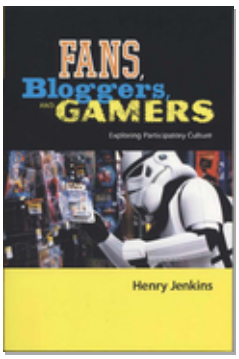
PROJECT MUSE®

Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers

Jenkins, Henry

Published by NYU Press



For additional information about this book
http://muse.jhu.edu/books/9780814743690

Access provided by New York University (22 Mar 2013 21:53 GMT)

6

Interactive Audiences?

The "Collective Intelligence" of Media Fans

*If "*Star Trek *Rerun, Reread, Rewritten" represented my first public airing of the ideas in* Textual Poachers, *"Interactive Audiences" was my first attempt to lay out the reconceptualization of fandom that would shape* Convergence Culture. *The goal I set for myself with "Interactive Audiences" was to write about fans without once mentioning Michel de Certeau. We should change our theory every five thousand miles just like we change oil in our cars. New injections improve performance and keep us from clogging up the system. I am frustrated that despite a growing number of younger scholars writing about fans, many still operate primarily in relation to the paradigms from the late 1980s and early 1990s. There are so many other potential ways of looking at the topic.*

When my friend Christopher Weaver handed me a copy of Pierre Levy's Collective Intelligence, *I realized that this approach addressed many of the questions I had trouble talking about in* Textual Poachers *—specifically the social dimensions of fan communities. Levy gave us a way of thinking about fandom not in terms of resistance but as a prototype or dress rehearsal for the way culture might operate in the future. Levy describes his vision of "collective intelligence" as an "achievable utopia"—not something that grows inevitably from the new configuration of technologies but rather something we must work toward and fight to achieve. Fandom is one of those spaces where people are learning how to live and collaborate within a knowledge community. We are trying out through play patterns of interaction that will soon penetrate every other aspect of our lives. Levy, in short, gives us a model for a fan-based politics.*

"Interactive Audiences?" first appeared in Dan Harries, ed., The New Media Book *(London: British Film Institute, 2002). Some dimensions of*

the convergence culture argument emerged in two other essays, "The Stormtroopers and the Poachers: Cultural Convergence in a Digital Age," in Phillipe Le Guern, ed., Les cultes médiatiques: culture fan et oeuvres cultes *(Rennes, France: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2002), and "Quentin Tarantino's Star Wars? Digital Cinema, Media Convergence and Participatory Culture," in David Thorburn and Henry Jenkins, eds.,* Rethinking Media Change: The Aesthetics of Transition *(Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003). (I should acknowledge that there are significant terminological shifts and rethinking between these three essays.)*

"You've got three seconds. Impress me."

An advertisement for Applebox Productions depicts the new youth consumer: his scraggly dishwater blonde hair hangs down into his glaring eyes, his chin is thrust out, his mouth is turned down into a challenging sneer, and his finger posed over the remote. One false move and he'll zap us. He's young, male, and in control. No longer a couch potato, he determines what, when, and how he watches media. He is a media consumer, perhaps even a media fan, but he is also a media producer, distributor, publicist, and critic. He's the poster child for the new interactive audience.

The advertisement takes for granted what cultural studies researchers struggled to establish throughout the 1980s and 1990s—that audiences were active, critically aware, and discriminating. Yet, this advertisement promises that Applebox Productions has developed new ways to overcome his resistance and bring advertising messages to this scowling teen's attention. The interactive audience is not autonomous; it still operates alongside powerful media industries.

If the current media environment makes visible the once invisible work of media spectatorship, it is wrong to assume that we are somehow being liberated through improved media technologies. Rather than talking about interactive technologies, we should document the interactions that occur among media consumers, between media consumers and media texts, and between media consumers and media producers. The new participatory culture is taking shape at the intersection between three trends:

1. New tools and technologies enable consumers to archive, annotate, appropriate, and recirculate media content;

2. a range of subcultures promote Do-It-Yourself (DIY) media production, a discourse that shapes how consumers have deployed those technologies; and
3. economic trends favoring the horizontally integrated media conglomerates encourage the flow of images, ideas, and narratives across multiple media channels and demand more active modes of spectatorship.

In this essay, I will try to describe how these three trends have altered the way media consumers relate to each other, to media texts, and to media producers. In doing so, I hope to move beyond the either-or logic of traditional audience research—refusing to see media consumers as either totally autonomous from or totally vulnerable to the culture industries. It would be naive to assume that powerful conglomerates will not protect their own interests as they enter this new media marketplace, but at the same time, audiences are gaining greater power and autonomy as they enter into the new knowledge culture. The interactive audience is more than a marketing concept and less than "semiotic democracy."

Collective Intelligence

In *Collective Intelligence,* Pierre Levy offers a compelling vision of the new "knowledge space," or what he calls "the cosmopedia," that might emerge as citizens more fully realize the potentials of the new media environment. Rejecting technological or economic determinism, Levy sees contemporary society as caught in a transitional moment, the outcome of which is still unknown, but which has enormous potentials for transforming existing structures of knowledge and power. His book might best be read as a form of critical utopianism framing a vision for the future ("an achievable utopia"), offering an ethical yardstick for contemporary developments. Levy explores how the "deterritorialization" of knowledge, brought about by the ability of the net and the Web to facilitate rapid many-to-many communication, might enable broader participation in decision-making, new modes of citizenship and community, and the reciprocal exchange of information. Levy draws a productive distinction between organic social groups (families, clans, tribes), organized social groups (nations, institutions, religions, and corpora-

tions), and self-organized groups (such as the virtual communities of the Web). He links the emergence of the new knowledge space to the breakdown of geographic constraints on communication, of the declining loyalty of individuals to organized groups, and of the diminished power of nation-states to command the exclusive loyalty of their citizens. The new knowledge communities will be voluntary, temporary, and tactical affiliations, defined through common intellectual enterprises and emotional investments. Members may shift from one community to another as their interests and needs change, and they may belong to more than one community at the same time. Yet, they are held together through the mutual production and reciprocal exchange of knowledge. As Levy explains,

> the members of a thinking community search, inscribe, connect, consult, explore. . . . Not only does the cosmopedia make available to the collective intellect all of the pertinent knowledge available to it at a given moment, but it also serves as a site of collective discussion, negotiation, and development. . . . Unanswered questions will create tension within cosmopedic space, indicating regions where invention and innovation are required.[1]

Online fan communities might well be some of the most fully realized versions of Levy's cosmopedia, expansive self-organizing groups focused around the collective production, debate, and circulation of meanings, interpretations, and fantasies in response to various artifacts of contemporary popular culture. Fan communities have long defined their memberships through affinities rather than localities. Fandoms were virtual communities, "imagined" and "imagining" communities, long before the introduction of networked computers.[2] The history of science fiction fandom might illustrate how knowledge communities emerged. Hugo Gernsbeck, the pulp magazine editor who has been credited with helping to define science fiction as a distinctive genre in the 1920s and 1930s, was also a major advocate of radio as a participatory medium. Gernsbeck saw science fiction as a means of fostering popular awareness of contemporary scientific breakthroughs at a moment of accelerating technological development.[3] The letter column of Gernsbeck's *Astounding Stories* became a forum where laypeople could debate scientific theories and assess new technologies. Using the published addresses, early science fiction fans formed an informal postal network,

circulating letters and amateur publications. Later, conventions facilitated the face-to-face contact between fans from across the country and around the world. Many of the most significant science fiction writers emerged from fandom. Given this history, every reader was understood to be a potential writer, and many fans aspired to break into professional publication; fan ideas influenced commercially distributed works at a time when science fiction was still understood predominantly as a micro-genre aimed at a small but passionate niche market. The fan-issued Hugo Award (named after Gernsbeck) remains the most valued recognition a science fiction writer can receive. This reciprocity among readers, writers, and editors set expectations as science fiction spread into film and television. *Star Trek* fans were, from the start, an activist audience, lobbying to keep its series on the air and later advocating specific changes in the program content to better reflect its own agendas. Yet, if fans were the primary readers for literary science fiction, they were only a small fraction of the audience for network television. Fans became, in John Tulloch's words, a "powerless elite," unable to alter the series content but actively reshaping the reception context through grassroots media production.[4] *Star Trek* fandom, in turn, was a model for other fan communities to create forums for debating interpretations, networks for circulating creative works, and channels for lobbying the producers.

Fans were early adopters of digital technologies. Within the scientific and military institutions where the Internet was first introduced, science fiction has long been a literature of choice.[5] Consequently, the slang and social practices employed on the early bulletin boards were often directly modeled on science fiction fandom. Mailing lists that focused on fan topics took their place alongside discussions of technological or scientific issues. In many ways, cyberspace is fandom writ large.

The reconstitution of these fandoms as digital enclaves did not come without strenuous efforts to overcome the often overtly hostile reception fan women received from the early Internet's predominantly male population. Operating outside of those technical institutions, many female fans lacked computer access and technical literacy. Heated debates erupted at conventions as fans were angered at being left behind when old fan friends moved online. At the same time, as Sue Clerc notes, fan communities helped many women make the transition to cyberspace; the group insured that valued members learned to use the new technologies, since "for them, there is little benefit to net access unless many of

their friends have it."[6] Fan women routed around male hostility, developing Web communities "that combine the intimacy of small groups with a support network similar to the kind fan women create off-line." Discussion lists, mailing groups, Web rings, and chatrooms each enabled fan communication.

Nancy Baym has discussed the important functions of talk within online soap fandom: "Fans share knowledge of the show's history, in part, because the genre demands it. Any soap has broadcast more material than any single fan can remember."[7] Fans inform each other about program history or recent developments they may have missed. The fan community pools its knowledge because no single fan can know everything necessary to fully appreciate the series. Levy distinguishes between shared knowledge (which would refer to information known by all members of a community) and collective intelligence (which describes knowledge available to all members of a community). Collective intelligence expands a community's productive capacity because it frees individual members from the limitations of their memory and enables the group to act upon a broader range of expertise. As Levy writes, within a knowledge community, "no one knows everything, everyone knows something, all knowledge resides in humanity."[8] Baym argues:

> A large group of fans can do what even the most committed single fan cannot: accumulate, retain, and continually recirculate unprecedented amounts of relevant information. . . . [Net list] participants collaboratively provide all with the resources to get more story from the material, enhancing many members' soap readings and pleasures.[9]

Soap talk, Baym notes, allows people to "show off for one another" their various competencies while making individual expertise more broadly available. Fans are motivated by epistemaphilia—not simply a pleasure in knowing but a pleasure in exchanging knowledge. Baym argues that fans see the exchange of speculations and evaluations of soaps as a means of "comparing, refining, and negotiating understandings of their socioemotional environment."[10] Matthew Hills has criticized audience researchers for their preoccupation with fans' meaning production at the expense of consideration of their affective investments and emotional alliances.[11] Yet, as Baym's term "socioemotional" suggests, meanings are not some abstracted form of knowledge, separated from our pleasures and desires, isolated from fandom's social bonds.

When fans talk about meaningful encounters with texts, they are describing what they feel as much as what they think. . . . Fan speculations may, on the surface, seem to be simply a deciphering of the aired material, but increasingly speculation involves fans in the production of new fantasies, broadening the field of meanings that circulate around the primary text. . . .

Levy contrasts his ideal of "collective intelligence" with the dystopian image of the "hive mind," where individual voices are suppressed. Far from demanding conformity, the new knowledge culture is enlivened by multiple ways of knowing. This collective exchange of knowledge cannot be fully contained by previous sources of power—"bureaucratic hierarchies (based on static forms of writing), media monarchies (surfing the television and media systems), and international economic networks (based on the telephone and real-time technologies"—that depended on maintaining tight control over the flow of information. The dynamic, collective, and reciprocal nature of these exchanges undermines traditional forms of expertise and destabilizes attempts to establish a scriptural economy in which some meanings are more valuable than others.[12]

The old commodity space was defined through various forms of decontextualization, including the alienation of labor, the uprooting of images from larger cultural traditions so that they can circulate as commodities, the demographic fragmentation of the audience, the disciplining of knowledge, and the disconnect between media producers and consumers. The new information space involves multiple and unstable forms of recontextualization. The value of any bit of information increases through social interaction. Commodities are a limited good and their exchange necessarily creates or enacts inequalities. But meaning is a shared and constantly renewable resource and its circulation can create and revitalize social ties. If old forms of expertise operated through isolated disciplines, the new collective intelligence is a patchwork woven together from many sources as members pool what they know, creating something much more powerful than the sum of its parts.

How Computers Changed Fandom

For Levy, the introduction of high-speed networked computing constituted an epistemological turning point in the development of collective

intelligence. If fandom was already a knowledge culture well before the Internet, then how did transplanting its practices into the digital environment alter the fan community? The new digital environment increases the speed of fan communication, resulting in what Matthew Hills calls "just in time fandom."[13] If fans once traded ideas through the mails, they now see the postal service as too slow—"snail mail"—to satisfy their expectations of immediate response. Hills explains, "The practices of fandom have become increasingly enmeshed with the rhythms and temporalities of broadcasting, so that fans now go online to discuss new episodes immediately after the episode's transmission time or even during ad-breaks perhaps in order to demonstrate the 'timeliness' and responsiveness of their devotion."[14] Where fans might have raced to the phone to talk to a close friend, they can now access a much broader range of perspectives by going online.

This expectation of timeliness complicates the global expansion of the fan community, with time lags in the distribution of cultural goods across national markets hampering full participation from fans that will receive the same program months or even years later. International fans often complain that they are additionally disadvantaged because their first-time experience of the episodes is spoiled by learning too much from the online discussions.

The digital media also alters the scope of communication. Fandoms centering on Asian popular culture, such as Japanese anime or Hong Kong action films, powerfully exploit the Internet's global reach. Japanese fans collaborate with American consumers to insure the underground circulation of these cultural products and to explain cultural references, genre traditions, and production histories.[15] Anime fans regularly translate and post the schedule of Japanese television so that international fans can identify and negotiate access to interesting programs. American fans have learned Japanese, often teaching each other outside of a formal educational context, in order to participate in grassroots projects to subtitle anime films or to translate manga (comics). Concerned about different national expectations regarding what kinds of animation are appropriate for children, anime fans have organized their own ratings groups. This is a new cosmopolitanism—knowledge sharing on a global scale.

As the community enlarges and reaction time shortens, fandom becomes much more effective as a platform for consumer activism. Fans can quickly mobilize grassroots efforts to save programs or protest

unpopular developments. New fandoms emerge rapidly on the Web—in some cases before media products actually reach the market. As early participants spread news about emergent fandoms, supporters quickly develop the infrastructure for supporting critical dialogue, producing annotated program guides, providing regular production updates, and creating original fan stories and artwork. The result has been an enormous proliferation of fan Web sites and discussion lists. . . . As fandom diversifies, it moves from cult status toward the cultural mainstream, with more Internet users engaged in some form of fan activity.

This increased visibility and cultural centrality has been a mixed blessing for a community used to speaking from the margins. The speed and frequency of communication may intensify the social bonds within the fan community. In the past, fans inhabited a "week-end only world," seeing each other in large numbers only a few times a year at conventions.[16] Now, fans may interact daily, if not hourly, online. Geographically isolated fans can feel much more connected to the fan community and home-ridden fans enjoy a new level of acceptance. Yet, fandom's expanded scope can leave fans feeling alienated from the expanding numbers of strangers entering their community. This rapid expansion outraces any effort to socialize new members. For example, fandom has long maintained an ethical norm against producing erotica about real people rather than fictional characters. As newer fans have discovered fan fiction online, they have not always known or accepted this prohibition, and so there is a growing body of fan erotica dealing with celebrities. Such stories become a dividing point between older fans committed to traditional norms and the newer online fans who have asserted their rights to redefine fandom on their own terms.

Online fan discussion lists often bring together groups who functioned more or less autonomously offline and have radically different responses to the aired material. Flame wars erupt as their taken-for-granted interpretive and evaluative norms rub against each other. In some cases, fans can negotiate these conflicts by pulling to a metalevel and exploring the basis for the different interpretations. More often, the groups splinter into narrower interests, pushing some participants from public debates into smaller and more private mailing lists.

Levy describes a pedagogical process through which a knowledge community develops a set of ethical standards and articulates mutual goals. Even on a scale much smaller than Levy's global village, fandoms often have difficulty arriving at such a consensus. While early accounts

of fandom stressed its communitarian ideals, more recent studies have stressed recurring conflicts. Andre MacDonald has described fandom in terms of various disputes—between male and female fans, between fans with different assumptions about the desired degree of closeness of the producers and stars, between fans who seek to police the production of certain fantasies and fans who assert their freedom from such constraints, between different generations of fans, and so forth.[17] MacDonald depicts a community whose utopian aspirations are constantly being tested against unequal experiences, levels of expertise, access to performers and community resources, control over community institutions, and degrees of investment in fan traditions and norms. Moreover, as Nancy Baym suggests, the desire to avoid such conflicts can result in an artificial consensus that shuts down the desired play with alternative meanings.[18] Levy seemingly assumes a perfect balance between mechanisms for producing knowledge and for sustaining affiliations. Yet, MacDonald and Baym suggest a constant tension between these two goals, which can reach a crisis as list memberships have expanded alongside the exponential growth of net subscribers. . . .

Networked computing has also transformed fan production. Web publication of fan fiction, for example, has almost entirely displaced printed zines. Fanzines arose as the most efficient means of circulating fan writing.[19] Fan editors charged only the costs of reproduction, seeing zines as a vehicle for distributing stories and not as a source of income. In some fandoms, circuits developed for loaning individually photocopied stories. In other cases, readers and editors came to see zines as aesthetic artifacts, insisting on high-quality reproduction and glossy color covers. Fans have increasingly turned to the Web to lower the costs of production and to expand their reading public. Fans are also developing archives of older zine stories, helping to connect newer fans with their history. . . .

Digital technologies have also enabled new forms of fan cultural production. Photoshop collage has become popular as a means of illustrating fan fiction, and now digital art may go to auction at cons (conventions) alongside illustrations done in pen and ink, colored pencil, or oil. For a time, mp3s of fan-generated music (filk) could be readily downloaded alongside commercial favorites through Napster. . . . Fan artists have been part of the much larger history of amateur film and video production. George Lucas and Steven Spielberg were themselves amateur filmmakers as teenagers, producing low-budget horror

or science fiction movies. *Star Wars,* in turn, has inspired Super 8 filmmakers since its release in the early 1970s. Some British fan clubs produced original episodes of *Doctor Who,* sometimes filming in the same gravel quarries as the original series. As the videocassette recorder became more widely available, fans re-edited series footage into music videos, using popular music to encapsulate the often-unarticulated emotions of favorite characters.[20] As fan video makers have become more sophisticated, some fan artists have produced whole new storylines by patching together original dialogue.

The World Wide Web is a powerful distribution channel, giving what were once home movies a surprising degree of public visibility. Publicity materials surface while these amateur films are still in production, most of the films boast lavish movie posters, and many of them include downloadable trailers to attract would-be viewers impatient with download times. *Star Wars* fans were among the first to embrace these new technologies, producing at last count more than three hundred Web movies.[21] These fans exploited the various merchandise surrounding this blockbuster film franchise for raw materials to their homegrown movies. . . . These fan filmmakers have used home computers to duplicate effects Lucasfilm had spent a fortune to achieve several decades earlier; many fan films create their own light saber or space battles. . . .

Knowledge Culture Meets Commodity Culture

Levy distinguishes between four potential sources of power—nomadic mobility, control over territory, ownership over commodities, and mastery over knowledge—and suggests a complex set of interactions and negotiations between them. The emergent knowledge cultures never fully escape the influence of the commodity culture, any more than commodity culture can totally function outside the constraints of territoriality. But knowledge cultures will, he predicts, gradually alter the ways that commodity culture operates. Nowhere is that transition clearer than within the culture industries, where the commodities that circulate become resources for the production of meaning: "The distinctions between authors and readers, producers and spectators, creators and interpretations will blend to form a reading-writing continuum, which will extend from the machine and network designers to the ultimate recipient, each helping to sustain the activities of the others."[22]

Creative activity, he suggests, will shift from the production of texts or the regulation of meanings toward the development of a dynamic environment, "a collective event that implies the recipients, transforms interpreters into actors, enables interpretation to enter the loop with collective action."[23] Room for participation and improvisation are being built into new media franchises. Kurt Lancaster, for example, has examined how commercial works (including computer, role-playing, and card games) surrounding the cult science fiction series *Babylon 5* facilitate a diverse range of fan performances, allowing fans to immerse themselves in the fantasy universe.[24] . . . Cult works were once discovered; now they are being consciously produced, designed to provoke fan interactions. The producers of *Xena: Warrior Princess,* for example, were fully aware that some fans wanted to read Xena and Gabrielle as lesbian lovers and thus began to consciously weave "subtext" into the episodes. As Levy explains, "The recipients of the open work are invited to fill in the blanks, choose among possible meanings, confront the divergences among their interpretations."[25]

To be marketable the new cultural works will have to provoke and reward collective meaning production through elaborate back stories, unresolved enigmas, excess information, and extratextual expansions of the program universe.[26] The past decade has seen a marked increase in the serialization of American television, the emergence of more complex appeals to program history, and the development of more intricate story arcs and cliffhangers. To some degree, these aesthetic shifts can be linked to new reception practices enabled by the home archiving of videos, net discussion lists, and Web program guides. These new technologies provide the information infrastructure necessary to sustain a richer form of television content, while these programs reward the enhanced competencies of fan communities.

Television producers are increasingly knowledgeable about their fan communities, often soliciting their support through networked computing. *Babylon 5* producer J. Michael Straczinski actively courted the science fiction fan community long before his proposed series was approved for production. He cited the fan buzz to demonstrate its market potential, and the fans lobbied local stations to purchase the syndicated series. The series producer, known affectionately by his user name, JMS, went online daily, responding to questions about his complex and richly developed narrative. Kurt Lancaster estimates that JMS may have made more than 1,700 posts to the fan community, sometimes actively

engaging in flame wars with individual fans as well as conducting what he saw as a continuing seminar on the production of genre television.[27] While JMS sought to be more accessible to fans, he found it difficult to shed his authority or escape a legal and economic system designed, in part, to protect corporate interests from audience appropriation. His lawyers warned him that he would have to leave the group if there was danger that he would be exposed to fan speculations that might hold him hostage to potential plagiarism suits. Such restrictions reimpose the hierarchy of commodity culture over the informal reciprocality of the knowledge culture.

While JMS is perhaps unique in the degree of his exposure to fans, other producers have shown a similar awareness of online fan discourse. For example, when the WB Network postponed the season finale of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* in the wake of the Columbine shootings, producer Joss Whedon made a notorious public call for Canadian fans to "bootleg that puppy" and distribute it via the Web to American viewers. Fans, in turn, rallied to Whedon's defense when the religious right launched a letter-writing campaign against the introduction of a lesbian relationship involving series regulars.[28] By contrast, *Survivor* producer Mark Burnett engaged in an active disinformation campaign to thwart audience efforts to predict the winner of its million-dollar competition, burying false leads in the official Web site awaiting discovery by fan hackers. When longtime World Wrestling Federation announcer Jerry Lawler was fired, he brought his side of his disputes with Vince McMahon directly to online fans. Some of these producers sought to deceive, others to inform the fan community, but each showed an awareness of how online discourse reframed the reception context for television programs.

For many media producers, who still operate within the old logic of the commodity culture, fandom represents a potential loss of control over their intellectual property. The efforts of the recording industry to dismantle Napster demonstrated that the traditional media companies were prepared to spend massive sums in legal action against new forms of grassroots distribution. The recording industry explicitly framed the case as a chance to "educate" the public about corporate intellectual property rights and thus avoid future "piracy."[29] Television producers, film studios, and book publishers have been equally aggressive in issuing "cease and desist" letters to fan Web sites that transcribe program dialogue or reproduce unauthorized images. If new media has made vis-

ible various forms of fan participation and production, then these legal battles demonstrate the power still vested in media ownership.

The horizontal integration of the entertainment industry—and the emergent logic of synergy—depends on the circulation of intellectual properties across media outlets.[30] Transmedia promotion presumes a more active spectator who can and will follow these media flows. Such marketing strategies promote a sense of affiliation with and immersion in fictional worlds. The media industry exploits these intense feelings through the marketing of ancillary goods, from T-shirts to games, with promises of enabling a deeper level of involvement with the program content. However, attempts to regulate intellectual property undercut the economic logic of media convergence, sending fans contradictory messages about how they are supposed to respond to commercial culture.[31] . . . Often, the conflict boils down to an issue of who is authorized to speak for a series, as when a Fox television executive justified the closing of *Simpsons* fan sites by saying: "We have an official Web site with network approved content and these people don't work for us." It is perhaps symptomatic of this highly charged legal culture that fandom.com, a company created to support fan community activities and thwart "cyberbullying," almost immediately began issuing "cease and desist" letters to other sites that used the term "fandom." Ultimately, fandom.com was forced to back down, but only after it had totally undercut its claims to be "by and for fans."

Levy sees industry panic over interactive audiences as short-sighted: "By preventing the knowledge space from becoming autonomous, they deprive the circuits of commodity space . . . of an extraordinary source of energy." The knowledge culture, he suggests, serves as the "invisible and intangible engine" for the circulation and exchange of commodities.[32] The online book dealer Amazon.com has linked bookselling to the fostering of online book culture. Readers are encouraged to post critical responses to specific works or to compile lists of their favorite books. Their associates program creates a powerful niche marketing system: Amazon patrons are offered royalties for every sale made on the basis of links from their sites. Similarly, the sports network ESPN sponsors a fantasy baseball league, a role-playing activity in which sports fans form teams, trade players, and score points based on the real-world performance of various athletes. Such activities give an incentive for viewers to tune into ESPN for up-to-the-minute statistics.[33]

Attempts to link consumers directly into the production and mar-

keting of media content are variously described as "permission-based marketing," "relationship marketing," or "viral marketing" and are increasingly promoted as the model for how to sell goods, cultural and otherwise, in an interactive environment. Jupiter Communications notes that 57 percent of consumers visit a new site based on word of mouth.[34] As one noted industry guide explains, "Marketing in an interactive world is a collaborative process with the marketer helping the consumer to buy and the consumer helping the marketer to sell."[35] Researchers are finding that fandom and other knowledge communities foster a sense of passionate affiliation or brand loyalty that insures the longevity of particular product lines.[36] In viral marketing, such affiliations be-come self-replicating as marketers create content that consumers want to circulate actively among their friends. Even unauthorized and vaguely subversive appropriations can spread advertising messages, as occurred through Internet spoofs of the Budweiser "whazzup" commercials.

Building brand loyalty requires more than simply coopting grassroots activities back into the commodity culture. Successful media producers are becoming more adept at monitoring and serving audience interests. The games industry, which sees itself as marketing interactive experiences rather than commodities, has been eager to broaden consumer participation and strengthen the sense of affiliation players feel towards their games.[37] LucasArts has integrated would-be *Star Wars* gamers into the design team for the development of their massively multiplayer online game. A Web page was created early in the design process and ideas under consideration were posted for fan feedback. Kurt Squire describes the benefits of this "participatory design" process: "Ordinary users, who are ordinarily left out of the design process, can bring their expertise using products to the conversation, and help ensure more usable products. This ends up saving money for the designers, who can spend less energy in user/customer support. And, of course, this process results in more usable products, which benefits everyone."[38] Game companies often circulate their game engines as shareware, seeking to unleash the creative potential of their consumers. In some cases, fan-designed "mods" or game worlds (such as *Counterstrike*) have been integrated into the commercial releases. Maxis, the company that manages the *Sims* franchise, encourages the grassroots production and trading of "skins" (new character identities), props, and architectural structures, even programming code. *Sims* creator Will Wright refers to his product as a "sandbox" or "doll house," viewing it more as an author-

ing environment where consumers can play out their own stories than as a "hard-rails" game. Ultimately, Wright predicts, two-thirds of *Sims* content will come from consumers.[39]

It remains to be seen, however, whether these new corporate strategies of collaboration and consultation with the emerging knowledge communities will displace the legal structures of the old commodity culture. How far will media companies be willing to go to remain in charge of their content or to surf the information flow? In an age of broadband delivery, will television producers see fans less as copyright infringers and more as active associates and niche marketers? Will global media moguls collaborate with grassroots communities, such as the anime fans, to insure that their products get visible in the lucrative American market?

From Jammers to Bloggers

In his 1993 essay "Culture Jamming: Hacking, Slashing and Sniping in the Empire of Signs," Mark Dery documented emerging tactics of grassroots resistance ("media hacking, informational warfare, terror-art and guerilla semiotics") to "an ever more intrusive, instrumental technoculture whose operant mode is the manufacture of consent through the manipulation of symbols."[40] In citizens band (CB) radio slang, the term "jamming" refers to efforts to "introduce noises into the signal as it passes from transmitter to receiver." Culture jammers refused to be "passive shoppers" and insisted on their right to insert alternative ideas into the meme-stream. . . .

Dery's essay records an important juncture in the history of DIY media. Over the past several decades, emerging technologies—ranging from the photocopier to the home computer and the video cassette recorder—have granted viewers greater control over media flows, enabled activists to reshape and recirculate media content, lowered the costs of production, and paved the way for new grassroots networks. Recognizing that their revolution would not be televised, the 1960s counterculture created an alternative media culture, using everything from rock to underground newspapers, from poster art to people's radio, to communicate outside the corporately controlled media, and in the process, student leaders proposed theories of participatory culture that would influence subsequent activists. The DIY aesthetic got a second wind in the

1980s as punk rockers, queer activists, and third-wave feminists, among others, embraced photocopied zines, stickers, buttons, and T-shirts as vehicles for cultural and political expression.[41] These groups soon recognized the radical potential of videotape for countersurveillance and embraced the "digital revolution" as an extension of earlier movements toward media democracy.[42]

Many of the groups Dery describes, such as Adbusters, ACT UP, Negativeland, The Barbie Liberation Army, Paper Tiger Television, and the Electronic Disturbance Community, would happily embrace his "culture jammer" banner. Yet, Dery overreached in describing all forms of DIY media as "jamming." These new technologies would support and sustain a range of different cultural and political projects, some overtly oppositional, others more celebratory, yet all reflecting a public desire to participate within, rather than simply consume, media. Culture jammers want to opt out of media consumption and promote a purely negative and reactive conception of popular culture. Fans, on the other hand, see unrealized potentials in popular culture and want to broaden audience participation. Fan culture is dialogic rather than disruptive, affective more than ideological, and collaborative rather than confrontational. Culture jammers want to "jam" the dominant media, while poachers want to appropriate their content, imagining a more democratic, responsive, and diverse style of popular culture. Jammers want to destroy media power, while poachers want a share of it.

"The territory mapped by this essay ends at the edge of the electronic frontier," Derry wrote, expressing optimism about the emerging political and cultural power grassroots media activists might enjoy in a context where media flows are multidirectional.[43] Yet, he also cautions that the media industries will find alternative means of marginalizing and disenfranchising citizen participation. . . . Returning to this same terrain at the end of the decade, it is clear that new media technologies have profoundly altered the relations between media producers and consumers. Both culture jammers and fans have gained greater visibility as they have deployed the Web for community building, intellectual exchange, cultural distribution, and media activism. Some sectors of the media industries have embraced active audiences as an extension of their marketing power, have sought greater feedback from their fans, and have incorporated viewer-generated content into their design processes. Other sectors have sought to contain or silence the emerging knowledge culture. . . . The old rhetoric of opposition and cooptation

assumed a world where consumers had little direct power to shape media content and where there were enormous barriers to entry into the marketplace, whereas the new digital environment expands their power to archive, annotate, appropriate, and recirculate media products. . . . Levy describes a world where grassroots communication is not a momentary disruption of the corporate signal but the routine way that the new media system operates: "Until now we have only reappropriated speech in the service of revolutionary movements, crises, cures, exceptional acts of creation. What would a normal, calm, established appropriation of speech be like?"[44]

Perhaps, rather than talking about culture jammers, we might speak of bloggers. The term "blog" is short for "Web log," a new form of personal and subcultural expression involving summarizing and linking to other sites. In some cases, bloggers actively deconstruct pernicious claims or poke fun at other sites; in other cases, they form temporary tactical alliances with other bloggers or with media producers to insure that important messages get more widely circulated. These bloggers have become important grassroots intermediaries—facilitators, not jammers, of the signal flow. Blogging describes a communication process, not an ideological position.

As Levy writes:

> The new proletariat will only free itself by uniting, by decategorizing itself, by forming alliances with those whose work is similar to its own (once again, nearly everyone), by bringing to the foreground the activities they have been practicing in shadow, by assuming responsibility —globally, centrally, explicitly—for the production of collective intelligence.[45]

Bloggers take knowledge in their own hands, enabling successful navigation within and between these emerging knowledge cultures. One can see such behavior as cooptation into commodity culture insofar as it sometimes collaborates with corporate interests, but one can also see it as increasing the diversity of media culture, providing opportunities for greater inclusiveness, and making commodity culture more responsive to consumers. In an era marked both by the expanded corporate reach of the commodity culture and the emerging importance of grassroots knowledge cultures, consumer power may now be best exercised by blogging rather than jamming media signals.