Time, space, strategy: Fan blogging and the economy of knowledge at San Diego Comic-Con

Abstract: My essay examines the blogging culture surrounding San Diego Comic-Con. Con-bloggers share desirable strategies for navigating the convention, including buying tickets, hotel rooms, and access to panels. I argue that con-blogging’s focus on wait times, the convention space, and communal experiences among fans functions as an adjacent yet external “extra” to the industry’s promotional discourse. The popularity of con-blogging demonstrates that fans’ interests exceed industry promotion and panels. Con-bloggers’ primary fandom is the ephemeral experience rooted in a specific time (four days in July) and space (the San Diego Convention Center), expanding the usual definition of fandom as centering on a media text. Even though con-bloggers’ fandom remains apart from industry buzz, they adopt media industry strategies to promote their blogs, including branding, sponsorships, and swag. The complex economy of knowledge production among con-bloggers reorients our understanding of industry-fan interactions at conventions and beyond.

Keywords: San Diego Comic-Con, fandom, media industry, fan practices
“Time is the currency you spend at Comic-Con to get things done.” – James Riley, “SDConCast 6/7/17”


This essay examines the blogging culture surrounding San Diego Comic-Con (SDCC), an annual four-day convention focusing on comics, television, and film that attracts 130,000 attendees. Hosted by the non-profit organization Comic-Con International, SDCC has become a crucial event for pop culture fans and the media industry alike. SDCC started as a small gathering of comic book fans in 1970 and has grown into an event that receives extensive coverage in the entertainment trade press. SDCC’s popularity makes it challenging to attend the convention: tickets sell out in under an hour, hotel rooms are given out via a lottery, and getting into the most popular panels requires lining up before dawn. These circumstances lead to a desire for precise information about navigating SDCC’s challenges. Consequently, a circuit of knowledge production has evolved around the convention: one where fans pass on information about mastering SDCC based on their memories of previous conventions. A group of attendees who self-identify as “con-bloggers,” i.e. convention bloggers, share strategies honed over years of attendance. Con-bloggers are fans of comics, films, and TV shows, but first and foremost, they are fans of Comic-Con; even more specifically, they are fans of an experience situated in a specific time (four days in July) and space (the San Diego Convention Center, see Figure 1).
Figure 1. A con-blogger expresses their love of the San Diego convention-center on Twitter. Screenshot by the author.

Drawing on observations online and at SDCC from 2013-2018, I argue that understanding the knowledge production among con-bloggers reorients our understanding of industry-fan interactions at conventions, specifically, and of fandom more generally. The few existing scholarly analyses of SDCC have focused either on how the industry drives fan experience around promotion and consumption (Gilbert 2018, Gilbert 2017, Hanna 2017, Hanna 2014, Kohnen 2014), or on fans’ experiences at the convention (Bolling and Smith 2014, Geraghty 2014, Jenkins 2012, Scott, S. 2011). Situated at the intersection of Media Industries Studies and Fan Studies, my analysis of con-blogging expands our understanding of how industry and fans interact by analyzing the practice of con-blogging as an extra layer of fan-industry interactions at SDCC that supplements the usual discourse about consumption and
celebrities. Moreover, con-blogging also broadens the conventional understanding of fandom being rooted in the shared love of a text. The object of con-bloggers’ fandom is not one text, but rather a specific space and time. As such, con-blogging exists in relation to media spaces and fan tourism, but also differs from both phenomena as con-blogging is not anchored in the connections between space and fictional texts. Con-bloggers are not invested in SDCC because of its connection to a specific film or TV series; rather, it is the memories of the convention and the community of con-bloggers that imbues the space of SDCC with importance. The ever-shifting experience of SDCC is the text of which con-bloggers are fans.

With its focus on time, space, and experience, con-blogging operates as an “extra” to fan-industry relations: it exists adjacent to the promotions circulated by the media industry at SDCC. In other words, con-blogging is in conversation with industry buzz, but also separate from it. For example, while con-bloggers share the news that *Game of Thrones* will hold a panel at SDCC, they do not speculate about what new information might be revealed about the series. Rather, they discuss the logistics of attending the panel, such as how a panel’s scheduling impacts wait times in line. To many attendees, con-bloggers’ discussion of logistics is of crucial importance because it facilitates access to the convention (Kohmander 2018, Kylie 2018, Wagnon 2017). Without the con-bloggers’ circulation of knowledge about SDCC, many attendees might not be able to get into panels, or indeed SDCC itself. Con-blogging thus fills in gaps left by media industry buzz: HBO taunts fans with promises of new insights into *Games of Thrones*, but con-bloggers get fans into the room where these insights are shared. While the trade press often oversimplifies attendees’ behavior, concentrating on eager reactions to panels, I argue that many attendees are equally concerned with a different layer of information: strategies of gaining access to the spaces of the convention, which are not covered by the trade press. Con-bloggers thus exist
in an odd relationship to the media industry: they pass on buzz and information, but are also not entirely invested in it. The lack of investment in promotional buzz also makes con-bloggers uninteresting as potential social media influencers for the industry; put simply, con-bloggers’ discussion of room sizes and wait times is not valuable to big industry players like film studios and TV networks. Even though the content produced by con-bloggers remains apart from industry buzz, they adopt media industry strategies to promote their blogs. Con-bloggers place ads on their websites, partner with sponsors, and in some cases, make the transition from amateur to geek media professional. Indeed, con-blogging is turning into an industry, fueled by but external to the media industry’s promotional machine.

In the following sections, I first introduce the space and experience of SDCC to provide a foundation for my analysis of con-blogs and those who create them. Next, I examine two prominent con-blogs, *The SDCC Unofficial Blog* (67,500 Twitter followers, founded in 2009) and *Crazy 4 Comic-Con* (12,000 Twitter followers, founded in 2010). I analyze how *The SDCC Unofficial Blog* and *Crazy 4 Comic-Con* create a discourse of space and time at SDCC that is both practical and mythological: it provides concrete steps for navigating the con but also upholds the notion that gaining access to its biggest attractions is akin to a quest. In the final section, I examine con-bloggers’ adoption of industrial promotional strategies including branding, sponsors, and parties. My analysis draws on five years of closely following each blog’s posts, tweets, and video podcasts in combination with my own observations as attendee at SDCC. I participated in the activities highlighted in con-blogs, including waiting in line for hours, attending panels in the biggest rooms, and vying for autographs, merchandise, and swag.

I chose these two blogs for analysis because they represent key aspects of con-blogging, such as strategies for navigating wait times, room sizes, panel popularity, and gaining access to
SDCC. *The SDCC Unofficial Blog* is the most popular con-blog (based on Twitter followers), and covers all aspects of the convention. Its all-white team is representative of con-blogging as, in Mel Stanfill’s words, a “predominantly white fandom,” in which normative whiteness is presumed as default identity and diversity is rarely discussed (2018, p. 306). *Crazy 4 Comic-Con* exhibits a journey of increasing professionalization with founder Tony Kim moving from con-blogger to panel moderator to owner of geek fashion brand Hero Within. Kim’s entry into the geek industry parallels con-blogging’s overall trajectory toward an embrace of self-promotion and branding. Kim used to be a part of SDCCUB’s team, but split from them over differences in how to monetize their content. Like many con-bloggers, Kim lives in Southern California, which provides him with easy access to San Diego. Kim identifies as Asian American and is one of the few con-bloggers who regularly speaks out about issues of racial diversity. The con-blogging scene is split fairly evenly between men and women (based on self-identification). There are many other con-blogs, including *An Englishman in San Diego*, *Friends of CCI*, *Outside Comic-Con*, and *Parks and Cons*, each of which address specific aspects of the convention. CCI hosts *Toucan*, the official SDCC blog, but it lacks the detailed strategic information offered by con-bloggers.

“We’ll see you in line somewhere:”¹ Con-Blogging and the Space of SDCC

In order to grasp the significance and content of con-blogging, it is important to understand SDCC as space and experience. Inside the convention center, con-goers can attend panels all day long or visit the showfloor, which offers 525,000 square feet of opportunities for consumption, including exclusive merchandise and free swag (see Figure 2). Finally, SDCC hosts autograph

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sessions with celebrities. Many related events—known as “offsites”—have sprung up in the downtown area. Offsites include virtual reality experiences promoting films and TV shows, brands, and video games. The rise of con-blogging goes hand-in-hand with the increasing popularity of SDCC, which in turn is a result of the mainstreaming of geek culture over the past decade (Scott, A.O. 2015, Stein 2015).

Figure 2. A floor plan of the San Diego convention center. Created by Comic-Con International.

Panels, merchandise, and celebrities are the most discussed aspects of the convention in the mainstream press. However, space and scheduling are equally important. The space of the convention center and the scheduling of panels shape the practical experience of SDCC and are at the heart of con-blogging. Over the course of a day, an attendee usually visits panel rooms, the exhibit hall, and mingles in the hallways. Room sizes vary sharply, ranging from 168 seats in the smallest venue to 6,500 in Hall H and 4,250 in Ballroom 20. Panels are scheduled back-to-back the entire day with minimal breaks. Rooms are not cleared between panels, which means that once you have a seat, you can stay for as many panels as you like. Unlike other conventions, Comic-Con does not sell VIP packages that guarantee access to panels; the only way to gain access to a panel is to wait in line. Even con-bloggers and TV critics with a press badges need to
wait in line with regular attendees. The combination of available seats, scheduling policies, and high numbers of attendees leads to long lines (see Figure 3).

![Figure 3. Early morning lines. On the left, people camping out for the next day. On the right, people waiting to enter the convention center. Photo by the author.](image)

Almost everything at SDCC requires waiting in line; consequently, the discussion of when to line up for which room or piece of merchandise is central to con-blogging. For example, Tony Kim says that “how to get into Hall H” is the number-one search topic that drives traffic to his site (2015b). It is no coincidence that con-bloggers have referred to SDCC as “line-con.”

Lining up costs time; as con-blogger James Riley puts it, “[t]ime is the currency you spend at Comic-Con to get things done” (San Diego Comic-Con Unofficial Blog, 2017b). Decisions about how to spend one’s time at SDCC are strategic: you need to know how the con works in order to decide how to invest your limited supply of hours every day. From con-bloggers’ point of view,
failing to understand how room sizes, scheduling, and demand intersect diminishes one’s chances at having the best possible experience at SDCC.

Con-bloggers’ investment in mastery of SDCC’s schedule and spaces reveals most clearly that they are fans of an experience rooted in a specific space and time. This insight challenges common scholarly and industrial definitions of fandom as coalescing around specific texts. Scholars in Fan and Media Industry studies examine a wide range of fan practices, including the production of transformative works (fan fiction and art), collecting, cosplay, activism, and fan debates around diversity and media representation, to name just a few. Scholarly analyses of physical sites associated with fandom are less prominent and focus on conventions and filming locations; in most cases, scholars investigate how fans’ investment in a specific text shapes their experience of a physical location, such as the Doctor Who experience in Cardiff and the Wizarding World of Harry Potter, or their interactions at a convention, e.g. the experience of sharing Star Trek’s values with other fans (Couldry 1999, Garner 2016, Waysdorff and Reijnders 2018, Williams 2018, Zubernis and Larsen 2018). In analyses of fan tourism, the site has meaning because it served as filming location or because it recreates the diegetic space. In studies of fan conventions, the physical site gains meaning through its association with a text. Discussing anime conventions, Nicolle Lamerichs (2014) acknowledges that fan conventions are “affective spaces” that hold great significance for attendees (p. 264). At the same time, she argues that “a convention identity emerges independent of physical place” because the affective meaning of the space centers on fans’ shared love of anime (Lamerichs 2014, 269). Likewise, Jennifer Porter (2004) asserts in her discussion of Star Trek conventions as a site of pilgrimage that “[a] convention, after all, can be held anywhere—any town, any country—and fans will attend” (p. 168). Star Trek conventions become a pilgrimage destination because the philosophy
of “Infinite Diversity in Infinite Combinations” comes alive through the meeting with other fans at the convention; the physical space in which these meetings takes place matters little (Porter 2004, 165). Kane Andersen (2014) and other scholars in Performance Studies discuss how cosplay can transform the space of Comic-Con; the presence of cosplayers gives attendees a glimpse of beloved fictional worlds (Andersen 2014, 19). In contrast to Andersen, Lamerichs, and Porter, Anne Gilbert argues that SDCC has become “a media ritual without specific textual affiliation” where fans have the chance to pursue “a sense of intimacy with a broader media world” of celebrities and industry news (Gilbert 2017, p. 360-361). In a study of toy collectors at SDCC, Lincoln Geraghty offers the most thorough analysis of Comic-Con’s spaces and their emotional significance. He argues that “the San Diego Convention Center, the city, associated buildings and tourist sites become a geography of nostalgic recollection” (Geraghty 2014, p. 103). He acknowledges the significance of the spaces in which SDCC takes place, particularly their relevance in convention attendees’ fond memories. Geraghty (2014) proposes that it is the interaction among attendees, industry, and space that turns SDCC into a “vast playground of memories and texts, superheroes and fans, signs and objects, ephemera and commodities” (p. 103).

Building on these observations, I argue that the specific physical space of the San Diego Convention Center matters to con-bloggers, and not only because it serves as an entry point to a media world. Particular rooms, such as Ballroom 20 and Hall H, have become infused with their own mythology to the point that con-bloggers have strategies for gaining entry to each room that vary with the topic of the panel and the time of day. In the case of con-blogging, the text and the location are one and the same: if there is a shared text that motivates con-bloggers’ affective investment in the convention center, it is their memories of SDDC. Even during visits to filming
locations, text and space are not as fused as in the experience of SDCC and the convention center; filming locations, even ones as expertly staged as Hobbiton in New Zealand, only provide a partial experience of the diegesis, and are always temporally removed. SDCC-as-text diverges from a conventional fictional narrative as it is produced by con-bloggers themselves, and only indirectly by the media industry (as the media industry creates the panels around which con-bloggers’ memories form).

In its convergence of space and experience, SDCC is similar to music and film festivals. The Glastonbury Festival of Contemporary Performing Arts, which started in the same year as Comic-Con, has also grown from a small gathering to a commercialized media event (Flinn and Frew 2014, p. 421). In their analysis of the festival, Jenny Flinn and Matt Frew argue that attendees’ social media usage creates an “alternative live narrative to that of managerial prescription and promotion” (p. 419). While the creation of a live narrative parallels the ways in which con-bloggers update their followers about the status of lines and waiting times during SDDC, and thus create information that does not directly relate to the promotional content shared at panels, the social media engagement around Glastonbury is less sustained than the year-round con-blogging and not embedded in a cohesive community. Similarly, one-off advice blog posts exist for the Sundance Film festival, New York Fashion Week, or SXSW, but they do not constitute a blogging culture dedicated to examining the logistics of these events. For example, fashion blogger Kristin Chambless wrote an advice post entitled “How to Attend NYFW for the First-Time Blogger,” but overall her blog is dedicated to “sharing fashion inspiration” and “travel, home décor + beauty” (Chambless 2017, 2018). Moreover, Chambless is a professional blogger, whereas con-bloggers do not blog professionally (Perhaps the closest parallel to con-
blogging are the regional Burning Man communities that co-exist in online and offline spaces (Bowditch 2010).

The practice of con-blogging also expands previous scholarly analyses in Media Industries Studies and Fan Studies that define the relationship between fans and industry at SDCC exclusively through the lens of promotion and consumption. It is undeniable that the industry’s main goal at SDCC is the promotion of upcoming properties and the encouragement of consumption. Tim Baysinger asserts in Broadcasting and Cable that “[t]elevision in particular has taken advantage of the show as a marketing platform” (2014). In AdAge, Tobias Bauckhage shares that “San Diego Comic-Con provides a unique opportunity for marketers to adopt a grand scale with their promotions” (2015). From this point of view, the industry may appear as the dominant force at SDCC. Erin Hanna (2014) argues that SDCC offers the media industry a chance to “reassert its cultural and economic power by presenting them [fans] with exclusive experiences framed as rewards for their loyalty” (p. 189). Overall, Hanna observes that fans find themselves in a “position of subjugation in relation to Comic-Con organizers, and even more significantly, the massive media industries that this event supports” (p. 135). In short, according to Hanna, SDCC is an “industry space” that aims for a “controlled and universal experience” for fans (2013). Such a stark view of fan-industry relations does not take fans’ agency into account; it also cannot account for con-blogging’s intense preoccupation with logistics that often supersedes the industry’s offerings. In “Live from Hall H” Anne Gilbert (2017) offers a more nuanced view of fan-industry engagement at SDCC. She argues that the fan-industry relationship is one of interdependence. After all, the industry needs promotions to translate into profit—in Gilbert’s words, fans’ “responses to (and potential rejection of) upcoming media properties is a powerful economic consequence of producers who fail to generate genuine fan interest” (p. 367).
At times, the industry invests heavily into promotion at SDCC, as was the case with the TV program *Almost Human* (2013), produced by J.J. Abrams and starring Karl Urban, which had a presence through a pilot screening, a panel, and a signing. Yet, fans didn’t respond, and Fox cancelled the show after one season. Similar failures include *Enders Game* (2013) and *Fantastic Four* (2015).

*The SDCC Unofficial Blog* and *Crazy 4 Comic-Con: Time, Space, Strategy*
The story of a failed autograph quest illustrates con-blogging’s preoccupation with space, time, and the value of SDCC. In a video called “SDCC Prep: 2016 Guide to Exhibit Floor San Diego Comic-Con,” Shawn Marshall shares a story about fellow con-blogger Kerry Dixon’s attempt to get an autograph from the cast of *The Avengers* (Marshall 2016). He explains that they practiced the fastest route through the exhibit floor to the signing and that Kerry lined up overnight but ultimately did not get an autograph. Looking back on this experience, Marshall says:

“[S]omething we really love about San Diego is *trying to learn as many parts of the con as we can* . . . [i]t didn’t work, all that time, but she got a really cool story, a really cool experience, and you know, to us, *San Diego Comic-Con is more about stories than any of the exclusives or swag*” (emphasis mine).

Marshall’s story does not center on the missed opportunity of meeting the cast of *The Avengers*. Rather, it highlights the mastery of the convention space and the importance of experience and memory-making.

Strategic knowledge, physical space, and ephemeral experiences are persistent themes in the content produced by *The SDCC Unofficial Blog* (SDCCUB) and *Crazy 4 Comic-Con*. Both blogs produce content year-round, but most intensely in the months between ticket sales and the
convention. In the month leading up to SDCC, both blogs make numerous posts per day and field questions on social media. During SDCC, con-bloggers share real-time updates with attendees, who often share information about line lengths and room capacities. In addition to their website, Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook presence, SDCCUB also has a YouTube channel with 195 videos that address the convention, the ticket-buying process, and the hotel room lottery. Tony Kim has a presence on the same platforms. Beyond blogging, Kim participates in panels, including “I’m not a sidekick: Diversity in pop culture.” As moderator, Kim has hosted panels at numerous conventions with e.g. the cast of Doctor Who. Below, I analyze two sets of strategy videos by Kim and SDCCUB, both of which contribute to an ongoing valorization of certain rooms and practices.

Once Comic-Con International releases the SDCC schedule two weeks before the convention, SDCCUB produces special editions of the “SD ConCast,” their regular video podcast shared on their YouTube channel. The editorial team discusses how to access the most popular panels. Over the course of two hours, editors weigh room sizes, popularity of panels, and past experiences in order to predict when attendees should line up. The editors value expert knowledge of the convention center’s floorplan and of CCI’s line management. Consider the following exchange from 2016:

Kerry Dixon: So, so let’s talk about when you have to get in line for this panel. I had someone ask me earlier today if they could go to a 10am panel in another room and then make it back here [to Hall H] for Marvel Studios [scheduled at 5:30pm]. Yeah, no.

James Riley: No.

Kerry Dixon, laughing: No. This—this line, this is the biggest day, this is the biggest line-up of all Comic-Con weekend, of all Comic-Con week. Basically, if you’re not in
line for this [panel] long before the sun rises, you’re not getting in because there will be very very little turnover, um, until after Marvel Studios. . . . basically, the people are going to pack in there for Marvel Studios and everything else and nobody is going to leave.

James Riley: Right.

This exchange is typical of con-bloggers’ advice and strategies. Using their knowledge of Marvel Studio’s popularity, CCI’s rule of not clearing panel rooms, and attendees’ previous behavior, Dixon and Riley dismiss the possibility of attending panels in Hall H and another room on the same day. Indeed, the mere idea seems laughable to them. Based on personal experience of lines at SDCC, I understand their reaction. The Hall H line comprises thousands of people during all days of SDCC, and making it into Hall H for the most popular panels is considered an achievement. Put simply, Hall H is the Mount Everest of SDCC. It looms large in the imagination of con-bloggers and attendees alike; making it into Hall H is a result of careful planning and dedication (and most likely sleeping outside on the sidewalk). The reward for this dedication is being in the room where all-star casts appear and exclusive clips are screened. Or even, as in the case of the 2015 Star Wars: The Force Awakens panel, having the chance to attend a private concert with the San Diego Philharmonic and fireworks on the nearby marina (Bishop and Opam, 2015). The prospect of taking part in those experiences fuels con-bloggers’ (and other attendees’) investment in SDCC.

Tony Kim’s “Survival Guide,” an eleven-part YouTube series addressing strategic planning for SDCC 2015, fulfills a similar function as SDCCUB’s videos. Kim provides the most sought-after information and shares personal advice. For example, in “How to Get into a
Panel!”, Kim provides practical information, like CCI’s rules for the Hall H line-up process. Like the SDCCUB editors, he also repeats the conventional wisdom that overnight camping is almost a requirement for getting into Hall H. He adds, “so to get into this room, it’s a real commitment” (Kim 2015a). But he also stresses that among all the strategizing, attendees should not forget how to have fun. His concluding remark highlights con-bloggers’ investment in experiences and memory: “Programming will make some of the most memorable experiences at Comic-Con” (Kim, 2015a). In addition to this survival guide, Kim’s blog also features posts that provide advice to SDCC attendees.

The SDCCUB videos and Tony Kim’s survival guide share a number of characteristics. Both are tailored to that year’s schedule, providing fans with insights into how to plan for that year’s SDCC in particular. Here, memory meets speculation to predict what will be most popular. Additionally, putting out new guides for each year’s convention also maintains interest in their blogs. While much of the advice is the same from year to year, con-bloggers tailor tips for each upcoming convention based on their experiences the previous year, new CCI policies, and unique factors particular to the upcoming convention. The creation of specific guides for each convention ensures that readers continue to visit the blogs and sustain their popularity.

SDCCUB and Kim’s strategies for getting into the most popular panels underline that while con-bloggers exist outside of the typical fan-industry interactions at SDCC, con-bloggers are not the kind of resistant fans that have long been the focus of scholarly analyses. Con-bloggers have a strong investment in SDCC and embrace the media industry’s presence at the convention. Con-bloggers often voice criticisms of the way ticket sales, hotels, and lines are organized, but they also strive to comply with the existing system in order to have access to the convention. The ultimate goal of con-blogging is enabling attendees to be in the room where
Marvel announces their latest film, purchase this year’s hottest Hasbro toy, or get a favorite celebrity’s autograph. In this sense, con-bloggers are affirmational fans, i.e. fans who celebrate the vision of creators (Obsession_inc 2009). On the other hand, con-bloggers are also transformational fans, i.e. those who use media texts as jumping-off point for their own art and fiction (Obsession_inc 2009). Con-bloggers take their memories of SDCC and transform them into knowledge that is circulated among fellow attendees. Moreover, con-bloggers continuously emphasize that what they cherish most is the experience and community of SDCC, not owning the most desirable merchandise. Occasionally, con-bloggers critique the consistent encouragement to consume. Regarding the demise of NerdHQ, a popular non-profit offsite, Kerry Dixon remarked that it was special because “across the street [in the convention center], everybody is just trying to sell you something” (SDConCast 2018). Dixon’s comment illustrates that con-bloggers experience frustration with the industry’s persistent encouragement to consume even as con-bloggers pass on these encouragements, e.g. by sharing news about exclusive merchandise, and use promotional strategies to draw readers to their blogs.

The Industry of Con-Blogging: Community Creation, Branding, and Professionalization

At SDCC 2015-18, Tony Kim hosted meet-ups attended by over a hundred con-bloggers (2017). This number shows that the con-blogging scene—or the fandom of SDCC—has developed into a noticeable network of knowledge production and cultural exchange. The goals of the meet-up are manifold: to share the love of Comic-Con, to network with other con-bloggers, and to give readers the chance to meet their favorite bloggers. The event parallels other parties at SDCC organized by the media industry that blend celebration with promotion. Kim’s blogger meet-up is just one example of increasing parallels between con-blogging and industry promotion.
Both bloggers and industry are invested in drawing fans to their products, defining a clear brand, and transforming information into revenue. In the case of con-bloggers, this revenue may be monetary, but mostly consists of attention, gratitude, or making new friends. The industry focuses on revenue in the form of brand loyalty and future profit by promoting new films and TV shows, building temporary branded entertainment experiences, and direct sales of merchandise. While con-blogging is largely invisible to the industry, con-bloggers adopt media industry strategies to promote their blogs: they tease with exclusive news, hold panels on creating personal brands as part of the official SDCC programming, and make money through ads on their blogs. It is perhaps no surprise that con-bloggers, who are so invested in understanding all aspects of SDCC, would know how to adapt branding and promotional strategies of branding and promotion. While the content of con-blogging—room sizes, panel schedules, wait times—is not focused on industry content like films and TV shows, the structure of how con-bloggers address their audience is increasingly similar to how the industry addresses their fans. This development shows another facet of con-blogging as an “extra” to the media industry. Both SDCCUB and Tony Kim have carefully branded their blogs. For example, SDCCUB has a logo that appears on their site, social media accounts, and Google hangouts. Tony Kim’s brand is rooted in his dedication to SDCC (hence the blog title Crazy 4 Comic-Con), his idea of creating a new “mission” for each convention, and his yearly creation of a blazer made from the large WB logo bags handed out to SDCC attendees—a tradition that eventually led him to create a geek fashion brand for men.

At SDCC 2015, Tony Kim participated in a panel about con-blogging, and has joined similar panels with an emphasis on geek fashion branding. The 2015 panel featured four prominent con-bloggers who discussed how they got started, found their brand, and gave advice
for con-blogging newbies. Kim explained that creating a successful con-blog weighs the attendees’ “felt need” to learn about how to get into panels against their “real” need, which he defines as “community, creativity, connection” (Kim, 2015b). Kim’s emphasis on community and connection echoes Shawn Marshall’s failed autograph story: it is the communal experience of SDCC that matters, not meeting the Avengers cast. At the same time, Kim and other con-bloggers understand that they need to cater to attendees’ “felt need” in order to ensure their blogs’ popularity. Kim traces his success to understanding his audience and blending their interests with his own values.

Panelists also emphasized the need to develop a passionate “why” that defines one’s con-blog. Kim states, “The ‘why’ has to permeate everything that you do” and underlines that readers “only connect with you and stay with you if they connect with your ‘why,’ the passion behind it” (Kim, 2015b). In industry terms, this “why” is the con-blogger’s individual brand. Kim repeated this advice in a 2016 post about the core values of his blog, stating that a con-blog needs to have a clearly articulated focus, which “helps you build your brand” (Kim, 2016b). In addition to using the term “brand,” Kim also refers to bloggers as “content creators,” suggesting an increasing professionalization that frames con-blogging in media industry discourse.

The “Wrath of Con-Bloggers” panel most clearly demonstrates parallels between the industry’s activities at SDCC and con-blogging. The panel’s format mirrors other career advice panels where established comic writers and artists provide guidance for those breaking into the profession. Similarly, Kim’s emphasis on finding your “why” echoes TV networks and comics publishers’ pursuit of creating a brand with which consumers identify. Finally, Kim’s appeal to “find your passion” in con-blogging recalls media industry professionals’ statements. At public events, TV producers and writers often discuss how storytelling—their passion—is at the center
of the work they do; they rarely talk about money as incentive or constraint in their work. Similarly, con-bloggers highlight their passion for SDCC and their desire to connect with other fans, but do not often discuss the money that is also at stake in con-blogging. Con-bloggers generate small profits from their blogs via advertising.

The divided opinions about generating revenue via con-blogs became public in 2013, when Tony Kim quit the SDCCUB editorial team. In a post, he discusses his reasons for leaving the blog, which at the time had greater exposure than Kim’s still-new site. Kim reveals tensions in the con-blogging scene that usually stay hidden from readers:

Then we made a move into advertising and plastering ads all over the site with now the focus becoming about generating traffic. So again, I talked to Jeremy [the former editor of SDCCUB] about this and he made it very clear that we are going to monetize this with and the focus was going to be on gaining numbers. I didn’t like it because it took our focus off of the fans but I stuck with it. I have nothing against advertising, but the focus to me changed at that point from fans to attracting clicks (Kim, 2014).

Kim shares his frustration with former SDCCUB editor Jeremy Rutz’s decision to add advertising to the blog. As Kim’s post is the only one discussing this controversy, it is difficult to verify his claims. It shows that conversations about monetization of con-blogging have taken place for several years and that con-bloggers develop strategies for attracting traffic to their sites. Both Kim and SDCCUB promote their posts on Twitter. To varying degrees, both also repost official information from CCI with short editorial commentary. One might see that as encouraging fans to read official SDCC information on their sites rather than CCI’s blog and thus profiting from the additional traffic, or one can see this as service to those who might not
pay attention to CCI’s blog. In either case, con-bloggers are concerned with generating content that attracts traffic. Kim’s post also shows his emerging personal brand of providing desirable information and creating a sense of community among SDCC attendees. Con-bloggers value community, but the stand-off between Kim and SDCCUB reveals the fractures running through their fandom.

Since Kim’s post, the landscape of con-blogging has moved toward professionalization and sponsorship. It is difficult to imagine the same argument about the monetization of con-blogging erupting again. Con-bloggers have openly embraced the monetization of their passion for SDCC and both have created events that strengthen their brand. For example, SDCCUB partners with Uber to provide discounts to their readers, and they also hosted a giveaway during SDCC 2017 that featured prizes by over 30 sponsors (Dixon 2017a, Unofficial San Diego Comic-Con Blog, 2017c). Moreover, some con-bloggers have transitioned from amateurs to industry professionals. In 2016, Tony Kim launched his men’s fashion label called Hero Within featuring “high-end style for everyday geeks” (Hero Within 2017). Officially licensed by DC and Marvel Comics, Hero Within sells clothing that subtly displays superhero logos. The company’s name underlines Kim’s interest in diversity; as he explains, “I believe there is a hero within all of us. Regardless of age, sex, orientation, social economics, race, culture or beliefs, we all have the capacity to inspire, lead, sacrifice, serve and save. So I developed a line of men’s apparel to reflect this” (Kim 2016a). Within a year, Hero Within went from offering small quantities of clothes to being featured on DC’s webstore and becoming an exhibitor at SDCC (see Figure 4). The successful launch of Hero Within rests on Kim’s persistent expansion of his con-blogging activities; within only seven years, Kim went from SDCC attendee to blogger, panel moderator, and finally, exhibitor. Kim does not advocate that all con-bloggers follow his path, but he
frequently speaks about creating a successful geek brand should others wish to emulate his success.

Figure 4. Tony Kim presents Hero Within at SDCC 2017. Photo by the author.

Kim’s career is part of the rise of “geek chic” and his transformation from fan to professional fits the narrative of “going pro” in which hobbies function as training wheels for professional development, especially for male fans (Brooker 2014, Scott, S. 2013). Hero Within is one of several fan-focused fashion companies founded in the last decade, such as HerUniverse, which Ashley Eckstein created out of frustration with the lack of geeky apparel for women (Lane 2015). While both Eckstein and Kim aim to shake things up, Derek Johnson argues that brands like HerUniverse do not subvert the gendered dynamics of geek fashion. Rather, they revitalize traditional franchising logics built around normative gender ideals; as such, “Eckstein markets her store by claiming to know what female fans want, with her entrepreneurial femininity giving
her natural insight into that market” (Johnson 2014, p. 900). Kim similarly merges his identity as wearer of sophisticated fashion with his con-blogger identity to promote Hero Within.

As SDCCUB’s close relationship with sponsors and Kim’s journey from blogger to professional shows, blogging about first-hand experiences at Comic-Con is becoming an industry in and of itself, motivated by but external to the media industry’s promotional machine. There are some signs that con-blogging may not stay off the industry’s radar for much longer as both SDCCUB’s “2 Blog 2 Furious” meet-up and Kim’s “Game of Bloggers” were featured in The Hollywood Reporter’s party guide for SDCC 2017 (Goldberg, 2017). But con-bloggers’ investment in logistics rather than promoting media industry content may also mean that they remain in a supplemental role.

Adventures of Prize Mule and Beyond

In 2017, SDCCUB launched a contest called Adventures of Prize Mule. Using stuffed animals hidden in the convention center and surrounding areas, the editors gave away prizes donated by sponsors and swag with their blog’s logo. The editors tweeted photos of seemingly non-descript locations and handed out the prize to the first person who found the “prize mule.” This contest exemplifies the core principles of con-blogging in its current state. First, being able to find the prize mule requires detailed knowledge of the convention center and thus once again highlights con-bloggers’ appreciation of mastering the spaces of SDCC. Second, the contest encourages SDCCUB’s followers to pay close attention during the convention—a time of information overload when attendees’ attention is perhaps not as focused on con-blogs as in the lead-up to the convention. In order to ensure that followers are aware of the prize mule contest, SDCCUB promoted the contest extensively via social media. Third, the branded swag handed out via the
prize mules serves as promotion of SDCCUB, much like the swag given out by media companies at SDCC. This is another example of con-bloggers’ adoption of media industry strategies.

Finally, while the end goal of the contest is obtaining a prize, it is also the experience of figuring out where the prize mule is hidden and the thrill of finding it first that drives the contest.

Similarly, as I have stressed throughout this essay, con-blogging’s end goal is making it easier for readers to get into a panel or buying an exclusive, but the journey there and memories formed on this journey are equally important. As Kerry Dixon observed regarding SDCC 2017: “year after year, the thing that makes San Diego Comic-Con truly great is the people. Catching up with old friends, making new ones, bonding with strangers in line – those are the memories that will last a lot longer than some Hall H footage” (Dixon, 2017b).

Dixon’s comment is an important reminder that various facets shape the relationship between con-blogging and the media industry. One might see con-blogging as playing into the industry’s hand by providing free advertising for panels and merchandise and by adopting promotional strategies, but this perspective only captures parts of con-blogging and disregards the transformative knowledge production that centers on space, time, and memory. The best summary of con-bloggers’ affective investments in SDCC’s culture of promotion appears in Shawn Marshall’s video about free swag. He recalls receiving a piece of origami paper promoting the ABC program Lost: “And this was something, I mean, junk to a lot of people, but to us, really loving that show, it mattered” (Marshall, 2017). In one sentence, Marshall expresses why people come to SDCC and put up with crowds and lines: because something there matters to them. In this example, what matters is a small token associated with a favorite show. In Anne Gilbert’s words, items of swag become “touchstones of cultural meaning” (2017, p. 359). For Marshall, the origami paper is both a memento associated with Lost and a physical trace of a
cherished SDCC memory. Here, Marshall’s investment in a text gets folded into the practice of con-blogging, as he shares it as one of many stories about swag at SDCC.

Beyond the specific context of SDCC, Paul Booth (2015) asserts that in the current moment, fans exist “within both dominant and resistant identities/practices simultaneously” (p. 14). Accordingly, analyses of fan-industry relations should not fall into an either/or paradigm of dominance/resistance, but rather recognize “enduring moments of temporal connectivity” between fans and industry (p. 12). SDCC and con-blogging offer concrete instances of how fan-industry interactions create encounters that are both ephemeral and enduring. Considering this relationship as one in flux allows the recognition that “fandom exists as separate from (and therefore, able to be valued in relation to) the industry” (Booth 2015, p. 12). Con-blogging’s status as an adjacent yet external “extra” to the industry’s promotional efforts illustrates this duality: con-blogging exists in close relationship to the industry, but has value beyond this relationship. This value resides in con-bloggers’ investment in space, time, memory, and community.

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