

Hell hath no fury like a female superhero scorned (by fans)

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The devoted followers of comic book heroes are diversifying beyond the likes of Sheldon, Leonard, Raj and Howard as depicted on the CBS Network's "The Big Bang Theory." Rebecca Borah, a pop culture researcher and associate professor of English at the University of Cincinnati, says that's partly what caused the Internet to "Hulk out" after fans flocked to "Avengers: Age of Ultron." Borah is among the UC faculty presenting at the regional conference of the Midwest Popular Culture Association/Midwest American Culture Association which takes place Oct. 1-4, at the Hilton Cincinnati Netherland Plaza Hotel downtown.

Borah's paper, "Put Down Your Pitchforks: Fertility, Freak-outs and Monstrosity in 'Age of Ultron's' Black Widow Controversy" examines how [social media](#) erupted in outrage and even death threats following one of the film's subplots that romantically linked the Black Widow (played by actress Scarlett Johansson) with Bruce Banner/The Hulk (played by Mark Ruffalo), as well as the fallout from the press junket when cast members Jeremy Renner and Chris Evans joked about the sexuality of the team's sole female character.

Fan anger and hate speech also boiled over from a scene in the movie for Black Widow's alter ego, Natasha Romanoff. In that scene, she confessed to Bruce Banner (the Incredible Hulk's alter ego) that she was sterilized and later said, "Still think you're the only monster on the team?"

"Some interpreted this to mean Natasha thought her infertility made her a monster," Borah says. She adds that the passion over the controversy is partly due to a growing female fan culture as well as a younger fan base in a genre that at one time attracted primarily males - a genre in which females are still underrepresented and still provocatively costumed to reflect the Marvel Universe comic book art stretching back to the 1940s.

"Comic books are traditionally very exploitative of females, but there has been progress," Borah says. "Still, there are people who feel that in order for Black Widow to be a strong female character, she can't have a love interest.

"Also, she's not shown in the movies as actually promiscuous. She's seductive, but she's a spy - that's her job," continues Borah, amid the fallout from the promotional press junket.

Borah adds that the Black Widow also got a back seat when it comes to merchandise that was marketed for the movie. "People can't buy clothing, toys and action figures of her for their kids like they can for most of the male characters. They'd like to see her on a T-shirt with the team, and this isn't just reactions from women. The social media feedback indicates men would like this, too," says Borah.

Borah's presentation explores participatory culture theory in examining how future Internet "freak outs" can be avoided. "Is there a way to have a discussion that's more constructive instead of tearing each other down, when a lot of times fan factions' and creators' interests are not that far apart? Adding more strong, diverse female characters is one remedy, so one female character doesn't have to represent an entire sex. People love the Black Widow character so much and so dearly that they're almost too invested in the character, and the anonymity of the Internet turned things as mean and as horrible as ever."

In fact, Borah says that the social media "monsters" and extremists are far worse than the monsters on the big screen. "The anonymousness of the Internet makes bullying too easy. Whether it's something as legitimate of a problem as Gamergate or über-radical feminists calling out other feminists, social media is a double-edged weapon that can also deliver blunt-force trauma," Borah says. "When it's used for good causes, it can have a positive impact, even beyond the immediate fandom. When it's a wildfire of backlash without reflection or dialogue, it silences creativity and cooperation between parties that ought to be allies in bigger social issues."

Borah's presentation at the Midwest Popular Culture Association/Midwest American Culture Association is part of a panel examining horror and science fiction/fantasy.

Provided by University of Cincinnati

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