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Television Fans in the Digital Era

Television fans over the last decade have progressively reshaped their image from the obsessive loners of half-baked fan clubs to intricate online communities compiled of aficionado activists. This revolution of the television fanatic was fostered by the media convergence between television and Web 2.0, which runs on open source software. This software, used to build interactive sites like YouTube, Wikipedia, and all blog programming, has uncovered an untapped market of sophisticated fans devoted to programs that make them think and that inspire meaningful exchanges in online discussions. This television-internet convergence has also enabled fans with the ability to effectively organize as resisters and shapers of commercial television narratives, challenging the “hypodermic needle” theory of passive audience consumption (McLuhan 55). The new perception of fandom pathology has allowed media corporations to recognize online fan communities as a distinguished body of active narrative navigators and producers. As a result, this significant change has transformed the modern fan into a vital component of the production process of television from the passive consumer. The “participatory culture,” as coined in Henry Jenkins’ groundbreaking ethnographic book *Textual Poachers* (1992), is described as an empowered fan community of highly interactive producers collaborating together on the Internet. Since Jenkins’ book, fans are glorified as digital crusaders that challenge traditional perceptions of academia,

professionalism, and the current studio economic model. By decentralizing production and placing it in the hands of the adoring masses, it seems that television in the digital era has opened an equal dialogue with its consumers. This dynamic relationship between fans and television producers, however, is not so clear-cut. As online fan communities have increased, so has the interest of the media industry in harnessing this pool of creative labor for the sole purpose of making money. This operation runs on the contradiction of fans generating online content for the sole purpose of affecting what is played over the traditional television airways. This Faustian bargain, which runs under the illusion of a “global village” (McLuhan 86), is still in fact controlled by a concentration of a few major television co-operations, but under the guise of the new online community. While the television-Internet convergence has revolutionized fan interactions and perceptions, the way in which we pay and acknowledge this new creative production has not. This in turn creates subtle disenfranchisement of fans as a payable creative power, raising issues about ownership, and challenges the very legitimacy of Henry Jenkins’ utopian “participatory culture.”

Shifting Definitions and Receptions of Fandom

The pathological connotations associated with fandom have remained a stigma since the creation of the Hollywood star system in the early 1900’s. Yet, as entertainment has evolved, so have the perceptions of fandom. The power of a fan is first acknowledged with the invention of the Hollywood star system in the 1920’s and the creation of celebrity fan clubs. Major Hollywood studios marketed entire films off their star’s on- and off-screen persona, drawing in public curiosity through scandals and romantic

entanglements. Fans who fixated around the manufactured celebrity quickly became defined solely as a response to the star system and thus passive observers vicariously living through mass media. Joli Jenson in her article, "Fandom as Pathology," acknowledges that since the creation of this star system, fandom is seen as "excessive, bordering on deranged, behavior" (9). Jenson goes on to suggest that there are two types of fans: "the obsessed individual and the hysterical crowd" (9). These images of fandom, which are drastically different from the "empowered aficionado" bloggers described today, significantly mark the shifting power of fandom before and after the digital revolution. Fandom in the 20th century is often associated with a type of social dysfunction because of the implied displacement of identity onto the celebrity or the growth of a cult fixation and establishment of artificial social relationships. Jenson argues, however, that these academic descriptions of fandom are over dramatic representations that do not necessarily describe fan interactions, but are a way of establishing cultural hierarchies, "us" versus "them" relationships (19). The objects of desire and the modes of enactment are the cultural separators that engender fan hierarchies, associating cool and detached emotion with classical high brow appreciation and hysterical emotional with low brow appreciation. That is, a fan of a television show like *Star Trek* is described in these fanatic pathological terms, whereas a scholar of Hemingway is deemed an expert or aficionado. However, with the invention of open source software on the web, fans are not only generating new content, but also rewriting traditional notions of fandom itself.

The Shift to the Aficionado

MySpace, Wikis, YouTube, and blogs all allow fans to create online communities that challenge academia's hold on fan discourse because they themselves are building new vernacular while reworking the narrative texts of their favorite T.V shows. By reclaiming the power of self-definition and becoming their own authorities of their favorite shows, fans are demonstrating a new collective, interactive, and real-time exchange of ideas that shake the traditional foundations of fan identity. Paul Booth in "Rereading Fandom: Myspace Character Personas and Narrative Identity," explores how fans are also no longer "poaching texts," that is struggling to define their fan community within the context of an already established narrative (Jenkins 3), but rather they are "ripping and shredding texts, combing them and reworking them to create something entirely different" (Booth 516). Meaning is not taken but formed by the fan community. It is this shift from fans being perceived as scavengers, passive consumers, and obsessive loners to these aggressive producers that destabilizes old consumer-producer relationships. While the extent in which fans have come to use the communal software on sites like Wikipedia, MySpace, and YouTube could have not been accurately predicted, the very creation of these sites highlight the limitations and inaccessibility of previous television-fan relationship.

Web 2.0

YouTube, "Broadcast Yourself"

YouTube's 2005 launch and the creation of similar communal hosting sites validated the birth of a new fan and a new digital economy possible because of the

maturity of the infrastructure of Web 2.0. Web 2.0 was first introduced by Tim O'Reilly at the O'Reilly Media Web 2.0 conference in 2004. Web 2.0 does not imply an updated or technical specification to the previous version of the Internet, but rather it refers to "the cumulative changes in ways software developers and end-users use the web. In Web 2.0, web applications facilitated interactive information sharing, inter-operability, user-centered design, and collaboration on the World Wide Web. Web 2.0 allows its users to interact with other users or to change the website content, in contrast to non-interactive websites where users are limited to the passive viewing of information that is provided to them. The resulting ease of posting, finding, watching, and sharing videos, along with the incorporation of Webcams and basic editing tools like iMovie, have facilitated an eruption of user-generated media (Russo 125).

YouTube, a social video website, most encapsulates the new power and possibilities of Web 2.0 for television fans. YouTube allows users to upload, view, and share video clips, combining the isolated experience of television watching with the highly interactive nature of the Internet. YouTube uses Adobe Flash to serve its content, which includes clips from films and television programs, music videos, and homemade videos. Video feeds of YouTube videos can also be easily embedded on blogs and other websites creating a system of free sharing and virtual promotion. YouTube's launch and resulting popularity illuminates three important trends that were occurring in the media industry and fan markets in the early 2000's. First, YouTube's launch raised awareness of the growing trend of media concentration, as a handful of multinational media conglomerates increasingly dominated all areas of the media industry. Second, YouTube offered a service that directly challenged classic modes of production, distribution and

the concentration of media ownership. Finally, the very popularity of YouTube signaled an important shift in fan and television interactions, as fans increasingly used the site to produce video mash-ups, the splicing of several television episodes to create a new narrative, or video diary-like commentary on their favorite television shows. YouTube has not only offered fans a way of broadcasting their ideas about their favorite television shows to other fans, but a way to broadcast themselves back at the television.

Open Source Software

The new dialogue between fans and the subsequent generation of fan communities online is made possible through the use of free and open-source software that YouTube, MySpace, Wikipedia, and blogs use. Yochai Benkler points out in his essay, “Peer Production and Sharing,” that this new software is based on the shared effort of a “nonproprietary model”—one that depends on many individuals contributing to a common project without any one person or entity asserting rights over another to exclude them from the production or from the resulting project (328). This open-source software, used on fan sites such as *Lostpedia*¹, blogs like TelevisionWithoutPity.com, and hosting sites like YouTube, enables fans from across the globe to establish virtual fan communities or “Global Villages” that work together in generating new content. The type of peer production Benkler describes is best exemplified through the website Wikipedia, where users can edit and add pages to the site. Intertextual linking allows users to connect information from one page to another, creating a never-ending linking system of interchangeable information. It is through this new global digital community of

¹ *Lostpedia* is a website designed just like Wikipedia but specifically geared to ABC’s television show “Lost”. Character profiles, development, history, narratives, and plot theories are collaboratively generated by fans, just like topics on Wikipedia.

interaction that fans are transformed into activists, aficionados, and a greater “participatory culture.”

The Collective Intelligence of a Participatory Culture

This merger between the Internet and the television has allowed television fans to interact on the Internet as one “collective intelligence,” in the words of a French cyberspace theorist Pierre Levy (Jenkins 35). This “collective intelligence” that television fans partake in is described as large-scale information gathering and processing activities that have emerged specifically in web communities. On the Internet, he argues, people harness their individual expertise towards shared goals and objectives, working as one collective and productive body (Levy 1997). This theory of a “collective intelligence” is expanded in Henry Jenkins’ essay, “Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education in the 21st Century.” In his essay he describes a “participatory culture” as a “culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one’s creations with others, and some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices. A participatory culture is also “where members believe that their contributions matter and where members feel some degree of social connection with one another (Jenkins 3) Forms of participatory culture include:

***Affiliations**— memberships, formal and informal, in online communities centered around various forms of media, such as Friendster, Facebook, message boards, metagaming, game clans, or MySpace).*

***Expressions**— producing new creative forms, such as digital sampling, skinning and*

moddin, fan videomaking, fan fiction writing, zines, mash-ups).

Collaborative Problem-solving— *working together in teams, formally and informally, to complete tasks and develop new knowledge (such as through Wikipedia, alternative reality gaming, spoiling).*

Circulations — *Shaping the flow of media (such as podcasting, blogging).*

This “participatory culture” is a projected utopian image upon online television fans, as they embody most of the characteristics outlined by Jenkins. But the interactive “free for all” digital frontier didn’t remain that free for long.

Corporate Reaction: Hulu

The development of a “participatory culture” highlights that media convergence is more than just a technological shift or an opportunity to watch more commercial television, but rather it alters the relationship between existing technologies, industries, markets, genres, and audience interactions. The importance of this alteration is best demonstrated by the reaction against it: Hulu. Hulu is the corporate attempt at subtly joining and fighting the new growing participatory culture. While Hulu embodies the style of YouTube, this television-Internet convergence attempts to deflate the influence of fan-generated content. By broadcasting popular television shows from several big networks (NBC, ABC, and FOX) on one Internet site, Hulu mocks the collage aesthetics and global any-time-accessibility of an online fan community, but prohibits fan interactions like message boards and response videos, the very things that define fan communities. Hulu goes even further by reinforcing old television standards by limiting a user’s viewing time through ad placements. While television networks adapt to this

changing television paradigm online, fans are a step ahead, generating their own narratives to their favorite television shows.

Fan Generated Content

Fans are generating their own content in response to their favorite television programs. It has been suggested that audience activity occurs when fans move from the role of consumer to that of producer (McKee 169; Hills 29). The production and consumption of fan fiction is another popular activity for keeping a program alive and fresh. Fans borrow characters and settings from current and past TV series and create their own plot lines and story narratives. This bricolage has been seen in other cases as a rebellion against the system. Fans who, because of their economic status, have no power over television content, meet their needs by manufacturing their own fantasies (Jenkins 1992). In a study of online fan interaction, Victor Costello in "Cultural Outlaws" reported a pattern within fan-generated content. Fans were reported to take popular characters and create narratives where they became homosexual, females moved from the background into dominant roles, and the histories and futures of characters from long-dead series were extended (Costello 136). This type of fan fiction is privately and publicly shared by its creators, but critiqued and modified collectively by the community. This type of fan production has not only empowered fans as producers but in the process of creation they have also altered traditional narrative structure. In "Narrativity and the Narrative Database," Paul Booth explores fan-generated content and online fan communities in relation to the structure of traditional television narrative. Booth argues that in the presence of wikis, the audience's relationship with narrative content and structure is

altered by the interactive capabilities of the Web 2.0's open source software (3). This new collective and interactive narrative construction and deconstruction is termed by Booth as "narrativity" (3). Fan-created wikis for serialized and complex shows like *Lost* and *Heroes* offer more than just information; they also act as a beehive of creative narrative construction. On *Lostpedia*, for example, each episode and narrative element from ABC's *Lost* has its own wiki-page, and users can hypertextually flip across the pages' links in any order. Characters have their own individual pages, as do situations, themes, motifs, and other story information. Any fan, through hypertextual connections, can link any two pieces of information. These hypertextual connections form not just through the audience's reconstruction of the story, but also through a reconstruction of the discourse (Booth 7). The fan audience re-writes this narrative, but the connection itself becomes a re-reading of the *Lost* TV show. If any particular connection does not already exist on screen, or appears for the first time in an episode, fans can re-write that connection, re-read that discourse, and re-produce that story, through narrativity (Booth, 7). Fans can construct and deconstruct the narrative. Unlike before, fans can collectively outline the show's canon: the characters, technologies, backstories, and other essential components. Yet, more importantly, fans can also rewrite these elements by speculating what is to come, changing the course of the show, through an "imaginative discourse" (Booth 3). This "imaginative discourse" is also known on the web as "spoilers," where fans predict the outcome of the shows plot before it happens, or even have insider information to future episodes. The combination of fan theories and the global outreach of the fan online communities puts a newfound pressure on television writers and producers to produce intellectually stimulating shows, and also guard their work from being leaked.

Furthermore, show writers on *Lost*, whose plots get intricate and confusing, often turn to fan sites for future plot ideas and story lines.

While fan generated content can affect a show's story structure, the ultimate power of Internet fandom is in controlling the actual life and death of a series. For fans of a show, that power is usually in the hands of a network executive or, and for a syndicated series, a production company. However, online fans believe they can prevent the cancellation of a program or even resurrect it after the decision has been made to end it. In the world before the Internet, dedicated fans had organized mail campaigns and known some success, but online fans can move more quickly, organize more people, and generally be more effective. The "I'm with CoCo" fan campaign fought to keep Conan O'Brien on the air as the Tonight Show host on NBC when executives wanted to replace him with the lackluster Jay Leno. While the viral campaign didn't prevent Conan O'Brien from losing his time slot on NBC, he did receive a hefty compensation due to the exponential attention he was receiving from the media and fans. All the attention Conan O'Brien has received from fans and the campaign has also made him a hot ticket for another network, something NBC never expected for the awkward red head host.

Troubles With Ownership and a Process of Commodification

As the industry relies on the labor of fans to produce and promote the value of its properties with increasing openness, it becomes increasingly difficult to hold in place the distinctions between owners and consumers. Furthermore, the dynamic qualities of fan-generated content on fan communities has sparked an increased interest by the media industry in harnessing some of this creative labor for the purpose of making money in

promotional ventures. The use of fan-generated content for the purposes of promotional ventures is a topic ignored in the utopian “participatory culture” of Henry Jenkins. The commodification of fan-generated content is possible because of fans’ passive toleration of being free laborers and the contradictory satisfaction of generating online content for the sole purpose of being played over the airways. Secondly, the recent corporate takeover of once independently run fan friendly sites troubles the creative freedom associated with Jenkins’ “participatory culture.”

With shows like *Lost* mimicking YouTube’s hosting and iMovie’s editing software, they are attracting fans to make free 35 second clips for promotional contests. Fans who enter are provided with the software, the clips, and the music to build the ultimate promotional video for the show’s finale. Marketing campaigns that solicit user-generated content offer an instructive contrast to the horizontal creativity of fan producers. Such user-generated advertising typically features a top-down arrangement that attempts, through its interface and conditions, to contain excessive fan productivity within proprietary commercial spaces (Russo 125). Already in its two weeks of operation, more than 1,000 videos have been uploaded, all working for free. The promotional video contest is also in conjunction with Kia Motors, who shamelessly promotes their cars on the sites building software. The commercialization of fan production has also increased with Google’s purchase of YouTube in 2006. Unlike before, ad banners are now embedded within fan-generated content, and anything that is uploaded to YouTube is owned by YouTube and its affiliates, allowing them to use their user videos for any type

of self promotion.² The biggest and less known corporate takeover of a fan community occurred on the popular blogging site Televisionwithoutpity.com. The dilemma rests in the website's original promise of shared control and the sudden increase in off-loading market research labor onto viewers and users of Televisionwithoutpity.com (Andrejevic, 27). Sites like Televisionwithoutpity.com were set up to fight the consolidation and concentration in the television industry, allowing freedom for uncensored fan discussion. However, the consolidation of network television had leaked over onto new media and the Internet, a consolidation that has increasingly crippled creativity and competition on the Internet. When Televisionwithoutpity.com used to be independently run, users had the freedom to bash popular shows and exchange in an open dialogue with actual show writers and producers. This all changed when Bravo, a cable channel under the NBC Universal family, bought the website, seeing the site as a valuable resource for market research. Since the purchase, Bravo has also been limiting and censoring discussion board topics, taking down comments, and promoting only NBC affiliated network shows. This type of interactivity has now come to reposition the power not in the hands of the adoring masses, but back in the hands of the few corporate suits.

So the question arises, "Where do we go from here?" If online fan communities are increasingly recognized as a new labor force by big studio executives, how will the Internet remain the democratic digital frontier as envisioned in Henry Jenkins' "participatory culture" or Marshal McLuhan's "global village"? The good news is that

² YouTube Terms of Agreement: By submitting User Submissions to YouTube, you hereby grant YouTube a worldwide, non-exclusive, royalty-free, sublicenseable and transferable license to use, reproduce, distribute, prepare derivative works of, display, and perform the User Submissions in connection with the YouTube Website and YouTube's (and its successors' and affiliates') business, including without limitation for promoting and redistributing part or all of the YouTube Website (and derivative works thereof) in any media formats and through any media channels.

there is still hope for the digital frontier to be kept separate from incorporation. Sites like Vimeo offer the same video service as YouTube but prevent businesses and commercial videos from being uploaded to the site. They are strictly for fan generated content and personal videos. They do not have advertising embedded on their user's videos or on their site, and allow just the same sharing capabilities as YouTube but in higher quality. With sites like Televisionwithoutpity.com going corporate, fans need to reclaim fan communities and fan-produced content through more independently run sites. Hosting a website has become cheaper through domain sites like Godaddy.com and open source software which can be downloaded for free over the Internet. The most fundamental flaw in the fan- television-producer relationship, however, is compensation laws for new media content. This payment issue was most heavily explored in the 2007 writers' strike over compensation for Webisodes and residual payment for shows played on internet video sites like Hulu and YouTube (Russo 129). Participants in online fandom, who are uniquely equipped to realize the web's status as a commercial platform, banded together to support television writers by picketing, educating, and fundraising. As fans are left wondering how they will be contracted and compensated in this new media economy, it is the potential "queerness of convergence itself—transgressing the accepted boundaries of media formations," that fosters the need for these new negotiations and protocols on the part of the industry (Russo 128). While boundaries and economic models are breaking down, so might the barriers and contradictions that are holding back Henry Jenkins' utopian digital world.

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