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# Bad Lieutenants

Time to rally the mindless fan armies into a force for good.

120 million (give or take their unavoidable Venn overlap and some egg avatars). Most of the time, you're blissfully unaware of the shiny-eyed child soldiers and their strange crusades. For example, did you know that Echelon, the fan army for Jared Leto's band, 30 Seconds to Mars, helped the guy-linered, 41-year-old fop break a Guinness World Record? It was for longest

concert tour by a rock band—309 shows—but I prefer to think of it as longest tour in the history of cochlea abuse. Thanks, Echelon, for making a good case for how much cooler music was when I was a kid. You know, before the Internet.

Chris Brown, that tattooed, pugilistic cretin, has one of the most organized fan armies. Members of Team Breezy enlist by region; woe betide anyone who dares speak ill of Mr. Brown, because Team Breezy descends on that hapless infidel with the fervor and speed

Legions of loyal fans on Twitter have earned a bad rap—for good reason. The followers of Rihanna, Lady Gaga, Justin Bieber, and Katy Perry together tally over

of a biblical plague. It's enough to make you wish that freedom of Internet assembly came with certain preconditions. Like "no masochism"—several who count themselves on Team Breezy have tweeted that they'd let Brown beat them up.

It was not always like this. Once, not so long ago, intelligent, noble folk of like pop-culture sensibilities gathered for important work, such as trying to keep *Firefly* on the air. But whether it's Browncoats, Bronies, or Baker Street Irregulars, the thing

that has changed isn't that social networks enable the superfan set. It's that social networks now weaponize them. The relationship between fan army and commander used to be one-sided, a parasocial interaction on the part of the fans that never amounted to anything more than an occasional autographed 8-by-10 or T-shirt. But now? Taylor Swift or some floppy-haired lad from whatever boy band will contact you directly in front of all of your friends and compel you to do something. Go to a concert, buy a commemorative mug, post something on Facebook.

It all sounds like a reverse *Truman Show*, in the worst possible way. But powerful fan armies don't necessarily mean a war against quality. If you consider how many millions of humans are leaning on the lever for their reward pellet—vacation pictures of Rihanna, Mumford & Sons tickets, whatever—the possibilities are staggering. Groupthink has its hazards, but if we can redirect these armies, give them new orders, they might bear real fruit. Cool, weird, high-risk fruit.

Felicia Day reaped some. Trading on her status as queen of the comic-niche nerds, Day leveraged her strong social media presence and slavishly devoted audience—*The Guild*, Day's self-produced web series, has racked up over 100 million views—to nab a coveted premium YouTube channel called Geek & Sundry. And beyond the now commonplace celebrity pet projects being funded by the crowd, some novel business models are finding ways to enlist enthusiasts in a positive way. A Reddit post proposes that fans prepay for a music download and pocket a share of the album's profits, spreading the risk and stiffing the record labels. (Backstagr, a website in a stage that I can only dub almost-*proto-beta*—not to be confused with customer loyalty site Bckstr—is trying to make this happen.) That's the potential of a fan army rallied for good instead of evil. Think of them as UN peacekeepers. With their help, the tide of battle may yet turn to favor superior tastes and dignified goals. Live-action web shows about indie geek culture are the future! That, my friends, is a war worth waging. 

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