

## **Facing the Heels: Fannish Producers Constructing an Alternative “Shoot” History of Professional Wrestling through New Media**

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*Few phenomena have the enduring cultural reach and economic durability of professional wrestling. One company, World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE), effectively controls the majority of its recorded history owning the tape libraries of nearly every North American wrestling organization from before the year 2000. Through this ownership, it provides a flattering corporate history in an Orwellian manner. However, through new media content, fans have constructed an “alternative history” (Dawson and Holmes) of the hegemonic “worked” history provided by WWE. To investigate this, we conducted in-depth interviews with seven of the best-known producers of dirt sheets, podcasts/vodcasts, and shoot interviews in the industry. Their content is seen in over 200 countries by an audience of millions. Their “fannish productions” (Jenkins; Watson) focus on the “shoot,” or factual elements of the industry and demonstrates the power of fannish producers to disrupt hegemonic messages.*

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Professional wrestling has an enduring cultural reach and economic durability. After years of increasing earnings, World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) reported revenues of \$960.4 million, which is the company’s most profitable year to date (“WWE Reports 2019 and 2020 Business Outlook”). In 2020, WWE media reached

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900 million homes worldwide with programming translated into twenty-eight languages for more than 180 countries (“Company Overview”). In addition, WWE boasts partnerships with big-name corporations like Coca-Cola, Microsoft, Mars, and Kentucky Fried Chicken that have quadrupled in revenue since 2011 (Santana). Despite the nearly century-long popularity of professional wrestling, few fandoms carry more stigma. Professional wrestling fans generally begin watching at a young age as enthusiastic fans (“marks”) and their fannish roles and activities shift with age as they get “smart” to the business (Koh).

The modern era of wrestling has experienced two boom periods: during its nationalization (1984-1988) and during the television wars of the late ‘90s (1997-2001). For each period of extended popularity, professional wrestling had mainstream visibility, incredible television ratings, and multiple companies in competition with one another. The World Wrestling Federation (WWF) competed with the National Wrestling Alliance (NWA) and American Wrestling Association (AWA) in the 1980s and World Championship Wrestling (WCW) and Extreme Championship Wrestling (ECW) in the 1990s (Hester). By 2001, the WWF had bought out every major competitor, including the complete tape library of each. By 2014, in preparation for the launch of its over-the-top video streaming on demand (OTT VSoD) service, the organization had amassed the tape libraries of twenty-two major wrestling territories dating back to the 1930s from all over the United States and Canada. According to a 2015 presentation by WWE Chief Strategy and Financial Officer George Barrios, the company holds the master tapes and rights to 150,000 hours of television broadcasts, pay-per-views, and live event footage. These tape libraries contain nearly all of the televised wrestling in North American history with only a few exceptions. Effectively, WWE owns the recorded history of professional wrestling and now selectively represents the previous century in a manner flattering to its brand.

From the 1980s to the early 2000s, each WWF/E video, pay-per-view, and telecast began with a graphics package of the WWF/E logo with a voiced over slogan such as “The WWF: What the World is watching” and “The World Wrestling Federation: For over fifty years, the revolutionary force in sports entertainment.” In 2005, the company began its current practice of using its video library to construct a twenty-second introduction video of footage and audio quotes of the most important individuals in the history of professional wrestling. The first video package featured the iconic footage of Hulk Hogan and Mick Foley falling off of a steel cage at the 1998 King of the Ring, and the voice of the WWF/E Jim Ross calling the action. However, each time that an employee did something outside of the WWE bubble, they were written out of wrestling's history. Ross found himself on

the other side of the WWE bubble after being pulled from WrestleMania 26 and, ultimately, replaced by commentator Michael Cole (Ross and O'Brien). Other notable examples of WWE's revision of history include the reintroduction into WWE packages of footage of the Ultimate Warrior, who had been omitted from all previous packages before reconciling with WWE. The contentious and negative 2005 DVD *The Self-Destruction of the Ultimate Warrior* altered the wrestler's transmedia story by reshaping perceptions of history in a way that benefitted WWE's corporate interests (Medjesky). As part of the reconciliation, WWE yet again altered history releasing 2014's celebratory *Ultimate Warrior: The Ultimate Collection* and the flattering posthumous *Ultimate Warrior: Always Believe*. In that same timespan, all mentions of Hulk Hogan were deleted from WWE programming, merchandise, and web content when recordings of Hogan using an unforgivable racial slur surfaced on TMZ (Fears and Lehman). Most recently, the WWE's momentary erasure of superstar Roman Reigns's memory over his refusal to participate in WrestleMania 36 (Hampi) further shows that the official history of professional wrestling is ultimately malleable.

However, beginning in the 1980s, fans began producing publications called "dirt sheets" that focused on independent reporting of wrestling events, especially the business and relational portion (McBride and Bird). With the proliferation of the Internet, dirt sheets spread and gave birth to new media content such as podcasts (on-demand audio broadcasts) and vodcasts (video on-demand broadcasts) discussing the art and business of professional wrestling as well as "shoot interviews" (interviews with wrestlers who usually no longer work for the WWE, who comment on the behind the scenes elements of historical events) where wrestlers discuss the actual occurrences of wrestling history out of character and without corporate pressure. Fans produce these media texts independent of WWE's massive influence in order to provide an alternative history of professional wrestling.

This study examines how the individuals who became fans during these periods in their youths spend their adulthoods constructing an "alternative history" (Dawson and Holmes) of the hegemonic version of professional wrestling's history provided by WWE. Though the hegemony, in this case WWE, cloaks its version of reality in a fabricated, naturalized feeling of "common sense," the less powerful subaltern group may form an alternative to the dominant "reality" only when it has the means and distribution to disrupt the hegemony (Gramsci). By engaging with authoritative industry voices free from dominant organizational pressure and distributing these productions, fannish producers effectively construct "an alternative, or 'counter memory,' to dominant industry discourses" (Dawson and Holmes 445). Though the alternative histories presented may differ, bring about

arguments, and prioritize prominent alternative voices like Dave Meltzer (Greene) over others, the very existence of these alternative histories challenges WWE's hegemonic control over wrestling's past and present.

And while youth fandom focuses on the in-ring "kayfabe" (fictional storyline) history for "marks," adult fandom calls attention to the "shoot" (unscripted, non-fiction reality) history and encourages "smart" fandom and "fannish production" (Jenkins; Watson). The "shoot" history provided by WWE is ultimately as Orwellian and "worked" as a fictional act meant to advance the current corporate narrative, one that would circulate unchecked without the alternatives provided by fannish producers. These fannish producers offer an alternative history by preserving and re-airing original broadcasts (many from video tape, before they were edited by WWE/F), producing and circulating "shoot interviews," and demonstrating the manipulations of the WWE's version of wrestling (such as raw cell phone videos of live events). Through interviews with these content creators, this article examines how construction of an alternative history stands in contrast to the current hegemonic pro-WWE narrative. This study extends our understanding of media and professional wrestling as well as the importance of fannish practices in the absence of an alternative voice.

### **Wrestling with Binaries**

Any examination of professional wrestling should begin with Barthes's seminal 1957 piece in *Mythologies*. Barthes approaches Parisian wrestling in the same manner as he reads *Elle Magazine*, Einstein's brain, or toys for children: by examining the binaries that construct its cultural meanings. Few phenomena are so driven by its binaries as professional wrestling, and a review of the somewhat sparse amount of research on it is filled with binaries. Barthes reads Parisian professional wrestling as a cultural manifestation of the binary between good and evil. Thirty years later, Sorkin found the same types of recurrent symbols in American culture where wrestlers are "rapidly comprehended [as] a force for good or ill ... from a combination of literal enormity (of muscle, of hairiness, or avoirdupois) with excessively schematic presentations of personality" (164). Barthes, Sorkin, and other subsequent authors (Ball; Carter; Leverette) focus on the good/evil binary found in the kayfabe, or fictional storyline component, of professional wrestling.

Other research on professional wrestling focuses on the binary of masculinity/femininity. These studies are also limited to the on-screen kayfabe content. Of note, Soulliere found through a content analysis of 118 WWE television programs and pay-per-views that wrestling circulates a hegemonic masculinity. "Real men" are aggressive, they settle differences through violence, they are confrontational, they take responsibility for their actions, they are winners, and not

whiners. This demonstration of masculinity occurs through “a soap-opera type serialized structure” (Leverette 32), a “ritual drama” (Ball), a “masculine melodrama” (Jenkins), a spectacle (Morton and O'Brien), and in “classical theatre” (de Garis).

Violence/non-violence has been the other dominant binary in professional wrestling research, with notable scholars turning their attention to the purported effects of wrestling violence. DuRant et al. found a correlation between viewing wrestling and self-reports of conflicts with romantic partners, fighting in and out of school, as well as bringing weapons to school. Tamborini et al. analyzed the verbal aggression present in wrestling. Most scholarly investigations of professional wrestling's on-screen content have focused on the meanings and effects of violence. Maguire suggests that wrestling's prolonged popularity may be due to wrestling celebrating violence while culture generally seeks to curb it.

There has been limited research on professional wrestling fandom and fannish activities, generally centered on the binary of “mark”/“smart.” McBride and Bird examined the negotiation process by which “marks,” defined as individuals who respond to the text in the dominant manner, turn into “smart” fans, defined as individuals with perceived knowledge about the backstage processes of creating wrestling content, as well as how the “smart” community is bolstered by positioning themselves above the unaware “marks.” Koh extended the previous study by demonstrating how “smart” fans felt a “relative insider-ness [as] they consume the WWE spectacle at a deeper level [and a] critical/cynical affect mobilised around the binary of ‘real’ and ‘fake’ [remaining] captured by the spectacle” (4). This spectacle is the unending search for knowledge on the inner workings of WWE. Only Burke went to observe individuals interacting with a text. She challenged the passive/active audience binary of wrestling fans by observing a group's viewing practices during the late 90s Monday Night Wars where *WCW Monday Nitro* and *WWF Raw* would air head-to-head on Monday nights. She found that they interpreted as a group in creative and adaptive ways “to shape their understanding of the world, and to bind together their particular, shared viewing culture” (Burke 5). While observing their viewing practices, Burke noticed that they would personalize and clarify meanings by visiting web pages, chat rooms, magazines, and wrestling biographies. These support texts profoundly impacted how they understood the on-screen action as well as allowing them to invest further into the content. This study examines the contemporary versions of the fannish productions that guided these viewers' interpretations.

### **The Producers**

The goal of this study was to gain an understanding of the function of popular fannish productions and well as how they structured their alternative histories. In

order to understand how they understood the current context of professional wrestling, we used in-depth interviews. In professional wrestling, audience studies are surprisingly rare. Burke's observational study on fans viewing *WCW Monday Nitro* and *WWF Raw* during the Monday Night Wars was the last professional wrestling study with qualitative audience data. This study was conducted in a manner similar to that of Dawson and Holmes. They examined the alternative histories of British film and television by interviewing a wide range of media workers in the industry who, unlike directors, actors, and producers, are generally omitted from the dominant history.

The first author conducted in-depth interviews with seven of the most popular producers from the United States and United Kingdom of alternative wrestling texts. Their texts in total have amassed over a billion views and have been viewed in over 200 countries. For dedicated fans of professional wrestling, these dirt sheets, pod/vodcasts, and shoot interviews provide essential paratexts (J. Gray) in order to interpret the official on-screen content of professional wrestling organizations. The reach and influence of these fannish productions extends far beyond what Jenkins or Watson initially envisioned.

We sought to include a wide range of types of fan productions including shoot interviews (both audio and video), video compilations, podcasts/vodcasts, archival sites, and news sites (both video interviews as well as dirt sheets). As such, six in-depth asynchronous interviews were conducted via e-mail with the following six individuals:

Sean Oliver – Co-owner and president of *Kayfabe Commentaries*. The New Jersey-based company has released hundreds of “shoot” interviews with some of the most famous names in wrestling providing unmatched insight into the inner-workings of the wrestling industry. Its model of the shoot interview heavily influenced the structure of the WWE Network.

Telly Bistis – Founder of *Title Match Wrestling*. Based out of Houston, Texas, the site provides exclusive video news and interviews about the wrestling industry. Its content has millions of views and has been remediated on ABC, NBC, Fox, and the CW.

Matthew Gregg – Founder of the famed compilation show *Botchamania*. Based out of Newcastle-Upon-Tyne U.K., the episodic show features unedited fan footage from events, mistakes (or “botches”) from major and independent organizations, and matching “shoot” information to the original broadcast. *Botchamania* is also notable for its lively and active digital community that selectively shares wrestling-based humor, opinions, and information (Dozal and

Morales). These fans frequently bring signs to wrestling events which reference the program.

Graham Cawthon – Founder and editor of *TheHistoryofWWE.com* based out of Shelby, North Carolina since 2003, the site has provided reviews and analyses of WWE, TNA, ROH, ECW, and WCW/NWA content. Additionally, it provide an archive of results and an audio shoot interview section. The WWE frequently credits the site for research on videos.

Luke Washington – Founder and owner of *piledriverwrestling.net*. Based out of Portland, Oregon, *Piledriver Wrestling* is both an episodic podcast examining wrestling industry news and content as well as the parent company of U.K.'s OSW Review vodcast. It seeks to report unbiased information and critically analyze current and historical events. The podcasts and vodcasts garner millions of views and downloads worldwide.

Dave Scherer – Owner of *PWInsider.com*. Based out of Las Vegas, Nevada, *PWInsider* is the sequel to *1Wrestling.com* (founded in 1997 with Joey Styles and Bob Ryder). This “dirt sheet” is one of the most-read sources for breaking wrestling news.

Brunsdon suggests four considerations that a researcher who acts as an instrument should retain throughout the research process. First, a researcher should provide their autobiographical starting point and continue self-reflection throughout the research process. Second, a researcher should engage with texts and individuals with which they both do and do not identify to avoid privileging one text or individual over another. Third, the researcher should consider historical factors while examining all data. Finally, the researcher should attempt to map future possibilities in regard to both theory and the cultural phenomenon. Throughout the process, we questioned our own assumptions about professional wrestling as well as the functions of fans and fannish productions. Additionally, these questions were constructed as non-directive to avoid coercing respondents into one position or another (McCracken) and to decrease the distance between researcher and respondent. These interviews resulted in sixty-two single-spaced pages of content which were coded openly and axially with extensive memoing (Corbin and Strauss) with the goal of understanding the perceived functions of and motivations for these alternative media texts. As these individuals had been fans for multiple decades and were immersed in the world of professional wrestling and media, a large amount of their direct quotes were selected to demonstrate the overall phenomena. Upon completing multiple rounds of analysis, for validation we engaged in member checking (Lindlof and Taylor) a summary of initial findings was sent back to two of the participants to check for resonance and quality. The results are found in the following section.

### Fannish Producers and History Outside of the WWE Bubble

As Barthes suggested in *Mythologies*, professional wrestling is an industry steeped in binaries. The split between good/evil, brave/cowardly, and attractive/grotesque continues from 1950s Paris in today's product. However, binaries such as truth(shoot)/storyline(work) and mark/smart that were so prevalent through the 1980s have shifted by what is now known as professional wrestling's 'reality era' between 2014 and 2016 (Jeffries). This era was defined by a notable increase in social media platforms, which fostered a proliferation of fannish producers and information that undermined much of WWE's kayfabe content ("Goodbye, PG Era"). Additionally, new binaries such as curating (selecting in order to construct an image)/archiving (pursuing an accurate and complete history via a multiplicity of texts) emerged during this time period.

For the first eighty years of professional wrestling, it was considered to be a legitimate athletic contest. Its secrets were tightly held by those "smart" to how the business worked and the storyline or "kayfabe" had to be protected from any non-wrestler. This storyline continued in every facet of the wrestler's lives. If they were a good guy (or "babyface") in the ring, that is how they would go through everyday life. The opposite was true for bad guys (or "heels"). According to NWA and ECW champion Terry Funk, promoters of territories would even prohibit heels and babyfaces from being seen together in public. Beginning in the 1980s, this divide began being dissolved by fannish producers such as *Wrestling Observer Newsletter* (WON) publisher/editor Dave Meltzer and *Pro Wrestling Torch Newsletter* (PWTorch) creator Wade Keller. Dirt sheets, like Meltzer and Keller's humble 1980s do-it-yourself newsletters, began reporting on "shoot" information outside of storyline. The long-form interviews and insider information published like WON and PWTorch saw dirt sheets pick up in production and distribution over the next several years (Rupar). In 1994, the dirt sheets received further legitimation when Vince McMahon testified in front of a federal court that pro wrestling matches were a work, referencing wrestlers as performers (Assael). By the late 1990s, the Internet provided a highly accessible forum for dirt sheets to circulate quickly, and suddenly anyone with a modem could become "smart" to the backstage information of the industry. For those lacking a modem, they could call either the WCW or ECW 1-900 number to get their "dirt." By the end of the 1990s, all wrestling was intentionally breaking kayfabe in the ring, discussing backstage "dirt" now as a part of the storyline. Terms such as a "worked shoot" (combining the two elements in a promo so that it seems real) and "working the boys" (not telling wrestlers about a storyline) arose to describe the situations that sought to blur the divide of reality and storyline (Reynolds and Alvarez; Bischoff).

The fannish producers interviewed describe themselves as existing in three in-between positions: in-between shoot/work, audience/performer, and mark/smart. In the divide between shoot and work, they seek to provide archives of occurrences, to integrate backstage information into the analysis of in-ring content, and to debunk popular myths about the wrestling industry. The form and function of these fannish archives, and the liveliness of the surrounding community, is what sustains fan engagement (de Kosnik et al.). Far beyond a simple storage space moderator, this in-between archivist role is one that is crucial to the counter-hegemonic alternative history infrastructure. Though a complete alternative wrestling archive is an impossible concept (Lothian), the act of archiving can be both powerful and transformative.

In addition to that of shoot/work archivists, fannish producers also live in the in-between of the audience/performer binary and dissolve and reconstruct the divide between mark and smart. These independent producers look to extend the life of an industry where the magic trick has been exposed and the boundaries been deconstructed and pushed to their logical extremes. However, in deconstructing these binaries, fannish producers also construct a new binary, the “WWE bubble”/independent.

Fannish producers often site the divide between the sanitized corporate narratives in contrast to their independent analyses in pursuit of a definitive truth. Matthew Gregg, of the show *Botchamania*, uses a pastiche of popular culture and wrestling texts in order to demonstrate humorous mistakes and provide shoot insights into historical situations. He discusses the attempt of the WWE to construct a bubble around its product:

WWF/E has an interesting version of current history. Their preferred method is for fans to watch their weekly shows but forget the things they then change/omit. The weekly shows become rough drafts for history and the video packages that air before the important PPV matches become the real history. They sometimes shift and change events so it constructs a superior narrative... WWE wants to live in a WWE-sized bubble where the outside world only exists when they tell you it exists.

In the WWE bubble, WWE uses only resources within the bubble to construct history, and it deploys these resources to construct history. History becomes fluid rather than archival. WWE utilizes a tape library, or archive, to construct an ever-changing narrative presented as history. Luke Washington, the owner and content creator of the podcast and news site *Piledriver Wrestling* contrasted sites like his with the WWE bubble:

It's unbiased, looks at industry trends worldwide, and compares the different approaches of other promotions. You can't analyze the industry in a "WWE bubble," because if you do, you will never have a full understanding of how things work, nor learn any real lessons.... Some of WWE/WCW's most successful periods in business have been directly because of observations and ideas that they took from other promotions that often fans feel are unimportant, or WWE has conditioned them to believe is unimportant. WCW's most successful storyline was inspired by the NJPW vs. UWFI interpromotional feud, the WWE Attitude Era was a mix of taking the WCW Nitro format, and looking at what smaller promotion ECW was doing at the time. ECW, in turn, was inspired by a host of Japanese promotions, most notably FMW.

The "conditioning" of fans in the WWE bubble minimizes the contributions of intellectual properties not started in the WWE bubble (ex: WCW, ECW) and omits the contributions of intellectual properties not held by WWE (e.g., Japanese wrestling like New Japan Pro Wrestling and Union of Wrestling Forces International). The audience only receives a simplified history without depth or nuance.

Williams suggests that culture activates both media text and audience by "setting limits [and] exerting pressures" (32) on the meanings produced and negotiated. The corporate culture at WWE has its own unique set of pressures and limitations. Graham Cawthon, who has constructed an archive of news, event results, and interviews at *TheHistoryofWWE.com* details some of the more minor changes that the WWE does to its archives:

From the original music to the promotional clips during the broadcast to even the production faux pas, I love the WWE Network, but it's footage that's been cleaned up. You won't catch many mistakes on there. In regard to the weekly TV during the 1980s and prior, the original footage usually included hype packages for upcoming events in your area. You won't find those on the Network. But I think they're fascinating. You get to see how the events were sold to the fans of that time period.

While seemingly inconsequential, music, production issues, and ephemeral promotions provide essential information about a phenomenon. Popular music usage demonstrates a relationship to popular culture. Production mistakes emphasize the liveness of the broadcast. The promotions demonstrate the shifting nature of how audiences were sold on professional wrestling. These seemingly minor changes fundamentally change a text as the minutiae impart a unique character. As Telly Bistis of *Title Match Wrestling* suggests, circulating the original and unedited

version of these events “preserves history ... and it doesn’t allow anyone to change the narrative. What you see is what you get. There is no time to go into post-production and chop it into whatever story you want to be told.” As these tapes are digitized and delivered via the WWE Network, they go through the filter of 2010s production. The fannish producers serve the role as stabilizers and archivists in contrast to the constant and subtle shifts performed by the WWE. As Sean Oliver suggests, “Show it to me the way it was when I was five years old staring into my thirteen-inch color TV.” This filter extends beyond the seemingly minor into the larger binary of curating/archiving.

The fannish producers demonstrate a supreme interest in providing an accurate and inclusive archive of professional wrestling while WWE uses the materials it owns to curate a history that aids in building a positive corporate image. As Dave Scherer from *PWInsider.com* suggests, “We give the straight story, without bias. For people that want as honest accounting of the news as possible, they come to us.” Though the completely neutral accounting of history as described by Scherer may be an impossibility, these dirt sheets are valuable for providing a first draft of history. In the current media environment, shoot interviews, archive sites, and podcasts/vodcasts then ultimately seek to provide a diverse and stabilized, though not entirely objective, version of history. Producer perceptions of objectivity speak to the importance of these producers place on their roles in creating and circulating alternative histories. Indeed, the fannish productions offer the original broadcast on the thirteen-inch color television, a comparison to the edited version, insight into backstage elements, and insight into its relationship to other historical wrestling events. As professional wrestling lacks the traditional reporting of sports such as baseball and football, these fannish productions ultimately fulfill the function of traditional press in an atypical manner. Washington of *Piledriver Wrestling* details the importance of independent reporting and providing an alternative viewpoint:

Whilst much maligned at the time, the dirt sheets in the 1980s began to break this wall down exposing many of the industry’s secrets. Unscrupulous promoters found it more difficult to lie to talent about pay-offs once dirt sheets began reporting legitimate attendance numbers, live gate figures and more. Dubious business tactics like false advertising came under scrutiny. If done correctly, unbiased and accurately, independent reporting of the industry is an essential element. The profession is largely ignored by the mainstream media, and in the rare instances when a pro-wrestling story is reported, the quality of the journalism and understanding of the industry by outsiders can be extremely low.... In addition, fans are able to get information on promotions other than ones with cable TV exposure like WWE or TNA,

so they can be a vital source in helping smaller companies gain exposure and notoriety.

For fannish producers, the circulation of accurate information ultimately improve the industry and fulfill functions similar to that of journalists. These individuals do not have the same pressures and limitations as WWE, and therefore can focus on elements that they feel can improve the wrestling industry, including having fans view multiple wrestling promotions. "It's a mutual respect there and we absolutely respect the wrestling business," stated Bistis about the relationship between fannish producers and professional wrestling. These individuals are fans first and wish for professional wrestling to have longevity, for fans to invest in its history, and to help improve its on-screen content.

The pressures and limitations of the WWE bubble privilege corporate image over historical accuracy. Oliver, founder of *Kayfabe Commentaries*, conducts in-depth shoot interviews with wrestlers and other workers with direct involvement in the events that WWE. He discusses the current pressures and limitations of the WWE bubble:

The history of pro wrestling is now largely owned by WWE. The history of pro wrestling is always being addressed in some fashion by them in their programming and DVD releases, but it's always a very neatly packaged, easily digested and saccharine morsel they serve. Their attempts to emulate shoot style programming, and specifically many of our shows, will always fall short because as a public company there is a whole host of things to consider before telling "the truth" about wrestling history or even shining a spotlight on certain things in wrestling history. Shareholders have to be considered. How can one tell their own history ... good, bad, and ugly ... if one's image is tantamount to the narrative?

As such a lucrative publicly traded company that targets younger viewers, the WWE will always have a set of pressures and limitations absent from independent fannish producers. Oliver notes that WWE, keenly aware of the credibility attached to the mediated characteristics of dirt sheets, attempted to create similarly stylized content that conforms to its narrative. Examples include WWE's 1997-2006 webcast *Byte This!*, which sought to replicate gritty behind-the-scenes longform dirt sheet interviews, or its the recent *After the Bell with Corey Graves* podcast, which features supposedly unguarded conversations with a revolving cast of retired and active wrestlers. To those like Oliver, this dirt sheet-style content provided by WWE will always be a hollow emulation of independent fannish production. Though WWE attempts make these mediated textual forms "feel real," each still adheres to the

organization's overarching script. Oliver puts his comments on WWE's economic pressures into further context by discussing the controversial wrestler Chyna:

Chyna's place in WWE history is made so much more complex because of the nature of WWE's company being a publicly traded organization, with responsibilities to investors and share price. Should Chyna be in the WWE Hall of Fame? The short answer is "yes, of course." There are women wrestlers in there now, and I don't think any had the impact that she did. She was beating on dudes and was a featured part of the Attitude Era and she changed the perspective on women at ringside and in the ring. So it's a no brainer, right? Not so fast. The Hall of Fame, as we all know, is a show and is constructed for entertainment value first and merit second. Putting Chyna on that big show and touting her accomplishments and putting together that great promo package might make a ten-year-old girl Google her, while watching that Hall of Fame show with dad, who happens to be a senior investment banker at Citigroup. When his daughter's computer search returns write-ups and still images from her venture into adult films with Vivid, he may walk into the office the following day with a skewed perception of the company his firm might have been considering buying 10,000 shares in. His little girl was introduced to gangbangs courtesy of the WWE Hall of Fame show. Extreme example? Maybe. But this is the kind of liability that has to be considered as a publicly traded company and a slave to share price and performance alone. Period. That's all that matters.

When individuals engage in detrimental acts outside of the WWE bubble, such as making an adult video with nine sexual partners, WWE adjusts its dynamic history to accommodate. The fannish productions target and reach a largely male (e.g., Bistis from *Title Match Wrestling* reported a 93% male viewership) and adult audience. The content of these alternative sources are not broadcast safe examining topics such as mysterious deaths, horrific injuries, infidelities, sexual acts, substance abuse, insider business information, and general tales of chaos. For example, Oliver's *YouShoot* series includes the good, bad, and ugly of every story in the individual's own words.

Chyna is merely one example of an individual whose roles has been minimized over the course of history by the WWE. The most famous example happened when Chris Benoit murdered his wife and son over the course of a weekend before hanging himself on a Bowflex (Kirkland). Early in the investigation, only the news of Benoit's death was released. *Monday Night Raw* started with a five-minute tribute video package celebrating Benoit as a person and his accomplishments. However, as the gruesome details of the case emerged, the WWE

engaged in the Orwellian act of literally deleting Benoit from its history (Cortez). It deleted his title reigns and immediately removed all merchandise and mentions of him on its website. While Benoit still remains on some archival media pertaining to this past wrestling events, footage of him does not resurface in new WWE content. Though WWE stopped short of fully excising Benoit from all media, major mentions of him were scrubbed from digital media and new WWE-sanctioned histories will never tell his story.

In contrast to the wild diversity in interview subjects (and the subjects of those interviews) found in shoot interviews, the selectivity and omissions in WWE begin before the camera rolls. Bistis from *Title Match Wrestling* describes the omission process as well as the coaching process during the on-screen interview:

WWE has done a great job of interviewing names from the past on their documentaries and network specials. There are hundreds of past employees for whatever reason, never get their story told. Those are the people we want to speak with—the ones who aren't being directed to say anything specific. We want the best stories, unfiltered. As a producer, I can tell when an interview subject is being authentic or not. I look for things like that in documentaries—the inflection in the voiceover. What facts are included and which ones are dismissed? Who are these interview subjects? What is their history? Is there a good balance? What images are being displayed throughout? It's near impossible to give a completely unbiased version of history. Sometimes we succeed, other times we don't but we always try.

As Herman Gray discusses race on television, there is no perfect singular form of representation. Only through a wide variance of individuals being portrayed can a diverse and more complete representation occur. Bistis's approach to archiving the complete history of professional wrestling mirrors this philosophy. A more complete history can only be told by way of a diverse sample of individuals with differing perspectives. This diversity extends to subject matter as well, as previously discussed. Rather than simplifying disparate events down to a single historical narrative, fannish producers contribute to a rich and complex history of professional wrestling.

The alternative histories provided by the fannish producers are in a perpetually subaltern position against the dominant history of the WWE. Washington from *Piledriver Wrestling* describes this struggle:

The WWE version, even when its accounts have been completely discredited, will always continue to exist as the commonly held belief. Wrestling myths like the fictional attendances at WrestleMania will continue as long as WWE continues to insist on the legitimacy of their claims publicly. All you can do

is provide a medium where fans that want to learn the real facts and stories can do so, but you aren't going to be able to change the popular misconceptions.

The tension between “fictional” and “real facts” continues the binaries of work/shoot and curating/archiving. The pressures and limitations of each entity (WWE and fannish producers) provides two distinctly different motivations and platforms for their competing histories. For the fannish producers, the divide between “mark” and “smart” no longer refers to individuals who believe that wrestling is a genuine athletic contest and those who do not. Getting “smart” now refers to getting “educated” from sources outside of the WWE bubble. Cawthon from *TheHistoryofWWE.com* sees the role of these alternative media to provide information to supplement the prevailing stories and ultimately to educate fans:

I think a lot of pro wrestling is based in hype, myth and legend. Wrestlers will talk about the time they beat (insert name here) at a major venue or major event. Or discuss how they sold out a major venue against a top name. What I do is designed not only to educate fans and those within the industry but also disprove several of these myths and legends that have circulated for years or decades with no factual basis aside from what one person once said in an interview. If someone is telling a story about a backstage altercation they had with someone at the Atlanta Omni in 1986, you can easily check out my website and at least narrow down which specific event and date that altercation took place at based on the show's results. Some wrestlers lie because it promotes their brand. Others just don't remember things clearly because they were working twenty-eight days straight and events run together. And so rather than completely relying on their bad memory, you have a website to double check these events and come to your own conclusion.

Cawthon's site of historical reports differs from Oliver's shoot interviews, which are first-hand, and unedited, versions of historical events told by the individuals who lived them. As Cawthon points out, memories fade and wrestlers often have agendas as well, such as increasing their worth for bookings based upon their importance in a historical situation. Thus, getting “smart” refers to considering a variety of sources of information. “People need to do their own research. You don't ask a company to give you its history,” stated Scherer of *PWInsider.com*. In contrast to learning how a magic trick is done, getting “smart” to contemporary professional wrestling is an activity rather than a one-shot inoculation. Having the singular perspective ultimately limits fannish activities. The active fandom promoted by these fannish producers is the equivalent of fantasy sports; it allows for investment, speculation,

and enjoyment long after the broadcast has ended. In an odd twist of circumstance, getting “smart” allows people to “mark out.”

“Marking out” refers to a temporary state rather than a permanent one. Audience members lose themselves in the text for a moment in a manner similar to a science fiction film, a romance novel, or a competitive sports game. According to Cawthon, we all have the desire to “mark out”:

We’re all marks. The wrestlers are marks, too. We want to be captivated and enthralled and taken on an emotional roller coaster ride and not know how it’s going to end. I think the term “mark” has been taken to mean “stupid,” but that’s not the case if we’re discussing diehard fans as marks.

A “mark” can be “smart” under the contemporary understanding of the phrase. Oliver of *Kayfabe Commentaries* continues this division:

“Marks” don’t really exist anymore in the truest sense of the word, not any more than a passionate Dallas Cowboys fan could be called a “mark.” The term “mark” suggested gullibility. I think the average wrestling fan knows what they are seeing. The distinction that I think exists today is between the passive observant fan (watches John Cena, cheers for him, buys the t-shirt) and the active student of wrestling (critiques decisions on *Raw*, listens to podcasts, watches Kayfabe Commentaries programming, is interested in the machinations of the business of wrestling).

The equating of a passionate wrestling fan to a passionate professional football fan is an interesting one. According to a Harris Poll (“Pro Football”), for over thirty years football has been the most popular sport in America. According to the 2015 report by the Fantasy Sports Trade Association, Americans spend about \$15 billion in total annually playing fantasy football and Forbes (Goff) estimated its economic impact to be around \$70 billion dollars. People “mark out” to football on a Sunday and lead healthy productive lives. They have civilized discussions about the politics of the league and health of the players, and their investment in learning about the game strengthens the popularity of the league and its support shows. A professional wrestling fan can “mark out,” but in order to get “smart,” there is no ESPN equivalent for professional wrestling. They must seek out these fannish productions to get educated.

For fannish producers, the mark/smart binary reflects the age-old media binary of passive/active audiences within media studies. Active consumption of media means that individuals use media in order to gratify needs that they have identified (Katz et al.). Being a “smart” and active viewer, allows for a crucial type of fandom for the wrestling industry: as Gregg of *Botchamania* stated, “fans who want to enjoy wrestling as an art form.” Focusing on the art form of wrestling allows for a

new appreciation of in-ring action as well as the shoot elements not depicted on television. Washington suggests that when a fan gets “smart,” he or she “becomes fascinated by an industry where the actual truths, secrets and stories that occur behind the camera, are even more intriguing than the product featured on TV.” Active consumption opens up these new avenues of fandom and fannish productions provide the only conduit by which to do so.

### **Shoot Summary**

Professional wrestling lives in the middle of multiple binary tensions. Somewhere between work/shoot, smart/mark, curating/archiving, and passive/active lies fannish producers. In an industry lacking traditional press, where the vast majority of the video library is controlled by a single company, these fannish producers perform an essential duty for the wrestling industry. They compile a nuanced archive that does not allow individuals or moments to be written out of history completely. Instead of a discourse ecosystem dominated solely by one organization, fannish producers serve to democratize the space by disseminating new information and safeguarding wrestling history against profitable Orwellian revisions. This history undergoes deliberation and serious thoughtful analysis mixed with a pastiche of popular culture. By doing so, they extend the televisual texts of wrestling and promote an informed and active audience that can explore multiple avenues of fandom. The active fandom encourages the reading of wrestling as an art form, in a manner similar to multiple academic studies such as Ball, Gutkowski, and Jenkins.

Though pressures and limitations are minimal when compared to those of WWE, it is worth noting that there are still pressures and tensions at play for fannish producers. For example, in a recent case of market pressure, prominent fannish producer Wade Keller of *PWTorch* was driven to part ways with veteran pro wrestling writer Bruce Mitchell after he incorrectly suggested wrestler Brodie Lee died of coronavirus in a column (Bupp). The column was deleted, an apology was issue by Keller, and Mitchell was released all within the span of three days. Similar to alternative histories’ susceptibility to external pressures, fannish producers’ idealistic perceptions of objectivity in their work should also be noted. Though not free from subjective bias or external constraints, these fannish producers are spurred to construct this complex alternative history primarily out of a love for the wrestling industry.

The popularity and impact of these fannish producers speaks to the possibilities afforded through new media to provide alternative histories. Video compilations, podcasts, vodcasts, and independently produced and circulated interviews have the ability to disrupt a sanitized corporate narrative with a far lower budgets than the main wrestling companies. The alternative productions,

alternative histories, and alternative analyses ultimately strengthen professional wrestling and encourage a global, yet primarily male, community where every fan has the duty to be “smart” and to be active audience members.

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