



NETWORKED PUBLICS

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Although there are a handful of cases where anime music video creators have been asked to take their wares off the Net by corporations, these moves have rarely been initiated by the Japanese anime companies. Rather, it has been the U.S. licensors or record labels that own the soundtracks used in the mash-up videos that have been sending the cease-and-desist letters.⁴⁰

Although the relationship between anime fandoms and commercial anime studios seems less hostile than the tension between the music industry and P2P file sharers, it is difficult to know whether we are witnessing a momentary and fragile peace or the dawn of a golden era for overseas anime fandoms during which both fan and commercial distribution will continue to flourish. As the market for anime overseas becomes increasingly established, anime industries may feel that they don't need fans to evangelize their works, and break from their historical tolerance of fan production and distribution. Larger audiences and fandoms also mean a less tight-knit community that might lack the discipline to police themselves. The case of the transnational circulation and remix of anime provides hints as to some possible futures for networked publics in which amateur remix and derivative works will be tolerated; whether this model survives what seems to be an inevitable scaling up and scrutiny by mainstream media remains to be seen.

Viral Marketing

More willingly than music or anime, marketing embraces networked publics to harness the power and influence of the group once known as consumers. Now that emerging technologies have splintered audiences into micro-niches, the era of demographics-driven campaigns is widely considered to be over. In this fragmented media landscape, marketers are ever more dependent on fans to spread the word. Viral marketing assumes consumers, not firms, have the most influence in the creation of brands.⁴¹ Increasingly marketers attempt to tap into fan culture to co-opt fans' creativity for relatively inexpensive grassroots marketing campaigns. From the point of view of marketers, fans can serve as brand evangelists, essential partners in negotiating a product's meaning in the constant conversation that is native to networked publics.

According to Henry Jenkins, ever since Napster popularized file sharing, the approach to new-media fandom has split along two general lines. The film, television, and recording industries have predominantly attempted to regulate fan engagement with their products, while Internet and games companies have been more willing to experiment, adopting an approach that enlists fans in the work of content production and brand promotion. Jenkins refers to these two models as *prohibitionist* and *collaborationist*.⁴² According to Jenkins, the former

will fail to accommodate network demand for participation, one of the key products of the new media market, and thus lose fans to more tolerant forms of media. If the relationship with fans is becoming increasingly significant in the networked era, the role of marketing in mediating between producers and consumers will change. The way that marketers adapt this collaborationist approach to creating campaigns in a deeply fragmented media landscape suggests possible future strategies by which other media industries will engage networked publics.

A variety of disruptive technologies allow consumers to customize their media by choosing more selectively from a wider array of sources and time-shifting their consumption patterns. Traditional marketing practices are threatened by technologies such as set-top boxes, video on demand, and podcasting that allow consumers to cut ads from media. This results in a transformation in the media landscape, moving it from a push to a pull ecology, from a condition in which consumers passively receive content to one in which consumers begin to set the terms of their engagement. Rather than spending their entire marketing budget on thirty-second spots that dwindling audiences passively receive, marketers are increasingly interested in producing experience-driven campaigns, a phenomenon of convergence in which New York advertising meets Hollywood entertainment, what *Advertising Age* editor Scott Donaton refers to as “Madison and Vine.”⁴³

Social networking technologies, from e-mail to MySpace, have given consumers the power to transform brands. Eager to channel this participation, while still wary of grassroots criticism that could spiral out of control, marketers are attempting to create fan-driven experiences adapted to a wide variety of media. Viral marketing assumes consumers, not firms, have the most influence in creating brands.⁴⁴ Using social networks to spread the word, viral media grew as an epiphenomenon of e-mail forwarding, which according to Dan Brooks (famous for his spoof Volkswagen-suicide bomber advertisement), echoes a tacit understanding in the age-old practice of telling jokes: “If you repeat it, you own it.”⁴⁵ But activist brand detractors can also get into the game, appropriating brands to transmit their own messages. Take the instance of a series of Nike sweatshop e-mails initiated by Jonah Peretti. After Nike responded over e-mail that he could not customize his shoes with the word *sweatshop*, Peretti forwarded the e-mail correspondence to friends. The e-mail subsequently spread virally, becoming an Internet phenomenon and eventually landing Peretti a spot on the *Today Show*.⁴⁶

Media executive Jim Banister provides a useful theoretical frame for viral social networking. To describe such ventures as eBay and Friendster, Banister uses the term *enginnet* to refer to an algorithmic structure that combines code,

form, and function to create community-driven experiences in which the users themselves have found innovative, often unanticipated, ways to connect with one another. According to Banister, the successful enginet pulls visitors seamlessly through a variety of states, from producer to distributor to marketer to vendor to consumer. While Banister locates the antecedent of the enginet in the value-chain marketing schemes of Avon and Mary Kay, he claims that the frictionless nature of networked media has exponentially scaled them into entire ecosystems.⁴⁷

Enginets use shared-judgment systems to create reputation-based “value nets” that Banister says leverage a complex combination of community impulse, egocentrism, and individual superego with its desire to judge. The tension of these traits has produced the bizarre category of Internet fame, often shamelessly lowbrow, such as in the example of a popular thirteen-year-old video blogger named Bowiegirl, whose fame appears to be as much the result of the mockery she receives as of any admiration. Even so, Bowiegirl became an unintentional spokesperson for Logitech after having featured one of their webcams in a late-night bedroom confessional.⁴⁸

Although brand enthusiasts and detractors seem to be growing more and more empowered, marketers are ill at ease letting their reputations be determined by amateurs. It has become commonplace, however, for marketers to work from within the viral space, by creating campaigns cleverly dressed down in the aesthetics of amateur cultural production. The FX channel, for example, created a MySpace profile for a fictional character from their television program *Nip and Tuck* in order to promote the show. The pioneers of the fictive technique have been video game marketers and they continue to push forward, using fake blogs to seed elaborate online hoaxes. Working with the marketing firm Wieden + Kennedy, the game developer Sega created a viral campaign for the release of their game ESPN NFL Football 2K4 that passed itself off as a legitimate amateur homepage by a game tester named Beta-7. The imaginary tester claimed the game made him black out and fly into uncontrollable fits of rage. The phony site featured supposedly leaked confidential memos of a cover-up by Sega, which claimed they had knowledge of the health hazards of the game, as a way of appealing to extreme gamers.⁴⁹ In the world of the enginet, it seems that marketers are increasingly coming to resemble political spin doctors, carefully leaking disinformation to the press in order to advance an agenda, thwart detractors, and manipulate public opinion.

Media theorist Holly Willis proposes two categories for viral media: those that are “simply unseemly and outrageous,” such as Brooks’s Volkswagen ad, and those that “leave you very unsure about what you’re viewing.”⁵⁰ The majority of successful viral video clips conform to the former category, the most

successful being Crispin Porter & Bogusky's Subservient Chicken Web site, a satire of online webcam pornography, developed for Burger King's "Have it Your Way" campaign. Featuring a database of video clips of a man in a chicken costume, the Subservient Chicken would respond to commands from site visitors and was ultimately responsible for driving one in six visitors to Burger King's main site.⁵¹ Falling more clearly into the latter category is the emerging genre of alternative reality gaming (ARG). ARGs create entire self-contained worlds on the Web, often comprising a vast array of assets—logos, photos, scripts, movies, audio recordings, corporate blurbs, graphic treatments, flash movies—embedded within a network of (untraceable) Web sites. Involving a variety of complex puzzles, marketing experiences such as "the Beast," developed to promote the Spielberg film *AI*, take several weeks or months to solve and are far too complex to be solved by a single player. Networked audiences work together to process a huge amount of story information, building a collaborative relationship with each other as well as with the brand. Used with great success to market the film the *Blair Witch Project* (a film with a budget of \$35,000 that grossed over \$248 million), this technique is increasingly being used to market video games.

When describing the medium of ARGs, fans often note that the best-designed experiences explicitly blur the lines of reality.⁵² Though an undeniably powerful new medium uniquely adapted to the multimedia context of the Web, ARGs as hype-machines could also prove somewhat treacherous territory for marketers, as the online consumer is increasingly sensitive to being manipulated and increasingly adept at exposing deceptive practices. For example, Cillit Bang, a UK cleaning product brand, was forced to publicly apologize for conducting a deceptive viral marketing campaign in which members of its marketing team posed as fictional characters on the Web to place thinly disguised ads. The campaign unraveled when the marketers were exposed by bloggers.⁵³

As the forces of media disruption proliferate and audiences are increasingly lured away from official distribution channels, marketers must either adapt to the networked environment and redefine their relationship with consumers or become irrelevant. When describing the medium, ARG fans will often invoke the ideal of TINAG (This Is Not A Game), as the best of these experiences are explicitly intended to blur the lines of reality.⁵⁴

Such developments will not be lost on marketers. They will have to adopt a view of the entire field of cultural production in order to successfully invite people to participate in constructing compelling marketing "experiences." As the relationship evolves between production and consumption, Jenkins maintains there must be detente between political economy and audience research.⁵⁵

Perhaps we will find that, as in nature, mutualism and parasitism are, in fact, not discrete categories but rather a continuum of interaction. By creating a public arena shared by both nonmarket amateurs and commercial professionals, the Internet makes the engagements between these different parties necessarily more intimate.

Online News

In the case of online news, the relationship between the commercial industry and DIY producers is less contentious than it is in some of the other cases surveyed here. With increasing opportunities for amateur cultural production, it is clear people are actively resisting the content and practices of mainstream news, partly by using it as a launching pad to offer contesting points of view and alternative practices. Evolving digital communication tools and practices are clashing with those of traditional news media, resulting in paradox and contradiction. Stories filed by so-called embedded reporters in Iraq, for example, are being trumped by personal e-mails and photos from soldiers; Western-trained journalists in middle eastern countries are being criticized for lacking professionalism while Western audiences surf to Arab outlets to get news absent from Western reports; bloggers are working out tacit ethical codes for themselves while editorial opinions leak into all aspects of mainstream news publishing and programming.

Echoing these contradictions is the fact that one of the central assumptions about the news—its tie to democracy—grows more complex each day. On the one hand, scholars such as Robert McChesney, Edward Herman, and Cass Sunstein see civic culture as deteriorating, the flow of information and opinions limited by media consolidation, various forms of self and government censorship, and the fragmentation of audiences.⁵⁶ On the other hand, scholars such as Benkler and Jenkins celebrate DIY media for expanding the ranks of informed citizenry and facilitating the development of an engaged and participatory transnational culture.⁵⁷ Benkler suggests that the network, with its “variation and diversity of knowledge, time, availability, insight, and experience as well as vast communications and information resources,” has taken over the watchdog function of the press, making it irretrievably a peer-to-peer activity.⁵⁸ Many analysts, faced with the complexities of the networked news environment, have simply divided the landscape into two spheres, new and old media, pitting them against each other. But it is increasingly evident that the landscape grows more fully integrated every day. If news industry professionals are acting on this point reluctantly, media consumers-turned-producers have recognized it instinctively for some time.