup>224</sup>
- *I'll never understand why people are so quick to think that Nancy [Benoit] was a victim. How do we know she wasn't planning something even worse? Afterall Chris had to go home because of an emergency. The fact is we don't really know anything, therefore we have no right to judge.*<sup>225</sup>

Whilst there is acceptance of the official line there is argument over the ultimate causes of the tragedy. As we will see in the next chapter Chris Benoit would turn from a hero loved by the IWC to an extremely controversial figure at the end of his life.

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<sup>221</sup> Liza Porteus, "Chris Benoit: Professional Wrestler, Murderer, Suicide", *Fox News Network*, <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,286840,00.html> (accessed March 1, 2009); J.M Berger, "Chris Benoit -- Before the Killings, an Icon to Insiders", *Nowrepublic.com*, [http://www.nowpublic.com/chris\\_benoit\\_killings\\_icon\\_insiders](http://www.nowpublic.com/chris_benoit_killings_icon_insiders) (accessed February 1, 2009).

<sup>222</sup> Youngb11, "2 Years today we lost...", *Wrestlingforum.com*, June 24, 2009, <http://www.wrestlingforum.com/general-wwf/461990-2-years-today-we-lost-2.html> (accessed August 5, 2009).

<sup>223</sup> Admiremyclone, "2 Years today we lost...", *Wrestlingforum.com*, June 24, 2009, <http://www.wrestlingforum.com/general-wwf/461990-2-years-today-we-lost-3.html> (accessed August 5, 2009).

<sup>224</sup> Theloneshark, "Is this appropriate? \*Chris Benoit Chants\*", *Wrestlingforum.com*, June 21, 2009, <http://www.wrestlingforum.com/raw/461544-appropriate-chris-benoit-chants-3.html> (accessed August 5, 2009).

<sup>225</sup> Austin101, "2 Years today we lost...", *Wrestlingforum.com*, June 24, 2009, <http://www.wrestlingforum.com/general-wwf/461990-2-years-today-we-lost-5.html> (accessed August 5, 2009).

### ***Critique of the IWC and Smark Culture***

During his prime in the 1980s, former World Heavyweight Champion Harley Race, described kayfabe as a “code of secrecy” which wrestlers prided themselves on protecting.<sup>226</sup> Race suggested that “people know that matches are pre-determined, they shouldn’t be smartened up any more than they already are.”<sup>227</sup> One of the IWC’s biggest critics is the former vice president of the now defunct *WCW*, Eric Bischoff, who on numerous occasions has condemned the IWC. Bischoff believed the leakage of storyline plans and reporting of dirt sheets made it difficult for wrestlers to develop their characters, and the IWC as a whole was bad for the industry.<sup>228</sup> He believes,

*Wrestling fan sites are generally populated by people with too much time on their hands, who have very little real insight into what’s going on in the wrestling business. A lot of them create their own stories and realities just to watch other people react to them. I get a kick out of [Dave] Meltzer’s Web site...he leads people to believe by logging on to his site, you are going to get information on the headlines that he posts. For that you have to buy the “news letter” that he brags “contains more than 35,000 words.” The problem is, those 35,000 words are grammatically incorrect, run-on sentences that read like a fifth-grader wrote them...most of the “news” contained in his publication is second-third-and sometimes fourth-hand information that is so far off the mark it would be comical if it weren’t for the fact that so many people take it as fact.*<sup>229</sup>

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<sup>226</sup> Race, *King of the Ring*, op.cit. 139.

<sup>227</sup> Ibid.

<sup>228</sup> Bischoff, *Controversy Creates Cash*, op.cit. 197.

<sup>229</sup> Ibid. 3; 197 - 198.

In 2003, when crucial details from a *WWE* production conference had been leaked onto the internet almost immediately after the conclusion of the meeting, *WWE* owner Vince McMahon threatened to fire anyone suspected of collaborating with wrestling news reporters.<sup>230</sup> *WWE* play-by-play announcer Jim Ross has in the past described news and rumour reporting on the IWC as “horse manure.”<sup>231</sup> The following quotations are some criticisms of the IWC voiced by other industry professionals:

- *It's just too much information. I mean wrestling used to be about mystery. Now they [the IWC] have taken that away.*<sup>232</sup>
- *How can you respect someone's opinion about wrestling when they've never wrestled?*<sup>233</sup>
- *I think the Internet totally fucked us up. The fans get a lot more information...it's harder to make angles work. I mean, it's fine when people start knowing things, but at the same time there's just way too much stuff out there...when a fourteen year old kid can write, “Hey, Bret Hart's gay...” It annoys the hell out of everybody.*<sup>234</sup>
- *They [the IWC] wanna know everybody's real names, they wanna read the sheets, they wanna go out there and be smartasses, I don't understand this.*<sup>235</sup>

Wrestling industry workers objected to the inaccuracy of news items and the growing influence of column writers. Wrestler Erik Watts believed that

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<sup>230</sup> Ibid. 197.

<sup>231</sup> Jaya Roopansingh, “Opinion: A Little Cross with Ross”, *Slam! Sports*, <http://slam.canoe.ca/Slam/Wrestling/2004/02/19/353694.html> (accessed June 11, 2008).

<sup>232</sup> Viscera, “Has the Internet Ruined Wrestling?” in *Mysteries of Wrestling: Solved*, ed. Adam Kleinberg and Adam Nudelman (Toronto: ECW Press, 2005), 129.

<sup>233</sup> Jake Roberts, *ibid.* 134.

<sup>234</sup> Chris Candido, *ibid.* 131; 133

<sup>235</sup> Konan, “Between the Lines: A Love/Hate Relationship”, *Rajah.com*, July 29, 2006, <http://oratory.rajah.com/index.php?archive=2955> (accessed July 3, 2008).

*If you are an internet writer, you want to make sure you please your peers, just throw in “Erik Watts sucks” and no matter how bad your article has been they all think you are a pretty good writer because they all agree.*<sup>236</sup>

When referring to the credibility of wrestling news outlets former *TNA* owner Jerry Jarrett stated,

*They have decided negative sells better than positive so most of their effort is spent on the negative...by the time newsletters get the information, it seldom reflects the truth.*<sup>237</sup>

Jeff Hardy, a former *WWE* Champion echoed similar sentiments on weekly internet wrestling radio show *Get in the Ring (GIR)*:

*There is so much crap on there [the IWC] that it is not even true, it is amazing how many things people just automatically believe.*<sup>238</sup>

The loss of the traditionally unpredictable nature of wrestling narratives has generally been accepted by the majority of smark fans. Many smarks credit the internet for enhancing their enjoyment of pro-wrestling. Some fans advocate that the IWC offers the wrestling industry an elite focus group consisting of the most introspective, critical, informed, and loyal sector of spectators. One fan posting in a discussion forum thread titled *The Internet Wrestling Community, Is it Good or Bad for the Business*, believed the IWC is beneficial because “You can read the spoilers, if you read the spoilers you may be intrigued to see what happened on the show and how it went.”<sup>239</sup> In a similar thread on the *Captured-Beauty* web forum a member appended “Without the internet I’d likely not

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<sup>236</sup> Erik Watts, *Has the Internet Ruined Wrestling?*, op.cit. 135.

<sup>237</sup> Jarrett, *The Story of the Development of NWA-TNA*, op.cit. 149; 156.

<sup>238</sup> Jeff Hardy, *Has the Internet Ruined Wrestling?*, op.cit. 143.

<sup>239</sup> 2 Fast 2 See, *WWE-Club Debate*, op.cit.

know of Shimmer, TNA or ROH.”<sup>240</sup> Here the poster refers to smaller indy wrestling organisations like *Shimmer* and *Ring of Honor (ROH)* who solely rely on DVD and ticket revenue through the internet in order to maintain business operations as both do not have television exposure anywhere in the world.<sup>241</sup> *ROH* have developed a cult-like following among internet wrestling fans as a small but popular alternative to the *WWE* product. While the *WWE* have always preferred to glorify larger steroid-enhanced wrestlers who were less athletic, *ROH* features many smaller and more innovative performers.

### ***Bill Goldberg Vs Brock Lesnar - The Negative Impact of Smartened Wrestling Fans***

The feud between Brock Lesnar and Bill Goldberg in 2004 and in particular the concluding match of their storyline feud at *Wrestlemania XX* further demonstrates the complex relationship between smartened wrestling fans and media producers like the *WWE*. The feud was promoted as an encounter between two colossal figures from two different dynasties of the wrestling world. As a member of the *WCW* roster in the 1990s, Bill Goldberg was depicted as an unstoppable wrestling machine who at one stage was undefeated for 173 straight bouts.<sup>242</sup> Lesnar, touted with the leader, ‘The Next Big Thing’, had achieved similar successes in the *WWE* during the early 2000s. The distinct similarities between the two competitors in physique and wrestling styles would at times prompt fans to chant “Goldberg” during Lesnar’s matches at *WWE* events.<sup>243</sup> The *WWE*’s

<sup>240</sup> Ian, “The Internet and Wrestling?”, *Captured-beauty.com*, April 11, 2008, <http://www.captured-beauty.com/forum/viewtopic.php?t=3241> (accessed June 5, 2008).

<sup>241</sup> Jason Clevett, “2004 A Year of Triumph for Ring of Honor”, *Slam! Sports*, <http://slam.canoe.ca/Slam/Wrestling/2005/02/12/929388.html> (accessed July 5, 2008).

<sup>242</sup> John Milner, “Goldberg”, *Slam! Sports*, <http://slam.canoe.ca/Slam/Wrestling/Bios/goldberg.html> (accessed June 21, 2008).

<sup>243</sup> Calvin Martin, “(SPOILERS) WWE Velocity and Smackdown Taping Results from Toronto”, *Lordsofpain.net*, [http://www.lordsofpain.net/news/2002\\_/articles/1034772995.php](http://www.lordsofpain.net/news/2002_/articles/1034772995.php) (accessed June 25, 2008); J.D Dunn, “Dark Pegasus Video Review: Judgment Day 2002”, *411mania.com*, [http://www.411mania.com/wrestling/video\\_reviews/71278/Dark-Pegasus-Video-Review:-Judgment-Day-2002.htm](http://www.411mania.com/wrestling/video_reviews/71278/Dark-Pegasus-Video-Review:-Judgment-Day-2002.htm) (accessed June 23, 2008).

acquisition of Goldberg in 2003 led to their eventual contest at *Wrestlemania XX* in April 2004.

However, the *WWE*'s promotion of the much anticipated match-up failed to take into account the popular wrestling smark interpretations and the news items which they had access to concerning both wrestlers:

- *Goldberg sucks, he looks like a old man...he's not even a good brawler.*<sup>244</sup>
- *I'd cry, but I'm having too much difficulty containing my joy. Goodbye, Lesnar. And please, don't let the door hit you on the way out.*<sup>245</sup>
- *Goldberg is gone after Wrestlemania...Brock is gone after Wrestlemania.....so what's to stop them both stinking up the place in the most god awful match ever seen?*<sup>246</sup>

Instead, the *WWE* presented wrestling audiences with storylines and characters ignoring the widespread IWC smark testimonies concerning both competitors. *WWE* media officials invested their marketing energy in promoting Goldberg as a fan-favourite protagonist. Despite this, chants of "Goldberg sucks" were audible during the *WWE* events he performed in. Goldberg, while scripted as the babyface in *WWE* texts, had developed a dire reputation among the IWC crowd dating back to the late 1990s due to his perceived clumsiness inside the ring. It was also widely perceived by wrestling fans that Goldberg was responsible for the career-ending injury to an IWC favourite Bret 'The

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<sup>244</sup> JC, "Why the Belt Comes Back to HHH", *Talkwrestlingonline.com*, February 6, 2004, <http://www.talkwrestlingonline.com/forum/showthread.php?p=93936&highlight=goldberg+sucks#post93936> (accessed May 8, 2009).

<sup>245</sup> Kandiman, "HUGE NEWS: Brock Lesnar Quits Wrestling", *Talkwrestlingonline.com*, March 11, 2004, <http://www.talkwrestlingonline.com/forum/showthread.php?t=10850&highlight=lesnar+nfl&page=3> (accessed May 8, 2009).

<sup>246</sup> HSM, "HUGE NEWS: Brock Lesnar Quits Wrestling", *Talkwrestlingonline.com*, March 10, 2004, <http://www.talkwrestlingonline.com/forum/showthread.php?t=10850&highlight=lesnar+nfl&page=2> (accessed May 8, 2009).

Hitman' Hart.<sup>247</sup> In addition, during the week leading to the much anticipated epic battle, both Goldberg and Lesnar had informed *WWE* management that *Wrestlemania XX* would be their last appearance for the company.<sup>248</sup> The news was leaked throughout the IWC and was widely reported by respected wrestling news writer Dave Meltzer.<sup>249</sup> The *WWE* continued to promote the bout without acknowledging that the event would be both wrestlers' final appearances for the company. The conclusion to the storyline feud would be their match at *Wrestlemania XX* in which the memorable moments were not the wrestling competition but rather the reactions of the live audience. According to the surveyed sources, the fans in attendance were well aware of both men's imminent departures from the company after the match. Fans greeted both stars with choruses of jeers followed by a barrage of chants such as "you sold out", "Goldberg sucks" and "this match sucks" throughout the entirety of the match. The match ended with Goldberg scoring the victory over the younger Lesnar. Instead of showing appreciation for the victorious protagonist, the crowd echoed the arena with their rendition of *Na Na Hey Hey Kiss Him Goodbye* to both competitors. The disruption of the crowd and the violation of kayfabe led to an acknowledgment of the concluding *WWE* careers for both performers by commentator Jim Ross during the live telecast.<sup>250</sup> The match itself took several

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<sup>247</sup> Chris Chambers, "Goldberg- The Epitome of Suckage", *Onlineworldofwrestling.com*, <http://www.onlineworldofwrestling.com/columns/chambers/03.html> (accessed June 20, 2008); Greg Oliver, "Bret Hart Retires", *Slam! Sports*, [http://slam.canoe.ca/SlamWrestlingBretHart/00oct27\\_retire-can.html](http://slam.canoe.ca/SlamWrestlingBretHart/00oct27_retire-can.html) (accessed June 20, 2008).

<sup>248</sup> Ashish Pabari, "Motley Fool Reports on Brock, Goldberg Leaving WWE", *411mania.com*, <http://www.411mania.com/wrestling/news/21677/Motley-Fool-Reports-On-Brock,-Goldberg-Leaving-WWE.htm> (accessed June 24, 2008); Richard Gray, "WWE News: Further Details on Brock Lesnar Leaving WWE, Joining the NFL, More", *Lordsofpain.net*, <http://www.lordsofpain.net/news/2004/articles/1078945466.php> (accessed June 24, 2008).

<sup>249</sup> Robert Fahreimer, "Wrestling Observer Live radio report with Bill Goldberg", *Derkeiler.com*, <http://newsgroups.derkeiler.com/Archive/Rec/rec.sport.pro-wrestling/2005-11/msg04047.html> (accessed November 30, 2008).

<sup>250</sup> *Wrestlemania XX 14.03.04*, DVD, directed by World Wrestling Entertainment (New York, NY: World Wrestling Entertainment, 2004).

minutes to begin because of the hostile crowd. The contest was stalled for extended moments throughout the match as both wrestlers were seemingly clueless in approaching the situation.

The ways that the crowd became the spectacle rather than the competitors is a good indication of the impact that smartened fans can have on the wrestling industry. Audience reactions to the match became the primary focus and the storyline itself seemingly became irrelevant. The instance of the crowd's involvement because of their foreknowledge of the circumstances surrounding the two wrestlers serves as a good example of the concerns and criticisms about the IWC as voiced by insiders like Eric Bischoff and Jim Ross. Much of the IWC discourse regarding the match indicated fans were more intrigued with the crowd responses rather than the battle between the two former world champions:

- *Goldberg Vs Brock - stall - punch - stall - kick - stall - finisher. The only positive to this match was the NUCLEAR crowd heat.*<sup>251</sup>
- *I love that Goldberg / Lesnar match though. It was just great knowing that the WWE couldnt edit out how the fans felt for them.*<sup>252</sup>
- *While the match is an absolute disaster, it is also fun to watch, kind of like how people go to NASCAR to see car crashes.*<sup>253</sup>

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<sup>251</sup> Haws Gah Gawd, "Worst Wrestlemania Matches", *Thesmartmarks.com*, March 20, 2007, <http://forums.thesmartmarks.com/index.php?showtopic=85620> (accessed January 27, 2009).

<sup>252</sup> Emceelokey, "What had a Great Build Up but had a Let Down Match", *Wrestlezone.com*, April 21, 2007, <http://forums.wrestlezone.com/showthread.php?p=163074> (accessed January 27, 2009).

<sup>253</sup> Jason Clevett, "SLAM! Speaks: Our Best of Their Worst", *Slam! Sports*, <http://slam.canoe.ca/Slam/Wrestling/Wrestlemania21/2005/03/31/978447.html> (accessed January 27, 2009).

### ***Kurt Angle Vs Chris Benoit- The Positive Impact of Smartened Wrestling Fans***

Some online fans believe the wrestling industry has come to apprehend and resent their new found solidarity. It is now impossible for the once secretive industry to keep anything hidden from contemporary wrestling fans. While most inside observers concentrate on the negative influences of the IWC, there have been positive impacts on an individual's career largely attributed to this very community that media producers have shown disdain for. A good example of this arises from events concerning the remarkable turnaround in the career trajectory of former *WWE* World Heavyweight Champion Chris Benoit and, in particular, how fans engaged with his match against Kurt Angle at the *2003 Royal Rumble*. According to this study data sample (as variously cited), Chris Benoit was viewed with iconic status within the IWC because of his ability to perfect the technical wrestling discipline. Consensus among the IWC considered Benoit the best wrestler in the United States, if not, the world.<sup>254</sup> The Benoit character's main objectives in the fictitious *WWE* narratives were to win wrestling matches with an apparent disregard for fan response (despite his babyface status).<sup>255</sup> The portrayal of the Benoit character within the official narratives was also a good signifier of the changes in the *WWE* and the wrestling industry in general as fan-favourite characters had traditionally maintained enigmatic and flamboyant personalities.<sup>256</sup> Babyfaces in previous eras had established the nature of their relationship with fans by encouraging positive interactions with live audiences.<sup>257</sup> Benoit's lack of charisma had been the focus of

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<sup>254</sup> Livingstone, *Love Equals Death*, op.cit; D.Meltzer, "Wrestling Observer Newsletter Awards" Wrestling Observer, 24 January 2005, 1; Chris Jericho, *A Lion's Tale: Around the World in Spandex* (New York: Central Publishing, 2007), v; Randazzo, *Ring of Hell*, op.cit 260 - 261.

<sup>255</sup> Randazzo, *ibid.* 166 - 167.

<sup>256</sup> *Ibid.* 275.

<sup>257</sup> Mazer, *The Doggie Doggie World of Professional Wrestling*, op.cit. 100.

mockery from fellow wrestlers during past storylines. In 2000, Benoit was involved in a lengthy feud with Chris Irvine ('Chris Jericho'), who during his promos often poked fun at Benoit's demeanour by constantly referring to him as 'Mr.Roboto', due to his lack of charisma.<sup>258</sup>

Benoit's match against Kurt Angle for the *WWE* Championship at the *2003 Royal Rumble* was considered one of the best matches in both wrestlers' careers. The significance of the match in terms of Benoit's career was the crowd response afterwards. According to the study data, despite suffering another defeat, Benoit rose to his feet to be greeted by a standing ovation from the 15,000 fans in attendance, something which was rarely seen in wrestling. Benoit's facial expressions revealed an overwhelming appreciation for the live audience, and in a break from his television character, he acknowledged the crowd while holding back tears as he made his way out of the ring.<sup>259</sup>

Benoit was already an 18-year veteran by 2003 and had never won a major World Heavyweight title with any of the wrestling promotions he had competed for.<sup>260</sup> Many fans, especially the internet-based wrestling smarks, believed Benoit's career would ultimately end without any World Heavyweight title reigns to his credit.

However, by the end of 2003 and early 2004, Benoit had emerged as a serious contender for the World Heavyweight Championship. The crowd's responses from that particular match arguably changed the direction of Benoit's character as portrayed by the *WWE* production team. His television image was eventually repackaged to suit the

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<sup>258</sup> *WWF Smackdown 27.04.00*, VHS, directed by World Wrestling Entertainment (Raleigh, NC: World Wrestling Entertainment, 2000); John Powell, "Chris Jericho: Break Down the Walls", *Slam! Sports*, <http://slam.canoe.ca/SlamWrestlingReviews/jerichotape-can.html> (accessed February 9, 2009).

<sup>259</sup> *2003 Royal Rumble 19.01.03*, DVD, directed by World Wrestling Entertainment (Boston, MA: World Wrestling Entertainment, 2003).

<sup>260</sup> Jack Malone, "Chris Benoit: From High to Low", *Onlineworldofwrestling.com*, <http://www.onlineworldofwrestling.com/columns/misc/jackmalone06.html> (accessed June 23, 2008).

smark's preferences for technical wrestling. Within the *WWE*'s televised texts, Benoit's character represented the smaller framed underdog. He often wrestled against performers who were larger than him in size and considered more charismatically appealing than him by media producers. He would win the *WWE* World Heavyweight Championship in 2004, the quiet spoken Benoit subsequently became the face of the *WWE*'s global media empire. This will be discussed in depth in the next chapter.

### ***Official Communities***

One of the factors that make pro-wrestling such an interesting case study is the institutional disrespect for the audience that is so intensely entrenched in the industry's tradition. A common belief employed by industry insiders has been that wrestling marks are not smart enough to know what they want and it is the promoter's job to present them with what they should want. The emergence of the smark has challenged these traditional beliefs and alternative perspectives for the wrestling industry have resulted.

In 2002, *WWE* owner Vince McMahon, when questioned by a shareholder concerned about the influences of internet fans during an annual shareholder's meeting said, "Internet fans are an extremely small but extremely vocal minority."<sup>261</sup> He went on to declare that he did not wish for his creative writers to turn to the internet for ideas. While McMahon appeared to have downplayed the escalating influences of the IWC, his decisions concerning the operational practices of his company could suggest otherwise. By the early 2000s media producers within the *WWE* were required to pay extensive attention to fan discourses on the IWC. Former *WWE* employee, Sean Mates revealed his duties as a media producer required him to compile two reports per week dedicated to

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<sup>261</sup> Wrestling-news.com, "Vince McMahon: I Want to Bring ECW Back", *Wrestling-news.com*, [http://www.wrestling-news.com/nm/publish/news\\_1209.html](http://www.wrestling-news.com/nm/publish/news_1209.html) (accessed April 5, 2007).

reviewing fan discourses within the IWC. Mates exposed that his position within the company became exclusively devoted to compiling reports detailing fan discourses on the IWC which were reviewed by up to 120 *WWE* staff members each week, ranging from wrestling stars to the company owner.<sup>262</sup>

Due to the growing prominence of the internet, several corporate procedures in professional wrestling were forced to be re-evaluated and new concepts were introduced. In October 2004, the *WWE* introduced a new event named *Taboo Tuesday* (renamed to *Cyber Sunday* in 2005). The *WWE* had advertised *Taboo Tuesday* as an interactive pay-per-view where fans were encouraged to voice their input by voting on *wwe.com* for stipulations that would have ramifications on the wrestling matches scheduled to take place.<sup>263</sup> This interactive pay-per-view now known as *Cyber Sunday* is an annual event on the *WWE*'s pay-per-view calendar. Significantly, *TNA* also offered similar interventions by inviting fans to choose an "internet dream match" for their *Sacrifice* pay-per-view in 2005.<sup>264</sup>

The *WWE*'s investment into new media genres would provide glimpses of insider involvement while at the same time working to bring audience capability under control. By 2006, *WWE* had launched their own online community called *WWE Fan Nation* on popular social networks *Myspace* and *Facebook* which encouraged mass congregation of their fans from around the world. In 2008, *WWE Fan Nation* was renamed to *WWE Universe* and was re-launched as an independent networking community on *wwe.com*

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<sup>262</sup> Sean Mates, "Answering Your Questions; WWE and the Internet", *Newsday.com*, [http://weblogs.newsday.com/sports/specialevent/wrestling/2008/06/answering\\_your\\_questions\\_wwe\\_a.htm](http://weblogs.newsday.com/sports/specialevent/wrestling/2008/06/answering_your_questions_wwe_a.htm) 1 (February 9, 2009).

<sup>263</sup> World Wrestling Entertainment, "World Wrestling Entertainment Introduces New Interactive RAW Branded Pay-Per-View to Air on Tuesday, October 19, 2004", *World Wrestling Entertainment*, [http://corporate.wwe.com/news/2004/2004\\_10\\_05.jsp](http://corporate.wwe.com/news/2004/2004_10_05.jsp) (accessed June 12, 2008).

<sup>264</sup> Michael Bluth, "TNA News: "Internet Dream Match" This Sunday, St. Louis to Host Upcoming PPV", *Rajah.com*, <http://rajah.org/base/2005/3903> (accessed June 20, 2008).

where fans can create their own page profiles and have access to discussion forums, blog entries and multimedia.<sup>265</sup> Wrestling stars frequently communicate with readers by submitting blogs and actively participating on discussion forums within the virtual sphere of *WWE Universe*. Wrestler blogs adopt an informal tone which implies the notion of equality to its readers. Wrestler blogs at the same time reinforce the ‘extraordinariness’ of the media world compared to the ordinary world.<sup>266</sup> In contemporary culture famous figures through mass media are portrayed as people who are ‘unique’ and are usually inaccessible to the common individual. Promotion on the internet enables for the presentation of the star’s uniqueness through common grounds in cyberspace such as social networks, personal websites and so on. Because they appear to be accessible to the common individual, their actuality is further solidified as a result. This is because according to Couldry,

*the media sphere itself is not different in kind from the world in which viewers live; it is part of the same world dedicated to mediating it...through the naturalised hierarchy between the constructed terms ‘media world’ and ‘ordinary world’, this division of the social world is generally reproduced as legitimate.*<sup>267</sup>

As was the case with former incarnations of *wwe.com*, fans speculated on the ingenuity of the *WWE*’s new marketing strategy to sell their product. Media producers have a duty to protect their boundaries in order to preserve their authority.<sup>268</sup> A common belief among columnists on smark-operated wrestling news sites was that *WWE Universe*

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<sup>265</sup> Ashish Pabari, “Even More Various News: Foley, WWE Fan Nation, DVD Sales Chart”, *411mania.com*, <http://www.411mania.com/wrestling/news/73421/Even-More-Various-News:-Foley,-WWE-Fan-Nation,-DVD-Sales-Chart.htm> (accessed June 2, 2008).

<sup>266</sup> Couldry, *The Place of Media Power*, op.cit. 45.

<sup>267</sup> Ibid.

<sup>268</sup> Ibid. 59; Chin and Hills, *Restricted Confessions?*, op.cit. 259.

was launched due to declining visitors to *wwe.com* which had been adversely affected by fan and insider operated communities.<sup>269</sup> Other IWC columnists criticised the *WWE*'s social network as catering for "their own marks" as the community was believed to have been heavily moderated by *WWE* staff members.<sup>270</sup> There is a divide between the fan operated IWC and official communities like *WWE Universe*. This sentiment is highlighted on a wrestling discussion forum known as *Rajah* in which a member boldly asked "Has anyone ever mentioned forum invading *wwe.com*?"<sup>271</sup>

### ***The Power Struggle- WWE's Own News and Rumour Site***

By the late 1990s there was a radical shift in *WWE* programming content. Stereotype heroic characters were replaced with controversial anti-heroes and family friendly narratives were replaced with storylines revolving around a heavy emphasis on traditionally taboo subjects such as, alcoholism, sex and heightened graphical violence. Wrestling characters began adopting gimmicks more similar to their adult personalities and they conducted interview promos which were often laded with profanity and sexual innuendos. This era became known as the *Attitude Era*.<sup>272</sup> However, whilst the *WWE* took a more direct approach in appealing to more mature audiences, the company website during the *Attitude Era* maintained the policy of withholding insider information from wrestling fans. In contrast to practices adopted during the *Attitude Era*, *wwe.com* now often leads by opening the back curtains to behind-the-scenes news within their

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<sup>269</sup> Daniel Pena, "WWE News: Behind the Scenes Details on WWE.com's "Industry News" Section", *Lordsofpain.net*, <http://www.lordsofpain.net/news/2008/articles/1205439203.php> (accessed July 2, 2008).

<sup>270</sup> Spade, *WWE Fan Nation Not a Fan of Randy Savage?*, op.cit.

<sup>271</sup> Blood, "So you Know that Forum Invading Thing" *Rajah.com*, June 24 2008, <http://forums.rajah.com/showthread.php?t=133275&highlight=nation> (accessed July 4, 2008).

<sup>272</sup> Beekman, *Ringside*, op.cit. 134; Calhoun and Sennett, *Practicing Culture*, op.cit. 151; Fritz and Murray, *Between the Ropes*, op.cit. 150; Shawn Michaels, *Heartbreak & Triumph: The Shawn Michaels Story* (New York: Pocket Books, 2005), 255.

company.<sup>273</sup> The revamping of the *WWE* website took an even more significant transformation when the company introduced an “industry news” section in 2008 focusing on news and rumours of other wrestling companies around world.<sup>274</sup> In effect, the new look *WWE* website now possesses much of the same qualities which have made fan-driven elements of the IWC so popular today. The *WWE* has at times even cited popular IWC news sites such as the *Wrestling Observer* newsletter as sources of information in their new industry news section.<sup>275</sup> Similarities between the re-vamped *WWE* website and the common IWC news site include clear emphasis on news items which are independent from the official narratives. For example on *wwe.com*, there emerged a clear theme on publishing information like legitimate injuries to wrestlers and wrestler indiscretions outside of the ring.<sup>276</sup> Significantly, media content revealing the domestication of wrestling stars in their private lives has also become popular for the IWC fan population. Web-exclusive videos documenting the lives of wrestling stars away from the wrestling ring have also become more prevalent on *wwe.com*. These movies have a clear focus on ‘humanising’ the fictional characters of *WWE* performers by showcasing their personality traits independent from their television gimmicks. For instance, weekly exclusive programmes on *wwe.com* may show wrestling stars taking

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<sup>273</sup> Nick Tywalk, “Runaway Kayfabe”, *Slam! Sports*, <http://slam.canoe.ca/Slam/Wrestling/Tywalk/2007/06/18/4269909.html> (accessed February 8, 2009); Wrestlingforum.com, “WWF Attitude Era Wasn’t Always Loved by Wrestling Fans. Archive of Proof”, *Wrestlingforum.com*, <http://www.wrestlingforum.com/general-wwf/429999-wwf-attitude-era-wasnt-always-loved-wrestling-fans-archive-proof.html> (accessed February 8, 2009).

<sup>274</sup> Clark, *More Behind the Scenes News*, op.cit.

<sup>275</sup> Ibid.

<sup>276</sup> Bob Ryder, “WWE.com Adds Industry News Feature”, *1wrestling.com*, <http://www.1wrestling.com/news/newsline.asp?news=31516> (accessed February 18, 2009); Richard Gray, “Reason for Major Changes To WWE.com”, *Xheadlines.com*, <http://www.xheadlines.com/2008/03/13/reason-for-major-changes-to-wwecom-wrestlemania-ticket-sales/> (accessed February 19, 2009); Larry Csonka, “WWE News: WM Ticket Sales, WWE.com Changes, Post WM Plans and More (SPOILERS)”, *411mania.com*, [http://www.411mania.com/wrestling/news/70577/WWE-News:-WM-Ticket-Sales,-WWE.com-Changes,-Post-WM-Plans-and-More-\(SPOILERS\).htm](http://www.411mania.com/wrestling/news/70577/WWE-News:-WM-Ticket-Sales,-WWE.com-Changes,-Post-WM-Plans-and-More-(SPOILERS).htm) (accessed February 19, 2009).

fans on a virtual tour of their private homes and camera crews may follow wrestling performers on their days off.

Internet based- wrestling fans and news website staff officials perceive the *WWE*'s new production strategies as the company's acceptance of kayfabe becoming a historical concept.<sup>277</sup> However, many members of the IWC viewed this as an attempt by the *WWE* to drive smaller wrestling companies out of business and take a more dictatorial approach against the kayfabe violators.<sup>278</sup> A wrestling columnist on *prowrestling.com* in his article titled, *Save the Internet!*, Tim Wronka, feared *WWE* owner Vince McMahon had plans to one day control the entire wrestling industry including the IWC.<sup>279</sup> The author cites the *WWE*'s overwhelming dominance in the wrestling industry over the past five decades as possible reasons for such fears. Later in the article the author described McMahon as someone "crazy enough" to attempt driving the IWC into extinction.<sup>280</sup>

Casual readers of Wronka's article may find his views to be fanatical and perhaps far fetched but Wronka's view was indeed the general consensus among most internet wrestling smarks. Administrators of wrestling fan communities on the internet believed that although the *WWE* had accepted the notion that kayfabe was a concept of the past, the nature of information which appeared on *wwe.com* would still be controlled by the media producers. Staff members on *wrestlinginc.com* assured their readers that they would have an advantage over their *WWE* counterparts because they had access to "loads more backstage news and stories than *wwe.com* who would not post the 'backstage

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<sup>277</sup> Pena, *WWE News: Behind the Scenes Details*, op.cit.

<sup>278</sup> Pro Wrestling Torch, "Top Stories of the Day", *Pro Wrestling Torch*, [http://www.pwtorch.com/artman2/publish/Torch\\_Today\\_2/article\\_24630.shtml](http://www.pwtorch.com/artman2/publish/Torch_Today_2/article_24630.shtml) (accessed June 18, 2008); Csonka, *WWE News: WM Ticket Sales, WWE.com Changes*, op.cit.

<sup>279</sup> Tim Wronka, "Save the Internet!", *Prowrestling.com*, <http://www.prowrestling.com/article/columns/1935> (accessed June 10, 2008).

<sup>280</sup> Ibid.

gossip' stories."<sup>281</sup> The statement insinuated that the *WWE* would only release information which was favourable to the institution and therefore certain content would sometimes be censored or withheld in order to uphold a positive image for the company.

### ***Pro-wrestling Before the IWC***

For a good part of its history, the spectacle of professional wrestling has relied on connecting the genre to audiences by presenting the struggles of morality between good and evil.<sup>282</sup> Roland Barthes examined the culture of professional wrestling in French society in the 1950s. He suggested that the function of the professional wrestler is not to win wrestling matches but rather go through the motions which are expected of the performer by audiences.<sup>283</sup> The motions which Barthes alluded to are the extreme portrayals between good and evil in professional wrestling, where stories are told through the exaggerated gestures designed to exploit the meanings of this morality battle. Barthes also pointed out that "Wrestling is not a sport, it is a spectacle. The public [the audience] is completely uninterested whether the contest is rigged or not."<sup>284</sup> Wrestling fans are not interested in seeing a fair fight but rather prefer an authentic re-staging of the ageless battle between the "perfect bastard" and the "suffering hero."<sup>285</sup> While in many respects, Barthes' analysis of professional wrestling corresponds with the industry today, there have been significant changes in both culture and industry since the work of Barthes.

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<sup>281</sup> Clark, *More Behind the Scenes News*, op.cit.

<sup>282</sup> Barthes, *The World of Wrestling*, op.cit. 88.

<sup>283</sup> Ibid.

<sup>284</sup> Ibid. 87.

<sup>285</sup> Ibid. 88; Jenkins, *The Wow Climax*, op.cit. 75.

During the late 1980s and the early 1990s, professional wrestling became a cultural phenomenon.<sup>286</sup> The *WWE* at the time mainly targeted young children as their main demographic.<sup>287</sup> The main focus of the *WWE*'s marketing strategy was to present audiences with extreme portrayals of good and evil.<sup>288</sup> Official texts were dominated by wrestlers who performed as colourful social stereotypes. Matt Borne ('Doink the clown') and Barry Darsow ('The Repo Man') who performed as a clown and a cat burglar were among some of the more popular characters on *WWE* television during the early 1990s.<sup>289</sup> The character of 'Doink' connected with the mainly adolescent *WWE* audience by performing an array of children's party tricks on unsuspecting heels and subsequently became one of the most popular babyfaces of the company. Victims of 'Doink's' mischievous tricks were stereotype antagonists such as Scott Bigelow ('Bam Bam Bigelow'), whose tattoo-covered 400 pound physique draped in flame patterned wrestling attire characterised him as a menacing heel. These characters connected with the adolescent audience because they provided a comical embodiment of cultural myths.<sup>290</sup> The wrestlers' excessive gestures of emotional exaggeration transformed them into cartoon-ish figures in which they attacked each other with steal chairs, slamming each other into metal steps, emerging without any notable signs of damage ready to compete

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<sup>286</sup> Beekman, *Ringside*, op.cit. 128; Cappetta, *Bodyslams!*, op.cit. 24; Henry Jenkins, "Growing Up and Growing More Risqué" in *Steel Chair to the Head: The Pleasure and Pain of Professional Wrestling*, ed. Nicolas Sammond (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 325.

<sup>287</sup> Beekman, *ibid.* 127.

<sup>288</sup> Cappetta, *Bodyslams!*, op.cit. 137; Mazer, *The Doggie Doggie World of Professional Wrestling*, op.cit. 97.

<sup>289</sup> R. D. Reynolds and Blade Braxton, *The Wrestlecrap Book of Lists!* (Toronto: ECW Press, 2007), 342; R. D. Reynolds, Randy Baer, *Wrestlecrap: The Very Worst of Pro Wrestling* (Toronto: ECW Press, 2003), 175.

<sup>290</sup> Beekman, *Ringside*, op.cit. 76; 90.

again the next night.<sup>291</sup> In his analysis of the *WWE* (at the time known as *WWF*) during that particular era Henry Jenkins believed,

[The] *constant moral legibility of the WWF narrative...thereby maximizes the audience's own emotional response. Spectators come to the arena or turn on the programmes to express intense emotion to cheer the hero, to boo and jeer the villain without moral ambiguity or emotional complexity.*<sup>292</sup>

The heightened melodramatic struggle between good and evil ensured that audiences were presented with clear examples of which sides they were supposed to support.

However, by the mid 1990s most of the adolescent fans from the 1980s had grown up and were teenagers or young adults. The colourful action of the *WWE* was not as fun or convincing to its audiences anymore. From 1992 to 1997, wrestling's popularity diminished considerably.<sup>293</sup> It would not be until nearly the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century that professional wrestling began introducing new programming strategies to regain the interest of its former audiences. The *WWE* would re-vamp its textual format by regularly featuring bikini clad women and beer drinking celebrations along with intensified gimmicks and hardcore wrestling matches.<sup>294</sup> In the space of less than 10 years, *WWE* programming had transformed from a children's show, to a product which regularly featured striptease and wrestling performers launching themselves from the top of ladders

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<sup>291</sup> Jenkins, *The Wow Climax*, op.cit. 90.

<sup>292</sup> Ibid. 76.

<sup>293</sup> Beekman, *Ringside*, op.cit. 132; Jenkins, *Growing Up and Growing More Risqué*, op.cit. 325; Richard Garner, "Denver Debacle turns into 'Farce in Los Angeles' - Context of Celebrity Involvement with WWE Product", *Pro Wrestling Torch*, [http://www.pwtorch.com/artman2/publish/The\\_Specialists\\_34/article\\_32458.shtml](http://www.pwtorch.com/artman2/publish/The_Specialists_34/article_32458.shtml) (accessed July 20, 2009).

<sup>294</sup> Ibid. 331; Randazzo, *Ring of Hell*, op.cit. 249.

and buildings. Instead of lunch boxes and ice cream bars featuring wrestlers on them<sup>295</sup>, *WWE* merchandise featured posters of female wrestlers in bikinis and wrestler autobiographies.<sup>296</sup> This more mature approach would eventually see Vince McMahon's *WWE* dominate the wrestling industry by eliminating its biggest competition, *WCW*.<sup>297</sup> The *WWE* was clearly aiming their product at an older demographic. Professional wrestling, along with its hardcore fan base from the 1980s had grown up.

### ***Conclusion***

Since the works of Barthes and Jenkins, there have been important changes in professional wrestling. The relationship between contemporary wrestling fans and wrestling promotions had been fragile. The wide availability of information on the internet and the interactive features of websites have effectively made the role of the wrestling fan more dynamic than ever. In this changed environment, the enthusiast transformed from fan to critic, mark to smark, and audience to 'prosumer'.<sup>298</sup>

The primary argument of this thesis is that technologically supported interactivity has fostered drastic changes in the wrestling industry. While there is no doubt that smarks have perhaps existed long before the internet in the world of wrestling, the global reach of the IWC has essentially eliminated geography or proximity as limiting factors in relation to interactivity, feedback and response. This has enabled fans to become more aware of the behind-the-scenes aspects of pro-wrestling such as the way shows are pre-planned. There is greater widespread awareness of what wrestlers are like outside of the *WWE* arena. Fans were no longer ignorant of the inner secrets of pro-wrestling. All

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<sup>295</sup> Beekman, *Ringside*, op.cit. 127.

<sup>296</sup> Randazzo, *Ring of Hell*, op.cit. 333.

<sup>297</sup> *The Monday Night Rating Wars*, DVD, directed by World Wrestling Entertainment (Stamford, CT: World Wrestling Entertainment, 2004).

<sup>298</sup> Alvin Toffler, *The Third Wave* (London: Collins, 1980), 292.

aspects of wrestling narratives from characters to storylines have come to be evaluated more on the merits of authenticity.

## *Chapter 4- Chris Benoit*

### *Introduction*

In the previous chapter, it was established that the existence of rumour arising in online social communication media can influence the production strategies of professional wrestling. Wrestling fans using social media-based communications analyse the official narratives presented to them by media producers and seek to discover and interpret underlying hidden meanings.<sup>299</sup> This practice also takes into account the consumption of wrestling gossip columns which often focus on exposing the actual individuals behind the wrestling characters. It is the smarks or educated fans that influence the *World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE)* to the greatest extent.

This chapter will address the complexity of the contemporary fan and provide a greater insight into the growing influences of the dynamic fan community. In order to do so, the focus of this chapter will be directed at the examination of the ongoing online conversation among wrestling fans regarding former *WWE* World Heavyweight Champion Chris Benoit. Examining the commentary available via Internet Wrestling Community (IWC) web forums, alternative views of the Benoit character will become more apparent.

Throughout much of his *WWE* tenure, media producers employed Chris Benoit in the mid-card division while sparingly pitting him in main events against the company's marquee competitors. He gained the respect of peers backstage for his dedicated approach to wrestling.<sup>300</sup> But such dedication does not always lead to world championship glory in the wrestling profession. While little argument could be made

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<sup>299</sup> Sharon Mazer, *Real Wrestling / Real Life*, op.cit. 75.

<sup>300</sup> Randazzo, *Ring of Hell*, op.cit. 87; 260.

denying Benoit's wrestling abilities, it was claimed that his skills for the theatrical form of pro-wrestling were not as advanced as many of his *WWE* contemporaries.<sup>301</sup> However, in the span of 15 months from January 2003 to April 2004, Chris Benoit, at 36 years of age came to be marketed as a serious World Heavyweight title contender and eventually won the *WWE* World Heavyweight Championship.

The coverage of Chris Benoit's career within the IWC is interesting within the context of this study of how smark wrestling fans have influenced the creative direction of the *WWE* through their examination and interpretation of official narratives. Benoit's most loyal supporters regularly used internet wrestling chat forums to vent out their frustrations about what they perceived as unjust treatment against their hero. They often took on the role of the media 'prosumer'<sup>302</sup> by exchanging ideas exploring to seek alternative approaches to reading professional wrestling texts.

The latter half of this chapter will focus on the IWC's discourse on the topic of the death of Chris Benoit. The overwhelming support shown to him by many IWC members indicates that prior to his sudden demise, Chris Benoit was someone who wrestling fans respected and admired. Eventually the mass circulation of information surrounding his death would lead to the rejection of Chris Benoit by the same fans who had earlier supported him.

### ***Benoit Grabs Smark Attention***

Perhaps, the earliest sign of notable support for Chris Benoit from internet smarks was in 1999. In October of that year Benoit performed in a match against another IWC cult hero Bret 'The Hitman' Hart. This bout still holds a particular significance in terms

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<sup>301</sup> Wrestlingdb.com, "The Column That Everybody is Going to Hate", *Wrestlingdb.com*, <http://www.wrestlingdb.com/articles/2003/11/29/Korrosive-> (accessed March 20, 2009).

<sup>302</sup> Toffler, *The Third Wave*, op.cit. 292.

of its quality as a wrestling match. It also serves as an example of the makeover that the operating procedure of professional wrestling has undergone in recent years. The contest was a tribute to Owen Hart who had been accidentally killed while performing a pre-match stunt working as a *World Wrestling Federation (WWF)* competitor (the *WWF* became *World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE)* in 2002).<sup>303</sup> The match featured as the main event on the October 4<sup>th</sup>, 1999 edition of *Monday Night Nitro*. This tribute contest occurred in the midst of the *Monday Night Rating Wars* between *World Championship Wrestling (WCW)* and the *WWE* where both brands had developed a bitter rivalry in the quest to gain industry supremacy.<sup>304</sup> The warring promotions regularly attempted to sabotage the production strategies of one another in an effort to gain favouritism with wrestling fans. It had been noted in published wrestler memoirs and on fan operated forums on the web that, due to temporal differences across parts of the United States, *WWE Monday Night Raw* results were frequently published before its air-time by *WCW* media producers on their *Nitro* programme.<sup>305</sup> *WWE* media producers responded by sending their performers as spectators to televised *WCW* events to interact with fans in the live audience. However inter-promotional disputes, storylines and gimmicks were pushed aside specifically for the Chris Benoit Vs Bret Hart match-up.<sup>306</sup> *WCW* media officials focused on triggering the raw emotions of wrestling audiences in the commentary by sharing intimate details of the relationship between Benoit and the Hart

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<sup>303</sup> Diana Hart, *Under the Mat* (Toronto: Fenn Publishing, 2001), 146; Martha Hart, *Broken Harts: The Life and Death of Owen Hart* (New York: M. Evans & Company, 2004), 188.

<sup>304</sup> Bischoff, *Controversy Creates Cash*, op.cit. 163 - 164; Rick Scaia., "RAW vs. Nitro: Year Five", *OOWrestling.com*, <http://www.oowrestling.com/features/mnw-y5.shtml> (accessed March 17, 2009); *The Monday Night Rating Wars*, op.cit.

<sup>305</sup> Bischoff, *ibid.* 165 - 166; Harry Simon "RECAPITATION: MONDAY NIGHT WAR", *Thewrestlingfan.com*, <http://www.thewrestlingfan.com/id60.html> (accessed March 17, 2009); Mike Rickard., "The Death of WCW", *Gumgod.com*, [http://www.gumgod.com/mike\\_wcw.htm](http://www.gumgod.com/mike_wcw.htm) (accessed March 18, 2009).

<sup>306</sup> Randazzo, *Ring of Hell*, op.cit. 240 - 241.

family outside of wrestling's fictional universe.<sup>307</sup> *WCW* commentators also violated the kayfabe code by acknowledging the *WWE* accomplishments of Owen Hart, a wrestler who performed for the rivalling brand.<sup>308</sup>

The match itself was considered a technical masterpiece and is still thought to be one of the greatest matches ever by internet wrestling enthusiasts. More significantly, dialogue within IWC fan forums demonstrated the audience's emotional connection to both competitors. Despite losing the bout, Benoit had gained the respect of internet wrestling smarks:

- *Bret Hart Vs Chris Benoit is one of the most technically sound matches I have seen. That tribute to Owen Hart was made more memorable by the skill these two men exhibited in the ring.*<sup>309</sup>
- *This is a landmark match that ranks in my top 5 of all time. The emotion carried this match that was already a 9 to a perfect 10.*<sup>310</sup>
- *I'll never forget when Bret Hart & Chris Benoit wrestled that tribute match in Owen's memory.*<sup>311</sup>

There was an emerging belief among internet and television fans that Benoit had the potential to be a legitimate world championship contender.<sup>312</sup> The management of *WCW* also acknowledged this by crowning him the *WCW* World Heavyweight Champion at the

<sup>307</sup> Race, *King of the Ring*, op.cit. 164; Heath McCoy, *Pain and Passion* (Toronto: CanWest Books, 2005), 253; Randazzo, *ibid.* 233; 241.

<sup>308</sup> Randazzo, *ibid.* 242.

<sup>309</sup> Jerilyn, "Best Match: Bret 'The Hitman' Hart Tribute", *Hitman Tribe*, March 18, 2007, <http://hitman.tribe.net/thread/60da0278-f295-4bd3-ae02-58cf5ec44d91#55e1fa14-b3f1-4303-b63b-313ab3ec4202> (accessed January 29, 2008).

<sup>310</sup> Jon Waldman, "Benoit DVD a Must Have", *Slam! Sports*, August, 23, 2004, <http://slam.canoe.ca/Slam/Wrestling/2004/08/23/597666.html> (accessed January 29, 2008).

<sup>311</sup> Angelo Mantzios, "Wrestleview Remembers the Late Great, Owen Hart", *Wrestleview.com*, October 23, 2002, <http://www.wrestleview.com/messages1/1780.shtml> (accessed January 23, 2008).

<sup>312</sup> Randazzo, *Ring of Hell*, op.cit. 260.

*Souled Out* pay-per-view in January of 2000.<sup>313</sup> However, by this time Benoit had grown frustrated with *WCW* management. During his 8 year tenure with the company, he had only received 2 opportunities to compete for the *WCW* World Heavyweight Championship.<sup>314</sup> He felt *WCW* had given him no opportunity as a main event star,<sup>315</sup> and so the disgruntled Benoit left the company 24 hours after the event. He left behind a lucrative salary and a shortened schedule for a chance to succeed in the largest pro-wrestling institution in the world; the *WWE*.<sup>316</sup> Most wrestling smarks believed it was a tactical business decision employed by *WCW* management to crown the increasingly popular Benoit as *WCW* World Heavyweight Champion in order to prevent him from signing a contract with long-time rivals the world—the *WWE*.<sup>317</sup> These sentiments were voiced by fans on wrestling discussion forums:

- *WCW gave him the strap to try and keep him in the company, not as a tribute.*<sup>318</sup>
- *He only won the US Championship once and the World championship once, but both instances are riddled with all the wrong reasons.*<sup>319</sup>
- *Not even Chris Benoit's first World title win was enough to convince the Wolverine to stay, stating the comparisons of the World title to a piece of tin.*<sup>320</sup>

<sup>313</sup> 2000 *Souled Out*, VHS, directed by World Championship Wrestling (Cincinnati, OH: 2000).

<sup>314</sup> Wrestling-titles.com, "World Championship Wrestling World Heavyweight Title" *Puroresu Dojo*, <http://www.wrestling-titles.com/wcw/wcw-h.html> (accessed March 19, 2009).

<sup>315</sup> Randazzo, *Ring of Hell*, op.cit. 217; 247.

<sup>316</sup> Tim Towe, "Scientific Analysis: We Take an Unbiased Look at Chris Benoit's Rise to Meteoric Superstardom in the WWF - wrestler: Chris Benoit.", *CBS Interactive Inc*, [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m0FCO/is\\_4\\_3/ai\\_80302526](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0FCO/is_4_3/ai_80302526) (accessed July 27, 2008); Randazzo, *ibid*. 187.

<sup>317</sup> Randazzo, *ibid*. 254 - 255; Scaia, *RAW vs. Nitro*, op.cit; Jason Simmons, "Wrestling's Biggest Idiot...", *Inyourheadonline.com*, <http://www.inyourheadonline.com/viewnews.php?autoid=1438> (accessed March 16, 2009).

<sup>318</sup> Tempest, "Should Chris Benoit Just Quit the WWE?", *Rajah.com*, April 1, 2002, <http://slam.canoe.ca/Slam/Wrestling/2004/08/23/597666.html> (accessed July 5, 2008).

<sup>319</sup> Nick Togo, "Chris Benoit", *Weeklyvisitor.com*, February 12, 2002, <http://www.weeklyvisitor.com/profiles/benoit.html> (accessed July 5, 2008).

<sup>320</sup> Simmons, *Wrestling's Biggest Idiot...*, op.cit.

Wrestling smarks through reading wrestling columns on the internet incorporated what they believed to be Benoit's personal views regarding his situation with *WCW* and added this information to their core knowledge of the genre.

***“The best technical wrestler in the history of the WWF”***

Less than a month after his departure from *WCW*, Chris Benoit debuted for Vince McMahon's *WWF*.<sup>321</sup> By then he already had a considerable following among the wrestling fan movement on the internet.<sup>322</sup> Benoit's entry into the *WWE* was during a transition period in which the company had begun to adopt a more mature approach in the creation of storylines and wrestling characters. His nickname was the 'Canadian Crippler'; he always used the catchphrase “The best technical wrestler in the *WWF*” to endorse himself in interview promos.<sup>323</sup> Benoit's opportunities at main event stardom were still few and far between during his early *WWE* career as media producers still firmly preferred wrestlers who were more charismatic and larger in physique than him.<sup>324</sup> Despite the fact he received the most prestigious of wrestling training in Canada and Japan,<sup>325</sup> the performance techniques he learned did not prepare Benoit for the unique sports-entertainment style of the *WWE*. His lack of ability to verbally interact with fans was institutionally considered a major obstacle if he was to make the transition from mid-card obscurity to a main event superstar. In an interview featured on a DVD titled *Hard Knocks: The Chris Benoit Story* released in 2004, Benoit himself acknowledged that he was rarely given an opportunity to talk on the microphone due to his introverted

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<sup>321</sup> Randazzo, *Ring of Hell*, op.cit. 271.

<sup>322</sup> Ibid. 260 - 261.

<sup>323</sup> Sheldon Goldberg, “The Lost Art of Technical Wrestling - Trends and Technique Decline in Professional Wrestling.”, *CBS Interactive Inc*, [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m0FCO/is\\_6\\_2/ai\\_71403979](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0FCO/is_6_2/ai_71403979) (accessed July 30, 2008).

<sup>324</sup> Ibid; Towe, *Scientific Analysis*, op.cit; Jenkins, *Growing Up and Growing More Risqué*, op.cit. 342.

<sup>325</sup> Randazzo, *Ring of Hell*, op.cit. 77; 87; 140.

personality and his lack of experience in verbal interaction with live wrestling audiences.<sup>326</sup> Many within the IWC believed Benoit's lack of charisma on the microphone belied his overall skills as a wrestling entertainer and a possible World Heavyweight Champion.<sup>327</sup> Internet fans discussed Benoit's lack of opportunities as a main event performer, for example:

- *Benoit will never be more than an average orator. That is something that will continue to prevent him from joining the elite "sports entertainers" of his profession, such as The Rock and Triple H.*<sup>328</sup>
- *Never mind about being a great wrestler who is legitimately tough, who can have great matches with anyone, and who's been all over the world for years and years (like Benoit), you have to be a great speaker.*<sup>329</sup>
- *It saddens me when wrestlers like Chris Benoit are reduced to mid-card status because "his promo skills are horrible."*<sup>330</sup>

The American wrestling circuit have historically been size conscious regarding the physique of marquee performers.<sup>331</sup> Benoit was less than 6 foot tall and weighed around 220 pounds; which in wrestling terms, is considered small.<sup>332</sup> During Benoit's

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<sup>326</sup> *Hard Knocks: The Chris Benoit Story*, DVD, directed by World Wrestling Entertainment (Stamford, CT: World Wrestling Entertainment, 2004); Randazzo, *ibid.* 149;

<sup>327</sup> Randazzo, *ibid.* 142 - 144.

<sup>328</sup> Towe, *Scientific Analysis*, *op.cit.*

<sup>329</sup> NamaewaJieshii, "Has Promo Taken Away from the Wrestling?", *Onlineworldofwrestling.com*, July 9, 2005, <http://www.onlineworldofwrestling.com/columns/misc/juancadavid01.html> (accessed July 31, 2008).

<sup>330</sup> Chris Luxama, "The Big Bad Truth: Panic Button", *Prowrestling.com*, May 24, 2007, <http://www.prowrestling.com/article/columns/2072> (accessed July 30, 2008).

<sup>331</sup> Randazzo, *Ring of Hell*, *op.cit.* 16; 34; 36, 145 - 146; Ronny Sarnecky, "The Piledriver Report: The History of Vince McMahon's Wrestling Empire: Part Fifteen.", *411mania.com*, <http://www.411mania.com/wrestling/columns/37803> (accessed March 21 2009);

Kurt Scribe, "Between Quality and Competition: What Ratings Wars Mean to Wrestling Fans", *Bleacher Report*, <http://bleacherreport.com/articles/118453-between-quality-and-competition-what-ratings-wars-mean-to-wrestling-fans> (accessed March, 17 2009).

<sup>332</sup> Randazzo, *Ring of Hell*, *op.cit.* 12; Mike Mooneyham, "Ring of Hell Tells Disturbing Story", *The Post and Courier*, [http://www.charleston.net/news/2008/jul/13/ring\\_hell\\_tells\\_disturbing\\_story/](http://www.charleston.net/news/2008/jul/13/ring_hell_tells_disturbing_story/) (accessed July

unsuccessful stint with *WCW* in the early 1990s, promoter Ole Anderson described him as “female bones” deeming him too small to be a major star and having too “flashy” of a wrestling style to be a lower echelon performer.<sup>333</sup> Media producers have spent decades in the past conditioning fans to reject wrestlers with those perceived shortcomings. World champions were traditionally larger in physique and more charismatically gifted than Benoit.<sup>334</sup> He was known to *WCW* media producers and fellow wrestlers as a “vanilla midjet” because of his lack of charismatic appeal and physical size compared to higher-ranked wrestling performers.<sup>335</sup> However, this did not deter the support for Benoit. Instead it won the smark fans’ respect for technical wrestling. They supported the smaller framed underdog.

His match against Darren Matthews (‘Steven Regal’) at the *2000 Brian Pillman Memorial Show* was arguably considered to be the greatest match in his career at the time. The tribute event was hosted by Ohio-based indy wrestling promotion *Heartland Wrestling Association (HWA)*. The *HWA* promotion had no television exposure but gained widespread recognition through advertising on the internet. Former *WWE* Champion Kevin Nash during an in-ring interview at the event was so impressed by the turn out of fans that he addressed them as “You damn internet smarks.”<sup>336</sup> Wrestling supporters and newsletter journalists who attended the event provided glowing

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29, 2008); Childs Walker, “Benoit’s Shocking Death Raises Question of Fans’ Complicity”, *The Baltimore Sun*, <http://www.baltimoresun.com/sports/other/bal-benoit1217,0,4664553.story/> (accessed August 5, 2008).

<sup>333</sup> David Bixenspan, “BOOK REVIEW: Ring of Hell: The Story of Chris Benoit and the Fall of the Pro Wrestling Industry”, *Indywrestlingnews.com*, <http://www.indywrestlingnews.com/columns/2731-book-review-ring-of-hell-the-story-of-chris-benoit-and-the-fall-of-the-pro-wrestling-industry.html> (accessed March 1 2009); Randazzo, *Ring of Hell*, op.cit. 145 - 146.

<sup>334</sup> Ibid. 218.

<sup>335</sup> Ibid. 243 - 244.

<sup>336</sup> *2000 Brian Pillman Memorial Show*, VHS, directed by Hinterland Wrestling Association (Cincinnati, OH: 2000).

recollections about the high quality contest between Benoit and ‘Regal’ on the internet. This particular match would later be used as training material for aspiring industry performers in wrestling schools.<sup>337</sup> Benoit’s lack of charisma and size were less of an obstacle at the *Pillman Memorial Show* as he performed in front of indy wrestling fans who were more appreciative of the technical wrestling discipline.<sup>338</sup> Video media of the smark-acclaimed bout between Benoit and ‘Regal’ began circulating throughout the IWC. Despite the fact that Benoit portrayed the role of a heel during 2000 and early 2001 on *WWE* television, wrestling fans who were exposed to online video footage of him performing less theatrically-orientated forms of wrestling were impressed with his ability to suspend audience disbelief.

***“You will never win the big one”- Chris Benoit on WWE Television***

“Chris Benoit, you may be the best technical wrestler in the world, but you will never win the big one.”<sup>339</sup> While these words voiced by former World Heavyweight Champion Ric Flair were intended for storyline progression purposes, to internet wrestling fans that was precisely how they would have described Benoit’s career until that point. Even though during the *Attitude Era* in the late 1990s the *WWE* had flirted with a more realistic approach to present audiences with more mature characters and storylines.<sup>340</sup> *WWE* media officials continued to concentrate their marketing focus on more charismatic stars. Dwayne Johnson (‘The Rock’), Steve Williams (‘Stone Cold Steve Austin’) and Paul Levesque (‘Triple H’) were pushed as being the pinnacle of the wrestling industry. In sports-entertainment terms these wrestlers were considered better

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<sup>337</sup> Goldberg, *The Lost Art of Technical Wrestling*, op.cit.

<sup>338</sup> Randazzo, *Ring of Hell*, op.cit. 150.

<sup>339</sup> 2004 *Royal Rumble*, op.cit.

<sup>340</sup> Jenkins, *Growing Up and Growing More Risqué*, op.cit. 328. Mazer, *Real Wrestling / Real Life*, op.cit. 73.

performers because of their ability to draw on the audience's emotion through their theatrical and athletic prowess. Their marketability was considered more superior than Benoit because they were able to effectively make storylines appear authentic in the form of acting in backstage segments and delivering emotionally charged interviews. For example, one of the most successful storylines in *WWE* history was the feud between 'Stone Cold Steve Austin' and company owner Vince McMahon. During the *Attitude Era* there was a growing trend among smarks to learn more about the backstage world of pro-wrestling. Vince McMahon capitalised on this trend in fan enthusiasm by including himself in *WWE* storylines playing the tyrannical boss, pitting himself against the company's top protagonists.<sup>341</sup>

The theatrics of pro-wrestling focuses on presenting storylines through the visual and physical emotion of its performers rather than wrestling action or implemented scoring systems like in sports.<sup>342</sup> This allowed non-wrestlers from mainstream celebrities to wrestling media officials to guest star as performers on wrestling television programmes. The storyline feud between 'Austin' and McMahon had become so popular with fans that the only way to continue the plotline was to have the middle-aged company owner perform as an active wrestler.<sup>343</sup> 'Austin's ability to suspend audience disbelief through his perfection of the theatrics and wrestling action would play a crucial role in the storyline feud that lasted over 3 years against the inexperienced McMahon.<sup>344</sup> The feud transformed 'Austin' from a mediocre mid-card talent to a main event superstar.<sup>345</sup>

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<sup>341</sup> Beekman, *Ringside*, op.cit. 135; Oppliger, *Wrestling and Hypermasculinity*, op.cit. 22.

<sup>342</sup> Mazer, *The Doggie Doggie World of Professional Wrestling*, op.cit. 98.

<sup>343</sup> Beekman, *Ringside*, op.cit. 135; Oppliger, *Wrestling and Hypermasculinity*, op.cit. 22.

<sup>344</sup> Wrestling101, "WWF Austin vs. McMahon Review", *Wrestling101.com*, <http://www.wrestling101.com/101/article/FTV/146/> (accessed March, 19 2009); Pro Wrestling Wikia, 2009, Austin vs. McMahon", *Pro Wrestling Wikia*, [http://prowrestling.wikia.com/wiki/Austin\\_vs.\\_McMahon](http://prowrestling.wikia.com/wiki/Austin_vs._McMahon) (accessed March, 19 2009); *Austin Vs McMahon*,

Viewing pro-wrestling from a purely technical, scientific standpoint, Benoit was in a class of his own. In an industry where his fellow competitors excelled through charismatic personalities, limited wrestling repertoires or explicit use of weapons, Benoit helped transform professional wrestling into a sport. Media producers would place him against wrestlers who needed to appear technically sound inside the wrestling ring.<sup>346</sup> He had the ability to make average performers who worked against him look like great wrestling technicians.<sup>347</sup> However, his awkward demeanour even in the shortest of interview promos meant that media producers had distinct reservations about his ability to consistently progress major storyline angles in *WWE* texts.<sup>348</sup> He would periodically earn opportunities to compete for the *WWE*'s top prize but he fell short each time. Three particular instances of this occurred in July 2000, September 2000 and May 2001.<sup>349</sup> These instances are significant in the sense that the outcome of these matches served as signifiers of the *WWE* production team's portrayal of the Chris Benoit character until that point in time. In July of 2000 at the *WWE*'s *Fully Loaded* pay-per-view, Benoit had originally won the *WWE* title after defeating 'The Rock', only to have the decision reversed as part of a storyline angle.<sup>350</sup> A similar fate was imposed on him again at the 2000 *WWE Unforgiven* pay-per-view; Benoit was once again stripped of the *WWE*

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VHS, directed by World Wrestling Entertainment (Stamford, CT: World Wrestling Entertainment, 2003); Beekman, *ibid.* 135.

<sup>345</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>346</sup> Randazzo, *Ring of Hell*, *op.cit.* 134 - 135.

<sup>347</sup> *Ibid.* 119; 279.

<sup>348</sup> *Ibid.* 143; 279.

<sup>349</sup> John Powell, "A Bloody Good PPV WWF Stars Bleed for the Company at Fully Loaded", *Slam! Sports*, [http://slam.canoe.ca/SlamWrestlingPPV/jul24\\_fullyloaded.html](http://slam.canoe.ca/SlamWrestlingPPV/jul24_fullyloaded.html) (accessed July 31, 2008); J.D Dunn, "Dark Pegasus Video Review: Unforgiven 2000", *411mania.com*, [http://www.411mania.com/wrestling/video\\_reviews/66994/Dark-Pegasus-Video-Review:-Unforgiven-2000.htm](http://www.411mania.com/wrestling/video_reviews/66994/Dark-Pegasus-Video-Review:-Unforgiven-2000.htm) (accessed July 15, 2008); Scott Zerr, "Home-town Welcome for Benoit" *Slam! Sports*, [http://slam.canoe.ca/SlamWrestlingArchive2001/may30\\_smackdown1-sun.html](http://slam.canoe.ca/SlamWrestlingArchive2001/may30_smackdown1-sun.html) (accessed July 31, 2008).

<sup>350</sup> Randazzo, *Ring of Hell*, *op.cit.* 279; Powell, *A Bloody Good PPV*, *op.cit.*

championship moments after winning it.<sup>351</sup> On *Monday Night Raw*, May 28<sup>th</sup>, 2001, in front of his Canadian home crowd, Benoit was involved in yet another *WWE* title match only to have it abruptly ended. *WWE* owner Vince McMahon used his authority to cancel the contest while ‘Stone Cold Steve Austin’ had Chris Benoit locked in the ‘Crippler Crossface’ submission manoeuvre, Benoit’s own signature move.<sup>352</sup> This instance was possibly a good way for McMahon and ‘Austin’ to emphasis their dominant heel gimmicks at the time.

Rather than viewing these televised narratives simply as storyline progression, wrestling smarks interpreted them not only as disrespect to Chris Benoit but also as an act of defiance to their principles of fair play. The events were construed as a tilt against their community, the IWC. Fans, as consumers of the genre, believe that they have the moral right of “cultural authority”<sup>353</sup> in which they critique and complain about producer decisions challenging their own interest in the text property. Smark wrestling fans displayed characteristics of their perceived cultural authority through discourse on web forums by critiquing different aspects of professional wrestling on the merits of their established guidelines of authenticity and fairness. Smarks believed Benoit’s consistent role as the defeated in world championship situations were an indication of how the *WWE* viewed their hero.<sup>354</sup> This only fuelled their demands for him to be champion even more. A fan posting under the screen name ‘Donotdelete’ on the *411mania* discussion forum about Benoit’s near title victory at the 2000 *WWE Fully Loaded* event, states:

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<sup>351</sup> Dunn, *Dark Pegasus Video Review*, op.cit.

<sup>352</sup> Randazzo, *Ring of Hell*, op.cit. 284; *Monday Night Raw 28.05.01*, VHS, directed by World Wrestling Entertainment (Calgary, AB: World Wrestling Entertainment, 2001); Calvin Martin, “WWF Raw is War - Monday, May 28, 2001”, *Lordsofpain.net*, <http://www.lordsofpain.net/reports/raw/raw5-28-01.html> (accessed July 29, 2009).

<sup>353</sup> Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, op.cit. 87

<sup>354</sup> Randazzo, *Ring of Hell*, op.cit. 279.

*He starts all over in WWF and fights The Rock in the main event at Fully Loaded, wins and has the belt in his hands and I'm marking out like a twelve year old, and Mick Foley changed the decision. The time must be soon, he will be on top.*<sup>355</sup>

Less than one year after the 2000 *Fully Loaded* pay-per-view Benoit dropped out of the *WWE* due to neck surgery.<sup>356</sup> Content analysis of smark discourse within the IWC indicates there was a consensual tone within their sentiments of remaining loyal to Benoit, for example:

- *Benoit deserves a good hard push and once he's built back up in the marks' eyes, you know, the people who don't remember what happened 6 months ago, give him a good 1 year title run.*<sup>357</sup>
- *I would love to see Benoit repackaged and pushed as a legitimate WWF Title contender.*<sup>358</sup>

### ***Fan Interpretations of the Chris Benoit Character***

As the internet became further entrenched in contemporary society, the boisterous and opinionated nature of the smark community continued to grow with it. Jenkins describes fan culture as:

*an institution for theory and criticism, a semi structured space where competing interpretations and evaluations of common texts are proposed, debated and*

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<sup>355</sup> Donotdelete, "Why I Think Chris Benoit Should Get a LONG World Title Run ....", *411mania.com*, September 9, 2000, <http://www.411mania.com/ubbthreads/showflat.php?Cat=0&Number=4477517&an=&page=0&vc=1> (accessed January 23, 2008).

<sup>356</sup> Randazzo, *Ring of Hell*, op.cit. 287.

<sup>357</sup> Squirm, "Benoit Dream Matches", *411mania.com*, August 20, 2002, <http://www.411mania.com/ubbthreads/showflat.php?Cat=0&Number=232130&an=&page=0&vc=1> (accessed January 23, 2008).

<sup>358</sup> Donotdelete, "Benoit Dream Matches", *411mania.com*, August 18, 2002, <http://www.411mania.com/ubbthreads/showflat.php?Cat=0&Number=232130&an=&page=0&vc=1> (accessed January 27, 2008).

*negotiated and where readers speculate about the nature of the media and their relationship to it.*<sup>359</sup>

He adds that fans are the “true experts”<sup>360</sup> as they possess a knowledge which can only be attained from years of devotion to the product. It is common for fan cultures to resist the messages presented in set texts and attach their own definitions to the genre.<sup>361</sup> Wrestling fans want to know everything from the name of the moves to the ways in which wrestling events are constructed. Whether it is at live events or on the internet, fans love to show their expertise by sharing their knowledge amongst other fans.<sup>362</sup> Wrestling fans on the internet like to compete with each other in predicting storyline angles. They also like to create narratives of their own by taking into account their knowledge of official texts and the inner procedures of the wrestling industry.<sup>363</sup> IWC commentators focused on Chris Benoit’s relentless work ethic throughout his career.<sup>364</sup> Benoit’s wrestling style displayed those hard working attributes in his wrestling matches. He was extremely intense and his execution of wrestling manoeuvres was crisp and fast, just as they were powerful.<sup>365</sup> For internet wrestling fans, Benoit’s no-nonsense approach to their much loved form of entertainment represented someone who loved the

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<sup>359</sup> Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, op.cit. 86.

<sup>360</sup> Ibid.

<sup>361</sup> John Tulloch, *Science Fiction Audiences* (London: Routledge, 1995), 145.

<sup>362</sup> Mazer, *Real Wrestling / Real Life*, op.cit. 75; Catherine Perez, “DEADFACE WALKING!”, *Thewrestlingfan.com*, <http://www.thewrestlingfan.com/deadfacewalking48.html> (accessed March 16, 2009).

<sup>363</sup> Jenkins, *Growing Up and Growing More Risqué*, op.cit. 335; Mazer, ibid. 76.

<sup>364</sup> Mike Rickard, “Benoit, Chris”, *Wrestleinfo.com*, <http://www.wrestleinfo.com/Page27.html> (accessed July 29, 2009); Scott Zerr, “Benoit Living the Dream!”, *Slam! Sports*, <http://slam.canoe.ca/Slam/Wrestling/2004/04/18/427740.html> (accessed July 29, 2009); *Thewrestlinggame.com*, “Wrestling Stars of the Past”, *Thewrestlinggame.com*, [http://www.thewrestlinggame.com/wrestling/articles/superstars\\_of\\_the\\_past\\_and\\_present.asp](http://www.thewrestlinggame.com/wrestling/articles/superstars_of_the_past_and_present.asp) (accessed August 1, 2008); *Slam! Sports*, “SLAM! Wrestling Canadian Hall of Fame: Chris Benoit Memories”, *Slam! Sports*, [http://slam.canoe.ca/SlamWrestlingBenoit/benoit\\_memories.html](http://slam.canoe.ca/SlamWrestlingBenoit/benoit_memories.html) (accessed August 7, 2008).

<sup>365</sup> Walker, *Benoit’s Shocking Death*, op.cit; Randazzo, *Ring of Hell*, op.cit. 11; 102; 119.

wrestling profession.<sup>366</sup> He displayed values associated with dedication to his family life as well.<sup>367</sup> The IWC was frequently flooded with news reports about his adoration for his wife Nancy and their young son Daniel.<sup>368</sup> There were also many reports that Benoit would find every opportunity to spend time with his family even if it meant he had to spend longer hours on an aeroplane to do so.<sup>369</sup>

Benoit fans also began comparing the differences in the wrestling performances from earlier in his career where he competed in Japan to his matches in the *WWE*.<sup>370</sup> Smarks contributed to the notion that Benoit was not able to fully showcase his wrestling talents due to the limitation of manoeuvres influenced by the *WWE*'s theatre dominated style of wrestling.<sup>371</sup> While the *WWE* style may have been a factor in his status at the time, the most hardcore smarks on the internet refused to acknowledge the distinct difference in wrestling styles that were popular in Japan and the United States. They would instead cite the *WWE* style as another injustice against their hero. For example, fans when comparing Benoit's work in the Japan and in the *WWE* stated:

- *In New Japan [New Japan Pro Wrestling] the guy was top notch. I look at arguments for Chris Benoit having a limited move set as funny. Really you should attack the WWF for that, not the wrestler.*<sup>372</sup>

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<sup>366</sup> Randazzo, *Ring of Hell*, ibid. 260.

<sup>367</sup> Ibid. 213.

<sup>368</sup> Ibid. 293.

<sup>369</sup> Wrestlingrevealed.com, "Chris Jericho Comments on Chris Benoit", *Wrestlingrevealed.com*, <http://www.wrestlingrevealed.com/articles/chris-benoit/comments-jericho.php> (accessed March 18, 2009); *Monday Night Raw 25.06.07*, DVD, directed by World Wrestling Entertainment (Corpus Christi, TX: World Wrestling Entertainment, 2007).

<sup>370</sup> Randazzo, *Ring of Hell*, op.cit. 125.

<sup>371</sup> Ibid. 261.

<sup>372</sup> Baron Von Stylin, "Chris Benoit, Once Again Thrust into Midcard Obscurity", *411mania.com*, August 26, 2002, <http://www.411mania.com/ubbthreads/showflat.php?Cat=0&Number=4513743&an=&page=0&vc=1> (accessed January 23, 2008).

- *Benoit has never really been in an environment where promos were more important than ring work, until he went to the WWF.*<sup>373</sup>

The internet wrestling enthusiasts also tended to focus on the list of memorable matches Benoit has competed in throughout his career to further justify their support for him. These matches were often noted because of the technical prowess of Benoit's wrestling skills. For example, fans who saw the match between Chris Benoit and Kurt Angle from the 2003 *Royal Rumble* exchanged sentiments of approval and joy via web forums on the IWC:

- *It stole the show, and the standing ovation Chris Benoit received at the end of the match is a testament to his skill and his ability as a pro-wrestler.*<sup>374</sup>
- *I am so happy right now it's unbelievable. Benoit is over with the crowd and over main event babyface strong.*<sup>375</sup>
- *Just see the applause he got after his loss against Angle last time, people have up most respect for him and realise he's damn good.*<sup>376</sup>

Despite these examples of fan adulation for Chris Benoit, the general consensus was that of doubt when he faced the opportunity to win the World Heavyweight title. It was hard for fans to believe that *WWE* owner Vince McMahon would ever stray from his formulaic stereotype of a champion needing to be over 6 foot tall and nearly 300 pounds

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<sup>373</sup> Completeplayer, "Chris Benoit, Once Again Thrust into Midcard Obscurity", *411mania.com*, August 27, 2002, <http://www.411mania.com/ubbthreads/showflat.php?Cat=0&Number=4513743&an=&page=0&vc=1> (accessed January 23, 2008).

<sup>374</sup> Dan, "WWE Royal Rumble 2003 Review", *Wrestling101.com*, September 4, 2003, <http://www.wrestling101.com/101/article/WWEVD/158/> (accessed August 4, 2008).

<sup>375</sup> Phoenix, "Respect to Benoit Vs Angle Match", *411mania.com*, January 15, 2003, <http://www.411mania.com/ubbthreads/showflat.php?Cat=0&Board=UBB22&Number=4417347&Searchpage=397&Main=4417347&Words=benoit&topic=&Search=true#Post4417347> (accessed July 29, 2008).

<sup>376</sup> Deadmanwalking\*, "Why Won't They Let Benoit Win the Title?", *Rajah.com*, April 24, 2003, <http://forums.rajah.com/showthread.php?t=51870&highlight=benoit> (accessed June 28, 2008).

in weight.<sup>377</sup> *WWE* vice-president Stephanie McMahon believed Benoit was not a marketable character by describing him as “drab and bland.”<sup>378</sup> She once pointed out his lack of charismatic and physical appeal by saying:

*He isn't like Shawn [Michaels]: the guys don't wanna be him, and the girls don't wanna fuck him.*<sup>379</sup>

Some enthusiasts on fan operated entities of the IWC had even suggested that Benoit should quit the company if he was not recognised as a world champion in the *WWE* soon:

- *Chris Benoit will never be WWE world champion on respectable terms...he will be a fluke champ at best. In this country [United States] unselfish, good matches aren't rewarded with pushes.*<sup>380</sup>
- *If Benoit doesn't have a solid run with one of the major titles within the next year, Yes; then he should quit. There was no good reason for him to have not won it from Rock at Fully Loaded & there is no good reason for him to have not gotten it by now.*<sup>381</sup>
- *Just because of his size, Vince [McMahon] singles him out as not being a true main-eventer.*<sup>382</sup>

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<sup>377</sup> Randazzo, *Ring of Hell*, op.cit. 283; 304; Chris Lansdell, “The Way I C It 7.15.08: Vince McMahon’s Bias”, *411mania.com*, <http://www.411mania.com/wrestling/columns/80315> (accessed August 7, 2008); Jenkins, *Growing Up and Growing More Risqué*, op.cit. 342.

<sup>378</sup> Randazzo, *ibid.* 312.

<sup>379</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>380</sup> Baron Von Stylin, “Chris Benoit”, *411mania.com*, April 28, 2003, <http://www.411mania.com/ubbthreads/showflat.php?Cat=0&Board=UBB1&Number=19282&Searchpage=417&Main=19282&Words=benoit&topic=&Search=true#Post19282> (accessed July 23, 2008).

<sup>381</sup> Corinoismybestfriend, “Should Chris Benoit Just Quit the WWE?”, *Rajah.com*, May 8, 2003, <http://forums.rajah.com/showthread.php?t=61286&highlight=benoit> (accessed July 5, 2008).

<sup>382</sup> Jza1218, “Should Chris Benoit Just Quit the WWE?”, *Rajah.com*, May 8, 2003, <http://forums.rajah.com/showthread.php?t=61286&highlight=benoit> (accessed July 5, 2008).

Fans were making their voices heard by continually decrying the injustice of Chris Benoit not getting the recognition they believed he deserved. They continued to rally behind the underdog wrestler and discount the champions who the *WWE* preferred at the time such as ‘Triple H’. Benoit’s status as a veteran and his age were not an issue with the smark wrestling crowd. This kind of support for him would ultimately lead to a turning point in his career. Benoit’s most hardcore followers often referred to him as a “wrestling god” while others compared him to the “second coming of Christ.”<sup>383</sup>

According to Barthes, wrestling fans have always behaved in this manner. He stated,

*In the ring, and even in the depths of their voluntary ignominy, wrestlers remain gods because they are, for a few moments, the key which opens nature, the pure gesture which separates good from evil, and unveils the form of a justice which is at last intelligible.*<sup>384</sup>

Benoit was receiving much support from the IWC at the height of his popularity. Discussion topics regarding Benoit mainly focused at his lack of opportunity as a world title contender and the wrestling smark’s opinions of him as a good wrestler and a decent human being:

- *36 or 21 Benoit is still the best wrestler they [WWE] have at their disposal. He elevates young talent without having been a major player himself. Why not put the title on him?*<sup>385</sup>

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<sup>383</sup> Matt Kopp, “Chris Benoit: The Best There Is”, *Onlineworldofwrestling.com*, <http://www.onlineworldofwrestling.com/columns/misc/mattkopp01.html> (accessed March 21, 2009); 411mania.com, “More Proof to Why Benoit is the Second Coming of Christ”, *411mania.com*, <http://www.411mania.com/ubbthreads/showflat.php?Cat=0&Number=4881415&an=&page=0&vc=1> (accessed August 19, 2008); Wrestlingclique.com, “Chris Benoit”, *Wrestlingclique.com*, <http://wrestlingclique.com/wwe-discussion/23380-chris-benoit.html> (accessed March 15, 2009).

<sup>384</sup> Barthes, *The World of Wrestling*, op.cit. 93.

<sup>385</sup> Werty, “Why Won’t They Let Benoit Win the Title?”, *Rajah.com*, November 30, 2003, <http://forums.rajah.com/showthread.php?t=51870&highlight=benoit> (accessed June 28, 2008).

- *Chris Benoit should be champion and WOULD make a good champion. I particularly liked it when he was facing Angle at Royal Rumble 2003 as a family man who had sacrificed everything for wrestling. That made me care about him; care about why he needs to be champion.*<sup>386</sup>

The year 2003 proved to be a significant one in the career of Chris Benoit as by the end of it his rise in popularity among web-based wrestling fans altered the creative planning process of wrestling event producers. The *WWE* had no alternative but to shift their marketing strategies in promoting the 18-year ring veteran as the face of the company. More aspects of his personality outside of the wrestling ring were used to build his gimmick as a legitimate title contender in 2004. Essentially, the association of heightened melodrama and the maintaining of kayfabe would be relaxed by the producers of *WWE* media. Instead, the *WWE* would take a more realistic turn whereby extreme struggles between good and evil gave way to a focus on the moral codes Benoit applied to both his wrestling career and his personal life.<sup>387</sup>

### ***Chris Benoit- World Heavyweight Champion***

The portrayal of the Chris Benoit character on *WWE* television from the end of 2003 onwards is particularly noteworthy. His career path from that period was surely influenced by the smartened wrestling fans who exerted popular pressure to change the methods media producers use to manufacture characters and storylines. The more adamant wrestling smarks were in shunning the unrealistic storylines in the *WWE*, the more they looked for realism in wrestling action—live, televised and in video media. These mature fans demanded more realistic storylines. This eventually paved the way for

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<sup>386</sup> Chris, “Why Won’t They Let Benoit Win the Title?”, *Rajah.com*, November 21, 2003, <http://forums.rajah.com/showthread.php?t=51870&highlight=benoit> (accessed June 28, 2008).

<sup>387</sup> Randazzo, *Ring of Hell*, op.cit. 309.

even more important transitions in the world of professional wrestling when fictional storylines began to be blended with forms of structured reality in wrestling shows.

Chris Benoit's background earlier in his career and his family life had become common knowledge amongst fans who had access to the internet. Eventually, information of a similar tone was introduced to fans on *WWE* television. The result of this was that fans felt more sympathy and empathy for Benoit and became more connected to him as if he was one of their own. These die-hard wrestling fans; continued to hope for him to be the champion of the world despite his failures in major title situations. Benoit's lifelong dedication as a wrestler and his desire to become the *WWE* World Heavyweight Champion became the focal point of storylines and matches involving him.

The records document that at the *2004 Royal Rumble*, Benoit outlasted 29 other competitors in a 61-minute contest to become the number one contender for the *WWE* World Heavyweight Championship. This meant Benoit had reserved a place in the World Heavyweight title match at the biggest event on the *WWE*'s pay-per-view calendar, *Wrestlemania*. However, this *Royal Rumble* match holds further significance in relation to the official *WWE* narratives and the popular observations of wrestling smarks. Benoit was the first entrant in the gauntlet style battle royal match at the *Royal Rumble*. His last obstacle was Paul Wight ('The Big Show'). In what would be best described as a 'David Vs Goliath' battle, the 5 feet 10 inches, 230 pound Benoit hoisted the 7 foot, 500 pound 'Big Show' over the top rope to win the match. Roland Barthes portrayed such moments in professional wrestling as significant. He said,

*Each sign in wrestling is endowed with an absolute clarity, since one must always understand everything on the spot. No sooner are the adversaries in the ring, the public are overwhelmed with the blatancy of the roles.*<sup>388</sup>

The *WWE*'s creative energy in promoting Benoit as the working class underdog became evident by the conclusion of the *2004 Royal Rumble*. Victory for the first entrant in the battle royal match had only been achieved on one other occasion in the *WWE*'s history. Familiar scenarios of Benoit's wrestling career—his battling to overcome his physical and charismatic shortcomings—were repeatedly played out throughout *WWE* texts in events leading up to *Wrestlemania XX*. Despite a clear emphasis shown by the *WWE* on the promotion of Benoit, the internet smark community still had reservations as to whether *WWE* decision makers would finally crown Benoit as the World Heavyweight Champion. Such suspicion was partly triggered by the fact that Benoit's opponents for the World Heavyweight title at *Wrestlemania XX* would be the defending champion 'Triple H' and Michael Hickenbottom ('The Heartbreak Kid Shawn Michaels'), who together at the time had amassed a total of 12 world title reigns between them. Fans were concerned because they had learnt from the reports they read on the internet, that the defending champion 'Triple H' may exercise his political power within the company to alter production strategies in his favour.<sup>389</sup> Discourse on IWC discussion forums shows that internet smarks were well informed of 'Triple H's position of power behind-the-scenes due to his much publicised real-life marriage to *WWE* empire heiress Stephanie

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<sup>388</sup> Barthes, *The World of Wrestling*, op.cit. 88.

<sup>389</sup> Tim Haught, "Pro Wrestling Pundit 10.10.07: IWC vs. WWE", *411mania.com*, <http://www.411mania.com/wrestling/columns/61266> (accessed August 9, 2008); Walker, *Benoit's Shocking Death*, op.cit.

McMahon.<sup>390</sup> Some fans were worried ‘Triple H’s political power would be the greatest obstacle to Benoit accomplishing his dream of winning the World Heavyweight Championship at *Wrestlemania XX*. Smarks were also concerned that Benoit’s overwhelming support from the IWC may prove to be a major problem in him achieving world championship glory. Given that *WWE* insiders including ‘Triple H’ had shown disdain for the community in the past, fans believed media producers would stray away from popular interpretations and surprise audiences by preventing a Benoit victory. These issues are borne out in online comments such as:

- *You would expect Benoit to win but logic goes out the window when trippers [Triple H] enter the equation, he always pulls something out of the hat.*<sup>391</sup>
- *Sadly, I do not think Benoit will win at WM [Wrestlemania]. True, Triple H COULD surprise me and do something that I feel would be VERY out of character for him.*<sup>392</sup>
- *Wouldn’t it be ironic if Benoit was slated to win the Rumble, main event at Wrestlemania XX, and win the championship, but Vince [McMahon] changed those plans because of the amount of chatter there is about that potentially happening?*<sup>393</sup>

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<sup>390</sup> Randazzo, *Ring of Hell*, op.cit. 280; 309; Wrestlingdb.com, “ANGER MANAGEMENT: World Wrestling...Politics?”, *Wrestlingdb.com*, [http://www.wrestlingdb.com/articles/2003/02/24/S\\_D](http://www.wrestlingdb.com/articles/2003/02/24/S_D) (accessed March 20, 2009).

<sup>391</sup> Pento666, “Will Triple H Job to Benoit at WMXX?”, *Talkwrestlingonline.com*, February 4, 2004, <http://www.talkwrestlingonline.com/forum/showthread.php?t=10251&highlight=benoit> (accessed August 4, 2008).

<sup>392</sup> Ash\_D\_Wanderer, “I Really Hate to Say This (Benoit and Wrestlemania)”, *411mania.com*, January 26, 2004, <http://www.411mania.com/ubbthreads/showflat.php?Cat=0&Number=4773241&page=0&fpart=all&vc=1> (accessed July 28, 2008).

<sup>393</sup> Punchdrunk, “Will the IWC Ironically Screw their Beloved Benoit?”, *411mania.com*, January 21, 2004, <http://www.411mania.com/ubbthreads/showflat.php?Cat=0&Number=4767782&an=&page=0&vc=1> (accessed July 26, 2008).

It is clear from internet discussion that consensus among IWC members was that they wanted Benoit to win the title. Before the event, one fan predicted that if Benoit was indeed to win the title, it would create “the largest group orgasm in IWC history.”<sup>394</sup>

Chris Benoit did indeed win the World Heavyweight title at *Wrestlemania XX*. The match had all the spectacles one may associate with professional wrestling from the heavy loss of blood to table-breaking aerial manoeuvres. The conclusion of the match saw an outpour of emotion as Benoit burst into tears and sunk to his knees hugging the World Heavyweight Championship belt. Then moments later, he was embraced by his family and real-life best friend Eddie Guerrero who at the time was the *WWE* Champion. Captured by the raw emotion of the moment, fans cheered and cried with Benoit as he proudly lifted his newly won championship belt into the air.<sup>395</sup> Celebratory moments of the kind between Benoit and Guerrero were rarely seen in professional wrestling as both men performed for rivalling brand divisions in the *WWE* and were involved in different storyline programs with very different gimmicks. Yet their real-life relationship was put on display for the wrestling world to see—with the non-existence of enforcing kayfabe. In these instances, *WWE* concerns over kayfabe played a secondary role. Seemingly, this plan worked in its favour because internet wrestling smarks universally celebrated Benoit’s achievement. Following are some examples of the adulation:

- *It made me cry and I don’t do that easy, hell loved ones of mine have died and I cried less then I did that night.*<sup>396</sup>

<sup>394</sup> Jennette, “I Really Hate to Say This (Benoit and Wrestlemania)”, *411mania.com*, January 26, 2004, <http://www.411mania.com/ubbthreads/showflat.php?Cat=0&Number=4773241&page=0&fpart=all&vc=1> (accessed July 28, 2008).

<sup>395</sup> T.J Madigan, “Benoit Relishes Road to Victory”, *Slam! Sports*, <http://slam.canoe.ca/Slam/Wrestling/2004/04/03/407593.html> (accessed July 20, 2008).

<sup>396</sup> Robert Heard, “KR: The Road to Wrestlemania”, *Wrestling101.com*, March 29, 2008, <http://www.wrestling101.com/blogs/archives/61> (accessed July 24, 2008).

- *I cried, I actually cried when Benoit won! Man it was so emotional!*<sup>397</sup>
- *The biggest show of the year closed with two of the greatest workers of all time celebrating as the MSG [Madison Square Garden] crowd came unglued. The IWC rose as one and ejaculated.*<sup>398</sup>

Significantly for a key premise of this thesis, the outcome was perceived by many wrestling fans as the *WWE* having conceded to what had become the majority crowd—the IWC.<sup>399</sup>

Core personalities of the IWC promote opinions that are alternative to the traditional fundamental ideology of professional wrestling. The violation of the kayfabe code through the leakage of behind-the-scenes information had been the biggest concern voiced by those in power within the industry. Yet, the largest company of them all, the *WWE* came to bestow their top championship honour on an internet favourite. The *WWE* had used the goodwill that fans had attached to Benoit to promote his fictional character on the television screen. It had become extremely difficult to dissociate the character of Chris Benoit in *WWE* texts from the hype of smarks on the IWC that boosted the focus on his humane qualities. The reading of the official narratives through the interpretations that smarks attached to them ultimately supported the process of the *WWE*'s creation of

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<sup>397</sup> The Ravager of Worlds, "There IS a God! And His Name is Chris Benoit!!!", *411mania.com*, March 17, 2004, <http://www.411mania.com/ubbthreads/showflat.php?Cat=0&Number=4807552&an=&page=0&vc=1> (accessed July 28, 2008).

<sup>398</sup> Harry Simon, "Halftime Report: 2004", *Thewrestlingfan.com*, June 30, 2004, <http://www.thewrestlingfan.com/id34.html> (accessed July 24, 2008).

<sup>399</sup> Thewrestlingblog, "Smarks d. "Casuals" via Armbar", *Thewrestlingblog*, <http://wallsofjerichoholic.blogspot.com/2009/06/smarks-d-casuals-via-armbar.html> (accessed June 14, 2009); Justin Henry, "Matt Hardy: Savior of Kayfabe", *Onlineworldofwrestling.com*, <http://www.onlineworldofwrestling.com/columns/misc/justinhenry01.html> (accessed March 14, 2009); Lordsofpain.net, "Racism in Wrestling", *Lordsofpain.net*, [http://www.lordsofpain.net/news/2005\\_/articles/1128667627.php](http://www.lordsofpain.net/news/2005_/articles/1128667627.php) (accessed March 14, 2009); Malone, *Chris Benoit: From High to Low*, op.cit.

‘Chris Benoit—the World Heavyweight Champion’. This also cemented the Chris Benoit character into roles which were consistent with the wrestling smark’s expectations. Due to the power of such universal support it would be difficult for wrestling audiences to view the Chris Benoit character as anything other than a hero. During *WWE* telecasts, to further unify Chris Benoit the character and Chris Benoit the person as one individual, the *WWE* creative team created the catchphrase “Chris Benoit is for real!” He began to use it whenever he addressed fellow wrestlers and live audiences.

### ***The Hero Dies in the End***

The DVD, *Hard Knocks: The Chris Benoit Story* was released in July 2004. The documentary style presentation focused on Benoit’s private life from his early years as an adolescent wrestling fan idolising ex-*WWE* performer the ‘The Dynamite Kid’ Tom Billington to his marriage to Nancy ‘Woman’ Benoit, a former wrestler. The documentary feature illuminated his singular desire to succeed in the wrestling industry and showed how this motivated him to endure rigorous training methods around the world and to subject himself to brutal punishment inside the ring. In the opening segment of the DVD Benoit referred to his love for professional wrestling by stating “Wrestling has consumed my life. Wrestling is my mistress. It’s my passion.”<sup>400</sup> For wrestling fans, this DVD was a must-have as it celebrated the career of their hero. It essentially legitimised the information about Benoit’s private life that they had read on the internet—the trends and beliefs that smarks had expressed over the years and which were accumulated via the IWC forums. Benoit would eventually lose the World Heavyweight Championship at the *Summerslam* pay-per-view in August 2004. Despite this, Benoit remained as one of the *WWE*’s most marketable performers as fans worldwide continued

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<sup>400</sup> *Hard Knocks*, op.cit.

to rally their support for him. For both wrestling fans and the *WWE*, the future of Chris Benoit was more unpredictable and controversial than any storyline the *WWE* creative team could have ever envisioned.

On June 24<sup>th</sup>, 2007 Chris Benoit was once again the focal point of the wrestling fan population. Benoit failed to appear at the *2007 Vengeance: Night of Champions* pay-per-view event in which he was scheduled to compete for the *Extreme Championship Wrestling (ECW)* title. Television viewers were informed by the *WWE* commentary team that Benoit was absent from the event due to a family emergency. The following day, reports on the internet surfaced concerning the death of the Benoit family.

In an industry where the culture of alcohol and drug abuse is considered quite common, Benoit's death was initially received with bemusement, shock and sadness.<sup>401</sup> Fans mourned wrestling performers by remembering their personalities inside and outside of the ring,<sup>402</sup> but for the most part, if drugs or alcohol were involved, their deaths fitted the expectations. This was the stereotypical end for so many of the contemporary wrestling favourites including David Smith ('The British Bulldog'), Richard Rood ('Ravishing Rick Rude'), 'Mr. Perfect' Curt Hennig and Chris Benoit's own best friend, 'Latino Heat' Eddie Guerrero. For many wrestling fans, Chris Benoit should have been the exception. He had been perceived and eventually marketed as the model wrestler who

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<sup>401</sup> Randazzo, *Ring of Hell*, op.cit. 19; 338; Walker, *Benoit's Shocking Death*, op.cit; Paul Kent, "Wrestling with Evil: Chris Benoit a Hero or Villain?", *News Limited*, <http://www.news.com.au/story/0,23599,21980118-5007146,00.html> (accessed August 11, 2008).

<sup>402</sup> Aaron Rift, "Fans Speak Out on the Death of Chris Benoit", *Nodq.com*, <http://nodq.com/features/184823451.shtml> (accessed August 8, 2008); CNN, "Your e-mails: Reaction to Chris Benoit deaths", *CNN*, <http://edition.cnn.com/2007/US/06/27/benoit.deaths.feedback/index.html> (accessed August 8, 2008); *Wrestlezone.com*, "[Official] Chris Benoit Memorial Thread", *Wrestlezone.com*, <http://forums.wrestlezone.com/showthread.php?t=12140> (accessed August 10, 2008); Sam Ford, "Collective Coping: Fan Communities Deal with Tragedy", *M.I.T.*, [http://www.convergenceculture.org/weblog/2007/07/collective\\_coping\\_fan\\_communit.php#more](http://www.convergenceculture.org/weblog/2007/07/collective_coping_fan_communit.php#more) (accessed February 1, 2009).

(despite his fame and fortune) maintained society's moral codes. Fans congregated on chat forums throughout the IWC to share their emotions of grief and sorrow for their fallen hero:

- *My heart has been broken in half. I've grown up with him, idolised him, and have enjoyed every ounce of blood, sweat, and tears he shed for us all.*<sup>403</sup>
- *I am at a loss for words as this death hits very close to my heart. Eddie's [Guerrero] death stung without a doubt, but this one hit me a little too much.*<sup>404</sup>
- *I openly cried in front of my parents TWICE, as soon as I found out. I never do that, but seeing the headline on the web, my heart literally dropped.*<sup>405</sup>

The *Monday Night Raw* event on June 25<sup>th</sup>, 2007 was a three hour tribute to the career and life of Chris Benoit in which wrestlers, referees, and management higher-ups paid tribute to him.<sup>406</sup> Benoit's co-workers gave glowing references to his personality,<sup>407</sup> *WWE* television commentator Jim Ross described him as a "great father."<sup>408</sup> It was nearly the end of the telecast when new information was announced revealing that police had suspicions of a double murder/suicide as the cause of death of the Benoit family. These events impacted both the wrestling fan community and the wrestling world in ways arguably previously unimaginable. Revelation of the murder/suicide significantly jaded

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<sup>403</sup> Dragonplex, "For Those That Don't Go in the Wrestling Forum: Chris Benoit is Dead", *Rajah.com*, June 25, 2007, <http://forums.rajah.com/showthread.php?t=128285&highlight=benoit> (accessed July 14, 2008).

<sup>404</sup> Caer, "For Those That Don't Go in the Wrestling Forum: Chris Benoit is Dead", *Rajah.com*, June 25, 2007, <http://forums.rajah.com/showthread.php?p=5187850#post5187850> (accessed July 14, 2008).

<sup>405</sup> BJThetruth, "Benoit Found Dead, Per WWE.com", *411mania.com*, June 25, 2007, <http://www.411mania.com/ubbthreads/showflat.php?Cat=0&Number=5770155&an=&page=0&vc=1> (accessed July 14, 2008).

<sup>406</sup> Robert Mead, "Chris Benoit Murder Suicide Case Leaves WWE Fans Shocked and Stunned", *Associatedcontent.com*, [http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/293529/chris\\_benoit\\_murder\\_suicide\\_case\\_leaves.html](http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/293529/chris_benoit_murder_suicide_case_leaves.html) (accessed August 8, 2008).

<sup>407</sup> Randazzo, *Ring of Hell*, op.cit. 214.

<sup>408</sup> *Monday Night Raw* 25.06.07, op.cit.

what the IWC fans and the rest of the wrestling world thought of Chris Benoit. In an industry where, through the advancement of internet technology, wrestling fans had become as knowledgeable as the insiders, he had come to be perceived as being relatively uncontroversial, and in the ring he was considered as one of the best.<sup>409</sup> Discourse on the IWC about him prior to his death provided no hint that Benoit may have been in trouble with management officials, or involved in drug abuse. There was certainly nothing to indicate he was anything but the model employee. The IWC had always commended him for his dedication to both his profession and his family. Many fans were willing to give Chris Benoit the benefit of the doubt.

At first they believed it was impossible for a man who they idolised as the ultimate professional to be involved in a crime of such a horrendous nature:

- *He's being projected as a family man, right? God, I want to think this was an accident. I want to believe this was purely accidental.*<sup>410</sup>
- *I've gotta hope the honourable man he projected himself as wasn't a total facade and if the current picture stays true. I've gotta believe there were extenuating circumstances.*<sup>411</sup>
- *I don't believe this. I am in utter shock right now. Please God don't let this be real.*<sup>412</sup>

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<sup>409</sup> Randazzo, *Ring of Hell*, op.cit. 12.

<sup>410</sup> Jis, "RAW IS BENOIT - R.I.P. Discussion Thread", *411mania.com*, June 25, 2007, <http://www.411mania.com/ubbthreads/showflat.php?Cat=0&Number=5770233&page=0&fpart=all&vc=1> (accessed July 14, 2008).

<sup>411</sup> Cough, "RAW IS BENOIT - R.I.P. Discussion Thread", *411mania.com*, June 25, 2007, <http://www.411mania.com/ubbthreads/showflat.php?Cat=0&Number=5770233&page=0&fpart=all&vc=1> (accessed July 14, 2008).

<sup>412</sup> Sly, "Chris Benoit Deceased - Double Murder, Suicide", *Rajah.com*, June 26, 2007, <http://forums.rajah.com/showthread.php?p=5187413#post5187413> (accessed July 15, 2008).

- *Maybe Benoit's family were kidnapped and the "Family Emergency" was just a hoax to kill Benoit? I mean, what other way would Benoit and his family be found dead?*<sup>413</sup>

As further details of the cause and timeframe of deaths emerged on the internet<sup>414</sup> it became more evident that the passing of the Benoit family was indeed a double murder/suicide. This knowledge sent wrestling fan movements around the world into even more chaos and hysteria. The saga seemingly had taken on a life of its own. Both insider and fan operated communities tried to seek answers as to what the circumstances were behind the entire saga. Benoit's childhood idolisation of 'The Dynamite Kid' Tom Billington came under scrutiny by internet wrestling fans and newsletter reporters. On his DVD, Benoit had passionately recollected his childhood ambition of becoming a modernised version of his idol 'The Dynamite Kid', who was one of the earliest pioneers of the technical wrestling discipline in the United States.<sup>415</sup> The two shared distinct similarities in both wrestling styles and physique.

Like his childhood hero Billington, Benoit was alleged to have consumed regular intakes of steroids throughout his career.<sup>416</sup> News and rumour items such as marriage problems between Benoit and his wife as well as the mental well-being of the entire family came into question and were integrated into the widespread reports on the

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<sup>413</sup> Drake, "Chris Benoit Found Dead", *Talkwrestlingonline.com*, June 26, 2007, <http://www.talkwrestlingonline.com/forum/showthread.php?p=687785&highlight=benoit#post687785> (accessed July 17, 2008).

<sup>414</sup> Wrestling101.com, "Detailed WWE and Chris Benoit Timeline \*Includes Text Messages", *Wrestling101.com*, <http://www.wrestling101.com/101/newsitem/4036/> (accessed March 23, 2009); Larry Sutton and Macon Moorehouse, "Wrestling's Murder-suicide", *People Magazine*, <http://www.people.com/people/archive/article/0,,20061344,00.html> (accessed March 21, 2009).

<sup>415</sup> Randazzo, *Ring of Hell*, op.cit. 25; 290.

<sup>416</sup> Matt Bishop, "Fifth Estate Offers Balanced Show on Benoit", *Slam! Sports*, <http://slam.canoe.ca/Slam/Wrestling/Benoit/2008/02/06/4835337.html> (accessed March 4, 2009); CBC News, "THE Dynamite Kid", *CBC News*, <http://www.cbc.ca/fifth/fighttothedeath/kid.html> (accessed March 4, 2009); Randazzo, *Ring of Hell*, op.cit. 36 - 37.

internet.<sup>417</sup> Some website reports indicated rumours that Benoit and his wife had constantly bickered about financial matters despite the fact he was supposedly earning US \$500,000 per year wrestling for the *WWE*.<sup>418</sup> Internet rumours also suggested that Benoit and his wife were at odds about raising their son Daniel as there was a possibility that he was a child with special needs.<sup>419</sup> Wrestling news sites reported that Nancy Benoit had filed for divorce in 2003 under the grounds of alleged spousal abuse.<sup>420</sup> Text message records published on the internet suggested there had perhaps been problems for quite some time. Leaked private phone text messages from Nancy Benoit to her husband were made public by leading wrestling news reporter Dave Meltzer on *wrestlingobserver.com*. The leaked text messages were said to refer to Benoit's steroid use and his time away from family. There had been pleas for him to seek professional help.<sup>421</sup> In one of the text messages Nancy Benoit pleaded with her husband to "Get off the crap"—allegedly referring to his steroid use. Another text message was said to have read: "Ignoring the problem or running away isn't going to help you face it. You need

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<sup>417</sup> Keelan Balderson, "Will Chris Benoit as a Performer be Forgotten?", *Wrestlingtruth.com*, <http://wrestlingtruth.com/news/will-chris-benoit-as-a-performer-be-forgotten-scarlett-harris-investigates/> (accessed August 9, 2008); David Bixenspan, "The Story of Chris Benoit and the Wrestling Industry", *Indywrestlingnews.com*, <http://indywrestlingnews.com/content/view/2731/46/> (accessed August 10, 2008).

<sup>418</sup> Randazzo, *Ring of Hell*, op.cit. 10; 15; Greg Bluestein, "Benoit Strangled Wife, Smothered Son", *The Washington Post*, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/06/26/AR2007062600135.html> (accessed July 20, 2008); *Wrestlingscoop.com*, "WWE Salaries", *Wrestlingscoop.com*, <http://www.wrestlescoop.com/info/salaries.shtml> (accessed August 9, 2008).

<sup>419</sup> *Angrymarks.com*, "06/27/07: Latest Chris Benoit News", *Angrymarks.com*, <http://www.angrymarks.com/news/View.php?ArticleID=1520> (accessed August 9, 2008); Catherine Skipp and Arian Campo-Flores, "Chris Benoit's World", *News Week*, <http://www.newsweek.com/id/33341> (accessed August 1, 2008); Bluestein, *Benoit Strangled Wife, Smothered Son*, op.cit; Randazzo, *Ring of Hell*, op.cit. 293; 297

<sup>420</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>421</sup> Simon Rothstein, "Nancy Pleaded: Get off the stuff", *News Group Newspapers*, <http://www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/sport/wrestling/article999897.ece> (accessed August 10, 2008); Jason Powell, "Nancy Benoit Referred to WWE's Wellness Program as a 'joke' and Complained of Chris Benoit's Steroid Abuse in Text Messages Sent Just Weeks Before the Murders", *Prowrestling.net*, <http://www.prowrestling.net/artman/publish/WWE/article100835.shtml> (accessed August 12, 2008); Randazzo, *Ring of Hell*, op.cit. 327.

professional help and only if you're fully honest about it."<sup>422</sup> There were also reports on the IWC that Nancy Benoit had hoped Chris Benoit would take more time off the road to be with his family.<sup>423</sup> It must be remembered that these were the same people who had celebrated joyously inside the ring at *Wrestlemania XX* and who had together presented a wholesome family image.

Through the exposure on wrestling news and rumours on the internet Benoit had become someone who fans believed could do no wrong; in an industry which has historically been marred by controversies of drug related deaths and crooked business practices. Prior to the scandal Benoit had been marketed as a dedicated competitor who was a gentle, humble, devoted family man. The comments in the smark fan movement's forums demonstrated overwhelming attachment to him. This attachment was also emphasised in the *Hard Knocks* DVD and during the latter part of his career with the *WWE*.

It is a fundamental claim of this thesis that the *WWE* would not have marketed Benoit in connection to these perceived attributes if fan communities like the IWC had been less influential. Benoit had been considered to be an individual who was obsessed with pursuing success as a professional wrestler.<sup>424</sup> He was also considered as an individual of few words who tried to separate his personal and professional life as much as he could.<sup>425</sup>

His preference for privacy could also possibly explain why potential problems he may have been experiencing were not well known. It was not until after Benoit's death

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<sup>422</sup> Ibid.

<sup>423</sup> Skipp and Campo-Flores, *Chris Benoit's World*, op.cit; Rothstein, *Nancy Pleaded: Get off the Stuff*, op.cit.

<sup>424</sup> Randazzo, *Ring of Hell*, op.cit 10 - 11; 340.

<sup>425</sup> Ibid. 295 - 297.

that insights revealing a dark side to his personality began filling the spaces of the IWC—information depicting an antisocial and sadistic side of Benoit contrary to how the IWC gossip and rumour items had portrayed him before his death.

It was believed that Benoit maintained a very small inner circle of friends but even they appeared to have had a psychological distance from him.<sup>426</sup> “It was bound to happen” said one wrestler when questioned by popular wrestling newsletter *Pro Wrestling Torch*.<sup>427</sup> Another wrestler believed Benoit had “snap potential” referring to his quiet and at times awkward demeanour. There was a strong suspicion that either Chris or Nancy Benoit may have been capable of such atrocious acts. The couple’s volatile relationship was apparently known among Benoit’s fellow *WWE* competitors.<sup>428</sup>

### ***Conspiracy Theories***

Wrestling rumours published by insiders on the internet are often second or third hand recollections. They seldom reflect the truth.<sup>429</sup> Additionally, when popular trends are shaped without demographical or geographical limitation, they are difficult to dispute. This may very well be the case with the meteoric rise of Chris Benoit through the influence of the internet wrestling fan movement. The *WWE* were no longer able to dictate fan response to official texts in the way that they used to in pervious eras. Pro-wrestling had lost much of the aura it had achieved by exciting fans through shocking storyline developments and surprise match results. Fans discovered alternative ways to enjoy wrestling texts through the internet. Benoit had fitted the internet smark’s image of

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<sup>426</sup> Ibid. 227 - 228; 297.

<sup>427</sup> Wrestling101.com, “WWE: Updates on Chris Benoit’s Death”, *Wrestling101.com*, <http://www.wrestling101.com/101/newsitem/4031/> (accessed March 12, 2009).

<sup>428</sup> Ibid; Randazzo, *Ring of Hell*, op.cit. 292 - 293.

<sup>429</sup> Jarrett, *The Story of the Development of NWATNA*, op.cit. 149; 156; Bischoff, *Controversy Creates Cash*, op.cit. 197 - 198.

a “good wrestler” perfectly. He had been technically gifted inside the ring even though he had not possessed the largest physique. He had been considered an underdog. His supposed humane attributes had won him support among the smarks.

After Benoit’s death, official communities like *wwe.com* tried to shed light on the situation by publishing a timeline of events including text messages sent from Benoit’s mobile phone to fellow employees moments before and after he murdered his family.<sup>430</sup> Finer details such as toxicology reports and the methods Benoit used to slay his family surfaced elsewhere on the internet.<sup>431</sup> Wrestling fans followed the saga step by step and they were in touch with every piece of information available on the internet. Contentious rumours are often mixed in with information from more credible sources together under the one media space. Therefore it is at times difficult for readers to determine the reliability of the information items in the mix. The information spreads regardless of its accuracy. One report which gained significant circulation via IWC web forums speculated that police investigators had suspected that Chris Benoit’s son, Daniel may have died as a result of severe trauma to the neck and possibly had drugs in his system at the time of his death.<sup>432</sup> While these reports were based on speculation, fan communities on the internet added their theories to the stories. One popular rumour was that Daniel Benoit may have been strangled to death from application of the ‘Crippler Crossface’

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<sup>430</sup> World Wrestling Entertainment, “WWE Shares Internal Timeline and Details Relating to Chris Benoit Tragedy”, *World Wrestling Entertainment*, [http://corporate.wwe.com/news/2007/2007\\_06\\_26\\_2.jsp](http://corporate.wwe.com/news/2007/2007_06_26_2.jsp) (accessed July 28, 2008).

<sup>431</sup> Richard Clark, “Breaking Update: Benoit Toxicology Results”, *Wrestlezone.com*, <http://www.wrestlezone.com/article.php?articleid=186704993> (accessed July 30, 2008); Simon Rothstein, “Benoit’s Brain Like 85-year-old”, *News Group Newspapers*, <http://www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/sport/wrestling/article262701.ece> (accessed July 30, 2008).

<sup>432</sup> Ibid.

submission manoeuvre.<sup>433</sup> The ‘Crippler Crossface’ was a signature manoeuvre executed by Chris Benoit throughout his career to win wrestling matches. The move is performed by locking the hands around an opponent’s face and stretching the neck backwards.<sup>434</sup> The news spread and conspiracy theories began to emerge from internet wrestling columns and chat forums. One such theory was that Nancy Benoit and ex-husband Kevin Sullivan were practising Satanists from their time in *WCW* and that Sullivan had staged the murder/suicide as a revenge attack on the Benoit Family.<sup>435</sup> This outlandish theory possibly has its foundation in that Nancy Benoit had parted ways with Sullivan to be in a relationship with Chris Benoit while working together in *WCW*.<sup>436</sup> Some fans then attached the Sullivan theory to the death of another former female wrestler, Sherri Martel, who had passed away one week prior.<sup>437</sup>

It is obvious Chris Benoit had a dark side that seemingly nobody knew about. But his most hardcore fans were desperate for reasons that would somehow clear their favourite wrestler or at least defer the cause to professional and personal stress. Many resorted to clinging to wild rumours and conspiracies and were willing to believe anything to clear Benoit's name:

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<sup>433</sup> Randazzo, *Ring of Hell*, op.cit. 13; 336; ESPN, “Steroids Discovered in Probe of Slayings, Suicide”, *ESPN*, <http://sports.espn.go.com/espn/news/story?id=2917133> (accessed March 20, 2009).

<sup>434</sup> Ibid.

<sup>435</sup> Conspiracy.com, “Chris Benoit Conspiracy”, *Conspiracy.com*, <http://conspiracy.com.blogspot.com/2007/07/chris-benoit-conspiracy.html> (accessed July 23, 2008); Curtis Gillman, “The Chris Benoit-Kevin Sullivan Connection”, *Bleacher Report*, <http://bleacherreport.com/articles/1350-the-chris-benoit-kevin-sullivan-connection> (accessed July 29, 2008); Impact Wrestling, “The Benoit/Sullivan Murder Conspiracy”, *Impact Wrestling*, <http://www.impactwrestling.com/forum/showthread.php?t=7780> (accessed August 8, 2008); Randazzo, *Ring of Hell*, op.cit. 215.

<sup>436</sup> Ibid.

<sup>437</sup> Fox News Network, “Another Pro Wrestler Found Dead Days before Benoit Murder-Suicide”, *Fox News Network*, <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,287182,00.html> (accessed July 23, 2008).

- *It's a toss up for me Kevin Sullivan and Satanists...either way, it would have been unlike Benoit to do such a thing.*<sup>438</sup>
- *Kevin Sullivan threatened to kill Benoit at one point. Plus it's odd that this happens exactly 10 years after Nancy broke up with Sullivan for Benoit.*<sup>439</sup>
- *I think Kevin Sullivan framed Benoit. Who had a real-life grudge and hate for Benoit and his wife. We all know Benoit doesn't have it in him to kill his family.*<sup>440</sup>

In an interesting twist, according to some observers, news of the death of Nancy Benoit was added to Chris Benoit's page on popular information sharing site *Wikipedia*, 14 hours prior to the discovery of the bodies of the Benoit family.<sup>441</sup> The posting of the news on *Wikipedia* would later be ruled as a coincidence by police investigators, yet it set off a frenzy of tributes and condolences from fans on the IWC. The *Wikipedia* posting also led to speculation by some wrestling fans that the *WWE* may have planned the entire saga to fool the increasingly 'smarkish' wrestling fan population.<sup>442</sup> This speculation was largely influenced by the two coincidental factors. The internet service provider used by the editor of the Nancy Benoit *Wikipedia* entry was located in Connecticut, the same state

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<sup>438</sup> Kza, "Chris Benoit Deceased - Double Murder, Suicide", *Rajah.com*, September 3, 2007, <http://forums.rajah.com/showthread.php?p=5263943&highlight=kevin#post5263943> (accessed July 27, 2008).

<sup>439</sup> Divasarehot, "Chris Benoit Deceased - Double Murder, Suicide", *Rajah.com*, September 2, 2007, <http://forums.rajah.com/showthread.php?p=5262822&highlight=kevin#post5262822> (accessed July 27, 2008).

<sup>440</sup> Iblakers, "Kevin Sullivan", *Ewbattleground.com*, June 27, 2007, <http://www.ewbattleground.com/forum/index.php?&showtopic=54661&st=0&> (accessed July 27, 2008).

<sup>441</sup> Blane Bachelor, "Web Time Stamps Indicate Nancy Benoit's Death Reported on Web at Least 13 Hours Before Police Found Bodies in her Home", *Fox News Network*, <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,287194,00.html> (accessed February 21, 2008); Irvin Muchnick, "Guest Column: Strange Case of the Benoit Wikipedia Hacker", *Slam! Sports*, <http://slam.canoe.ca/Slam/Wrestling/Benoit/2008/08/04/7605881.html> (accessed March 20, 2009).

<sup>442</sup> Irvin Muchnick, "Benoit 911 Call: WWE Security Chief Gave Wrong Day of Wrestler's Last Message", *Benoit Book*, <http://benoitbook.blogspot.com/2008/03/benoit-911-call-wwe-security-chief-gave.html> (accessed August 8, 2008); *Slam! Sports*, "Did Benoit's Son have Fragile X?", *Slam! Sports*, <http://slam.canoe.ca/Slam/Wrestling/Benoit/2007/07/03/4309949-ap.html> (accessed August 8, 2008).

as *WWE* headquarters.<sup>443</sup> Secondly, in what proved to be a fictional sham as part of a storyline angle on *Monday Night Raw*, two weeks prior to Benoit's death, *WWE* owner Vince McMahon had allegedly been murdered when his limousine vehicle burst into a fiery explosion.<sup>444</sup> It eventually came to be revealed as untrue. These two coincidences were widely illustrated in online texts. Some fans were confused and continued to believe the death of the Benoit family was somehow connected to the fake storyline death of the *WWE* owner.<sup>445</sup> "Its so sad and really quite disturbing that with the angles in *WWE* now, nobody knows if a wrestler's death is a shoot [unscripted legitimate event] or a work [part of a storyline]" said one fan posting on the *talkwrestlingonline.com* chat forums.<sup>446</sup> Another forum member added, "How the \*\*\*\* is anyone supposed to know if this is legit or just a sick joke after the McMahon angle."<sup>447</sup> Media producers were said to have planned a storyline memorial service for the *WWE* owner on the June 25<sup>th</sup>, 2007 edition of *Monday Night Raw*. This became a tribute show to Chris Benoit with McMahon appearing instead to explain the death of the former World Heavyweight Champion.<sup>448</sup>

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<sup>443</sup> Ibid.

<sup>444</sup> *Monday Night Raw 11.06.07*, DVD, directed by World Wrestling Entertainment (Wilkes-Barre, PA: World Wrestling Entertainment, 2007); Keelan Balderson, "Vince McMahon Death Angle Explained", *Wrestlingtruth.com*, <http://wrestlingtruth.com/news/vince-mcmahon-death-angle-explained/> (accessed June 16, 2009); Craig Tello, "Feds Probe Crime Scene", *World Wrestling Entertainment*, <http://web.archive.org/web/20070621115331/http://www.wwe.com/inside/news/mcmahonexplosionupdate> (accessed June 16, 2009).

<sup>445</sup> Randazzo, *Ring of Hell*, op.cit. 330 - 333.

<sup>446</sup> The Beltster, "Chris Benoit Found Dead", *Talkwrestlingonline.com*, June 25, 2007, <http://www.talkwrestlingonline.com/forum/showthread.php?p=627502&highlight=disturbing#post627502> (accessed April 30, 2009).

<sup>447</sup> Slim Jim, "Chris Benoit Found Dead", *Talkwrestlingonline.com*, June 25, 2007, <http://www.talkwrestlingonline.com/forum/showthread.php?p=687759&highlight=sick#post687759> (accessed April 30, 2009).

<sup>448</sup> Balderson, *Will Chris Benoit as a Performer be Forgotten?*, op.cit; Danny Dunn, "Great Balls of Fire! Vince is Dead and Does it Matter!", *Wrestling101.com*, <http://www.wrestling101.com/blogs/archives/25> (accessed March 14, 2009).

### *No Longer a Hero*

The horrific nature of the Benoit family tragedy created news headlines and current affairs features in print and electronic media worldwide. However most wrestling fans believed that due to the stereotyped perceptions of pro-wrestling, it was difficult for the mainstream media to understand and investigate the characteristics of the industry and its individual wrestlers.<sup>449</sup> The IWC still felt a strong enough bond with professional wrestling to be antagonistic regarding what they believed to be, unfair reporting from mainstream media. When wrestling news sites began publishing recaps of television shows covering the tragedy, there were arguments that the media, particularly current affairs programmes like *Nancy Grace*, were looking for sensationalism instead of reporting news and facts.<sup>450</sup> This led to resentment from the IWC towards mainstream media as some correspondents felt the media was nothing but a venue of vultures looking to cash in on a tragedy.<sup>451</sup> They cited many occasions of unfounded rumours being reported as facts to support their claims. In addition to Chris Benoit's steroid use, Nancy Grace had linked facts about Benoit's career with *WCW* over a decade ago to his status with the *WWE* as critical factors towards his actions. An example of this was when Grace suggested Benoit's "demotion from the 'Four Horsemen' to *Raw*" may have played a part

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<sup>449</sup> Kevin Eck, "Disgraceful Coverage of Benoit Tragedy", *The Baltimore Sun*, [http://weblogs.baltimoresun.com/sports/wrestling/blog/2007/06/disgraceful\\_coverage\\_of\\_benoit.html](http://weblogs.baltimoresun.com/sports/wrestling/blog/2007/06/disgraceful_coverage_of_benoit.html) (accessed July 15, 2008); John Philipavage, "Jericho on Nancy Grace", *Pro Wrestling Chronicle*, <http://www.pwchronicle.com/2007/06/30/jericho-on-nancy-grace/> (accessed August 3, 2008).

<sup>450</sup> Ibid.

<sup>451</sup> Wrestlingepicenter.com, "Complete Detailed Report from Chris Jericho's Appearance on CNN's Nancy Grace Show to Discuss Benoit Tragedy", *Wrestlingepicenter.com*, <http://www.wrestlingepicenter.com/articles/185149723.shtml> (accessed March 15, 2009); Patrick Imig, "The Media has no Clue", *Joesportsfan.com*, <http://www.joesportsfan.com/column.php?storyid=583> (accessed March 15, 2009).

in his demise.<sup>452</sup> The ‘Four Horsemen’ was a wrestling group as part of a television storyline, who were disbanded over a decade ago and wrestled under the now defunct *WCW*; and Chris Benoit at the time of his death had not been a part of the *WWE Raw* roster in over 3 years.<sup>453</sup> Despite having no confirmation, many news anchors reported that Benoit killed his son in a wrestling chokehold known as the ‘Crippler Crossface’.<sup>454</sup> While this was refuted by the investigators, some media outlets treated it as fact and refused to change their stance. Furthermore, many mainstream news outlets also tied the death of *WWE* Hall of Fame inductee Sherri Martel to the Benoit family because they had all worked with Kevin Sullivan in *WCW*.<sup>455</sup>

Doctors who performed autopsy tests on Benoit revealed details which were contrary to what mainstream news outlets had been widely reporting. While the regular consumption of steroids may have been a factor in Benoit’s demise, an autopsy report published by neurosurgeon Dr. Julian Bailes revealed Benoit’s brain was reminiscent of an 85 year old Alzheimer’s disease patient.<sup>456</sup> Doctors also believed the advanced form of dementia found in Benoit’s brain was the result of a lifetime of chronic concussions and physical trauma to the head suffered from competing in wrestling matches.<sup>457</sup> Much of the discourse on IWC chat forums suggested internet wrestling fans had no interest in any of the valid points mainstream media outlets had raised, such as the concern for the high

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<sup>452</sup> L.Vincent Poupard, “Wrestling Fans Going to War with Nancy Grace”, *Associatedcontent.com*, [http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/295264/wrestling\\_fans\\_going\\_to\\_war\\_with\\_nancy.html?cat=17](http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/295264/wrestling_fans_going_to_war_with_nancy.html?cat=17) (accessed August 3, 2008).

<sup>453</sup> Ibid.

<sup>454</sup> Randazzo, *Ring of Hell*, op.cit. 336; ESPN. *Steroids Discovered*, op.cit.

<sup>455</sup> Fox News Network, *Another Pro Wrestler Found Dead*, op.cit; Imig, *The Media has no Clue*, op.cit.

<sup>456</sup> Randazzo, *Ring of Hell*, op.cit. 17; 230; Rothstein, *Benoit’s Brain Like 85-year-old*; op.cit; Wrestlingrevealed.com, “Chris Benoit Had Brain Damage”, *Wrestlingrevealed.com*, <http://www.wrestlingrevealed.com/articles/chris-benoit/chris-benoit-brain-damage.php> (accessed March 13, 2009).

<sup>457</sup> Ibid.

number of drug-related deaths in pro-wrestling. They were more interested in the misinformation that mainstream media outlets showed throughout their coverage of the Benoit saga. Despite collectively condemning Benoit's actions, internet smarks were stunned that many mainstream newsgroups failed to show compassion towards Benoit by failing to mention the condition his brain was in at the time of his death.

In what could be considered as the final blow to the hopes of wrestling fans, the contents of text messages from Chris Benoit's personal phones suggested that he was at least somewhat aware of the magnitude of his actions. Text messages sent by Benoit to three co-workers just hours after he murdered his family, that were published by the *WWE* on *wwe.com* revealed that he had notified them of his location providing instructions for entering the Benoit family residence.<sup>458</sup> Further details of this tragedy provided an even more chilling insight into the psyche of the once beloved world champion. According to police investigators, Benoit killed his wife on Friday; he murdered his son on Saturday and hanged himself early Sunday morning on June 24<sup>th</sup>, 2007.<sup>459</sup>

Wrestling fans on the internet interpreted this piece of information in a chilling manner. They believed this would have meant Benoit was likely to have spent the final days of his life with the dead bodies of his family before ending his own life.<sup>460</sup> In the

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<sup>458</sup> World Wrestling Entertainment, *WWE Shares Internal Timeline*, op.cit; Ryan Clark, "WWE Benoit Update: All 9 Text Messages Now Revealed", *24wrestling.com*, <http://www.24wrestling.com/index.php?id=news/9371> (accessed July 25, 2009).

<sup>459</sup> Wrestling101.com, "WWE: More Updates on the Benoit Family Deaths", *Wrestling101.com*, <http://www.wrestling101.com/101/newsitem/4033/> (accessed March 15, 2009); James Montgomery, "Deaths of WWE Champ Chris Benoit, Family Being Treated As Murder-suicide", *MTV Networks*, <http://www.mtv.com/news/articles/1563400/20070626/story.jhtml> (accessed July 29, 2008); Randazzo, *Ring of Hell*, op.cit. 13.

<sup>460</sup> Ibid.

weeks following his death more startling revelations regarding Chris Benoit crowded the headlines of wrestling news sites. Images once synonymous with Benoit were torn apart.

It was reported that Benoit once compared the necessity of steroids in wrestling to the popularity of cigarettes in the 1950s.<sup>461</sup> Police investigators reportedly found stockpiles of steroids and hormone enhancing drugs inside the Benoit family residence.<sup>462</sup> The disturbing underside to Benoit's personality became more illuminated through circulation of stories about his infliction of sadistic humiliation and trauma on young wrestlers.<sup>463</sup> It was alleged Benoit once demanded respect from a lower-ranked wrestler in the locker room by urinating on him while forcing him to do push-ups.<sup>464</sup> It was also alleged that, prior to signing with the *WWE* in 2000, Benoit had threatened *WCW* officials that he would "mutilate himself" on live television if he was forced to participate in a storyline he did not like.<sup>465</sup>

Negative portrayals of this nature were rarely, if ever, reported about Benoit on the internet prior to his death. These revelations were certainly in distinct contrast to the widespread reports of a wrestling veteran who enjoyed helping younger wrestlers.<sup>466</sup>

The initial sadness over Benoit's death eventually turned into anger, leading to a sense of betrayal felt by the IWC fan movement. The same information sources that had enhanced their enjoyment of pro-wrestling a few years earlier—news and rumours on the internet—would once again play a role in the interpretation process contributing to the

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<sup>461</sup> Walker, *Benoit's Shocking Death*, op.cit; Randazzo, *Ring of Hell*, op.cit. 9.

<sup>462</sup> Harry R. Weber, "Benoit's MD fights back", *Slam! Sports*, <http://slam.canoe.ca/Slam/Wrestling/Benoit/2007/08/13/4415790-ap.html> (accessed March 15, 2009); ESPN, *Steroids Discovered*, op.cit.

<sup>463</sup> Randazzo, *Ring of Hell*, op.cit. 107; 163; 295.

<sup>464</sup> Ibid. 10; 107; 127; 340; UKFF.com, "Ring of Hell", *Ukff.com*, <http://ukff.com/index.php?showtopic=105729> (accessed March 17, 2009).

<sup>465</sup> Wrestlingclique.com, *Chris Benoit*, op.cit; Randazzo, *Ring of Hell*, op.cit. 10; 255 - 256; 291.

<sup>466</sup> Randazzo, ibid. 260; Wrestlingrevealed.com, *Chris Jericho Comments on Chris Benoit*, op.cit.

sentiments of the contemporary wrestling fan. Some wrestling fans even began to question the veracity of the information they had read about him prior to his death.

Many wrestling fans have stated on discussion forums that Benoit's actions have effectively ruined their love for professional wrestling. Some have even stated that they refuse to watch the product again:

- *After what Benoit has done, this for me seals the deal. I can't watch wrestling any more.*<sup>467</sup>
- *Besides the fact that one of my favourite wrestlers is dead and involved in something so horrific...it just seems sort of morbid to keep watching wrestling.*<sup>468</sup>
- *I don't think I will feel comfortable watching wrestling anymore. I think it's over at least for me.*<sup>469</sup>

To put it in wrestling terms, fans "turned heel" on Benoit as they began to treat him with the disrespect and disregard normally reserved for wrestlers who did not meet their moral code. This was the biggest swerve compared to any storyline and more realistic than any gimmick in the history of professional wrestling. Sentiments such as "May God forgive Chris Benoit",<sup>470</sup> and calls for him to "burn in hell"<sup>471</sup> became popular rallying chants among his former supporters.

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<sup>467</sup> Nick, "Benoit Balls", *Robvandam.com*, June 28, 2007, <http://www.robvandam.com/2007/06/benoit-balls.html> (accessed July 18, 2008).

<sup>468</sup> Killswitch, "Chris Benoit Deceased - Double Murder, Suicide", *Rajah.com*, June 26, 2007, <http://forums.rajah.com/showthread.php?p=5188668&highlight=morbid#post5188668> (accessed July 18, 2008).

<sup>469</sup> Jaroto, "Chris Benoit Deceased - Double Murder, Suicide", *Rajah.com*, June 26, 2007, <http://forums.rajah.com/showthread.php?p=5189104&highlight=comfortable#post5189104> (accessed July 18, 2008).

<sup>470</sup> Eric Bischoff, "How Can This Be?", *Eric Bischoff Entertainment*, <http://www.ericbischoff.com/BlogComments.asp?ID=47> (accessed August 10, 2008).

<sup>471</sup> Angrymarks.com, "Latest Chris Benoit News", *Angrymarks.com*, <http://www.angrymarks.com/news/View.php?ArticleID=1515> (accessed August 9, 2008); About.com, "Chris Benoit 1967 - 2007/Nancy Benoit 1964 - 2007/ Daniel Benoit 2000 - 2007", *About.com*, <http://prowrestling.about.com/b/2007/06/25/chris-benoit-1967-2007.htm#gB3> (accessed June 10, 2008).

These fans were the same people who essentially forced the *WWE*'s hand because of their desire to see their hero at the pinnacle of the wrestling industry. Many of them felt they put their heart and soul behind supporting him; they connected with him, like they knew him. When it turned out that he was more of a monster than anyone could have imagined the whole psyche of each wrestling fan individually—and the collective intelligence too—was scarred.

This was partly due to the way that things turned out—contrary to the image that had been officially crafted. It was also due in part to the expectations and support the IWC had collectively invested in him. Benoit's close friend and mentor Bret 'The Hitman' Hart believed "Chris Benoit's character is the same person in and out of the ring...it is hard to distinguish between the performer and the real guy."<sup>472</sup>

Fans began speculating as to whether the attributes they had admired Benoit so much for may have played a role in his shocking demise:

- *I wonder if "Chris Benoit the man" put far too much faith in "Chris Benoit the TV character". If only he could have loved himself and his family as much as he loved his superhero image.*<sup>473</sup>
- *Benoit was a hero on camera BECAUSE he was supposedly a hero off-camera. Perhaps this is the beginning of the end for "insider fans" caring about wrestling?*<sup>474</sup>

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<sup>472</sup> Adam Martin, "Recap of Bret Hart & Scott Ballard on Nancy Grace Live", *Wrestleview.com*, <http://www.wrestleview.com/news2006/1183068597.shtml> (accessed March 19, 2009).

<sup>473</sup> Danmason, "Benoit", *Rspwfaq.com*, June 26, 2007, <http://www.rspwfaq.com/2007/06/benoit/> (accessed March 23, 2009).

<sup>474</sup> Lawrence, "Benoit", *Rspwfaq.com*, June 26, 2007, <http://www.rspwfaq.com/2007/06/benoit/> (accessed March 23, 2009).

It is with some irony that a number of fans reflected that, if it were not for the IWC fan base, Benoit would never have won the World Heavyweight Championship:

- *I think both Benoit and Eddie [Guerrero] owe their title reigns to the IWC. But Benoit more so because he lacked the charisma that Eddie had (and the Latino demographic) that propelled Eddie. Benoit was an internet darling so to speak. And despite Vince's [McMahon] insistence on saying he doesn't cater to the IWC. He could not deny the continual push those fans gave Benoit.*<sup>475</sup>
- *Benoit was fantastic. He was a god-send on the IWC. Everyone loved Benoit. Everyone.*<sup>476</sup>
- *Benoit and Guerrero as champions = horrific, apart from smarks no one was into either of them.*<sup>477</sup>
- *He was always an amazing worker, among the best who ever stepped in the ring. He developed a following among the hard-core Internet fans because they appreciated how great he was.*<sup>478</sup>

Benoit had been considered by the *WWE* as a solid mid-card wrestler. His size, charisma and overall wrestling style were essentially the opposite to the stereotypical *WWE* and World Heavyweight Champions of the past. However as fan communities became more dynamic, they had grown to become more influential. The internet had given fans the

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<sup>475</sup> Eboni, "The Internet and wrestling?", *Captured-Beauty.com*, April 11, 2008, <http://www.captured-beauty.com/forum/viewtopic.php?t=3241> (accessed June 5, 2008).

<sup>476</sup> Mandiblekicktoface, "Could have Bret Hart made it in the Attitude era?", *Wrestlingforum.com*, March 31, 2009, <http://www.wrestlingforum.com/general-wwf/450316-could-have-bret-hart-made-attitude-era-5.html#post7065243> (accessed August 5, 2009).

<sup>477</sup> The-gaffer, "Eddie Guerrero & Chris Benoit WWE & World Title Reigns", *Wrestlingforum.com*, May 11, 2009, <http://www.wrestlingforum.com/general-wwf/456530-eddie-guerrero-chris-benoit-wwf-world-title-reigns.html> (accessed August 5, 2009).

<sup>478</sup> Dave Scherer, "Chris Benoit Fans React with Sadness, Disgust to Apparent Murder-suicide", June 28, 2007, *MTV Networks*, [http://www.mtv.com/news/articles/1563641/20070628/id\\_0.jhtml](http://www.mtv.com/news/articles/1563641/20070628/id_0.jhtml) (accessed June 18, 2008).

space to not only be media audiences but at the same time to become media producers in their own right.<sup>479</sup> That is, through extensive consensus-building and opinion-exchanging related to set wrestling texts, these fans had been able to attach and extend ideas and threads—creating story variations and alternative viewpoints to the narratives presented by *WWE* media producers. Chris Benoit's career outcome highlighted the fact that, with advanced communication technologies, the IWC fans could communicate amongst themselves as well as with official media producers whether it was through their personal domains or official communities like *WWE Universe*. This strengthened the online fan community component of the wrestling industry.

As demonstrated in this review of the coverage of Benoit's career on the IWC, media audiences who play creative roles in the outcome of media narratives complicate the commercial strategies of the *WWE*. Discussions about the production of official narratives are often spread over the IWC with smarks spending hours at a time debating the potential ramifications that internet wrestling gossip can have on official texts. It is in this light that the complex characteristics of the contemporary fan community in the world of professional wrestling deserve deeper analysis.

### ***Conclusion***

Some fans have accused the *WWE* of having knowledge of the potential problems surrounding Benoit but failing to act upon them due to his universal popularity with wrestling audiences. From a business standpoint, the unconditional support and adoration for Chris Benoit from his fans was most likely a commercial goldmine for the *WWE*. Fans through wrestling news and rumours were lead to believe that Benoit was addicted to becoming the greatest wrestler and was driven by that obsessive hunger. They were

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<sup>479</sup> Hills, *Fan Cultures*, op.cit. 99.

also led to believe that Benoit breathed and lived professional wrestling. This self-confessed passion for pro-wrestling was eventually used to market his career. Smarks both young and old rallied behind him as the *WWE* eventually did too. However, most of these same fans would eventually turn against him. It could be said that those same fans forced the *WWE*'s hand to satisfy their demands for change and alternative approach and to push Benoit as the World Heavyweight Champion.

The roles played by smartened wrestling fans and the way in which they influence the outcome of official narratives is a significant factor in determining the outcome of this chapter in wrestling history. To a great extent the official *WWE* and the unofficial IWC exert a profound influence on each other—especially with respect to the development of the mystique of stars, the shifting focus of the genre the stars perform in, and the narratives that unfold and which are retold and remediated. The coverage of Chris Benoit's career and his death further highlights the impact which information on the internet can have regardless of its verisimilitude.

In the next chapter the process of manufacturing star images in contemporary culture and the notion of celebrity will be discussed.

## *Chapter 5*

### *Introduction*

How fans as a group engage with both official and unofficial narratives related to celebrities will be explored in this chapter. A star has an array of unique features, real and constructed, which can be marketed and which contribute to popular culture, such as a face, a body or a certain personality.<sup>480</sup> A star can be hyped to present the illusion of a conquering hero, an evil villain, a working-class underdog and so on.<sup>481</sup> Looking at stardom from a production perspective highlights the roles of media producers who promote stars or aid their existence. Fan acceptance or rejection of stars can have distinct economic and social implications for media companies and should be considered a crucial element in strategies for marketing celebrities.

The star system does not create the star but rather a candidate is proposed by media producers through official texts and it is up to the consumers to either support or reject the star.<sup>482</sup> This makes stars not only a product of media producers but also a phenomenon of audience consumption. Daniel Boorstin in his analysis of celebrity in the 1960s claimed that society is living in an “age of contrivance” in which fabrications and illusions have become a prevailing mainstream force.<sup>483</sup> Public culture, according to Boorstin, is dominated by “pseudo events”<sup>484</sup> which are staged and scripted events that present an illusion of something real. Stars serve as representations of people and signifiers of social trends and stereotypes, thus audiences are able to relate to them as

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<sup>480</sup> Kevin Gwinner, “A Model of Image Creation and Image Transfer in Event Sponsorship” *International Marketing Review* 14, no. 3 (1997): 150; Lynn Kahle and Pamela Homer, “Physical Attractiveness of the Celebrity Endorser” *Journal of Consumer Research* 11, no. 4 (1985): 957.

<sup>481</sup> Dyer, *Stars*, op.cit. 12.

<sup>482</sup> Ibid. 19; Gamson, *Claims to Fame*, op.cit. 40.

<sup>483</sup> Boorstin, *The Image*, op.cit. 255.

<sup>484</sup> Ibid. 9.

“ideas of what people are or are supposed to be.”<sup>485</sup> Because stars have an existence which is independent from their characters on film or television, it is possible for people to believe that they are more real than the characters they play in the official narratives.<sup>486</sup> This leads to an increasing desire for fans to read beyond the mediated star images and seek glimpses into the actual personalities of celebrities.<sup>487</sup>

It is proposed in this dissertation that contemporary trends with respect to the emergence of stars comply with the observations of Dyer and Boorstin even though those authors were referring to a period in modern culture when the media environment was significantly different from that of today. Where the manufacturing of celebrity has been closely articulated to both old and new generations of media formats such as print, film, radio, television and video, more recently some authors have focussed attention on the role of the internet in its formation.<sup>488</sup> This thesis participates in that dialogue through a study of texts posted in internet forums by wrestling enthusiasts and proposes that these texts have become influential factors in the manufacturing process of the contemporary wrestling performer.

The professional wrestling industry borrows from the model of star image production of *Hollywood*. The success of the created hype and illusion of wrestling characters relies largely on the reaction of fans. Despite employing similar production strategies to mainstream entertainment forms, professional wrestling’s hybrid format of scripted melodrama and semi-choreographed competition has drawn much disapproval from media critics in popular culture. There has been prevailing prejudice that pro-

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<sup>485</sup> Dyer, *Stars*, op.cit. 20.

<sup>486</sup> Ibid.

<sup>487</sup> Ibid. 39.

<sup>488</sup> Turner, *Understanding Celebrity*, op.cit. 31.

wrestlers were neither legitimate entertainers nor athletes and this made it difficult for *World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE)* to gain acceptance as a mainstream entertainment alternative.<sup>489</sup> Therefore it has become even more important for those media producers and the wrestlers themselves to further concentrate their efforts on connecting with wrestling fans as much as possible. The networked social media spaces of the internet have provided formal and informal; organised and anarchic venues for this interaction. The increasing availability, speed and convenience of internet communication and its coupling with convergent media forms such as discussion boards, peer-to-peer networks, and digital video have delivered more information with more richness and detail, more quickly to more people than in the past. Popular cultural activities such as the desire to look for the actual behind star images are afforded by new media technologies.

The most fanatical, loyal and obsessed wrestling fans from around the world can congregate and not only consume the product as disseminated in the more controlled online spaces offered by the wrestling industry but also participate interactively in the activities that take place throughout the myriad of alternative venues that comprise the IWC. It is particularly in the latter that fans develop character and storyline expectations regarding all elements of the pro-wrestling industry. It is a major contention of this thesis that this activity on the IWC has influenced key personnel in the wrestling industry to abandon long-held beliefs and to change strategies and practices previously used in the creation and the marketing of the product.

It has already been argued that the activities of the IWC participants were instrumental in the reduced emphasis on the maintenance of kayfabe. Whilst the maintenance of persona is still an integral part of professional wrestling mystique some

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<sup>489</sup> Jenkins, *Growing Up and Growing More Risqué*, op.cit. 319.

wrestlers tend to communicate more honestly and openly with fans. The IWC has become a space where wrestlers talk openly about controversial issues in the wrestling world, sometimes revealing information which only industry insiders would have had access to in the past. This has created more exposure for wrestling stars and wrestling promotions as the volume of inside information increased. The nature of the information changed too. Pro-wrestlers became more humanised. That is, the nature of the portrayal of their characterisation changed from being like fictional television cartoon or comic book hero characters to real-life everyday individuals, more akin to social documentary.<sup>490</sup> This is particularly significant as, until recent times, the entire wrestling industry image has been based on hiding the human side of its television wrestling stars from outsiders.

### ***Chris Benoit's Star Image***

As discussed in the literature review, examining star images from both a semiotic and sociological perspective will provide a better understanding of the significance of star images.<sup>491</sup> A semiotic approach will focus on the official narratives and how the star image is portrayed. The sociological approach will focus on the promotion and production of the star image and how effectively these are understood by fans. An analysis of Chris Benoit's star image suggests that both semiotic and sociological perspectives are just as important as each other in terms of understanding the star image-making process.

Chris Benoit's star image demonstrates how the wrestling industry draws on the star-making process of both entertainment and sporting industries. The *WWE* focused their creative energy on promoting Chris Benoit's technical wrestling superiority

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<sup>490</sup> Randazzo, *Ring of Hell*, op.cit. 159; Bischoff, *Controversy Creates Cash*, op.cit. 156 - 157.

<sup>491</sup> Dyer, *Stars*, op.cit. 1.

throughout his tenure with the company. However, due to his lack of charismatic appeal, *WWE* decision-makers had reservations about his abilities as a potential world champion.<sup>492</sup> As media producers continued to focus their attention on building star images for the more charismatic wrestlers within the company, Benoit's popularity continued to soar. Benoit regularly maintained a technical wrestling dominance over some of his more fancied *WWE* counterparts. His ability to suspend audience disbelief on a consistent basis would gain the attention of the most hardcore of fan communities, the IWC.<sup>493</sup>

Popular cultural fan preferences for more realism in mainstream entertainment forms, such as the desire to seek the actual behind star images, would influence *WWE* media producers to overhaul the portrayal of Chris Benoit's character on television. By the commencement of 2004, Benoit's star image was transformed from a regular mid-card performer to a World Heavyweight Champion. The Benoit star image makes an interesting analysis as, by the end of his career, his television character within *WWE* narratives included many facets of information that were independent from the control of media producers. His past accolades in overseas wrestling companies, his technical wrestling ability and his personal life were all eventually used to build Chris Benoit's star image as a World Heavyweight Champion. Access to photograph and video media of his most memorable matches on the internet gave supporters the personalised experience of being closer to their hero. Details about his personal life, such as his affection for his family provided wrestling fans with a glimpse of the 'real' Chris Benoit behind the star image. The popular perceptions of Chris Benoit as a great wrestler and the ultimate

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<sup>492</sup> Randazzo, *Ring of Hell*, op.cit. 149.

<sup>493</sup> Ibid. 91; 103.

family man meant that he was automatically thrust into hero status in the minds of IWC wrestling smarks. The following citations reflect that wrestling fans connected with Benoit through his character on *WWE* television as well as his actual personality outside the wrestling world:

- *I like him even more, and I hope he takes the title home. The man has a good heart to do charity work, and help children out.*<sup>494</sup>
- *The driven family man who sacrificed seeing his daughter grow up in order to be the best at the business he loves the most. I think it's all powerful stuff.*<sup>495</sup>
- *When he comes to the ring, his demeanour is pure "no-bullshit", and when his music hits everyone knows that someone is seconds from getting their ass handed to them.*<sup>496</sup>

Star images are produced not only based on an individual's achievements and personality but also on their favourable facial features and physiques.<sup>497</sup> Chris Benoit's physique, in the context of the star-making process was an interesting factor towards his status as a *WWE* World Heavyweight Champion. At the time of his world championship crowning, Benoit's size was not large enough to be considered as a potential main event wrestler in the *WWE*. The *WWE* had in the past notoriously favoured larger sized

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<sup>494</sup> Iluvwe, "Why Won't They Let Benoit Win the Title?", *Rajah.com*, March 9, 2004, <http://forums.rajah.com/showthread.php?t=51870&highlight=benoit> (accessed June 28, 2008).

<sup>495</sup> Foreverscred, "Why Won't They Let Benoit Win the Title?", *Rajah.com*, March 12, 2004, <http://forums.rajah.com/showthread.php?t=51870&highlight=benoit> (accessed June 28, 2008).

<sup>496</sup> Terrell McKnight, "Why Chris Benoit would Make a Great World Champion", *411mania.com*, January 9, 2004, <http://www.411mania.com/ubbthreads/showflat.php?Cat=0&Number=4705309&an=&page=0&vc=1> (accessed June 29, 2008).

<sup>497</sup> Andrew McDonald, "Reconceptualising Stardom" in *Stars*, Richard Dyer (London: British Film Institute, 1998), 182; Danielle Soulliere, "Wrestling with Masculinity: Messages about Manhood in the *WWE*" *Sex Roles* 1, no. 55 (2006): 2; Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies*, op.cit. 12; Gunston, *Play Ball!*, op.cit. 32.

performers. Benoit also possessed rugged facial features which were emphasised by his beard and a missing front tooth. Chris Benoit's physical appearance adds further significance to his rise in the wrestling world as it distorted the process of how star images in the entertainment industry and the *WWE* are constructed. The fact that Benoit did not portray the stereotype handsome image challenged the commonly understood fundamentals of the star image making process.

The *WWE* capitalised on Benoit's growing fan base by shifting his character allegiance on television to the role of a protagonist. He was marketed as a loving family man who had sacrificed and struggled against industry adversity throughout his career to earn his newly found main event status. The normally quiet and institutionally considered uncharismatic personality of Benoit was no longer an obstacle as his followers showed more interest in his wrestling skills and his private life rather than his imperfection with respect to the theatrical side of pro-wrestling.<sup>498</sup> The portrayal of Chris Benoit as a working-class underdog proved to be a successful business decision made by the *WWE*. The smark fan movement which made up an increasing proportion of the contemporary wrestling audience had foreknowledge of Benoit's background and history. The fundamental aspect of fan communities like the IWC share many similarities to fan magazines and celebrity orientated television programs in which the star is always the centre of discussion. Through the interactive practice of media trading and online discussion, wrestling smarks became well aware of Benoit's passion for pro-wrestling before the *WWE* had embarked on shifting their focus on repackaging his star image. *WWE* media producers eventually were forced to acknowledge the existence of the

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<sup>498</sup> Randazzo, *Ring of Hell*, op.cit. 261.

positive independent fan readings surrounding the Chris Benoit character and subsequently incorporated these aspects into his star image.

The general consensus within the IWC fan population was that they wanted Benoit to be champion. His major battles on *WWE* television from the end of 2003 until his title victory at *Wrestlemania XX* are significant in that they aided in perfecting his star image as an underdog protagonist through victories over some of the *WWE*'s most dominant stars. Among Benoit's most notable victories was one against the *WWE* World Heavyweight Champion Paul Levesque ('Triple H') who was the top antagonist character in both the official narratives and from fan observations on the IWC.<sup>499</sup> The string of victories over the *WWE*'s most dominant wrestlers further established Benoit's legitimacy as a main event calibre wrestler. It also aided Benoit's star image as a representation of the "success myth"<sup>500</sup> when he was finally rewarded with the World Heavyweight Championship as an 18-year ring veteran. Benoit rose and maintained his position as a main event competitor supported by the dedicated loyalty shown to him by wrestling fans around the world. The quotations below highlight a majority consensus in response to Chris Benoit's new star image:

- *Benoit's progress is a great story in pro wrestling. He came from very prestigious schooling in both Canada and Japan...became like an ambassador to the Japanese fans. He turned the world title down from WCW and opted instead to start over in the WWF...he was so out of place and atypical to the WWF that he never got the big promotion or the marketing...but yet here he is now...a top*

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<sup>499</sup> Jack Windham, "Big Backstage Battle", *Wrestlingrevealed.com*, <http://www.wrestlingrevealed.com/articles/0809/big-backstage-battle.php> (accessed April 8, 2009).

<sup>500</sup> Dyer, *Stars*, op.cit. 42.

*babyface in the top wrestling fed in North America. Benoit's finally doing it and it really could not have happened to a better guy.*<sup>501</sup>

• *I think Benoit is being an absolutely credible champion and the way he's booked proves that. He's not stretched into angles. There's a challenge, a challenger, and usually the focus is on the matches and he's extraordinary in them.*<sup>502</sup>

### ***The Hype and Illusion of Stars***

Fans are happy to consume and be drawn in by the illusions and myths used to market their favourite celebrities. The success of stardom according to Dyer is attributed to the “manipulation of the market”, extending the notion of the economic importance and persuasion of stars.<sup>503</sup>

Boorstin, in his analysis regarding the influences of the celebrity illusion states, “We see greatness as an illusion or if it does exist we suspect or know it is a secret.”<sup>504</sup> Fans for the most part do not view celebrity images as illusion at all. In fact fans are drawn in by it and view it with aggrandisement in their admiration and adoration for celebrity figures. The hype of the star relies heavily on the illusion that they are extraordinary people who achieve extraordinary things in the same physical environment.<sup>505</sup> “He [or she] has been fabricated...to satisfy our exaggerated expectations of human greatness...” said Boorstin in his distinctions regarding the celebrity

<sup>501</sup> Baron Von Stylin, “Benoit Appreciation Thread”, *411mania.com*, March 31, 2004, <http://www.411mania.com/ubbthreads/showflat.php?Cat=0&Number=4821307&an=0&page=102#Post4821307> (accessed June 23, 2008).

<sup>502</sup> Surge, “WWE Fans are Too Stupid to Appreciate Benoit...”, *Rajah.com*, April 15, 2004, <http://forums.rajah.com/showthread.php?t=86547&highlight=benoit> (accessed July 1, 2008).

<sup>503</sup> Dyer, *Stars*, op.cit. 12.

<sup>504</sup> Boorstin, *The Image*, op.cit. 51.

<sup>505</sup> Judith Briggs, “Celebrity, Illusion, and Middle School Culture” *Art Education* 60, no. 3 (2007): 39; Emily Pronin, Jonah Berger and Sarah Molouki. “Alone in a Crowd of Sheep: Asymmetric Perceptions of Conformity and their Roots in an Introspection Illusion” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 4 (2007): 586; Lin and Lin, *Impetus for Worship*, op.cit. 580.

phenomenon. Media producers have employed methods which reinforce the notion of stars as socially meaningful individuals by crossing the threshold between fantasy and reality in their marketing strategies for stars. For instance promotion and publicity for stars may include tell-all interviews or behind-the-scenes documentaries which focus on the typicality of back stories such as training regimes undertaken for movie roles or ritualistic habits on the sporting field. In addition, information of the more personal tone is often constructed and published by media producers to create extended hype for their stars. The method may or may not utilise behind-the-scenes information and may often be a fabrication of factual information and the creative vision of media producers. This method allows audiences a glimpse into the humanity behind the star image but at the same time it keeps media consumers in the immersive world of official narratives.

In the mid 1990s both *WWE* and *World Championship Wrestling (WCW)* media producers would adopt similar production strategies to mainstream entertainment industries. However the decision to construct reality in official narratives on the back of actual events was largely influenced by the actions of four wrestling performers. A group of tight-knit wrestlers who were known to wrestling insiders as ‘The Kliq’ had developed a notorious reputation for their influence in the backstage politics of the *WWE*.<sup>506</sup> In May 1996, ‘The Kliq’ was involved in an incident (later became known as *The MSG Incident*) that would have instrumental ramifications on the future of the mainstream American pro-wrestling circuit.<sup>507</sup> The four members of ‘The Kliq’ were Michael Hickenbottom

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<sup>506</sup> Prowrestlingdigest.com, “When Vince McMahon Wasn’t a Genius - Management of the World Wrestling Federation and World championship Wrestling”, *Prowrestlingdigest.com*, [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m0FCO/is\\_1\\_3/ai\\_74010845/?tag=content;coll](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0FCO/is_1_3/ai_74010845/?tag=content;coll) (accessed April, 8 2009); Randazzo, *Ring of Hell*, op.cit. 218; Kleinberg and Nudelman, *Mysteries of Wrestling*, op.cit. 38 - 41.

<sup>507</sup> *The Shawn Michaels Story: Heartbreak and Triumph*, DVD, directed by World Wrestling Entertainment (Stamford, CT: World Wrestling Entertainment, 2006); *Triple H: The King of Kings*, DVD, directed by

(‘Shawn Michaels’), Paul Levesque (‘Hunter Hurst Helmsley’), Scott Hall (‘Razor Ramon’) and Kevin Nash (‘Diesel’). The non-televised *WWE* event on May 19<sup>th</sup>, 1996 in New York’s Madison Square Garden was to be the last appearance of ‘Diesel’ and ‘Ramon’ for the *WWE* before departing for *WCW*.<sup>508</sup> ‘Ramon’, a babyface, was scheduled to perform against the antagonist ‘Helmsley’ while the protagonist ‘Michaels’ was set to compete against ‘Diesel’, a heel character. *WWE* management expected both ‘Ramon’ and ‘Diesel’ to do their jobs and exit the company like professionals. However, this was not to be the case. After ‘Michaels’ defeated ‘Diesel’ in the main event, both ‘Ramon’ and ‘Helmsley’ made their way back into the wrestling ring. Instead of a brawl between the antagonist and protagonist characters, the four men embraced before turning towards the crowd gesturing a final farewell. The significance of this moment was that all ‘The Kliq’ members were involved in different storylines and portrayed different character affiliations at the time. It was during a period where the *WWE* continued to present itself as a sport rather than sports-entertainment. The four friends had exposed a side of the wrestling business that the fans were never meant to see.<sup>509</sup>

Discarding their pseudonyms and performing under their real names ‘Razor Ramon’ (Scott Hall) and ‘Diesel’ (Kevin Nash) debuted for Eric Bischoff’s *WCW* 1 week after *The MSG Incident*. The duo were formed into a storyline group known as ‘The Outsiders’ who represented a faction known as the ‘New World Order’ (‘NWO’) which was portrayed as a separate entity from *WCW*.<sup>510</sup> The main storyline objective of the

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World Wrestling Entertainment (Stamford, CT: World Wrestling Entertainment, 2007); *The Monday Night Rating Wars*, op.cit; Kleinberg and Nudelman, ibid. 38 - 49.

<sup>508</sup> Ibid.

<sup>509</sup> Ibid.

<sup>510</sup> Beekman, *Ringside*, op.cit. 134; Bischoff, *Controversy Creates Cash*, op.cit. 211.

‘NWO’ was to invade and take over the operations of *WCW*.<sup>511</sup> Eric Bischoff perfected the idea for this storyline and made fans believe that the *WWE* had sent wrestlers to invade his promotion without even mentioning a rivalling company’s name.<sup>512</sup> The concept for the storyline began with Hall appearing on the May 27<sup>th</sup>, 1996 edition of *Monday Night Nitro*. He declared that “they were taking over” without declaring who “they” were.<sup>513</sup> The chief implication was that it was a *WWE* takeover; due to the notion that Hall and Nash had appeared on *WWE* television just 1 week prior. *WCW* vice-president Eric Bischoff saw an advantage, knowing news of Hall and Nash’s exit from the *WWE* would not reach fans via mail-distributed newsletters until they were in the midst of their storyline [the reader is reminded that the internet was not a widespread entity at the time].<sup>514</sup>

The more personal tone of *WCW*’s official texts was something wrestling fans were not accustomed to at the time. The more controversial, edgier and personal concept of the ‘NWO’ saw *Monday Night Nitro* become the most popular wrestling programme in the United States for over 2 years.<sup>515</sup>

When *WWE* owner Vince McMahon failed in a copyright infringement lawsuit to have the ‘NWO’ storyline terminated<sup>516</sup> he was convinced by his media production team to follow a similar path and emulate the cutting edge methods of *WCW*. Like Eric Bischoff, *WWE*’s lead media producer Vince Russo recognised the growing influence of dynamic audiences in the late 1990s and saw the need to revolutionise the wrestling

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<sup>511</sup> Bischoff, *ibid.* 214; 218; Prowrestlingdigest.com, *When Vince McMahon Wasn’t a Genius*, op.cit; Randazzo, *Ring of Hell*, op.cit. 220.

<sup>512</sup> Bischoff, *ibid.* 216; *The Monday Night Ratings Wars*, op.cit.

<sup>513</sup> *Monday Night Nitro 27.05.96*, VHS, directed by World Championship Wrestling (Macon, GA: World Championship Wrestling, 1996).

<sup>514</sup> Bischoff, *Controversy Creates Cash*, op.cit. 210.

<sup>515</sup> *The Monday Night Ratings Wars*, op.cit; Randazzo, *Ring of Hell*, op.cit. 220.

<sup>516</sup> Beekman, *Ringside*, op.cit. 134; Bischoff, *Controversy Creates Cash*, op.cit. 192.

product by presenting audiences with characters and storylines that were more realistic.<sup>517</sup> He believed by crossing between the boundaries of fiction and reality, through information of a more personal tone, the audience's consumption of official televised texts would be enhanced.<sup>518</sup> To do this, *WWE* media producers took the remaining members of 'The Kliq' and followed the 'NWO' path of creating a storyline based on a real situation and presented the illusion of breaking kayfabe.<sup>519</sup> To appeal to the new generation of wrestling fans that was becoming more advanced in their expertise, an overhaul was done to the characters of 'Hunter Hurst Helmsley' and 'The Heartbreak Kid Shawn Michaels'. 'Hunter Hurst Hemsley' was no longer the 'snotty 19<sup>th</sup> century blueblood' and 'Shawn Michaels' was no longer the 'teenage heartthrob'; they discarded their cartoon-ish images for something more urban and appealing to a more mature wrestling crowd.<sup>520</sup> Going by the acronyms of 'HHH' ('Triple H') and 'HBK', they conducted interview promos and backstage segments in regular street clothes instead of their character garb.<sup>521</sup> The newly formed storyline faction known as 'Degeneration X' ('DX') proceeded to help turn pro-wrestling into a more mature-orientated product with propaganda style vignettes and regular violations of the kayfabe code.<sup>522</sup> Vince McMahon was known for shielding the inner workings of his promotion from wrestling fans, and there was a legitimate feeling among insiders that 'Triple H' and 'Shawn Michaels' violated company policy during *The MSG Incident*.<sup>523</sup> However, *WWE* media

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<sup>517</sup> Russo, *Forgiven*, op.cit. 241; Michaels, *Heartbreak & Triumph*, op.cit. 264; Randazzo, *Ring of Hell*, op.cit. 248 - 249; Beekman, ibid. 138.

<sup>518</sup> Russo, ibid. 238; Randazzo, ibid. 210 - 211.

<sup>519</sup> Randazzo, ibid. 239.

<sup>520</sup> Randazzo, ibid. 238.

<sup>521</sup> Michaels, *Heartbreak & Triumph*, op.cit. 265; *Triple H: The King of Kings*, op.cit.

<sup>522</sup> Russo, *Forgiven*, op.cit. 239; Bischoff, *Controversy Creates Cash*, op.cit. 277 - 278; Prowrestlingdigest.com, *When Vince McMahon Wasn't a Genius*, op.cit.

<sup>523</sup> Michaels, *Heartbreak & Triumph*, op.cit. 265; *Triple H: The King of Kings*, op.cit; Russo, ibid. 236.

producer Vince Russo viewed the situation differently and acknowledged how *The MSG Incident* created intrigue among wrestling fans. A video recording of the incident was eventually used to build the ‘DX’ gimmick.

*The MSG Incident* occurred during a period where knowledge of the inner workings of the wrestling industry was beginning to become prevalent amongst wrestling fans. However during the mid-1990s the internet was not a widespread entity and postal mail newsletters were still the dominant source for wrestling gossip. It makes an arguable point that had online fan communities like the IWC been more accessible during the mid-1990s, media producers may not have been as effective in marketing the hype of the ‘NWO’ or ‘DX’. Wrestling fans, had they been more knowledgeable may have not been easily conned into believing the illusion that was presented to them with the ‘NWO’ and ‘DX’ wrestling factions.

Boorstin claims that media fans have a unique reading process that demands events of novelty or greatness and for the average fan “nothing is really real unless it happens on television.”<sup>524</sup> Boorstin’s analysis of fan behaviour towards stars coincides with Barthes’ examination of wrestling audiences. As mentioned in chapter 3, Barthes believed wrestling fans were not interested in whether the wrestling genre was an illusion but instead were more focused on the authentic portrayal of social issues and stereotypes in set texts.<sup>525</sup> Contemporary wrestling fans demonstrate a need to read beyond the official narratives to try and uncover something deeper and more ‘real’. The internet has allowed the IWC to become a space for the exposure of information to more wrestling enthusiasts.

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<sup>524</sup> Daniel Boorstin, “Quotes about Television” in *A Companion to Television*, Janet Wasko (Boston: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 8.

<sup>525</sup> Barthes, *The World of Wrestling*, op.cit. 88.

In turn this enhances the access to the potential illusion of a real story behind the gimmicks and storylines of pro-wrestling. IWC smarks generate hype for their favourite wrestling stars by consuming volumes of information about them on the internet. Sometimes this fan generated hype can distract the television production strategies of media institutions. This idea was discussed in chapter 3 in relation to the love triangle incident between *WWE* personalities Matt Hardy, Amy Dumas ('Lita') and Adam Copeland ('Edge'). The notion is further illuminated through observation of the career of Chris Benoit. His star image was constructed on the foundation of support shown to him by the IWC fan movement. His dedication to both his professional and personal life provided fans with the illusion to relate to him as not only as a fellow wrestling fan but also as an admirable human being. Benoit fitted the wrestling smarks' mythical definition of a "good wrestler" and a "good person."

The *WWE* subsequently were presented with an opportunity to hype the illusion of a more realistic product by blending fan observations of Chris Benoit into the scripted televised texts. However, media producers initially ignored smark interpretations of the Benoit character and continued to promote him as a mid-card talent. Internet smarks became more vocal regarding what they perceived as the *WWE*'s lack of respect for Chris Benoit's abilities. The unconditional backing IWC fans showed for Benoit would become influential at live wrestling events as well. Media producers were eventually forced to acknowledge the reading processes of contemporary wrestling fans by presenting them with a repackaged Chris Benoit character.

It is certainly possible that the *WWE* made use of that aspect of stardom identified by Dyer as the “success myth.”<sup>526</sup> It was part of the illusion which made up Chris Benoit’s star image. He was built up as the greatest technical wrestler in the company’s entire history; who, through a string of victories over the company’s best performers would eventually become the World Heavyweight Champion. This would lead to other product endorsements within the company such as a personal DVD, t-shirts, children’s toys, and so on. The success of the Chris Benoit star image further demonstrates the illusion that triumph is rewarded with fame and fortune.

### ***Fanaticisms & Obsessions***

Rather than focusing on what stardom means, there needs to be as much attention to the question “what does stardom do?”<sup>527</sup> According to Dyer,

*Contemporary idols and heroes stem predominantly from the sphere of consumption and organised leisure time (i.e. they are entertainers or sportspeople), and equally their private lives are lives of consumption.*<sup>528</sup>

Stars are models of consumption in what is largely considered as a consumer society.<sup>529</sup> The products they endorse and the media they feature in can be copied and are often imitated by fans. Fashion styles are often reproduced, behaviours are mimicked and sports are pursued as a result of celebrity encouragement.<sup>530</sup> Captivated by illusions of courage, extravagance and individuality, fans develop a deep connection with their

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<sup>526</sup> Dyer, *Stars*, op.cit. 42.

<sup>527</sup> McDonald, *Reconceptualising Stardom*, op.cit. 200.

<sup>528</sup> Dyer, *Stars*, op.cit. 79.

<sup>529</sup> Leo Lowenthal, *Literature, Popular Culture and Society* (Prentice-Hall: New Jersey, 1957), 121; Turner, Bonner and Marshall, *Fame Games*, op.cit. 9; Sejung Marina Choi and Nora J Rifon, “Who is the Celebrity in Advertising? Understanding Dimensions of Celebrity Image” *Journal of Popular Culture* 2, no. 40 (2007): 305; Saxton, *Collections of Cool*, op.cit. 23.

<sup>530</sup> Alan Bush, Craig Martin and Victoria Bush, “Sports Celebrity Influence on the Behavioral Intentions of Generation Y” *Journal of Advertising Research* (2004): 108 - 110; Dyer, *Stars*, op.cit. 39; Saxton, *ibid.* 23.

favourite stars. Fans regularly cross the boundaries between supporting a star's public image and exhibit interest in their private lives as well.<sup>531</sup> The 'truth' about a character's personality and the feelings which it evokes can often be determined by what fans observe to be the truth about the actual person portraying the star image.<sup>532</sup> The appearance of sincerity and authenticity are two qualities which have been historically been perceived as persuasive attributes in stars.<sup>533</sup> The relationship between celebrities and fans frequently involve a high degree of emotional dependence.<sup>534</sup> The physical and social remoteness between famous figures and fans are compensated by mass media information such as magazines, newspapers, television, recorded video and the internet. All of which personalise the celebrity, turning them from distant strangers to significant figures.<sup>535</sup> The personalisation of stars through mass media leads to a sense of familiarity, intimacy and legitimacy.<sup>536</sup> Some celebrities have become cult figures in which fans only project positive emotion and feelings towards them while maintaining an oblivious stance towards anything negative about them.<sup>537</sup>

The relationship between professional wrestlers and fan communities like the IWC share similar implications. The demand and desire for authenticity by contemporary wrestling fans is a significant factor because unlike the film and television industry where the practice of created illusion is widely known and accepted, the creation of illusion (kayfabe) in professional wrestling essentially legitimises the official narratives as both sport and theatre. When kayfabe was publicly exposed during *The MSG Incident* in 1996,

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<sup>531</sup> Rojek, *Celebrities*, op.cit. 11; Lin and Lin, *Impetus for Worship*, op.cit. 582.

<sup>532</sup> Dyer, *Stars*, op.cit. 125.

<sup>533</sup> Ibid. 11.

<sup>534</sup> Rojek, *Celebrities*, op.cit. 51.

<sup>535</sup> Ibid. 53.

<sup>536</sup> Cashmore, *Making Sense of Sports*, op.cit. 416 - 417.

<sup>537</sup> Rojek, *Celebrities*, op.cit. 53.

it created awareness among fans that there were perhaps alternative ways to read pro-wrestling.

The rise to prominence of the IWC forced industry promoters to rethink their marketing and production strategies. The constant access to behind-the-scenes wrestling gossip turned some wrestling stars into cult figures whilst for others this resulted in rebuke and rejection from the smark wrestling fan movement. As demonstrated in chapter 4, the Chris Benoit star image presented fans with a character that made distinction between the coincidence of ‘public’ and ‘private’ personas. Benoit’s most hardcore fans regularly scoured the internet for rare images and video footage of him and shared them with other enthusiasts on wrestling chat forums. Ultimately fans not only felt connection to him as Chris Benoit the *Canadian Crippler* and Chris Benoit the *Rabid Wolverine* but also as Chris Benoit the *underdog*, Chris Benoit the *family man* and, Chris Benoit the *wrestling god*:

- *There IS a god! And his name is Chris Benoit!!!*<sup>538</sup>
- *Benoit is Benoit...he’s the real wrestling God.*<sup>539</sup>

### ***Wrestlers as Celebrities***

Although largely discounted as a legitimate sport by mainstream critics, professional wrestling is a form of popular culture entertainment that is at least conceptually comparable to professional contact sports like boxing, football and rugby.<sup>540</sup>

<sup>538</sup> The Skin Man, “There IS a God! And His Name is Chris Benoit!!!”, *411mania.com*, March 15, 2004, <http://www.411mania.com/ubbthreads/showflat.php?Cat=0&Number=4807552&an=0&page=103#Post4807552> (accessed June 23, 2008).

<sup>539</sup> CMV1, “The Velocity Report (6/25/05): Benoit and Booker T in Action!”, *Lordsofpain.net*, June 26, 2005, <http://www.lordsofpain.net/news/2005/articles/1119766770.php> (accessed September 30, 2008).

<sup>540</sup> Michael Atkinson, “Fifty Million Viewers Can’t be Wrong: Professional Wrestling, Sports-entertainment, and Mimesis” *Sociology of Sport Journal* 19 (2002): 47; Lisa Schnirring, “Pain and Injury are Real in Professional Wrestling” *Physician and Sports Medicine* 28 (2000): 18; Beekman, *Ringside*, op.cit. 36.

Whether it is considered ‘entertainment’ or ‘sport’, pro-wrestling has achieved renowned status in popular culture as millions around the world tune in to *WWE* television programming each week.<sup>541</sup> The marketing of professional sports is often considered as a difficult task because of its unpredictable outcomes and at times its inconsistent competitive standards.<sup>542</sup> Professional wrestling is masqueraded as a competitive sport, yet it is not. The results are pre-planned and the players (characters) are often a result of the imagination of script writers or dictated outcomes influenced by defiant fan communities. However, the physicality of in-ring competition is legitimate in the sense the blows and the falls a wrestler’s body must endure. Therefore, while in theory professional wrestling may not be considered as a genuine sporting discipline; the athleticism and physicality involved in wrestling contests suggests it can be viewed with the same degree of legitimacy as traditional competitive sports. Turner states that

*sport is one of the few areas of public life that is truly meritocratic; sports stars can prove they are the best...further, sports stars perform unequivocally as themselves.*<sup>543</sup>

Professional wrestling characters complicate those distinctions by portraying significant similarities to Boorstin’s distinctions of “well-known-ness”<sup>544</sup> and Turner’s idea regarding the meritocracy of sports stars. However, due to its scripted nature, pro-wrestling also exhibits differences to the distinctions proposed by Boorstin and Turner. For instance, Chris Benoit, among various other wrestlers, used his actual name for his wrestling character. This complicates Turner’s observations of sports stars performing as

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<sup>541</sup> Ibid.

<sup>542</sup> F. Ashley and others, “Professional Wrestling Fans: Your Next-door Neighbours” *Sport Marketing Quarterly* 9 (2000): 146; Cashmore, *Making Sense of Sports*, op.cit. 323.

<sup>543</sup> Turner, *Understanding Celebrity*, op.cit. 19.

<sup>544</sup> Boorstin, *The Image*, op.cit. 58; 61.

themselves because pro-wrestling characters have traditionally been stereotypical heroes in fictional television storylines. This fusion of illusional competition and fundamentals of theatre creates a unique star image for professional wrestlers and the industry in general.

In the professional wrestling industry, the distinction between character and person is blurred within the narratives to a greater degree compared to the film industry. Wrestlers such as Terry Bollea ('Hulk Hogan') and John Cena while popular, were not necessarily considered as superior athletes by contemporary wrestling fans. Rather they are known for the characters they portray on *WWE* television—in this sense they are known for their well-known-ness rather than their athletic achievements inside of the wrestling ring. The case of 'Hulk Hogan' demonstrates not only a change in the wrestling profession but also how audiences viewed professional wrestling during the 1980s, where fan communities had limited access to information that exposed the industry practices of the *WWE*. 'Hogan's cameo appearances on *WWE* programming still garner positive responses from wrestling audiences but this should be viewed as an appreciation for nostalgia rather than his athletic accomplishments. Most of the contemporary fan community were young children during the height of his popularity.

Wrestlers get rewarded with bigger roles on television from media producers in response to their 'drawing power' (according to the 'ratings' of their performances). This is similar to television soapie characters. The key focus for wrestling stars is to evoke the suspension of audience disillusionment in relation to the outcomes of drama in the scripted genre. They often gain a championship reign as reward for standout performances in their genre. This has semblance of similarity to the sporting industry.

The popular belief within the cultural mainstream was that professional wrestlers were neither legitimate athletes nor actors in a phoney industry.<sup>545</sup> This popular notion was largely influenced by the wrestling industry's operational procedures during the 1980s. Wrestling media producers continued to reward appearance over reality due to the institution of protecting its staged nature from outsiders. The strict reinforcement of kayfabe encouraged wrestling industry workers to believe their fictional lives were reality. So when pro-wrestlers appeared in mainstream media such as on talk show programmes or feature films during the 1980s, they were in full character in accordance to their roles in *WWE* set texts.<sup>546</sup>

For the better part of the past decade, the *WWE* have attempted to break through the barriers of mainstream entertainment by involving celebrities from the entertainment industry in storylines and wrestling matches. Well known celebrities like 'Ozzy Osborne', Cyndi Lauper, Pamela Anderson and Donald Trump have been involved in *WWE* storylines in the past.<sup>547</sup> In June 2009, as part of a fictional television storyline, real estate mogul and part-time reality television star Donald Trump purchased the *WWE*'s flagship television programme *Monday Night Raw*, allowing him control of production strategies and talent contracts.<sup>548</sup> *WWE* media producers attempted to reinforce the

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<sup>545</sup> Mazer, *Professional Wrestling*, op.cit. 36.

<sup>546</sup> Greg Oliver and Steven Johnson, *Pro Wrestling Hall of Fame: The Heels* (Toronto: ECW Press, 2007), 21; 44; Beekman, *Ringside*, op.cit. 126; 130

<sup>547</sup> World Wrestling Entertainment, "Wrestlemania 2 Celebrities", *World Wrestling Entertainment*, <http://www.wwe.com/shows/wrestlemania/history/wm2/celebrities/> (accessed September 29, 2008); John Powell, "WrestleMania: The Dynasty Begins", *Slam! Sports*, <http://slam.canoe.ca/Slam/Wrestling/Wrestlemania20/WrestleMania1.html> (accessed September 29, 2008); Mike Kinosian, "Wrestlemania 20th Anniversary", *Hollywood Reporter*, [http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/hr/search/article\\_display.jsp?vnu\\_content\\_id=1000456103](http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/hr/search/article_display.jsp?vnu_content_id=1000456103) (accessed September 29, 2008); Mike Householder, "Donald Trump's 'do' Survives WWE Bet", *USA Today*, [http://www.usatoday.com/life/people/2007-04-02-trump-wwe-bet\\_N.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/life/people/2007-04-02-trump-wwe-bet_N.htm) (accessed April 12, 2009).

<sup>548</sup> Michael Bluth, "Donald Trump Buys WWE RAW: No commercials next week", *Lordsofpain.net*, <http://www.lordsofpain.net/news/wwe/2784.html> (accessed July 12, 2009); Jack Windham, "Donald Trump

legitimacy of the storyline by holding a public press conference between Trump and *WWE* owner Vince McMahon confirming Trump's purchase of *Monday Night Raw*.<sup>549</sup> This pseudo event generated mainstream publicity for the *WWE* with many entertainment news outlets reporting on Trump's involvement with the wrestling company. The *WWE*'s presented illusion of Trump's business expansion into pro-wrestling proved to be successful as many news outlets reported Trump's acquisition of *Monday Night Raw* as a legitimate business transaction. This eventually forced the *WWE* and its television broadcaster *USA Network* to issue a press statement to clarify that Trump's acquisition of *Monday Night Raw* was part of a scripted television storyline.<sup>550</sup> Furthermore, the *WWE* also introduced an initiative where entertainment and sporting celebrities were invited to serve as guest hosts on weekly telecasts of *Monday Night Raw*.<sup>551</sup> Celebrity guest hosts were given full control of the *WWE Raw* roster for that evening. At the time of writing, guest hosts have included rock band 'ZZ Top', actor Seth Green and basketball player Shaquille O'Neal.<sup>552</sup> The interaction between mainstream celebrities and professional

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buys WWE Raw", *Wrestlingrevealed.com*, <http://www.wrestlingrevealed.com/articles/0906/donald-trump-buys-wwe-raw.php> (accessed July 12, 2009).

<sup>549</sup> Nick Paglino, "Trump to Have Pre-RAW Press Conference With Big Surprise", *Wrestlezone.com*, <http://www.wrestlezone.com/news/article/trump-to-have-pre-raw-press-conference-with-big-surprise-79345> (accessed July 12, 2009); James Caldwell, "WWE News: WWE and Donald Trump hosting press conference before Raw on Monday night", *Pro Wrestling Torch*, [http://www.pwtorch.com/artman2/publish/WWE\\_News\\_3/article\\_32969.shtml](http://www.pwtorch.com/artman2/publish/WWE_News_3/article_32969.shtml) (accessed July 12, 2009).

<sup>550</sup> Marc Graser, "Trump stunt boosts WWE ratings", *Variety.com*, <http://www.variety.com/article/VR1118005305.html?categoryid=14&cs=1> (accessed July 12, 2009); Jason Powell, "USA Network clarifies that Donald Trump buying WWE Raw is part of a storyline", *Prowrestling.net*, <http://www.prowrestling.net/artman/publish/WWE/article1006458.shtml> (accessed July 12, 2009); Shawn Moniz, "Media Not Realizing 'Trump Buys Raw' is a Storyline", *Wrestlingnewsarena.com*, <http://www.wrestlingnewsarena.com/2009/06/media-outlets-not-realizing-trump-buys-raw-is-a-storyline/> (accessed July 12, 2009).

<sup>551</sup> Aubrey Sitterson, "The Animal's kingdom", *World Wrestling Entertainment*, <http://www.wwe.com/shows/raw/archive/06292009> (accessed July 12, 2009); Todd Martin, "June 29, 2009, WWE Raw Results", *Wrestlingtruth.com*, <http://wrestlingtruth.com/news/june-29-2009-wwe-raw-results/> (accessed July 12, 2009).

<sup>552</sup> Nick Paglino, "WWE Touts the Success of Seth Green as Raw Guest Host", *Wrestlezone.com*, <http://www.wrestlezone.com/news/article/wwe-touts-the-success-of-seth-green-as-raw-guest-host-80709> (accessed July 15, 2009); Aubrey Sitterson, "Shake, rattle & roll", *World Wrestling Entertainment*,

wrestlers on *WWE* television allowed media producers to create publicity and added legitimacy to the wrestling product. This reflects Boorstin's distinctions of the pseudo event in which the persuasion of the celebrity image or the celebrity name is used to present the illusion of a significant occasion to attract a "responsive stimulus" from the audience.<sup>553</sup>

In more recent years, the *WWE* has accelerated its efforts to break into the mainstream by venturing into different forms of traditional and new media. It is an arguable point that, had the code of kayfabe been maintained after the IWC became a widespread entity in pro-wrestling, it would have been extremely difficult for company owners like Vince McMahon to distribute his product as a mainstream entertainment alternative. With the notion of kayfabe now a mostly historical concept, Vince McMahon aimed to make his product more diverse by marketing it in different ways and changing the stereotypes that had historically been associated with professional wrestling. The *WWE* expanded its production capacities by featuring its performers in various extensions of media. In addition to print and web based media, the *WWE* have also begun producing studio recorded music albums and cinematic feature films for the big screen.

With contemporary fan groups like the IWC capable of possessing knowledge to rival wrestling industry insiders, McMahon capitalised on this enlarged fan enthusiasm base. He understood that fans wanted to see glimpses behind the mystique of wrestling characters and storylines. Wrestlers became not only known as fictional characters in official televised texts but also as the real people who play the star image in other

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<http://www.wwe.com/shows/raw/archive/07202009/> (accessed July 21, 2009); Greg Adkins, "Shaq clocks in", *World Wrestling Entertainment*, <http://www.wwe.com/shows/raw/archive/07272009/> (accessed July 29, 2009).

<sup>553</sup> Boorstin, *The Image*, op.cit. 174.

mainstream extensions of entertainment. Some of the *WWE*'s most successful media ventures have been the production of autobiographical DVDs and the publication of tell-all memoirs written by professional wrestlers from past and present.

With maintaining the kayfabe code no longer the objective, McMahon and his team of media producers have followed the trend of pulling back the curtains over this once secretive industry.<sup>554</sup> This has allowed wrestling performers to export their actual personalities behind the star image into mainstream venues. For instance, former *WWE* Champion John Layfield ('JBL') is a regular financial panellist on national syndicated programmes for the *Fox News* and *CNBC* cable television networks in the United States.<sup>555</sup> At the time of writing, multi-time *WWE* champions Dwayne Johnson ('The Rock'), Glen Jacobs ('Kane') and John Cena have been lead actors in 9 feature films in between them.<sup>556</sup> Cena also recorded a best selling hip hop album in 2005.<sup>557</sup> Wrestling stars now make regular appearances on talk show programmes, television melodramas, feature films and product commercials. They appear as themselves instead of their wrestling characters.

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<sup>554</sup> Randazzo, *Ring of Hell*, op.cit. 262 - 263.

<sup>555</sup> Reuters, "Innovative Beverage Group Signs Deal with Layfield Energy Inc", *Reuters*, <http://www.reuters.com/article/pressRelease/idUS94748+29-Dec-2008+PRN20081229> (accessed April 8, 2009).

<sup>556</sup> World Wrestling Entertainment, "The Rock", *World Wrestling Entertainment*, <http://www.wwe.com/superstars/wwealumni/therock/bio/> (accessed April 7, 2009); Patrick Luce, "WWE Superstar John Cena Bust onto DVD with The Marine", *Monstersandcritics.com*, [http://www.monstersandcritics.com/dvd/news/article\\_1239672.php](http://www.monstersandcritics.com/dvd/news/article_1239672.php) (accessed April 7, 2009); Oliver and Johnson, *The Pro Wrestling Hall of Fame*, op.cit. 227.

<sup>557</sup> Billboard.com, "Artist Chart History - John Cena", *Billboard Magazine*, [http://www.billboard.com/bbcom/retrieve\\_chart\\_history.do?model.chartFormatGroupName=Albums&model.vnuArtistId=643036&model.vnuAlbumId=679945](http://www.billboard.com/bbcom/retrieve_chart_history.do?model.chartFormatGroupName=Albums&model.vnuArtistId=643036&model.vnuAlbumId=679945) (accessed April 7, 2009).

***The Conglomerate of Media Networking Between the Celebrity Culture and the Development of Online Communities***

The convergence of the internet communication medium have enabled the creation of an online environment where fans can relate to their favourite celebrities on a much more immediate level. This immediacy may seem more personal and engaging. Mass media outlets in recent years have gradually altered their methods for the promotion of celebrities and diverted their attention to promoting the ‘actual’ in order to entertain consuming fans.<sup>558</sup> Stars themselves have also become more aware of this trend. This notion is evident in the increasing presence of stars on social networking websites on the internet such as *MySpace*, *Facebook*, *Bebo* and *Twitter*.<sup>559</sup> Celebrities were once considered to be people who were larger than life and who lived in a world which was inaccessible by the common individual. And yet, perhaps ironically, in recent years online communities have proven to be the ideal environment for fans to get closer with their favourite celebrities. In 2008, popular online social network, *MySpace* launched a celebrity community channel intended for stars to create their own personal pages.<sup>560</sup> These social networks have the capability to support the sharing of photo albums, music and video play lists as well as journals (blogs) which are accessible by fans.<sup>561</sup> The wide accessibility of social networks allows celebrities to portray themselves to fan communities in a manner that at least conceptually presents the notion of normality and authenticity. Richard Schickel suggests that “media celebrity community exists and fans

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<sup>558</sup> Turner, Bonner and Marshall, *Fame Games*, op.cit. 1.

<sup>559</sup> David Smith, “Myspace Shrinks as Facebook, Twitter and Bebo Grab its Users”, *The Guardian*, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/2009/mar/29/myspace-facebook-bebo-twitter> (accessed April 9, 2009).

<sup>560</sup> Gary Strauss, “Myspace Gives Celebrities their Own Space”, *Honolulu Advertiser*, <http://the.honoluluadvertiser.com/article/2008/Jan/10/br/br8760249351.html> (accessed March 11, 2008).

<sup>561</sup> Robert Sanchez, “Anthony Starring in Myspace, too”, *Denver Post*, [http://www.denverpost.com/nuggets/ci\\_5072305](http://www.denverpost.com/nuggets/ci_5072305) (accessed September 21, 2008).

consider themselves a part of that community.”<sup>562</sup> Schickel also highlights that everyone can participate in a media community regardless of demographic.

Presently, fan communities are dominated by websites and chat forums solely devoted to reporting celebrity news and rumours. Websites of this particular nature often demonstrate not only the glamorous side that is often associated with celebrities but also focus on their misfortunes as well. These websites operate like 24/7 tabloids in which news and rumour items are often supported by fresh photographic or video media to add legitimacy to the headlines. This provides for the desires of a digital generation of fans where nothing is off-limits. Media producers, celebrities and fans themselves will continue to facilitate this growing trend as demands for it continue to increase. And for many, online communities appear to be the best option as they provide a space that is not only the most cost effective but also the most efficient way to circulate information.

### ***Sports and Media Networking***

Mass media whether it is television or the internet has given audiences the opportunity to be up close and personal with their favourite stars. The current format of the internet utilises the benefits of previous communication technologies by merging them together. Online communities are no longer simply an environment where fans can read and exchange ideas regarding stars, they have also become an outlet where fans can watch and listen to them as well.<sup>563</sup> For example professional sporting organisations like *Major League Baseball (MLB)* provide a service where fans, for an annual fee can watch every baseball game for the current season through both live and delayed video streaming

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<sup>562</sup> Drucker and Cathcart, *American Heroes*, op.cit. 268.

<sup>563</sup> Irvin Rein, Philip Kotler and Ben Shields, “The Future of Sports Media” *The Futurist* 41, no. 1 (2007):42 - 43.

online.<sup>564</sup> The merging of popular cultural trends such as the desire to look for the actual behind star images and, new technological concepts such as ‘many-to-many,’ otherwise known as peer-to-peer (P2P), networks have created an environment where the most fanatical, loyal and obsessed fans from around the world can sample and consume the document collections of each other. Individuals who are part of online fan communities have the opportunity to congregate and communicate; to gain knowledge and take in opinions to greater effect than casual fans without dedication to online pursuit. As a result, the IWC fan membership has gained unique power and influence over the wrestling industry.

### ***Professional Wrestling and Media Networking***

Online communities like the IWC have become the gateway for communication between the wrestling industry and its fans from around the world. A good example of this is the official *WWE* social network known as *WWE Universe*. This officially hosted community allows both wrestlers and wrestling fans to create their own profile pages and to interact with other fans around the world.<sup>565</sup> The site offers videos, music as well as news and rumour sections reminiscent of popular websites such as *Pro Wrestling Insider* and the *Wrestling Observer* newsletter. Fans may communicate with their favourite wrestlers directly either through private messaging or discussion forum participation. For some professional wrestlers their only official presence on the internet is their profile on the company websites. However, keen wrestling fans who prefer the real-life story to the fictionalised one would likely gain their knowledge through the network of websites and

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<sup>564</sup> Ibid.

<sup>565</sup> World Wrestling Entertainment, “Wwe.com Launch Much Anticipated Social Network”, *World Wrestling Entertainment*, [http://corporate.wwe.com/news/2008/2008\\_11\\_19.jsp](http://corporate.wwe.com/news/2008/2008_11_19.jsp) (accessed April 21, 2009).

discussions forums that makes up the IWC. This emergent environment where both wrestling insiders and wrestling fans around the world congregate has lead to several popular trends which have influenced the wrestling industry as a whole. The IWC provides the spaces for consensus exchanges which often lead to stories that deviate from official narratives, and that have played a part in influencing the fortunes of particular wrestlers and storylines. Wrestling smarks, with their added knowledge, have developed an unwritten but mutually understood set of guidelines within the IWC according to which is determined their level of support for wrestling performers.

The fortunes of former World Heavyweight Champion Chris Benoit serve as a good example of the influence of the development of online communities. His rise to that status occurred during a period when there was not only an increase in the use of internet technology in popular culture but also during a time of growing focus on the real-life personalities behind the image of celebrities. The *WWE* changed their approach to product development and marketing in a concerted effort to cater more for these popular trends. Chris Benoit's character was effectively repackaged with a new focus on the actual rather than the scripted. This was due to the fact that wrestling smarks, through all the stories they read about him on the internet, saw him as a hero. The support for him permeated throughout the IWC to live *WWE* events. During his meteoric rise, Benoit himself never had direct connection with wrestling fans on the internet. Neither did he have an official website nor maintained a profile on any of the popular social networks. Yet wrestling fans felt connected to him just from watching his wrestling matches, reading about him, discussing stories about his antics and participating in the dissemination of rumours and opinions. This contributed to the Benoit actuality.

Ultimately wrestling fans were just as determined in their demand for the truth when Benoit murdered his family before taking his own life.

The most devoted fans on the IWC analyse and critique just about anything related to pro-wrestling. They consider themselves as expert fans who knew everything about their favourite wrestlers. Their absolute involvement in this actuality meant that they rode a rollercoaster ride of emotions through Benoit's rise and tragic demise.

### ***What Technology Means For This Culture***

Celebrities embody the characteristics of mass familiarity and acceptance.<sup>566</sup> A star's image is made of a combination of different media texts such as promotion, publicity, official narratives as well as expert and fan criticisms and commentaries.<sup>567</sup> As technology continues to become more accessible, so will the images and stories about this group of individuals known as celebrities. Information available will focus on all facets of the rich and famous. Publicity is an important aspect to the make-up of the star image. Theoretically publicity is distinct from promotion in the sense that it is not a deliberate attempt at image creation. Publicity is essentially what the mass media reports whether it is from interview revelations of the stars themselves, fan recollections or from gossip and rumour fabrications. Also according to Dyer, publicity "in its apparent or actual escape" from the images that media producers are trying to promote, "seems more authentic...it is thus often taken to give a privileged access to the real person of the star."<sup>568</sup>

This dissertation has shown that an additional form of publicity, not specifically considered by Dyer, contributes to the development of commercially-oriented strategies

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<sup>566</sup> Kahle and Kim, *Creating Images*, op.cit. 164; Choi and Rifon, *Who is the Celebrity in Advertising?*, op.cit. 309; Hiebert, Gibbons and Silver, *Exploring Mass Media*, op.cit. 129.

<sup>567</sup> Dyer, *Stars*, op.cit. 60.

<sup>568</sup> Ibid.

employed in the promotion of stars. In the context of international wrestling, publicity and hype generated by internet-based fan cults have had profound influences on the production and marketing strategies of media producers.

Some commentators have suggested that fans are not concerned whether their heroes are exemplifying a sense of falsehood or truth within their public image.<sup>569</sup> Others believe that the desire and demand for the more realistic is likely to eclipse the standards of today.<sup>570</sup> Cyberspace has become a place where fans can read tensions between the celebrity as a person and the celebrity as a star image. The practices arising out of the smark networks have become the new standard of information sharing. In other words, the overhauling of the operational practices of the professional wrestling industry has been strongly influenced by the increased application of common socio-cultural knowledge sharing and social networking practices afforded by increased availability of and accessibility to internet-based technologies.

As mentioned in chapter 3, non-affiliated websites such as *wrestleingobserver.com* and *pwinsider.com* offer wrestling fans content which original models of *wwe.com* did not provide. Wrestling news and rumour websites operated by industry reporters focused on exposing the inner workings and behind-the-scenes elements of the wrestling industry. In addition, the rise in wrestling themed websites and chat forums operated by fans lead to a steep decline in visitors to *wwe.com*.<sup>571</sup>

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<sup>569</sup> Pronin, Berger and Moluki, *Alone in a Crowd of Sheep*, op.cit. 586; Saxton, *Collections of Cool*, op.cit. 21; Lin and Lin, *Impetus for Worship*, op.cit. 576;

<sup>570</sup> Gamson, *Claims to Fame*, op.cit. 41; Cashmore, *Making Sense of Sports*, op.cit. 397 - 398; Gunston, *Play Ball!*, op.cit. 34.

<sup>571</sup> Csonka, "WWE News: WM Ticket Sales, WWE.com Changes, op.cit; Wrestling101.com, "WWE: Unique Visitor Numbers Continue to Drop on WWE.com", *Wrestling101.com*, <http://www.wrestling101.com/101/newsitem/5383/> (accessed March 12, 2009).

In response to its declining presence among web-based wrestling fans, the *WWE* shifted its marketing strategies to combat the power struggle between the fan operated IWC and the official *wwe.com*. The *WWE*'s new strategic approach would utilise much of the tactics that made the IWC an influential staple in the world of pro-wrestling. The official web networks of the *WWE* no longer target its focus entirely on its scripted storylines and characters. Instead, the new format has allowed *WWE* owner Vince McMahon to build a media network that exploits the fictional and the real personalities of his wrestling stars. By appealing to active fan behaviours, the company capitalised on the trends of engagement, archiving and consumption exhibited by wrestling smarks. The *WWE* re-modelled its web presence and provided original wrestling content that had been amassed, preserved and produced throughout the company's history.<sup>572</sup> In addition to the preservation and distribution of historical wrestling footage, the *WWE* also ventured into the production of internet exclusive wrestling programmes such as *Sunday Night Heat* and, later on, *Extreme Championship Wrestling (ECW)*. Subsequently the *WWE* developed a variety of internet-only video media featuring *WWE* performers. These web-exclusive programmes took on a lifestyle theme and featured performers away from the characters they played on *WWE* television. *Wwe.com* exclusive shows such as *Lifestyles of the Built & Dangerous* featuring virtual tours of wrestler's private homes and *On My Day Off* documenting the lifestyles of wrestling stars outside of the ring have become flagship showcases on the official *WWE* website.<sup>573</sup>

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<sup>572</sup> World Wrestling Entertainment, "Wwe.com Legacy", *World Wrestling Entertainment*, <http://www.wwe.com/subscriptions/legacy/> (accessed March 12, 2009).

<sup>573</sup> World Wrestling Entertainment, "WWE: Video Originals", *World Wrestling Entertainment*, <http://www.wwe.com/broadband/> (accessed March 19, 2009).

Some fans' fantasy involvement with wrestling stars is further heightened through the online fantasy gaming experience known as *Fantasy WWE*. The interactive game, based on weekly *WWE* television programming, allows fans to design their own talent rosters and allocate wrestling matches themselves.<sup>574</sup> The *WWE* has also benefited from its own social network, *WWE Universe* which allowed the company's own talent to publish their own wrestling columns to interact with wrestling fans.

The "industry news" section on *wwe.com* openly acknowledges the existence of rivalling wrestling companies in the United States and abroad. Exclusive "breaking news" such as wrestler injuries, drug test results, talent acquisitions and releases has become key components in the re-incarnation of *wwe.com*.<sup>575</sup> It even provides news emanating from rival companies. It is particularly noteworthy that, before the internet became a staple in the communication habits of popular culture, the *WWE* maintained a strict policy which prohibited the acknowledgment of rival wrestling companies and non-affiliated news outlets.

This change in marketing strategy of the *WWE*'s web-based presence had allowed wrestling fans to shift between the threshold of the fiction and the reality of the wrestling world within the one media space. This has also allowed the official *WWE* network to directly compete with the unofficial fan networks that make up the IWC.

### ***Increased Pressure on Stars***

Driven by consistent exposure to the scrutiny of the relentless mass media and by contributions from loyal fan communities that know no limits, publicity surrounding the

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<sup>574</sup> World Wrestling Entertainment, "New Webcast to Kickoff the Next WWE Fantasy Season", *World Wrestling Entertainment*, <http://www.wwe.com/inside/news/archive/fantasykickoff> (accessed April 10, 2009).

<sup>575</sup> Pena, *WWE News: Behind the Scenes Details*, op.cit.

lives of stars has become a captivating medium for global audiences to engage with. There is an accompanying increased demand for famous figures to participate in even more public life such as sponsorship initiatives and political campaigns. The constant pressure and demands of being in the public eye has triggered a downward spiral in the lives of some of the most adored celebrity figures in popular culture. The same impact is evident in the professional wrestling industry.

In the past there has been much mainstream criticism directed at questioning the alleged crooked business practices that many have come to associate with pro-wrestling. Until the death of former World Heavyweight Champion Chris Benoit in 2007, there had been little attention paid to the physical demands and constant pressures of the professional wrestling lifestyle. There is a common perception that professional wrestlers lead glamorous lifestyles much akin to their *Hollywood* counterparts because of the wrestling industry's increasing acceptance in popular culture. This perception has its truth in that *WWE* wrestlers do earn wealthy salaries.<sup>576</sup> However, the competitiveness within the wrestling industry sees wrestlers often jockeying for positions.<sup>577</sup> Wrestlers can find themselves at the height of super-stardom for one event and yet, released from the company the very next night.<sup>578</sup> Unlike movie stars and professional athletes, wrestling stars perform on an average of 300 days per year.<sup>579</sup> The logistics of travel for a

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<sup>576</sup> Ken Anderson, "TNA News + WWE Salary Details", *Thewrestlingblog.com*, <http://www.thewrestlingblog.com/2006/03/16/wwe-salaries/> (accessed March 23, 2009).

<sup>577</sup> Hal Habib, "Death Match: Many Pro Wrestlers Dying Before Their Time", *Palmbeachpost.com*, [http://www.palmbeachpost.com/sports/content/sports/epaper/2007/07/15/a1b\\_wrestling\\_0715.html](http://www.palmbeachpost.com/sports/content/sports/epaper/2007/07/15/a1b_wrestling_0715.html) (accessed April 13, 2009); Gary Will, "A Tribute to Mat Stars of the Past", *Garywill.com*, <http://www.garywill.com/wrestling/decwres.htm> (accessed April 13, 2009).

<sup>578</sup> Randazzo, *Ring of Hell*, op.cit. 94 - 95.

<sup>579</sup> Mike Celzic, "WWE's Chairman Calls Benoit a Monster", *Msnbc.com*, <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/19474972/> (accessed March 20, 2009); Jim Barber, "Marella Loves His Life as a WWE Superstar", *Blue Mountains Courier Herald*, <http://www.bluemountainscourierherald.com/article/73139/> (accessed March 20, 2009); Jon Robinson,

professional wrestler is a facet of the pro-wrestling industry that is impossible to compare with other entertainment and sporting industries. Lance Evers ('Lance Storm'), a former *WWE* Intercontinental Champion who spent 4 years working as a mid-card performer for the company described the demands of regular travel as a *WWE* competitor as "harder than all the punishment in the ring."<sup>580</sup> On his official blog 'Storm' revealed that *WWE* performers work in a gruelling environment where sleep deprivation and long hours travelling in rental cars are the norm. It is estimated that a typical *WWE* wrestler is on the road an average of 51 weeks per year, travelling 5 days and performing up to 3 to 4 shows per week.<sup>581</sup> The details of the *WWE*'s gruelling schedule highlighted by 'Storm' did not take into factor the various promotional functions and international tours contemporary wrestling performers are required to attend.<sup>582</sup> Former *WWE* champions Chris Irvine ('Chris Jericho') and Rob Szatkowski ('Rob Van Dam') cited the rigorous demands of the pro-wrestling lifestyle as an impetus in their decision to take extended hiatuses from the wrestling industry.<sup>583</sup> Unlike 'Lance Storm', 'Jericho' and 'Van Dam' were main event calibre wrestlers who featured prominently as world title contenders within televised texts. The demands for 'Jericho' and 'Van Dam' would have been considerably higher than that of mid-card competitors like 'Lance Storm'.

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"WWE Smackdown vs. Raw 2009: WWE gets Raw in Spain", *ESPN*, <http://sports.espn.go.com/videogames/news/story?id=3633280> (accessed March 20, 2009).

<sup>580</sup> Lance Storm, "Interview with Lance Storm", *Mysteryone.com*, <http://www.mysteryone.com/LanceStormInterview.htm> (accessed March 31, 2009).

<sup>581</sup> Lana Cooper, "What 'The Wrestler' Means to Wrestling Today", *Prowrestling.com*, <http://www.prowrestling.com/article/columns/2422> (accessed March 21, 2009); Associatedcontent.com, "Are you Ready to Become a WWE Superstar?", *Associatedcontent.com*, [http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/970360/are\\_you\\_ready\\_to\\_become\\_a\\_wwe\\_superstar.html?cat=2](http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/970360/are_you_ready_to_become_a_wwe_superstar.html?cat=2) (accessed March 21, 2009); Mick Foley, *Hardcore Diaries* (New York: Pocket Books, 2007), 2.

<sup>582</sup> Lance Storm, "Q & A- April 26, 2006", *Stormwrestling.com*, <http://www.stormwrestling.com/042606.html> (accessed March 27, 2009).

<sup>583</sup> Chris Jericho, "One on One with Chris Jericho", *Hobotrashcan.com*, <http://www.hobotrashcan.com/interviews/chrisjericho.php> (accessed March 27, 2009); Rob Van Dam, "Rob Van Dam Interview: Talks About Feud with Bigelow, new ECW, more", *Wrestleview.com*, <http://www.wrestleview.com/news2006/1202677169.shtml> (accessed March 26, 2009).

The physical and mental demand on professional wrestlers is perhaps a valid insight into the alarmingly high death rate that has marred the wrestling industry. With no off-season in their profession, the effort to perform in wrestling events takes a huge toll on the physical well-being of pro-wrestlers. Unfortunately, accidents and injuries are a part of the profession and wrestlers must perform in active competition in order to maintain their positions within the talent rosters of their respective companies. These factors have lead to a steady downward slope where wrestling stars get addicted to pain killers to numb the painful effects of in-ring competition and anabolic steroids to maintain their size and accelerate their recovery. The lethal cocktail of legally prescribed drugs and illegally obtained body enhancers along with the stresses of constant travel and the pressures of in-ring performance has lead to the demise of 105 wrestlers in the past 15 years under the age of 65 from the North American pro-wrestling circuit alone.<sup>584</sup> 82 of those deaths were related to suicide, drug usage or cardiovascular issues.

It would be extremely difficult for outsiders of the wrestling industry to comprehend with the stress Chris Benoit had to endure during his *WWE* career. As the World Heavyweight Champion, Benoit was the face of the company and was expected to lead the *WWE*'s push for further positive status in mainstream culture. As the *WWE*'s top performer, media producers used Benoit's star image in crafting and exploiting new markets around the world. As the world champion, Benoit was required to perform in more wrestling bouts and attend more promotional events than lower ranked *WWE* performers. As stated in chapter 4, autopsy tests revealed Benoit's brain resembled that of

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<sup>584</sup> Eric Cohen, "Wrestling's Dirty Secret", *About.com*, <http://prowrestling.about.com/od/whatsrealwhatsfake/a/wrestlersdeaths.htm> (accessed March 27, 2009); Habib, *Death Match*, op.cit; Will, *A Tribute to Mat Stars of the Past*, op.cit.

an 85-year old Alzheimer's disease patient.<sup>585</sup> The normally reserved Benoit dealt with the rigorous pressures of top flight *WWE* competition by exercising his demons in the form of a personal diary, he wrote about the stresses of life on the road and the extra demand that was put on him as a feature performer for the world's premier pro-wrestling organisation.<sup>586</sup> He frequently addressed letters to his fallen best friend 'Latino Heat' Eddie Guerrero and in one of his diary entries to Guerrero, Benoit wrote "I'll be with you soon."<sup>587</sup>

The pressures Benoit had to deal with raise questions about fan complicity, in particular the profound pressures that may have resulted from the intimate engagement of internet based fan-cults like the IWC. As examined throughout this study; contemporary fan communities have been an integral part of the production process of media texts. Media producers are increasingly adopting new practices in order to cater to the increasingly cynical contemporary fan community. As the examination into the changes in fan responses towards Benoit in chapter 4 showed, fans can lose interest in a wrestler as quickly as they build up support for them. The reasons for such drastic shifts in allegiances shown by fans can be of various: from wrestler injuries, the speculation of news and rumours or, in Benoit's case, choices in their personal lives.

Wrestling performers of the 21<sup>st</sup> century have to consistently stay connected with wrestling fans and often perform through extreme mental and physical circumstances in order to maintain their positions within the company. Fans claim that Chris Benoit was

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<sup>585</sup> Rothstein, *Benoit's Brain Like 85-year-old*, op.cit.

<sup>586</sup> Wade Keller, "WWE News: Intimate Details of Chris Benoit's Diary Revealed, Including Admiration for Family", *Pro Wrestling Torch*, [http://www.pwtorch.com/artman2/publish/WWE\\_News\\_3/article\\_22816.shtml](http://www.pwtorch.com/artman2/publish/WWE_News_3/article_22816.shtml) (accessed April 6, 2009); Randazzo, *Ring of Hell*, op.cit 325.

<sup>587</sup> Ibid.

someone who lived his life by the traditional ideologies of professional wrestling; regardless of the physical and mental pains he suffered, he never missed an event or compromised a performance.<sup>588</sup> He was someone who enforced tradition and respect in the *WWE* locker room.<sup>589</sup> His love for professional wrestling along with the demands put on him by both media producers and wrestling fans would eventually shatter his body and scramble his mind.

### ***Conclusion***

The study of star image production and consumption provides an insight into the meaning of stardom and also how stars function in society and culture. The study of the impact of mass communication technology on the world of celebrities shows how the commodity of the star has become more complex compared to previous eras.

Contemporary fans no longer need to tune in to the television screen or attend movie screenings to get a dosage of celebrity. Fans can gain glimpses of their favourite stars through new media formats such as mobile phones and the internet. Stars are now considered integral assets to media producers whether for endorsement deals or marketing campaigns for media productions. Stars are often utilised for promotion outside of their fields of profession such as serving as ambassadors for charity and political campaigns.<sup>590</sup> Historically, the analysis into the function of star images has positioned fans as passive consumers of stardom.

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<sup>588</sup> Dave Batista, *Batista Unleashed* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2007), 200; Scott E. Williams, *Chris Benoit: The Definitive Story of Murder, Drugs and Wrestling's Darkest Hour* (Bloomington: Rooftop Publishing, 2008), 31; Randazzo, *Ring of Hell*, op.cit. 217; 260.

<sup>589</sup> Batista, *ibid.* 201.

<sup>590</sup> John Hanlon and David Twomey, "Celebrity Spectacle Influence on Young Voters in the 2004 Presidential Campaign" *American Behavioral Scientist* 50, no. 9 (2007): 1242.

This study's analysis into the interactive reading processes of internet wrestling fans suggests contemporary audiences play an active role in the star image-making process. They use these images to connect, compare and identify their personal selves. The notion of authenticity and legitimacy has become a crucial factor in the creation of star images. The consumption of stars by fan communities has prompted media producers like the *WWE* to overhaul their operational approach in the presentation of official texts and website media. This has increased the pressure on wrestling performers as their each and every move is not only scrutinised inside the wrestling ring but also in their private lives. In order to satisfy the demands of a more fanatical and obsessive wrestling audience, media organisations end up putting even more pressure on their stars.

## *Chapter 6- Conclusion*

### *Introduction*

It must be acknowledged that fan communities have existed long before the integration of the internet into popular culture. They have always exhibited the desire to seek alternative ways to view official narratives. Fandom functions like a social sub-community where fans discuss and read deeper into all facets of their favourite genres.<sup>591</sup> In *Textual Poachers*, Jenkins believed fandom was mostly a “weekend-only world.”<sup>592</sup> In previous eras fan communities were at a cultural disadvantage, in the context that they did not have ready access to information and a majority of fan communities were limited by geographical boundaries. The internet eliminated these previous obstacles and has become the destination of fan discourse across a range of entertainment genres, allowing for the prosperity of online fan communities.<sup>593</sup> New media formats have enabled audiences to annotate, articulate and re-circulate media content derived from official narratives. This trend has encouraged the free flow of images, text, ideas and interpretations throughout a wide range of media forms.<sup>594</sup>

One of the main attributes of fandom is that it recognises no boundary between producer and audience, and fans feel that it is their right to have the freedom to express their opinions.<sup>595</sup> Fan operated discussion forums and websites are an important source of information for this study as they offer an uncensored insight into the behaviour of the contemporary wrestling fan culture. As a group, the Internet Wrestling Community

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<sup>591</sup> Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, op.cit. 280; 282.

<sup>592</sup> Ibid.

<sup>593</sup> Gamson, *The Web of Celebrity*, op.cit 41; Lévy, *Collective Intelligence*, op.cit. 12.

<sup>594</sup> Jenkins, *Fans, Bloggers and Gamers*, op.cit. 136.

<sup>595</sup> Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, op.cit. 280; Virginia Nightingale and Karen Ross, *Critical Readings: Media and Audiences* (Berkshire: McGraw-Hills International, 2003), 14.

(IWC) has struggled to negotiate its relationship with the wrestling industry's workers and the genre's casual audiences. For the most hardcore wrestling spectators, the internet has been hailed as an important variable in enhancing their experiences as wrestling fans. It allowed them to locate and communicate with other fans and the wrestling industry by sharing and accumulating information and opinion. Many internet wrestling fans believe the IWC offers wrestling industry officials a focus group comprising of the most knowledgeable individuals who have invested much time and effort to pursue their fandom online. Among industry insiders, the IWC had become the target of much condemnation due to the increase of leaked information revealing future creative strategies mapped out by wrestling event producers. Information published on internet wrestling communities also intruded into the private lives of wrestling stars revealing personalities different to their television characters. In addition, information items which make their way onto the IWC are often a combination of news reported by respected industry journalists and personal opinions contributed by passionate fans. Therefore it is at times difficult for the IWC readership to distinguish between accurate and inaccurate news items.

Wrestling media producers have been forced to re-strategise their methods not only in the event production process but also in the marketing and promotion of the wrestling stars. News and rumour items relating to the actual person behind wrestling characters have increasingly become a common theme for discourse among internet based wrestling fans. The added knowledge of wrestling fans has had significant impact on the wrestling industry. There have been instances in recent years where wrestling fans have seized control over the creative direction of official narratives in order to suit their own

preferences. The wrestling characters of Matt Hardy, Amy Dumas ('Lita'), Adam Copeland ('Edge'), Bill Goldberg and Brock Lesnar serve as examples of both the positive and negative influences that wrestling smarks can have on official televised texts.

The role which the IWC played in the rise and eventual demise of former World Heavyweight Champion Chris Benoit has served as a significant case for this study examining the complexity of the relationship between media producers and audiences. It has become clear that the adopted reading process of internet-based fan groups is further complicated due to the multidirectional nature of circulated information on the internet, creating an array of predictable and unpredictable reading outcomes.<sup>596</sup> This vocal and at times rebellious fan community, in response to pro-wrestling's already unique generic conventions, provided an interesting insight into the psyche of the internet wrestling fan base. The analysis into the IWC's engagement of the Chris Benoit character demonstrated that the old model of producer and audience relationship is no longer capable of sustaining new fan demands and expectations. These new fan demands are largely influenced by the influx of information that is now available to them through the spaces of the IWC. The significance of this notion is that this is also the likely trend of audience behaviour throughout the fan communities of other entertainment genres. The advances in media production and new interactive media formats such as the internet have transformed audiences once considered casual-passive into elite genre experts.<sup>597</sup> This has been illuminated through the critical analysis of fan discourse within the IWC

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<sup>596</sup> Jenkins, *Fans, Bloggers and Gamers*, op.cit. 154; Lévy, *Collective Intelligence*, op.cit. 141; Hills, *Fan Cultures*, op.cit. 139.

<sup>597</sup> Gamson, *The Web of Celebrity*, op.cit. 41; Hills, *ibid.* 126; Jenkins, *ibid.* 117.

regarding how fans interpreted Chris Benoit, the *WWE* television character and, Chris Benoit the individual.

The Chris Benoit character within official texts was initially promoted as a man of few words outside of the ring, and who utilised an aggressive wrestling style inside the ring. However on the internet, Chris Benoit, in the minds of many wrestling fans, was a gentle family man who was considered as the ultimate professional and the greatest exponent of the technical wrestling style.<sup>598</sup> The distinctions between what the media producers envisioned and the reading-writing process adopted by the majority of wrestling fans initially conflicted. Ultimately the support for Benoit had grown so strong that it was impossible to disassociate him from any of the connotations which existed through the discourses of the IWC. The data supporting this dissertation—the texts published on websites and chat forums operated by wrestling fans—show clear evidence of news accumulation and rumour speculation, evaluation and critique of the official *WWE* texts, and scrutiny of wrestling performers. Consequently, these discourses added another level of signs for fans to connect with wrestling characters.

The relationship between fans and producers was further complicated when internet wrestling smarks became boisterous in their demand for possible reasons to clear the name of their hero after the initial revelation of his death on popular information sharing website *Wikipedia*.<sup>599</sup> IWC websites and discussion forums were initially flooded with fan tributes mourning the death of the former world champion.<sup>600</sup> When all sources of

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<sup>598</sup> James Montgomery, “Chris Benoit Fans React with Sadness, Disgust to Apparent Murder-suicide”, *MTV Networks*, [http://www.mtv.com/news/articles/1563641/20070628/id\\_0.jhtml](http://www.mtv.com/news/articles/1563641/20070628/id_0.jhtml) (accessed June 18, 2008); Randazzo, *Ring of Hell*, op.cit. 213.

<sup>599</sup> Bachelor, *Web Time Stamps Indicate Nancy Benoit’s Death*, op.cit.

<sup>600</sup> Bruce Bostwick, “Benoit Family Murder Case May Keep him out of the Hall of Fame”, *Associatedcontent.com*,

information indicated that Chris Benoit was solely responsible for the tragedy, fans rejected him as quickly as they had built up their support for him just a few years prior. The eventual failure of Benoit's star image to stay connected with the wrestling fan community demonstrated the shift in power relations between media producers and audiences. As demonstrated in chapter 4, fan discourse within the spaces of the IWC played a vital role in the *WWE*'s creative direction of the Chris Benoit character and their complete disassociation with him after his death. This analysis of Benoit's career, both within official set texts and independently, has demonstrated how wrestling fan interpretations through sheer numbers, assumed the position of power by offering opinionated and at times viscous point of views based on factual and speculative information they consumed on the internet.

This analysis of the coverage of Chris Benoit on the IWC has also explored the fans' eventual rejection of him after his death. It could be argued that both the IWC and the *WWE* appear to share some responsibility for the extreme pressure exerted on the star.

### ***Popular Culture and Pro-wrestling***

Important to this study has been the ability to show how wrestling characters share similar conventions of star image construction with other entertainment forms that have previously been defined in literature. It is clear that trends in popular culture such as the fetishisation of celebrity figures like actors and athletes proved to be influential factors in shaping the interpretation process of contemporary fan communities. The works of Daniel Boorstin, Graham Turner and in particular Richard Dyer aided in providing a better understanding of not only the complex reading practices of contemporary wrestling

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[http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/295076/benoit\\_family\\_murder\\_case\\_may\\_keep.html?cat=14](http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/295076/benoit_family_murder_case_may_keep.html?cat=14) (accessed November 30, 2008); Montgomery, *Deaths of WWE Champ Chris Benoit*, op.cit.

fans but also how the industry relies on many fundamental aspects of consumer and popular culture. However, professional wrestling's textual format has long been considered illegitimate within the cultural mainstream, because wrestling is an unconventional and uneasy mix of sport and theatre. This also means the genre has its own unique signifying process for fans to engage with.<sup>601</sup>

Criticism of the wrestling industry has focused on media producers and the wrestlers. An ethical challenge has often been mounted and the industry accused of selling rebellion and taking advantage of the easily-conned. Indeed there are facets of the industry which deserve criticism. Concerns about the often sexist and unbalanced portrayal of women within official texts are justified on ethical grounds.<sup>602</sup> This has left little room for wrestling fans and in particular female audiences to identify with respected portrayals of women. Rather, a sense of inequality between male and female genders is fostered. Furthermore, the well-documented reliance on chemically enhanced bodies within the wrestling industry has raised much concern over the health of wrestling talent. Criticism and condemnation of the rate of premature deaths of performers in professional wrestling compared to traditional sports such as basketball or football has resulted. These are aspects of pro-wrestling that are rightfully criticised and condemned in popular culture. However, these criticisms and concerns have for the most part focused on the operational practices of media producers. Members of the fan communities themselves have not been subject to the same scrutiny. Rarely has impartial insight been provided as

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<sup>601</sup> Laurence De Garis, "The "Logic" of Professional Wrestling" in *Steel Chair to the Head: The Pleasure and Pain of Professional Wrestling*, ed. Nicolas Sammond (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 195; Mazer, *Professional Wrestling*, op.cit. 21.

<sup>602</sup> Philip Serrato, "Not Quite Heroes: Race, Masculinity and Latino Professional Wrestlers" in *Steel Chair to the Head: The Pleasure and Pain of Professional Wrestling*, ed. Nicolas Sammond (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 255; Robert Strauss, "CHECKUPS; An 'R' Rating for Wrestling" *New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/06/24/health/checkups-an-r-rating-for-wrestling.html> (accessed November 29, 2008); Danielle Soulliere, *Wrestling with Masculinity*, op.cit. 5; Mazer, ibid. 141 - 144.

to the reasons why wrestling fans often overlook unsavoury, unhealthy and antisocial aspects that characterise the objects of their own fandom.<sup>603</sup>

### *Star Images*

In *Stars*, Richard Dyer proposed examining stars from both semiotic and sociological perspectives. He said that the signifying processes of stars were best understood through their representation within official narratives. In this dissertation the semiotic approach is balanced out with a sociological examination of the industrial and cultural aspects of star image production such as promotion and publicity. The promotion element refers to aspects of the star image which were organised by media producers such as public appearances and interviews.<sup>604</sup> Dyer's theory suggested that publicity was often created by media producers themselves in order to generate more hype for the stars.<sup>605</sup> It is undeniable that media producers still employ this practice in order to garner more exposure for their product. The publicity aspect of contemporary star images refers to social discourse surrounding the celebrity such as ideas and narratives circulated from popular culture like fan communities on the internet. This notion is exemplified by the *WWE*'s revamped web networks which now regularly feature stories, photo and video media of wrestling stars in situations independent from the official televised narratives.<sup>606</sup> The *WWE*'s decision to recognise popular fan interpretations by incorporating their views into the presentation of wrestling storylines and characters essentially legitimises the

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<sup>603</sup> Mazer, *Professional Wrestling*, op.cit. 102; Lucia Rahilly, "Is RAW War? Professional Wrestling as a s/m narrative" in *Steel Chair to the Head: The Pleasure and Pain of Professional Wrestling*, ed. Nicolas Sammond (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 283.

<sup>604</sup> Dyer, *Stars*, op.cit. 12.

<sup>605</sup> Ibid.

<sup>606</sup> Mark Serrels, "WWE and Kayfabe: Retaining the Real", *Popmatters.com*, <http://www.popmatters.com/sports/features/060504-wrestling.shtml> (accessed November 29, 2008); Louie Dee, "Kayfabe Returns to wwe.com", *Wrestlingclique.com*, <http://wrestlingclique.com/wrestling-news-rumors/9664-kayfabe-returns-too-wwe-com.html> (accessed November 29, 2008).

circulated news and rumours that appear on unofficial wrestling news outlets on the IWC. This thesis contends that the element of publicity as a result of fan responses and hysteria has in fact overtaken publicity created by media producers themselves.

### ***No Longer Passive- The Dynamic Audience***

Boorstin described the phenomenon of celebrities as “pseudo events”<sup>607</sup> in the sense that the hype for the stars was entirely fabricated by media producers as a marketing strategy to attract audience attention. Audiences were once considered as vulnerable, gullible and easily manipulated in the context they were expected to absorb anything that was presented to them by media producers.<sup>608</sup> In his exploration into fan cultures of the early 1990s, Henry Jenkins recognised the possible need to envision fan communities as active audiences.<sup>609</sup> Jenkins suggested that audiences “poached” from official narratives such as re-creating storylines in the form of fan fiction or by mimicking the behaviours of television personalities to help shape their own identities.<sup>610</sup> Jenkins’ observation is still relevant and is perhaps even more illuminated among the contemporary fan population. Due to their added knowledge through information becoming widely accessible on the internet, contemporary audiences are becoming more capable of resisting the intended meanings of official narratives proposed by media producers. They act as creators of media texts themselves. The enthusiasm that wrestling smarks exhibited through the archiving, conversing and sharing of everything about pro-wrestling on the IWC demonstrates how fan communities behave and perform in a similar capacity to media

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<sup>607</sup> Boorstin, *The Image*, op.cit. 57.

<sup>608</sup> Hills, *Fan Cultures*, op.cit. 115; Lévy, *Collective Intelligence*, op.cit. 4.

<sup>609</sup> Hills, *ibid.* 186; Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, op.cit. 283; Jenkins, *Fans, Bloggers and Gamers*, op.cit. 5; Michael R. Real, *Exploring Media Culture* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1996), 43.

<sup>610</sup> Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, *ibid.* 23; Baym, *Tune In, Log On*, op.cit. 100.

producers. These reading behaviours complement the theories behind the active and creative audience models proposed by media theorists.<sup>611</sup>

Contemporary fan communities are not only more knowledgeable, but they are also voluntary, temporary, and tactical; their affiliations and loyalty are defined through common emotional investments.<sup>612</sup> Fans can belong to more than one online community and have the option to shift between communities depending on their interests yet they are bonded together under the notion of information exchanging, consensus building and news and rumour analysing. Part of the functions of an online fan community is that it pools its knowledge base as fans share details or interpretations of televised programming that other members may have missed or enquired about.<sup>613</sup> Online communities allow fans to display their knowledge prowess about certain genres and are motivated by the pleasure in demonstrating knowledge but also exchanging it as well.<sup>614</sup> In his analysis regarding the functions of knowledge communities, Lévy writes, “within a knowledge community, no one knows everything, everyone knows something, all knowledge resides in humanity.”<sup>615</sup> Lévy distinguishes the practice of online information sharing as “collective intelligence”<sup>616</sup> which refers to knowledge being available to all members of a community. The intelligence arising from this cumulative knowledge is far greater than the sum of its parts. The productive capacities of online fan communities are expanded through collective intelligence because it compensates individual members from the limitations of their memory and enables them as a group of fans to read texts with a wider

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<sup>611</sup> Jenkins, *Fans, Bloggers and Gamers*, op.cit. 117; Turner, *Understanding Celebrity*, op.cit. 113.

<sup>612</sup> Jenkins, *ibid.* 136; Lévy, *Collective Intelligence*, op.cit. 113.

<sup>613</sup> Baym, *Tune In, Log On*, op.cit. 7.

<sup>614</sup> *Ibid.* 13.

<sup>615</sup> Lévy, *Collective Intelligence*, op.cit. 20.

<sup>616</sup> *Ibid.*

range of expertise.<sup>617</sup> On the internet, knowledge equates to prestige, reputation and power; the measures of which are often determined by the speed of the information circulation rather than its accuracy.<sup>618</sup> Thus, as the internet became more of a household expression, fan communities are thriving through the process of information wealth.

In this dissertation, exploration of relevant texts such as fan discourse on discussion forums directly from the heart of the IWC has demonstrated that fans of professional wrestling take into account the official narratives presented by media producers and incorporate unofficial fan-developed ideas when reading the professional wrestling genre.

As membership to online communities has enlarged and reaction times have shortened, fandom has become much more effective as a platform for audience activism. Fan communities can now quickly activate complaints and protests to unpopular decisions made by media producers. As new technologies continue to expand, fan communities have transformed from their cult-like status to the cultural mainstream with more fans frequently engaging in some kind of fan activity on the internet.<sup>619</sup>

The access to a free flowing array of behind-the-scenes information has provided contemporary wrestling fans glimpses of professional wrestlers as day-to-day people as well. Responses to the Chris Benoit storyline reflect this, and fans' insistence on a more authentic product suggested they viewed professional wrestling as competitive sports as well.

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<sup>617</sup> Jenkins, *Fans, Bloggers and Gamers*, op.cit. 139; Lisebet van Zoonan, *Entertaining the Citizen* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), 61.

<sup>618</sup> Elihu Katz, Jay G. Blumler and Michael Gurevitch, "Utilisation of Mass Communication by the Individual" in *Critical Readings: Media and Audiences*, ed. Virginia Nightingale and Karen Ross (Berkshire: McGraw-Hill International, 2003), 38; Baym, *Tune In, Log On*, op.cit. 17; Jenkins, *ibid.* 125.

<sup>619</sup> Jenkins, *Fans, Bloggers and Gamers*, op.cit. 142; Nightingale and Ross, *Critical Readings*, op.cit. 216.

By the end of his career, Chris Benoit played a character that was very similar to the person behind the star image on *WWE* television. That Chris Benoit was his real name further blurs the distinction between fictional character and actual human being. The overwhelming positive response to the Benoit character over some of the *WWE*'s main event performers highlighted the initial failure of media producers' dictatorship. Such breakdown in the producer/audience relationship can largely be attributed to the *WWE*'s failure to accommodate to fan preference for a more authentic product, thus failing to present substantial engaging narratives to complement the more knowledgeable reading practices of contemporary fan communities.

Prior to the internet, media producers viewed fan interaction as a form of exposure to their product and encouraged fan groups to become more knowledgeable about the genre through consumption of the product. In the professional wrestling industry this was mostly achieved through the company's own line of magazine publications and telephone hotline networks, where media producers still had considerable control over the content of information which was released. However, as technology continued to evolve, fans were able to have access to information which had been traditionally unavailable to them. Fans became able to extend their textual poaching habits by producing works of fan fiction and articles which focused on extending, altering and criticising the official narratives originally created by media producers. Additionally, these works were no longer limited to being shared within the vicinities of their local communities but rather to the whole world. They were able to freely and substantially show their defiance if they were presented with storylines or wrestling performers that did not fit their expectations. This may have referred to the presentation of unrealistic storylines within set texts or to

wrestling stars who they felt were not worthy of prominent positions within the *WWE*. Media producers had generally viewed the IWC as an opinionated minority whose goal was solely to disturb and sabotage the media production process.

In recent years, as a result of the growing influence of the wrestling smark behaviour, media producers have had little alternative but to cater for the fans of the IWC largely due to the support or rejection the community can apply to particular wrestlers. This has proven to be chaotic for media producers as much effort in creative planning can sometimes amount to nothing. In order to prevent situations where media producers are forced to make drastic changes to the creative direction of official narratives, they have found the need to make changes and accommodate the expectations and trends of opinion emanating from online fan culture. They are also showing greater awareness that audiences are no longer simply passive consumers. They are coming to realise that fan communities should be viewed as collaborative contributors to the production of media and that fans' insights can be used to help shape official narratives. Persistence in seeking the 'actual' behind star images and detailed attention to the process of archiving and sharing of information among their kind indicates that members of fan groups are the "true experts"<sup>620</sup> of their genre. They know what they want and they actively seek it. The disdain shown by industry insiders to the emergence of the IWC seemingly aided in shaping these behavioural trends and reading patterns as a group of passionate wrestling fans.

The notion of dynamic audiences complements previous theoretical conceptions made by media scholars. It is clear that media producers are tending to adopt new strategies to discover and cater for fan demands. The *WWE* are now attempting to

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<sup>620</sup> Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, op.cit. 86.

capitalise on the trend of active fan engagement. The *WWE* began by relaxing the industry ideology of protecting kayfabe. They accommodated the preferences of IWC members by re-instating Matt Hardy back into the company and by crowning Chris Benoit the World Heavyweight Champion. The overwhelming acceptance of Hardy and Benoit and the extraordinary rise in their overall popularity once the *WWE* presented storylines in accordance with IWC fan perceptions demonstrates the success of that strategic reformation.

The rejection of Bill Goldberg and Brock Lesnar at *Wrestlemania XX* further emphasised the flaw in treating audiences as passive entities. The *WWE* failed to make any foremention of Goldberg and Lesnar's imminent departures in official texts leading up to the event. They promoted the bout as a marquee event between two dominant figures of the wrestling industry, withholding information regarding the future of Goldberg and Lesnar. The result was a fan response that company officials perhaps never anticipated.<sup>621</sup> Instead of a fairytale farewell conclusion of both men's wrestling careers, the live audience focused their energy as one to shun both former world champions. Fan responses during the Goldberg Vs Lesnar match demonstrated the flaws of implementing the old media producer/audience model with contemporary wrestling fan communities. It illuminated the potential consequences if media producers continued to grossly underestimate the knowledge of fans of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### ***Conclusion***

The annual interactive pay-per-view *Cyber Sunday* is an example of media producers advertising that they have handed over control of the official narratives to

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<sup>621</sup> Chris Pankonin, "411's WMXX Coverage: Goldberg Vs. Lesnar", *411mania.com*, <http://www.411mania.com/wrestling/livecoverage/34783> (accessed April 15, 2009).

wrestling fans. The promotional campaign for the 2008 edition of *Cyber Sunday* consisted of wrestling personalities voicing the tagline “My future is in your hands.”<sup>622</sup> Promotional taglines for previous editions of *Cyber Sunday* was “Log on, take over”, inviting fans to log on to *wwe.com* and take over the creative direction of the pay-per-view event simply by voting.<sup>623</sup> The *WWE*’s own social network, *WWE Universe* now publishes personal blogs written by the company’s wrestling talent with some wrestlers regularly interacting with fans on discussion forums.<sup>624</sup> Additionally the *WWE* has extended its efforts on a stronger presence among the internet wrestling fan-membership. More recently, the *WWE* has ventured into providing exclusive web content targeted at combating the influences of wrestling gossip websites and fan operated chat forums.<sup>625</sup> The *WWE*’s exclusive web-content provides a variety of photo and video media for fans to connect with wrestling stars. Content on *wwe.com* has increasingly taken on a lifestyle theme which purports to deliver the ‘actual’ stars.<sup>626</sup> The *WWE* has furthered its attempts in enticing visitors to their website by offering fans a continuous streaming of live events on *wwe.com* during television commercial breaks.<sup>627</sup> These methods present the notion of accessibility to fans; the very sense of realism that they had longed for.<sup>628</sup>

While the *WWE* has accelerated its efforts in catering for contemporary wrestling audience trends, its status as an official media provider still has many fans weary and

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<sup>622</sup> *WWE Cyber Sunday 2008*, DVD, directed by World Wrestling Entertainment (Phoenix, AZ: World Wrestling Entertainment, 2008).

<sup>623</sup> World Wrestling Entertainment, “Cyber Sunday Pay-Per-View History”, *World Wrestling Entertainment*, <http://www.wwe.com/shows/cybersunday/history/alltimeresults> (accessed April 21, 2009).

<sup>624</sup> World Wrestling Entertainment, *Wwe.com Launch Much Anticipated Social Network*, op.cit.

<sup>625</sup> Matt Loede, “WWE.com Launches New High Def Video Player on Site”, *Letstalkwrestling.com*, <http://www.letstalkwrestling.com/2008/11/wwecom-launches-new-high-def-video.html> (accessed April 19, 2009).

<sup>626</sup> World Wrestling Entertainment, *WWE: Video Originals*, op.cit.

<sup>627</sup> Wrestlingclique.com, “WWE.com Takes RAW to New Places”, *Wrestlingclique.com*, <http://wrestlingclique.com/wrestling-news-rumors/27599-wwc-com-takes-raw-new-places.html/> (accessed April 21, 2009).

<sup>628</sup> Jenkins, *Fans, Bloggers and Gamers*, op.cit. 145; Baym, *Tune In, Log On*, op.cit. 193.

suspicious of their business strategies. Many IWC members believe there will always be a division between the official *WWE* network and the unofficial IWC. Internet wrestling commentators and fans believe that while *wwf.com*'s industry news section may provide some behind-the-scenes information, it will not provide information items which can potentially harm the business goals of their company.<sup>629</sup> This is a significant distinction because the integral attraction of fan operated communities and wrestling 'dirt sheet' websites is the unbiased and uncensored insight into the world of pro-wrestling. The majority of online fan communities have no affiliations with media producers and their anarchic constitution makes it impossible to control the content that is published by them anyway. Thus, it has become impossible for media producers to control every aspect of the reading trends exhibited by contemporary fans.

There is much more to culture of fandom than mainstream soap operas and feature films. Fans have the inclination to deeply examine genre texts from the reading of televised narratives to the scrutiny of characters and media producers. There has been extensive research done in the past studying the fan cultures of mainstream entertainment genres of science fiction, soap operas and sporting fandom. However, objective academic research examining the behavioural trends of pro-wrestling fans has been relatively scarce. As this study has shown, lesser-studied fan communities like the IWC provide a fascinating insight into the reading patterns of different audience cultures. The study of the IWC fan group has illuminated the potential influences that circulated news and rumours, regardless of accuracy can have on the reading practices of genre audiences and how their interpretations can come to impact the strategic visions of media producers.

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<sup>629</sup> Clark, *More Behind the Scenes News*, op.cit; Daniel Pena, "WWE Launches "Industry" News Section - Features News from Various Wrestling Websites & Plugs TNA", *Lordsofpain.net*, <http://www.lordsofpain.net/news/2008/articles/1204317368.php> (accessed April 7, 2009).

Through the analysis of the discourse shared by wrestling fans on the IWC, this study has provided examples of unique audience practices of the expert wrestling smark. It has been asserted that there is a distinction between the smark and the regular, gullible wrestling mark. Examination of that difference has resulted in further emphasis on the importance of the internet as a communication variable with respect to the accumulation and application of collective intelligence, in line with the assertions of Pierre Lévy. The existence of independent fan-established narratives and interpretations, and the influence they have had on official televised texts have been shown to be particularly noteworthy. Resulting changes in the relationship between wrestling media producers and audiences have been highlighted.

The IWC crowd is different from the majority of casual wrestling audiences and it is perhaps a widespread truism that internet fan groups in general differ from their real-life counterparts. The objective examination of this entertainment and sporting industry shows how other industries may benefit from such a study.

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## APPENDIX A

### *Glossary of Wrestling Industry Terms*

**Angle:** Refers to a plot within televised texts. The term ‘angle’ or ‘storyline angle’ may be used to describe an ongoing ‘feud’ between wrestlers or groups of wrestlers on wrestling television programmes.

**Attitude Era:** A time period between 1997 and 2001 referring to an era in the *World Wrestling Federation* (in 2002 *WWF* became *World Wrestling Entertainment- WWE*). During this period, the wrestling product shifted from its family orientated format to being more mature and controversial in content, often dealing with more ‘adult’ life situations involving issues of more violent and at times sexual nature.

**Babyface:** A wrestler who plays the good guy or the hero in storylines. Fans are expected to cheer for babyface wrestlers. Sometimes also referred to as ‘face’.

**Backstage Politics:** The practice of using your status to prevent success of another worker and to get choice matches and storylines that provide the best personal gain with no regard for the company or individuals.

**Blading:** The act of cutting one self to bleed. Blading is usually done to the forehead in order to further suspend audience disbelief.

**Curtain Call (The MSG Incident):** An incident which occurred in 1996, during a non-televvised *WWE* event, in front of a sold out crowd, ‘Shawn Michaels’, ‘Hunter Hurst Helmsley’, ‘Diesel’ and ‘Razor Ramon’ violated kayfabe when they broke away from their television characters and embraced in a group hug to farewell two of its members.

**Dirt Sheet:** Insider newsletters exposing the secrets of the wrestling business. Dirt sheets are published by industry journalists who have no affiliation with official wrestling organisations.

**Drawing Power:** A term used to define a performer’s ability to connect with wrestling audiences.

**Feud:** A battle between wrestlers or a group of wrestlers. In a storyline angle, a feud comprises of wrestling matches, interview promos. On average, feuds usually span for a few months.

**Finisher:** A wrestling performer’s trademark manoeuvre, used to win wrestling matches.

**Friday Night Smackdown:** Wrestling television programme- also referred to as *Smackdown*.

**Gimmick:** A wrestler’s television personality. Gimmicks from the 1980s until the mid-1990s were considered ‘cartoon-ish’ due to pro-wrestling’s mostly adolescent audience

during that period. In the past decade, wrestler gimmicks have emphasised more on the ‘actual’ with performers often portraying gimmicks very similar to their own personalities in their private lives.

**Heat:** Negative audience response towards a wrestler.

**Heel:** An antagonist character within wrestling narratives. Audiences are expected to jeer and dislike heel wrestlers.

**House show:** Non-televised wrestling events.

**Indy:** Short for independent wrestling companies. Indy companies usually have no television exposure and operate on a very limited budget.

**Jobber:** A wrestler who’s primary function within the official narratives is to enhance the image of marquee performers. This is achieved with jobbers losing wrestling matches against better known wrestlers.

**Kayfabe:** An old carnival slang for ‘fake’ or “be fake.” In pro-wrestling kayfabe is a term used to describe the illusion of professional wrestling as a legitimate sport in which the matches are portrayed as legitimate events and the tensions between characters are depicted as authentic. Among insiders kayfabe also represented a code of silence in

which the inner-workings of the industry was to be protected at all costs in order to maintain the illusion of pro-wrestling.

**Low-Carder:** A wrestling performer who performs at the beginning of a wrestling event.

**Main Eventer:** The top talent of a wrestling company. Main event wrestlers are usually the most popular with wrestling audiences. Main event wrestlers usually compete last on a wrestling programme, usually in match situations involving world heavyweight championships.

**Mark:** A term used to describe wrestling fans who are easily persuaded by what they see on wrestling shows. At the most extreme, marks believe everything in pro-wrestling is legitimate.

**Mark Out:** To act like a mark. To react to wrestling characters and texts as though the events were real, even though the smark wrestling spectator has full knowledge that wrestling texts are scripted and improvised.

**Mid-Carder:** A wrestling performer who competes in the middle of a wrestling programme, sometimes vying for the company's secondary championships.

**Monday Night Nitro:** Wrestling television programme- also referred to as *Nitro*.

**Monday Night Rating Wars:** From late 1995 to early 2001, *WWF's Monday Night Raw* went head-to-head with *WCW's Monday Night Nitro* in a battle to gain industry supremacy each week. This power struggle turned both companies into bitter rivals in which production sabotaging tactics were used. Legitimate defections of several wrestling performers and media producers between both companies also occurred during this period.

**Monday Night Raw:** Wrestling television programme- also referred to as *Raw*.

**No-Contest:** A match which concludes without a winner. No-contests are usually ended due to wrestler injuries (legitimate or scripted) or interference from wrestlers not scheduled to be involved in the contest. No-contests are often used to create more tension between wrestling characters in the official narratives.

**Over:** Refers to overwhelming positive crowd responses towards certain wrestlers.

**Pay-Per-View (PPV):** Pay-per-views are major live events where audiences can purchase the rights to view it on television through a cable television provider. The *WWE* broadcasts up to 14 live pay-per-views per year. *WWE* pay-per-views are usually 3 hours in length.

**Promo:** A staged interview on television or on the internet to gain and increase audience interest in an upcoming match-up. A promo allows a wrestler to make obvious of his

antagonist or protagonist role within televised texts. The staged promo is also often conducted similar to the format of professional sporting broadcasts—such as interviewing wrestlers prior or after a bout. This method provides a sense of actuality to the wrestling match-up.

**Promotion:** Wrestling companies refer to themselves as a wrestling ‘promotion’.

**Push:** A ‘push’ occurs when company officials focus their creative energy in promoting a wrestler. Performers who are ‘pushed’ can enjoy victories over more dominant stars and are often rewarded with championship reigns. Reasons for pushing performers can range from positive crowd responses or favourable relationships with company officials.

**Sell:** Dramatic reaction to an opponent’s actions such as a signature or a finishing manoeuvre in order to further authenticate the situation.

**Shimmer:** Shimmer Women’s Athletes (Wrestling Company).

**Shoot:** A non-scripted event which occurs during a wrestling show, usually without the acknowledgement or approval of media producers e.g. The MSG Incident.

**Signature Move:** Manoeuvres performed by wrestlers on a regular basis. Every wrestler has a set of signature moves to help audiences better identify with them.

**Smirk:** A wrestling fan who follows all aspects of the wrestling industry and reads pro-wrestling not only on the basis of televised narratives but also on the merits of wrestling news and rumours. Sometimes referred to as ‘smarts’ or ‘smart marks’.

**Sports-Entertainment:** A term introduced by the *WWE* which defines the wrestling product as a hybrid of sporting competition and theatrical melodrama.

**Stable:** A group of wrestlers who have an alliance through a common element such as friendship, ethnicity lines or personality trait.

**Sunday Night Heat:** Wrestling television programme- also referred to as *Heat*.

**Swerve:** Sudden change in the direction of a television storyline in order to maintain the traditional mystique of the wrestling genre.

**Technical Wrestling:** A wrestling style that is based on the traditional forms of amateur wrestling. The technical wrestling style is dominated by the use of mat-based submission manoeuvres and traditional wrestling throws.

**Turn:** When a wrestler switches his character allegiance such as from antagonist to protagonist, vice versa.

**Tweener:** A wrestling character who is neither an antagonist nor a protagonist. Tweeners usually portray a character who are resistant to authority and will compete against any wrestler regardless of their character alignments.

**Work:** A pre-planned event. A work could refer to a wrestling match or storyline progression segments where wrestlers act out their intent by attacking an unsuspecting opponent outside of the ring.

**Workrate:** A wrestler's workrate is determined by their stamina and technical wrestling ability.

## **APPENDIX B**

### ***Wrestling Industry Acronyms***

**ECW:** Extreme Championship Wrestling (Wrestling Company).

**NJPW:** New Japan Pro Wrestling (Wrestling Company).

**ROH:** Ring of Honor (Wrestling Company).

**TNA:** Total Non-stop Action (Wrestling Company).

**WCW:** World Championship Wrestling (Wrestling Company).

**WWE:** World Wrestling Entertainment (Wrestling Company).

**WWF:** World Wrestling Federation (The *WWE* was known as the *WWF* prior to 2002).